

# THANKS TO AARON KATCHEN

Lawrence H. Schiffman



Ten years ago when AJS invited Aaron Katchen to assume the post of executive secretary, AJS was a different organization. A series of dedicated administrations, with the assistance of Charles Berlin as executive secretary, had transformed the fledgling AJS into a respectable learned society. AJS had developed a journal of high standing, and its annual conference, regularly held in Boston's Copley Plaza Hotel, afforded growing numbers of scholars and graduate students the opportunity to develop, to share their ideas, and to feel part of an expanding academic enterprise. While we all knew there was much to do, we were convinced that AJS had grown to maturity, and that Charlie's replacement would oversee a continuation of the past, with some expanded member services. But we could not know when Aaron assumed office that we all would be presiding—Aaron and the officers—over the development of AJS into a much larger and more centralized organization.

Shortly after coming into office, Aaron's title was changed to executive director. This change signified a transition of the position from part-time (theoretically) to full-time and toward greater professionalization. More and more, the

business of AJS became the province of Aaron and later of his dedicated assistant Miranda Rich Winer. In the years of his service, the number of members and conference participants grew, as did the number of those who turned to AJS from outside for guidance and assistance. Due to Aaron's efforts, AJS began to hold its conference in other cities, so that eventually we traversed even the Rockies to reach California. His ability to favorably negotiate contracts with hotels was a key factor, as was his willingness to undertake the trips necessary to make all this happen.

His gentle, salesman-like way brought us new members, new exhibitors, and new conference participants. What is more, because we meet every year, we have become one of the major Judaic studies conferences in the world, greatly increasing our European and Israeli membership. When the World Union of Jewish Studies invited our president to be an ex-officio member of their board, Aaron stood in at several meetings, creating a close working relationship with that organization. He successfully stewarded the transition of our journal from its initial publisher, Ktav, who placed faith in us at a time when our organization was just coming into being, to the prestigious Cambridge University Press. He also helped restart our newsletter under the new title *AJS Perspectives*, even proofing the issues himself.

So here we are now, after ten years, and unbelievable accomplishments under Aaron's leadership, and I am supposed to be able to express our thanks? How can I?

For many of us, besides his great professional accomplishments for AJS and with AJS, there is Aaron the friend. There is virtually no one here who does not count him as a personal friend, and has not been helped by him in some way, professionally or personally. For me, it is more complex. Aaron and I have worked together for nine years, at times talking every day. Much of what I am often thanked for was done by him or would not have been done without him.

Our relationship has been very close, sharing in happy and, unfortunately, sad occasions. In the early years, Aaron had

the support of his devoted wife, Rosalie, עייה, who was a close colleague of my wife in the Judaica library field. We were two families e-mailing each other daily, and the friendship even extended to the next generation. So for me, it is all the more difficult to say thanks to Aaron, knowing how deep his dedication to our work runs, and—and I want to stress this—how his unending sacrifices made it possible for me to be so involved in AJS while so busy at New York University and with other academic pursuits.

When Aaron decided to step down from this position, we realized that the task of replacing him would be difficult. This was especially the case when we decided to move the office to the Center for Jewish History in New York, a move that has great potential for our future role in the field. When Rona Sheramy was selected as the new executive director, Aaron went to work with his usual devotion to make sure that Rona would have all the help necessary to ensure that this year's conference would be unaffected by the complex transition, and to facilitate moving the AJS office to New York. If you want to know what kind of person Aaron is, look at the picture of the smiling duo, our outgoing and incoming executive directors, in the last issue of *Perspectives*.

I have no words of thanks to offer except to suggest that we all ought to follow the advice of Mishnah Avot and emulate his ways:

הוה מתלמידיו של אהרן,  
אוהב שלום ורודף שלום,  
אוהב את הבריות ומקרבתן לתורה.

Be like the students of Aaron: Love peace and run after peace, love one's fellow creatures, and bring them close—permit the homiletical license here—to the field of Judaic studies and the support of the Association for Jewish Studies.

Aaron, thank you!

*Lawrence H. Schiffman is the Ethel and Irvin A. Edelman Professor in Hebrew and Judaic Studies at New York University. He is also the former president of the Association for Jewish Studies.*