Steinschneider’s renown in the world of scholarship derives primarily from his magisterial catalogues of Hebrew manuscript collections and from his precise and systematic presentations of discrete categories of medieval intellectual writings. His mastery of all of the subjects treated by him in this manner has led to his being characterized, in some circles, as a “bibliographer,” and, in others, as an “orientalist”—terminology that stubbornly clings to him and resists amelioration. Such portrayals, however, tend to diminish the variety and impact of Steinschneider’s achievements by virtue of their concentrating only on certain aspects of his oeuvre that happen to quantitatively outweigh others. A perusal of writings by him not classifiable simply as “orientalist” or “bibliographic” in nature, however, tends to encourage a wider appreciation of his contributions to knowledge—and also gives rise to the question of his long-range goals as a cultural researcher.

In point of fact, my own interest in Steinschneider today is not so much to insist that he was a historian or was not a bibliographer, but rather to inquire into his oeuvre with the purpose of determining, as far as possible, how his research career might best be characterized in terms of scholarship—and in so doing, to detect whether any long-range unifying scheme sparked his labors. Let us consider certain well-known evidence, bibliographic or otherwise, that may be germane to these questions and their possible resolution.

By the time Steinschneider had reached his 21st year (1837), Leo-pold Zunz’s “Verein für Cultur und Wissenschaft des Judenthums” had already been established for 18 years, and his Zeitschrift für die...
Wissenschaft des Judenthums for 14 years; moreover, Zunz’s own writings—I refer particularly to Die Gottesdienstlichen Vorträge (1832) and, even more so, to his Zur Geschichte und Literatur (1845)—would soon be eloquently illustrating the scientific goals of the Verein and the Zeitschrift particularly as conceived by Zunz himself. Zunz’s goal went beyond earlier formulations of the “Jüdische Wissenschaft” concept—it was to establish, by the example of his own writings, a veritable science of Judaism, secularly conceived and based firmly on sound philological and historical method. The subject of this study was, and for him was always to be, Judaism and the history and culture of the Jewish people.

As for Steinschneider, at the early stages of his scholarly life he was apparently in full accord with this ideal. Yet it is no secret that in his youth, both in Prossnitz and later in Nikolsburg, while excelling as a student of Hebrew and Rabbinics, he also mastered Italian and French. He must have perceived soon enough his linguistic gifts. When at the age of 17 he moved to Prague (1833)—with Zunz’s Gottesdienstliche Vorträge having appeared but one year earlier—he divided his time between Hebraic studies at the Jewish Lehranstalt on the one hand, and other disciplines of a strictly non-Hebraic nature, including philosophy and modern languages, at the city’s Normalschule on the other hand.

This was the pattern he again followed, but with even greater intensity, after moving to Vienna in 1836, at the age of 20: immersing himself in advanced rabbinic studies leading to a mastery both of halakhic subjects and Hebrew language, as well as sessions with Leopold Dukes (1810–1891) in the areas of Jewish bibliography and medieval literature—while yet attending lectures in Arabic and other Semitic languages at the university’s Catholic theological faculty. And, while there, he also translated various moral fables of Hebrew, French and Italian origin into German for Abraham Belais’s Sammlung on that subject, as well as publishing, in book form, letters related to Samson Raphael Hirsch’s (then controversial) work Horeb.

Three years later, having reached his 23rd birthday, and by then, after tentative stays elsewhere, having moved to Leipzig, he furthered his Arabic, intensively, under the masterful Heinrich Leberecht Fleischer (1801–1888), initiated additional Hebraic and Semitic studies under Franz Julius Delitzsch (1813–1890), and even collaborated with the latter on an edition (published in 1841) of the Hebrew text of Etz Hayyim by the 14th-century Karaite Aaron ben Elijah.