Getting to know state-side Jews

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Considering the importance of America’s role in Israeli life, it may come as a surprise that Israel’s archives don’t hold much on the history of the American Jewish community. But that situation has begun to improve, with the arrival of Dr. Jonathan Sarna.

Sarna is the Joseph H. & Belle R. Braun professor of American Jewish history at Brandeis University, where he chairs the Hornstein Jewish Professional Leadership Program. He is also the president of the Association for Jewish Studies and chief historian of the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia.

Clearly he is just the person to help the National Library of Israel get its American Jewish archival house in order, which is just what he has been doing for the past few weeks from an office at the Givat Ram institution.

The historian says his temporary berth in Jerusalem was prompted by the national repository’s planned move to a new spot down the road, near the Knesset.

“The library invited me to come and write a report on their holdings dealing with American Jewry, as they think about moving to a new location. I guess the thought was that they should really take a look at some collections,” says Sarna. “For some years it had been known that, understandably, Americans was weaker here than some other collections.”

That, he points out, was not due to any bias against documentation of the Jewish community in “the new world,” rather, he puts it down to Stateside technology and efficiency.

“If we, here at the National Library, don’t collect information about Jews in Arab lands, it’ll disappear. But America is full of libraries that collect” information about local Jewry, he explains. “The question is, what should the National Library do?”

While accumulating information and physical moments is important, the bottom line for any library is making its collections available to the populace. This is a crucial area of Sarna’s work here.

“The library is thinking about itself in new ways,” he observes. “Once upon a time, it was a very traditional library — books, pamphlets, that’s what they wanted. Then they started thinking about oral history, a sound library, music, all of those things.”

Having a fresh pair of eyes, and hands, on board generally helps to shake things up, and when the dust settles, one often comes across unexpected developments.

“I was surprised that, in some areas, the library had more archival material bearing on American Jewish life than they knew or I knew,” Sarna says. “There were Americans who settled in Israel, who brought stuff over [and] no one knows how it got here.”

ONE SUCH item particularly appealed to Sarna.

“There is this amazing document — I actually knew it was here, and I once wrote about it. [It’s] a ketuba [Jewish marriage contract] with an amazing signature — Haim Salomon... the 18th-century hero — and [the signatures of] a few other very significant American Jews,” enthuses the American historian. Salomon was a Polish-born Jew who put his financial skills to great effect, and basically helped George Washington’s army gain victory in the American Revolution.

But there is more to the historical document than just the social standing of the witnesses.

“You read the ketuba, and you realize what a strange ketuba this is,” continues Sarna. “This is a ketuba of a kohen who is marrying a giyoret [female convert to Judaism].”

According to Halacha, a kohen — a member of the priestly caste — is forbidden to marry a convert, so the document, and the fact that such prominent members of the American Jewish community sanctioned the illegal union, is an earthshaker.

“The Mikveh Israel synagogue in Philadelphia refused to perform the wedding. However, they had just fought a revolution, and America is a free country,” Sarna says.

It appears that a combination of this free-thinking attitude and compassion — not to mention romance — won out.

“Here was a guy who was already in his 30s, and she was a widow... and they fell in love. I guess that Haim Salomon and the others who signed it said, ‘You know what? God won’t mind so much,’ and they carried out this wedding. They did it privately, which is what is so amazing.”

This was a genuine landmark event, and the ketuba is tangible evidence of the more liberal zeitgeist of American Jewry compared to the atmosphere in Eastern Europe. American pragmatism did the trick.

Sarna surmises that Jacob Cohen, the bridegroom, had found his way from the small Jewish community of Richmond, Virginia, to Philadelphia in the hope of finding a mate.

“For a brief time, after the revolution, Philadelphia had the largest Jewish community in America — a lot of immigrants had gathered there,” he explains.

Cohen, it seems, was a man of means, so it is somewhat surprising that he “settled” for a widowed mother, who was a convert to boot. Presumably
he could have had his pick of single Jewish women. But Sarna points out that US Jewish numbers were not too accommodating 250 years ago. “There were only 3,000 Jews in the whole country, and not a lot of women – and there are limits to what a historian can figure out, and I can’t tell you why he fell in love with her,” he says with a chuckle. “But it is fascinating to see that this may be the beginning of thinking that maybe some Jews can rebel against the rabbis occasionally.”

Sarna was delighted to see the evidence of the seismic development with his own eyes. “I had seen a copy of the ketuba, but here they have the real thing. It is also enormously valuable, because anything with Haim Salomon’s signature is enormously valuable, and of course, it has this whole story connected to it. You never know what will turn up.”

OF COURSE, the National Library is not a lone player in the Jewish documentation field, and Sarna is keen for local library users to benefit from the efforts of like-minded bodies around the global village. “There are places with which you can make collaborations, and that’s part of what I am trying to help the library do,” he says. “My hope is that the library will be able to amalgamate material and make it more accessible.”

Although one might think the Internet has already solved that problem, Sarna says that in fact researchers and lay people alike can be bamboozled by the sheer volume of data out there, and sometimes struggle to identify the sources they need. “The problem with the Web is that there’s so much there that nobody really knows what’s there, and the information can be in very strange places,” he says.

“For example, there is some magnificent material put on the Web by the College of Charleston in South Carolina, Jewish ephemera and pictures of synagogues. Not so many people would think of looking at the website of the College of Charleston for that. You’d have to dig very deep in Google to find it.”

He would like to see global repositories of data be easily accessible to National Library users. Will there, then, be a prominent link between the library’s website and that of the College of Charleston? “If they take my advice, there will be,” he says with alacrity. “I think the average person would have trouble, the way the Web is set up, figuring out what a magnificent website with wonderful material there is at Charleston – and of course, you have Wikipedia with stuff that isn’t always reliable.”

When he’s not helping the National Library out or enriching the knowledge of his students at Brandeis, Sarna also finds time for his own research. Earlier this year, together with Benjamin Shapell, he published an impressive tome called Lincoln and the Jews: A History, which sheds light on the iconic US president’s friendly attitude towards the emerging American Jewish community of the mid-19th century.

For starters, Lincoln counteracted a move by Maj.-Gen. Ulysses S. Grant to expel all Jews from his military district. Sarna also says Lincoln was instrumental in changing the way the United States thought about religion in general, and in making America a more pluralistic society. “In Lincoln’s time, of course you needed chaplains in the army, but according to Congress, a chaplain had to be a minister of some Christian denomination. So suddenly Jews were second-class citizens, and that’s a big problem,” he explains. “Jews come to Lincoln and complain, and he says, I hadn’t noticed this. You’re right.” So Lincoln got working with Congress – he was very clever with his work with Congress, as [Director Steven] Spielberg understood in the 2012 film [Lincoln] – and they find a way around that without quite changing the law. They construe the word ‘Christian’ to mean ‘white’ and then Lincoln simply appoints a Jewish chaplain. If you hadn’t had Lincoln, they might have kept the law as it was. That changed America.”

For more information about the National Library: http://web.nli.org.il