REMEMBERING DAVID GOLDSTEIN
(1933–1987)

With the death of David Goldstein on 26 July 1987 the British Library lost one of its ablest and most productive curators. Nearly two years later this loss is still acutely felt by all his colleagues in the Hebrew Section, and in Oriental Collections, the department he had joined some twelve years earlier. The following is an attempt to record, briefly, his career, life, interests and achievements (both inside and outside the Library), to pay tribute to the inspiration he gave to all who worked with him and, sadly, to record the many unfulfilled promises and incomplete tasks left by his untimely death.

David Goldstein was born in London on 31 January 1933, the youngest of five children, three sons and two daughters. His parents owned a drapery shop in Hackney. In 1939, when he was six years old, the family home was bombed and David, together with one of his brothers, was evacuated to the country. The two boys found a temporary home in the house of two sisters in the village of Upwell, in Norfolk. Both sisters were devout Christians but a gentleman’s agreement was reached by which they undertook to abstain from any attempt to convert to Christianity the two little boys. They, in return, were expected to join the sisters at the local village church twice each Sunday; in David’s case this also meant attending the Sunday school. The agreement was scrupulously adhered to by both parties. By the time David returned to London, at the age of eleven, he had not only gained firm and lifelong friends in the sisters who had recognized his intellectual potential, and who were to follow his subsequent career with interest and pride, he had most probably also received the basic grounding for an unswerving liberal outlook.

Back in London David went to the Hackney Downs School where he distinguished himself in French, Latin and Greek but showed as yet no special interest in Hebrew or Hebrew literature. At the age of thirteen he was Bar Mitzvah and it moved him greatly. Six years later, just as he was about to go up to Oxford to read English Literature at St Edmund Hall, David’s mother died of cancer. This made a deep and lasting impression on him and decisively influenced his outlook on life. He became, on the one hand, strongly opposed to the idea of unnecessarily prolonging anybody’s life and sufferings, but on the other hand the tragedy seems to have given him an added zest and enthusiasm for life which never deserted him.
David’s love for English literature was not restricted to abstract scholarship; all his life he not only appreciated and avidly read but also wrote poetry. As an undergraduate at Oxford he had joined a group which called itself ‘The Makers’ and held regular meetings where poetry and short stories were read. In later life he used to look upon poetry as his ‘light reading’, diligently seeking out all new publications and keeping a complete collection of modern English poetry in his house. He remained greatly interested in seventeenth century English sermons and in the course of his Rabbinical career he was to become a fine writer of sermons himself.

While still at Oxford he also took steps to enhance his practical appreciation and love of music; at the age of twenty he learned the guitar and began to specialize in Spanish and Latin American music. As was the case with many of David’s interests and achievements his colleagues at the Library learned about this only by chance. Some colleagues still remember a courteous, though firm, unsigned note, being passed round the department which requested staff to put an end to the newly developing habit of stapling internal envelopes. ‘I am playing the guitar’, the note said, ‘and the staples are damaging the delicate skin on the tips of my fingers.’ It was with some surprise, and only after several younger colleagues had been suspected of secretly training for some more lucrative musical career, that we discovered that the author of the note had been David. There were other lifelong interests and involvements we discovered only by accident, such as the fact that he was a Fellow of the Royal Philatelic Society, a member of the M.C.C., and also of the Athenaeum.

David never stopped surprising us, not only with the brilliance of his work, the sheer volume and variety of his output, but also with his personality which had many more facets than any of us knew. He was never dogmatic, always willing to help, teach and learn, strong-willed and determined where necessary but also unfailingly gentle and generous. There was indeed much about him (as, for example, the fact that he was the principal founder of an active group of Amnesty International associated with the Liberal Jewish Synagogue) we only learned after his death.

In 1956 David took his M.A. and prepared himself to become an English teacher. His life and career seemed settled. Then, in the course of the year, he met the distinguished Talmudic scholar Abraham Spiro who persuaded him that a Jew as deeply committed and as sensitive to literature should extend his interest from English to Hebrew, and help make other members of his community aware of their own heritage. David agreed and just before his marriage that same year to Berenice Phillips he embarked on the study of Hebrew literature under Dr Ernst Wiesenburg, Siegfried Stein and Joseph Weiss at University College, London. His wife, who had herself always been involved with liberal Judaism, gave him her full moral support and continued with her job to assist him financially.

In 1959, after having been awarded a B.A., David started his Rabbinical career and became a Minister at the South London Liberal Synagogue. In 1964 he moved to St John’s Wood Liberal Synagogue and two years later he became a full Rabbi. In the intervening years he had first studied for his M.A. at University College, London, as
a part-time student and then embarked on a Ph.D. thesis on ‘The commentary of Immanuel ben Solomon of Rome on chapters I-X of Genesis’. He obtained his doctorate in 1966. By then his first son Joshua had been born.

Between 1967 and 1975 David continued at the Liberal Synagogue at St John’s Wood. In addition he worked as part-time lecturer in Medieval Jewish History and Jewish Bible Commentary at the Leo Baeck College in London, gave lectures at the Institute of Jewish Studies (London), Exeter University, the University of Lancaster and the University of Manchester. In 1971 he spent some time in America and gave a course of lectures on Hebrew studies at the University of Wisconsin. In the meantime two more sons were born, Daniel in 1963 and Benjamin in 1966, and his wife had left her job to devote herself fully to the growing family.

David had by then already started his astounding publishing career. In 1966 he published *Hebrew Poems from Spain*, a book that established his reputation as a scholar and translator of medieval Jewish literature; revised and expanded, it was reprinted in 1971 under the title *The Jewish Poets of Spain 900–1250*. David once said that this was the work which gave him most satisfaction and pleasure since it had not only allowed him to explore the literature he loved, but also to use his own poetic gifts and sensibilities.

A year earlier he and Rabbi Dr Lewis Jacobs had become the founding editors of the Littmann Library of Jewish Civilisation. The series, originally published by Routledge, is now with the Oxford University Press. So far fifty volumes have been produced and at the time of his death David was, despite his many other commitments, still one of the joint editors. The publication enjoys the respect of the scholarly community and is in fact only rivalled by the Yale Judaica Series.

In 1975 David joined the recently founded British Library as a Research Assistant in the Hebrew Section of the Department of Oriental Manuscripts and Printed Books (now Oriental Collections). His love for books and literature had long been focussed on the Library’s unique collection of Hebrew books and manuscripts but, typically, he heard about the vacancy by accident in the course of a casual conversation with Dr Richard Barnett, the then Keeper of Western Antiquities in the British Museum.

David’s first task was the *Second Supplementary Catalogue of Hebrew Printed Books*, a project with a somewhat chequered history. It contains all material acquired between 1893 and 1960 and consists mainly of Rabbinical works printed in eastern and central Europe at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, together with rare items published in India, also some beautifully bound Sephardi prayer books of earlier centuries and several incunables. The catalogue represents an important bibliographical tool and has for long been eagerly awaited by the scholarly community. Indeed in the 1960s a question had been asked in Parliament about its long overdue publication. It was a daunting task, several attempts having been made over the years to edit the 10,000 or so entries kept in seventeen boxes on blue slips written with varying degrees of legibility by a number of different and often very temporary editors. For some mysterious reason progress had so far nearly always been
arrested at the letter F, with certain earlier sections still unedited. David, who by now was already an experienced editor, established a much more precise format and organized the work in such a manner that, when promoted to Assistant Keeper I (Curator C) and Head of the Hebrew Section two years later, he was able to hand over the task to a younger member of staff. Under his guidance and inspiration Dr Diana Rowland-Smith has now completed the mammoth task. The catalogue is in the press and will be dedicated to David’s memory.

Under David’s leadership the Section gained new direction and momentum. Though embarking straight away on an ambitious publication programme he always took his full share in the less glamorous and more mundane tasks of library work such as cataloguing and indexing current printed material, identifying objects and answering routine queries. His wide knowledge and appreciation of Hebrew literature, both religious and secular, and his detached and scholarly attitude greatly enriched the collection. Lacunae amongst the early printed books were filled and despite slowly decreasing financial resources the department was able to secure the acquisition of a substantial number of rare and valuable manuscripts. Though like most of his colleagues he still retained a slight nostalgia for the old British Museum’s values, David was well aware of the necessity of transforming the collection into a library more attuned to the needs of current research, not only in Rabbinical studies but also in modern Hebrew literature, politics and Jewish history.

In 1982 David advised the Treasury on the acquisition of twenty-six Hebrew manuscripts from the famous Sassoon Collection, in lieu of estate duties, and also supervised their allocation to British libraries. Under the terms of the arrangement the British Library received eight items, amongst them such treasures as an illustrated manuscript of Maimonides’s *Guide for the Perplexed* copied in Spain about 1350, and a seventeenth-century illuminated copy of the Judaeo-Persian work *Fatnamah* by Imrani of Shiraz. This was the Library’s most important Hebrew acquisition for over half a century. To celebrate the event, David arranged an exhibition of these manuscripts in August and September 1982. Other exhibitions he organized were: ‘Illustration in early Hebrew printing, 1474–1700’, December 1979–June 1980; and a year earlier ‘Maimonides’s *Mishneh Torah*: 800 years’.

As a colleague David was cheerful with a fine sense of humour often tinged with an element of healthy self-mockery. He had no time for hypocrisy or pretension. He was, he claimed, ambitious and as such selfish in his wish for achievement. Authors, he once said, were people who hated writing; what they did like was seeing their names on the covers of books: it was only in order to fill the space between those covers that they wrote. He had a great generosity of spirit; in all the years he worked in the department he never spoke ill of anybody—neither did anybody ever speak ill of him.

David’s colleagues rarely knew about a new publication or a new project of his before it either appeared in print or had at least reached an advanced stage of preparation, if not completion. Thus, in 1985 there appeared *Hebrew Incunables in the British Isles*, a preliminary census of all fifteenth-century Hebrew printed books in libraries and private
collections in Great Britain. The census was to form the basis for a more detailed work on the same subject, a catalogue of fifteenth-century Hebrew books, which was to be the last volume of the British Library Catalogue Series of early printed books. At the time of his death David had only just started work on this publication.

In the same year as the census he also brought out a facsimile edition of the so-called Ashkenazi Haggadah, a fifteenth-century illuminated manuscript of the Passover ritual written and illuminated by Joel ben Simeon, called Feibusch Ashkenazi, with a commentary attributed to Eleazar Ben Judah of Worms. The book was published by Thames and Hudson and appeared simultaneously in Great Britain, America, France and Germany. It is a fine reproduction of the British Library copy and contains David’s transcription and translation of the text, an introduction, notes on the illuminations and an evaluation of the work’s historical importance. Aimed at the general public it is both easily understandable and a work of great scholarship. In the following year it won the silver medal for the ‘Most beautiful book in the world’ at the Leipzig Book Fair. It has also proved a successful revenue earner for the Library.

David’s gift for popularizing a subject without compromising its scholarly integrity, combining depth with clarity and using his fine feeling for the English language, which had distinguished his translation of the Jewish poets of Spain, also came to the forefront in his Jewish Folklore and Legend, a work first published in 1980, and then later, in 1987, re-issued, in a revised edition under the (in his own opinion ill-chosen) title Jewish Mythology. In 1985, a rich and productive year, he used this same combination of qualities for his Hebrew Manuscript Painting in which he explained and described Jewish literature, traditions and ideas, and the art of Hebrew manuscript illustration, in a simple and straightforward manner designed to bring the subject, and the Library’s collection on which the illustrations are based, to the attention of a wider audience.

During his time in the Library he accepted a good deal of additional responsibility. The Yiddish collection, consisting of some 10,000 printed books and about one hundred newspaper and periodical titles, which had for long led a somewhat neglected existence in the Library’s German language section, was transferred to Oriental Collections in 1978. David actively expanded the collection and transformed it into a significant source for research and study. Within the collection itself, there had been a large gap in the Library’s holdings of Yiddish and Hebrew books published in America before 1960. With the assistance of the American Trust for the British Library and under his guidance, this shortcoming was much reduced. In 1985 he took over, on a temporary basis, responsibility for the collections of the Christian Middle East encompassing the Library’s valuable holdings of Amharic, Ethiopic, Coptic, Syriac, Armenian and Georgian printed books and manuscripts. This was a difficult assignment and it is largely because of the tact and understanding with which he handled it that the Christian Middle East is now an independent Section with its own Head.

Outside the Library David was actively involved in Jewish Studies and Hebrew librarianship. He was at various times President of the Jewish Historical Society of England; Member of the Mocatta Library Committee; Member of the Leo Baeck
College Library Committee; Member of the London Society for the Study of Religion; Hon. Treasurer of the British Association of Jewish Studies; Chairman of the Anglo-Jewish Archives; and Member of the Wiener Library Appeal Committee. In 1985 he had been instrumental, together with the Curators in charge of the Hebrew collections in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, and Cambridge University Library in forming the Hebraica Libraries Group which is now taking a leading role in the preservation, promotion, and the bibliographical control of Hebrew library material.

David was a sought-after and tireless book reviewer. His contributions which, as one editor put it, always showed 'quiet erudition, wit and generosity', appeared in The Times Literary Supplement, The Library, The Jewish Chronicle, The Jewish Quarterly, The Jewish Observer, Middle East Review, Pointer and European Judaism. In addition he worked on television programmes such as ‘The Passover of the Yemeni Jews’ for the Open University, gave radio broadcasts and innumerable lectures.

He was also well acquainted with all the major Hebrew collections of continental Europe. On behalf of the Library or of his own accord, he had visited the libraries of Copenhagen, Amsterdam and Paris. He had made several trips to Israel and to the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, establishing and renewing contacts with scholars and booksellers, initiating co-operative programmes, demonstrating by his own work and his own approach that the scholarship for which the old British Museum Library had been famous was still a living tradition in the new British Library. One of the projects he was working on at the time of his death was a catalogue of Gaster manuscripts in the British Library which was to be published in association with the Jewish National Library in Jerusalem.

It was unfortunately during one of these official visits abroad, a two-week trip to Hungary, sponsored by the British Council in the Autumn of 1986, that he fell seriously ill. The purpose of the visit had been to examine Hebrew material in the renowned Kaufmann Collection at the Jewish Theological Seminary in Budapest and to forge new links with Hungarian Jewish scholars by lectures and discussions. He was then at the height of his power, full of plans and projects. His work diary for the next two years had already begun to fill up. The New York Public Library had just asked him to co-operate on a prestigious and ambitious exhibition called ‘A sign and a witness’, planned for Autumn 1988, which was to give an account of the Hebrew book from antiquity to modern times. Apart from arranging for the loan of some of the Library’s most valuable manuscripts David had also agreed to write an article on ‘Early years of Hebrew printing’ for the catalogue; this contribution was to appear eventually as an independent monograph in conjunction with Oxford University Press.

The last few months of David’s life brought him many personal and professional recognitions and triumphs. In 1986 his name had been proposed for Merit Promotion to Deputy Keeper. Sadly, there were bureaucratic delays and the final announcement of his promotion reached him only in the Spring of 1987. In May he was jointly awarded the George Webber Translation Prize, administered by the Oxford Centre for Post-Graduate Hebrew Studies, for his English translation of the Mishnat Ha-Zohar,
a complex kabbalistic work. On a personal level his son Benjamin, who had inherited David’s love of English literature (Joshua having turned to accountancy and Daniel to journalism and modern music), had his first play performed in Sheffield and had also just been accepted as a post-graduate student of creative writing at the University of East Anglia.

David died on 26 July 1987. During his time in the Library he had often said to colleagues that he looked forward to retirement when he would have time to devote his energy towards completing some of the more urgent tasks in the area of Jewish bibliography and Hebrew scholarship. There are indeed, as the bibliography of his writings shows, a large number of projects left in various stages of completion. There are, in addition, others he had barely started; indeed some he had only just begun to plan, as, for example, a careful and exact list of all Hebrew periodicals in the British Library which he perceived as a much needed reference tool. His main reaction to his illness was one of anger, anger that his life should be cut short when there was so much to be done and so much he wanted to do. It was an anger his colleagues shared. Looking at the amount of his achievements, the list of his publications, one is taken aback at how much he did manage to condense in the time available to him.

Though he wrote poetry all his life David never made any serious attempt to have his work published. We are grateful to his wife Berenice for making one of his poems available to us and allowing us to publish it. We feel that, more than anything we could say, this poem demonstrates his attitude to books and learning, the deep commitment he felt towards all intellectual pursuit and the pleasure he took in the adventures of the spirit.

The book stands before me on the desk,
and I hesitate to join the fray,
to read it, to explain away,
to extract meanings at the slightest risk.

But still there is an argument
confronting me from every page
a quarrel I cannot assuage,
which makes the air more turbulent

Than the sophisticated fantasies,
the squabbles of the academic,
who displays his acrobatics,
to contribute before he dies.

The verse cries out: ‘Explain me.’
And there is no avoiding Abraham,
epitome of querying man,
whose questioning contains me;
No flight from the confrontation of the divine with humanity, and the overriding sanity of conceded frustrations.

The squarish letters on the white, are barbed wire barricades, armed with grammatical aids, I come warily to fight.

We all loved and respected David and we feel we can do no better than borrow a line from his poem and say: he certainly did contribute before he died.

ALBERTINE GAUR

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