

WE REMEMBER OUR COLLEAGUES

NAHUM M. SARNA 1923–2005

Marc Zvi Brettler



Nahum M. Sarna, a founding member of AJS, and its president from 1984 to 1985, died on June 23. Sarna was born in London in 1923 to an active Jewish and Zionist home—his late father was a well-known Jewish bookdealer in London. Sarna was especially interested in the sciences and engineering, but felt that the atmosphere in these professions was too anti-Semitic in England. He therefore studied Jewish studies, receiving his training in rabbinics at Jews College, London, and his B.A. and M.A. from the University College London (1946–49). One requirement for admission to the University was Latin, which Sarna taught himself; he later memorized *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*. Sarna had hoped to continue studying rabbinics with Arthur Marmorstein, but when Marmorstein died, Sarna went to study in Israel. He stayed there for two years, unable to find a suitable program due to the displacement of the Hebrew University after the War of Independence. He then settled in the United States in 1951, and

received his Ph.D. in biblical studies and Semitic languages from Dropsie College, Philadelphia, where Cyrus H. Gordon was his primary teacher.

Sarna taught at Gratz College in Philadelphia from 1951 to 1957 when he was appointed librarian of the Jewish Theological Seminary and member of its faculty. In 1965 he joined the Near Eastern and Judaic Studies Department at Brandeis University, where he taught for two decades and served as department chair. After retiring from Brandeis in 1985, he held a number of visiting professorships, and was Gimelstob Eminent Scholar and Professor of Judaica at Florida Atlantic University until shortly before his death.

Sarna's range was extraordinary. As a student of Cyrus Gordon, he was acquainted with the major Semitic languages of the ancient world; as a student of Isidore Epstein and Arthur Marmorstein, he had mastered rabbinic and classical medieval Jewish texts; and as a product of the British university system, he had a strong classical training and was attuned to the literary merit of texts. He also became interested in the Dead Sea Scrolls, and trained leading scholars in how rabbinic material might elucidate them. He was extremely close to the Israeli Bible establishment, and was deeply influenced by Kaufmann's magisterial *History of Israelite Religion*. But he was more interested in interpreting texts and less interested in history of religion than Kaufmann. In his work, Sarna rarely cited the documentary hypothesis, and often highlighted the moral values of the biblical text and the meaning of the final form of the text. His training allowed him to develop the idea of inner-biblical interpretation, namely the

manner in which late biblical texts are rabbinic-like in how they interpret earlier biblical texts; this method was further developed by his students, especially Michael Fishbane. Sarna, with his deep understanding of rabbinic texts, also wrote on medieval Jewish biblical interpretation and its value for modern biblical scholars, and he offered special insight into the process of canonization, discussed in several difficult and enigmatic rabbinic texts.

Sarna was involved in many of the most prestigious biblical projects in the second half of the twentieth century. He served as a translator for *Kethuvim* in the new Jewish Publication Society translation of the Bible and the general editor of its Bible Commentary Project, and, after retiring from Brandeis University, as an academic consultant for JPS. He was a departmental editor of the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* for Bible, and also contributed major articles to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the *Encyclopaedia Hebraica*, the *Encyclopaedia Biblica Hebraica*, the *Encyclopaedia of Religion*, and the *Oxford Companion to the Bible*. He wrote more than 100 scholarly articles, some of which were collected in *Studies in Biblical Interpretation*.

One of the major thrusts of his work has been to make the Bible and biblical scholarship available to the broad Jewish community. This may be seen in: *Understanding Genesis* (1966); *Exploring Exodus* (1986); *Commentary on Genesis* (1989); *Commentary on Exodus* (1991); and *Songs of the Heart: An Introduction to the Book of Psalms* (1993). In his final years, he had been working on another volume interpreting selected psalms, a monograph on the jubilee year, and

a book on the post-exilic period.

Sarna's sixty-year career spans the growth of Jewish biblical studies at secular universities in America, and he played a major role in this development. When he began teaching, it was difficult for Jewish biblical scholars to find employment in this area (Isaac Rabinowitz at Cornell was a rare exception); by the time he had retired from Brandeis, American Jewish Bible scholarship was well established, with many institutions seeking young scholars trained in both critical and Jewish-classical methods of biblical explication. Sarna played a major role in this transformation.

Sarna was a masterful teacher, engaging, witty, demanding, and meticulously prepared for every class. At least once a week in class, he would read from one of his index cards: "On such and such a date, when I taught this passage, Mr. or Ms. So and So (a former student) suggested that this verse or word should be interpreted in the following way." Sarna never followed fashions or fads, but was punctilious

about giving other people credit; when pressed, he said that he meant to illustrate the rabbinic dictum, based on a verse in Esther: "anyone who cites a tradition in the name of its originator brings redemption to the world."

Sarna loved interacting with students, scholars, and members of the community; he was also an active teacher of adults. He especially enjoyed intermingling with the wide-ranging and distinguished faculty of JTS when he taught there; in his latter years, a picture of the late Saul Lieberman hung in his study. Beginning in the mid-1970s, Sarna became especially close to the late Marvin Fox, professor of Jewish thought at Brandeis—they shared a common sense of humor, a belief in standards, and an interest in Jewish studies from its earliest through its most recent manifestations. After his main collaborators in the JPS *Kethuvim* volume, Moshe Greenberg and Jonas Greenfield, moved to Jerusalem, Sarna would spend an extended period every year there working with them; he

considered this *hevruta* type experience to be the intellectual highlight of his scholarly career.

Sarna raised several generations of students in all fields of Jewish studies who will continue his legacy. This legacy is not expressed through a "Sarna school of biblical interpretation," for Sarna allowed, even encouraged, his students to disagree with his views, as long as they paid close attention to texts, and did not become what he called "psychoceramics"—crack-pots. (Sarna was an avid punster.) His legacy is expressed through a deep and abiding sense of the Bible's beauty and value, which he conveyed to us, and we try to pass on to others. May his memory be a blessing.

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We Remember Our Colleagues

We request members of AJS, as well as directors and chairs of Jewish studies departments, centers, and programs to inform the AJS office about the deaths of their colleagues. We ask that you also help us to identify an appropriate colleague who will write an obituary about the deceased to be published in AJS Perspectives.

AJS Perspectives is published in the fall and spring, therefore obituaries need to be submitted by February 1 and August 1. We seek to honor the memories of people who have been teachers, scholars, librarians, and archivists in the field of Jewish studies.

Please send this information to ajs@ajs.cjh.org.