

Moshe Davis

It is not often that an individual involved in Jewish life makes major academic and cultural contributions to both the Diaspora and Israel. Professor Moshe Davis was such a person. He died in Jerusalem on the 7th day of Pesach 5756 at the age of 80. He was actively involved in educational projects until his death.

Davis' life in the United States was anchored in the Jewish Theological Seminary which ordained him in 1936, and where he served as Professor of American Jewish History, Dean of the Teachers Institute, Seminary Provost, a founder of Camps Ramah, and the first editor of the Eternal Light Program on NBC. He was also a leader in Ha'Noar Ha'Ivri, an organizer of the Massad Hebrew Camps, the Hebrew Arts Foundation, and the Hebrew Arts School of Music and Drama.

In Israel, where he settled in 1959, Davis taught at the Hebrew University — he was the first American Jew to have received a doctoral degree from that institution — organized and headed the President's Study Circles on World Jewry, the Center for Contemporary Jewry and, upon retirement, the International Center for University Teaching of Jewish Civilization.

At his shloshim, Charles Liebman, prominent sociologist and Professor of Political Science at Bar Ilan University, spoke of Davis' religious legacy. An excerpt of his address follows:

MOSHE DAVIS was a religious liberal who took his religious imperatives seriously, and acknowledged religion's role in shaping both public life and private conduct. He was tolerant and understanding of those who disagreed with him, and avoided imposing his own beliefs on others. Furthermore, his understanding of the Jewish religion and tradition was a liberal one. It not only allowed for human weakness but viewed the very gist of the tradition in an expansive and permissive manner. Sephardim in Israel were once notable for combining devotion to the tradition's core with openness, a generosity of spirit, and the ability to accommodate religious commitments to modern life. Many of them now appear to have either abandoned the tradition or adopted the rigidity and narrowness of spirit we have come to associate with Ashkenazic religiosity. It was Moshe's hope that the Masorti movement could recapture the original Sephardic spirit, and he was anxious that the movement include larger numbers of Sephardim.

Moshe's scholarly propensities were also part of his religious persona. I'm not referring to his scholarly research or academic interests but to his

scholarly disposition — above all else a grain of skepticism that accompanied everything he did despite his commitment and passion to Jews and Judaism, to religion and tradition.

It was a combination of religious seriousness and religious liberalism that helps explain Moshe's concern with Christian attitudes toward Judaism in general and toward Zion in particular. For the most part, we Jews don't engage in God talk. Academics in particular find talking about God a bit awkward. We are unlikely to ask ourselves, as did the Prophets, what does God demand of us? If we are religiously serious, we are more likely to ask what the tradition or *halakhah* demands of us. Moshe was no different. Christians, especially Protestants, are very different in this regard. And because Moshe was a religious liberal he appreciated the poignancy of the Christian position. He could understand that Zion and indeed Zionism in Christian eyes had parallels in the Jewish tradition but could only be appreciated within the context of a Christian world view. And he invited the collaboration of Christian friends and scholars in explicating this point of view — an enterprise which occupied much of his attention in the last decades of his life. It may have also had something to do with the establishment of the Lehman Institute on Religion and Ethics at the Jewish Theological Seminary, an enterprise in which Moshe played a role.

It was the religiously liberal side of Moshe that made him attentive to Mordecai Kaplan. However, like many of his generation, he had ambivalent feelings about Kaplan's theology. But he accepted the notion of Judaism as a civilization — or religious civilization. Any one familiar with contemporary Jewish studies knows of Moshe's work in establishing in Jerusalem the International Center for the University Teaching of Jewish Civilization, and the major role it plays in the advancement of Jewish studies throughout the world — among non-Jews as well as Jews. Less well known is the link between this project and the work Moshe carried out almost fifty years ago, in collaboration with Simon Greenberg, in establishing the University of Judaism in California. Their hope, following Kaplan, was to create an institution where the totality of Jewish civilization would be studied. It was only in reading Debra Dash Moore's recent study of post-war Judaism in Los Angeles that I became aware of Moshe's key role in this regard. I also learned of his critical role in formulating the philosophy of Ramah camps — a philosophy which is embedded in the notion of Judaism as a culture or civilization.

Moshe was a Conservative Jew, but of a particular kind. To understand this, we must be attentive to his conception of the Historical School of Judaism about which he wrote so authoritatively. As we know, he loved Jews and Judaism. But to say this is to distort Moshe's basic position. He was too involved, too much a part of the Jewish people and the Jewish

tradition, to transform it into an object of love. We can only love something which is apart or separate from us. We love a person, an object, or a tradition if we are capable of distancing ourselves from it, of assessing how we feel towards it. That was not Moshe's stance. His primary position was not love, or even admiration or awe, but engagement. The Jewish people were *his* people and the Jewish tradition *his* tradition, but how he *felt* about this people or its tradition was a secondary matter. Painfully aware that modernity means *choosing*, Moshe, in his own life, didn't really choose. His engagement with Jews and Judaism dictated the conduct of his life. And this was his conception of the Historical School of Judaism. This is what he believed the Conservative movement was meant to be.

The notion of "engagement" both limits and liberates. It limits us in one sense because it denies us the freedom to choose. The Historical School and in its wake the Conservative movement is pre-modern. It doesn't pretend that Judaism is a body of amorphous and fluid doctrine subject to the private interpretation of individuals. There *is* such a thing as Judaism existing independently of what we call it or what we make of it. But if we are truly engaged with Judaism, the very engagement shapes its nature. Jewish history or Jewish tradition do not command our allegiance because they are transcendent entities to which we owe a moral obligation. They command our fealty because they are what we are. We shape the tradition as we engage ourselves with it — as long as that engagement is honest and authentic. None of the founders of the Historical School, and least of all Moshe Davis, expected us to assume a posture or to accommodate a morality external to ourselves and to our own conscience. On the contrary, they believed that through engagement with the tradition both our morality and the moral precepts of the tradition would evolve.

This is an exquisitely delicate process. It is not one that is confined to Judaic scholars although they are especially suited to provide guidance. But the basic criteria are honest engagement and confrontation.

Such a position, in turn, dictates one's attitude toward other denominations in Jewish life. Moshe recognized that many Orthodox Jews, both here and abroad, were really partners to his conception of Judaism. He welcomed them. My own disagreement with him stemmed from his tendency to define them as Conservative Jews, but surely this was done out of affection, admiration, and the keen desire to share his struggle with them and their struggle with him. But he also opined that the bulk of Orthodox Jews today were not engaged with Judaism. Instead, their attitude is one of submission. And submission, however admirable, is a process of disassociation and alienation. Like members of the Historical School whom he studied, and the leaders of classical Conservative Judaism, Moshe was convinced that Orthodoxy's interpretation of the tradition was lacking. Nonetheless, he

retained a profound respect for Orthodoxy's commitment to the tradition, and even some empathy with its refusal to engage the tradition — an enterprise fraught with danger, perhaps only suitable, as David Weiss Halivni believes, to a religious and scholarly elite.

Reform Judaism, on the other hand, is an entirely different matter. An apt metaphor for Moshe's relationship to the tradition would be that of Jacob becoming joined to the angel as he wrestles with him. Conservative Judaism, at least ideally, wrestles whereas the Orthodox inclination is to give in. The Reform simply walk away. Sidney Morgenbesser, about as sharp a mind and tongue as American Jewry ever produced, once explained to me why he had little regard for Mordecai Kaplan as a religious personality: "He gave up too easily on God." To paraphrase Morgenbesser, Reform has given up too easily on tradition. The test of the authentic Conservative Jew, unlike the Reform Jew, is that he knows in his heart that he cannot enjoy the option of walking away. It would mean a cop out, one's surrender.

It is not surprising therefore that Moshe was distressed by the behavior of the Masorti movement in Israel which has so closely aligned itself with the Progressive movement. The two have become indistinguishable in the eyes of the Israeli media, and this is a travesty of what Conservative Judaism meant to him and to many of us here this evening.

Moshe Davis' contributions to the Jewish people live on, of course, in the magnificent institutions which he established and nourished. His religious legacy is less well known, but that doesn't make it any less significant or relevant for the contemporary Jewish world. □