

# AMERICA and ZION

Essays and Papers in Memory of  
MOSHE DAVIS



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## *Achavah* and History

Reflections on the  
Historical Emphases of Moshe Davis

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Of Moshe Davis's 250 publications, the one that taught me the most about his approach to history and Jewish life was his scholarly study of New York's *Achavah* Club (1909–1912), published in 1953. *Achavah*, Davis discovered, was an exclusive fraternity consisting of twenty-five of New York's foremost Jewish scholars, intellectuals and activists, all of them adherents of "National Judaism," who agreed to meet in one another's homes every two or three weeks to discuss what was simply called "Jewish matters." The club's membership included a galaxy of Jewish luminaries, including Judah Magnes, Louis Ginzberg, Mordecai Kaplan, Louis Lipsky, Alexander Marx, Israel Davidson, Israel Friedlaender, Chaim Zhitlowsky, David Pinski, Samson Benderly, Solomon Bloomgarden (known as Yehoash), and Max Radin. Davis, who might himself have been included in this august company had he been alive at that time, described the history of this unique club and filled in important details concerning its membership and *raison d'être*. For some of his information, he relied upon oral history, a methodology that in 1953 had not yet even been named. He also transcribed and published Israel Friedlaender's fascinating minute book of the club's meetings and activities. The article as a whole, published in the *Mordecai Kaplan Jubilee Volume*, represents a model of textual scholarship—the application of *Wissenschaft* methodologies to American Jewish history—while also

displaying impressive erudition and a lively writing style. Beyond its technical and scholarly mastery, however, the article is deeply revealing of Moshe Davis's own values. From it, one can learn much about his understanding of history and his approach to contemporary Jewish life.<sup>1</sup>

Davis believed, as he once explained to Geoffrey Wigoder, that "history indicates lines and trends for the present." Indeed, he felt that "you can understand the past better if you experience the present" and you need as well "to study the present, in order to better understand the past."<sup>2</sup> History, for him, was thus an intensely "relevant" subject in that it yoked past and present together in a single continuum. In this, Davis was Mordecai Kaplan's disciple—even as he was a disciple of Benzion Dinur and Alexander Marx in his respect for facts and primary source documentation. Still, it is appropriate that his study of the *Achavah* Club appeared in the Kaplan festschrift, for in his approach to Jewish scholarship he clearly sympathized with Kaplan as against the more Germanic, aloof textual scholarship that dominated the Jewish Theological Seminary in his day.<sup>3</sup>

It is likely that *Achavah* appealed to Davis for another reason: the club was true to its name, which in Hebrew means fraternity or brotherhood. It brought together people from different walks of life—scholars, Zionists, and Jewish communal activists, men (no women) who on many issues fundamentally disagreed with one another—asking them, in Levi [Louis] Ginzberg's words, to "help clarify the profounder questions of Jewish life and, if possible, apply their views to the solution of those problems."<sup>4</sup> Davis's own lifework as a historian and institution-builder reflected this same conception. He firmly believed in *achavah*, particularly in the larger sense of bringing variegated individuals and institutions into communication and partnership with one another. He was also convinced that Jewish scholarship—history in particular—could speak to contemporary concerns and present-day questions. Years later, Davis himself founded a study circle at the home of the President of Israel that echoed much of what he thought the *Achavah* Club had represented.<sup>5</sup> Many of his other projects similarly reflected his understanding of the club's values, particularly its stress on excellence, its inner diversity, its commitment to the Jewish people (*klal yisrael*), its confidence in the centrality of Zion, and its engagement with issues of present-day significance.

To borrow a phrase once applied to Louis Brandeis, Moshe Davis had a mind of one piece: his scholarship, his administrative under-

takings, his public activities, his religious faith—all reflected and reinforced one another. Coherence and intellectual consistency were among his most remarkable and endearing characteristics. The same values, the same lessons, the same stories and asides and words of wisdom characterized everything that he did. Nor is this an accident, for all of Davis's myriad activities flowed from a common set of assumptions and goals, very much the same ones, in fact, that underlay the club about which he so luminously wrote.

Davis's training as a historian took place both in America and in Israel, and from the beginning he took it as his personal mission to help each of these vital Jewish centers to understand the other. He was extremely proud of being "the first American to receive a doctoral degree from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (1946)," and even today his dissertation ranks among the most important ones ever written in Hebrew in the field of American Jewish history.<sup>6</sup> When he entered that field in the 1930s, American Jewish history was just beginning to emerge as a scholarly discipline. Davis's teachers and later colleagues at the Jewish Theological Seminary shied away, for the most part, from anything after the French Revolution, while most of those who wrote in American Jewish history were amateurs or filiopietists more interested in apologetics than in scholarship.<sup>7</sup> At the Hebrew University, not surprisingly, the study of American Jewish history was completely unknown. None of the three great scholars who read his dissertation (Dinur, Yitzhak Baer, and Joseph Klausner) had ever made any original contributions on the subject. Consequently, as he would so often do later in life, Davis blazed his own trail. He utilized a wide range of sources, many of them never previously examined, and he drew upon the expertise of anyone who could help him. Salo Baron guided his American research. Davis also called upon Hyman Grinstein, Baron's first significant doctoral student in American Jewish history, as well as upon Jacob Rader Marcus, who, like Baron, had begun to devote himself to this field. Years later, Marcus still remembered reading every word of Davis's dissertation in Hebrew with the aid of a dictionary. Davis, for his part, remained deeply indebted to Marcus for many invaluable comments and corrections.<sup>8</sup>

What set Davis apart from others working in the field of American Jewish history in his day was his focus on the religious history of American Jews. This was a neglected aspect of American Jewish history, then and later, and Davis approached it with admirable breadth—focusing on individuals, ideas, movements, and institutions. In 1951, an expanded

version of his dissertation appeared in Hebrew, entitled *Yahadut amerika behitpathutah* (The shaping of American Judaism) with a significant Hebrew subtitle: *Toldot haaskolah habistorit beme'ah hatesha 'esreh* ("A History of the Historical School of the Nineteenth Century"). The subtitle, in fact, captures Davis's central thesis: he felt that he could identify a "historical school" in nineteenth-century American Judaism that took issue with Reform, offered its own solutions to the problems affecting America's Jews, and ultimately became institutionalized in the Jewish Theological Seminary (1886) and in the Conservative movement. Davis thus offered the Conservative movement a usable past, a history that indicated "lines and trends for the present." Written for a select audience of Hebrew speakers, the volume concluded with a strong plea for the Hebrew language, Jewish peoplehood, and what we would today call Jewish continuity (*kiyum haumah*). The more widely read English version, entitled *The Emergence of Conservative Judaism*, published in 1963 and rewritten for an American audience, closed with a somewhat different message, perhaps more appropriate to the 1960s era in American Jewish life. In this version, Davis called for unity among the diverse elements of the Conservative movement and quoted Sabato Morais's call to "work to preserve historical Judaism, though for its sake concessions for which we are unprepared may be demanded."<sup>9</sup>

Both the Hebrew and the English volumes proved somewhat controversial both in their use of the term "historical school," which some found anachronistic, and for their embrace of men such as Isaac Leeser, whom other historians considered more Orthodox than proto-Conservative.<sup>10</sup> Davis, however, held his ground. He maintained that his critics failed to sufficiently appreciate his method, which entailed the use of a historical construct to shed light on larger themes, and he stood by his interpretation of Leeser. The controversy itself, as Lloyd Gartner has suggested, "points paradoxically to the significance of Davis's book."<sup>11</sup> Rarely before had a theme in American Jewish history been presented in a manner that was meaningful and timely enough to engender controversy. Davis demonstrated the ongoing relevance of many issues that confronted nineteenth-century American Jews. And he did so based on a thorough mastery of primary sources—newspapers, sermons, obscure pamphlets, and correspondence—that had never before seen the light of day.

Davis continued to publish studies in American Jewish history throughout his tenure at the Jewish Theological Seminary. His best-

known and most frequently reprinted work was a synthetic history of "Jewish Religious Life and Institutions in America" that appeared in Louis Finkelstein's *The Jews* (1949, 1955, 1960, 1971). Rewritten and separately issued in Hebrew, it served as a basic introduction to American Judaism for a full generation of Israelis.<sup>12</sup> He also authored other significant studies—including "*Ha-Zofeh Ba-Arez Ha-Hadashah*: A Source for East European Jewish Settlement in America," "Jewry East and West: The Correspondence of Israel Friedlaender and Simon Dubnow," "The Synagogue in American Judaism (A Study of Congregation B'nai Jeshurun, New York City)," and "The Human Record: Cyrus Adler at the Peace Conference, 1919"—all of which he later brought together in his Hebrew collection, *Beit yisrael beamerikah* (1970).<sup>13</sup>

Beyond this, Davis brought new excitement to the field of American Jewish history, particularly at the Jewish Theological Seminary. In 1953, together with chancellor Louis Finkelstein, he created the American Jewish History Center, funded by Louis M. Rabinowitz. The establishment of this center is of great interest, for its advisers from Columbia University included both the leading American historian of the day, Allan Nevins, and the leading Jewish historian, Salo Baron. Davis properly sought to locate American Jewish history within *both* disciplines, a point he made forcefully the following year at the Peekskill conference on "The Writing of American Jewish History," one of a series of events connected with the tercentenary of Jewish life in the United States.<sup>14</sup> At this conference, which he helped to organize and whose proceedings he co-edited, Davis argued:

The first step to improve the quality of American Jewish historical writing is to regain the awareness that the Jewish experience in America should be studied as part of the larger scheme of American history as well as of world Jewish history. . . . The interaction between historians of American and Jewish life in their studies and writings will naturally wean away American Jewish historiography from its tendency to parochialism. In turn it will deepen and broaden the character of general American histories.<sup>15</sup>

In the reference to "interaction" we see again the theme of *achavah*. Indeed, Davis went further, calling at the conference for the establishment of a scholarly "collegium" designed to foster collaborative research, collaborative thinking, and collaborative historical study. It was an audacious vision, and it guided the approach that he would take in his own work for the next forty years.

From the late 1950s, when he settled in Israel, Davis's historical emphases shifted, and he pioneered two new areas of inquiry: contemporary Jewry and America–Holy Land studies. Since both of these subjects are addressed elsewhere in this volume, I will confine myself to a few points relevant to historical scholarship.

First, both of these new areas had been adumbrated in Davis's earlier writings and activities. His bibliography includes articles on contemporary social issues that date from the 1940s, and in 1952 he helped to establish the Seminary's Israel Institute, "to strengthen the spiritual and cultural bonds between the State of Israel and America . . . and to help develop a recognition of Israel as a spiritual center for Jewry everywhere."<sup>16</sup> What we see in his career, as in that of so many fruitful scholars, is the elaboration later in life of themes set down earlier on. A full reading of his oeuvre, especially his early writings in Hebrew, indicate that contemporary issues and Zion were never far from his mind even in the years when his primary scholarship focused elsewhere.

Second, both contemporary Jewry and America–Holy Land studies involved the same kind of interrelationship between past and present that is central to so much of Davis's work. His approach to contemporary Jewry was informed by history—his article on intermarriage is significantly subtitled "Historical Background to the Jewish Response,"<sup>17</sup>—and he encouraged the use of traditional historical methodologies on the part of his colleagues at the Institute of Contemporary Jewry (many of whom were, in fact, trained as historians). This approach distinguished the study of contemporary Jewry in Jerusalem from the more sociological approach characterizing the field in the United States, as even a cursory comparison between *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, published by the Institute, and *Contemporary Jewry*, published by the Association for the Social Scientific Study of Jewry in the United States, amply reveals. Similarly, Davis understood that the relationship between America and Israel needed to be understood historically. Here again, through the America–Holy Land Project, he sought to place a subject of contemporary concern in a much broader historical and religious studies context.

Third, Davis insisted that both the Institute of Contemporary Jewry and the America–Holy Land Project focus on research based upon primary sources. Davis believed that in these new areas, as in American Jewish history, scholarship depended upon a firm foundation of data. When he was a student, Davis once recalled, he asked his teacher Allan Nevins, "Why is it that you never mention the Jews of the United

States in your writing?" "Mr. Davis," Nevins replied, "if you will mine the material, I will use it."<sup>18</sup> That answer made a great impression upon Davis—one that was doubtless reinforced by the worshipful emphasis on textual scholarship that characterized the Jewish Theological Seminary and the Hebrew University of his day. Having received essentially the same message from both his Jewish and his American history teachers, Davis internalized that message and made it his own. No matter what subject he subsequently researched, he invariably sought to "mine the material" by assembling primary data. The Institute of Contemporary Jewry's oral history collection, the America–Holy Land Project's archival guide, the Arno reprint series, the statistical data collected by the Institute of Contemporary Jewry over many years—these and many other data collection projects that he initiated and oversaw reflected Davis's lifelong belief that scholarship in any field was only as strong as the primary research in which it was grounded. Pragmatically, he also understood that in order to legitimate new fields of research at the Seminary and at the Hebrew University, he needed to root them in primary texts, for this was the sine qua non for acceptance. "Even Gershom Scholem," he once pointed out, had followed that route.<sup>19</sup>

Fourth, Davis believed in comparative study. Long before these became fashionable in American academic circles, he understood the value of interfaith and intercultural comparison. Davis resisted the narrow parochialism that Jewish historians, especially American Jewish historians, often fall prey to. Already in the 1950s, he co-taught a course with Robert Handy of the Union Theological Seminary that dealt with Jewish and Protestant perspectives on the Holy Land. Later, he insisted that the Institute of Contemporary Jewry work comparatively. He built comparative dimensions into the America–Holy Land Project. And from its inception, he made sure that the International Center for University Teaching of Jewish Civilization provided a global comparative perspective on Jewish studies. Two of Davis's most memorable and influential articles were also comparative in nature: "Centres of Jewry in the Western Hemisphere: A Comparative Approach," and the aforementioned "Mixed Marriage in Western Jewry."<sup>20</sup> Today, Israeli scholarship, especially in the area of contemporary Jewish studies, is almost reflexively comparative, in contrast to American Jewish scholarship. Davis alone may not be responsible for this difference—the multicultural nature of Israeli society, after all, fosters comparative research—but his role cannot be underestimated. In this, as in so many other areas, he was a pioneer.

Finally, in all of his later work—the Institute, the America–Holy Land Project, the International Center, and other projects—Davis emphasized collaborative and interdisciplinary research, the kind of “collegium” he had advocated back in 1954. The very last conference he planned, the junior scholars’ colloquium on America and the Holy Land, typified his approach. It began with an institutional partnership (the Hebrew University and Brandeis University), drew scholars from different countries, utilized diverse methodologies, and brought together a rich mix of Jewish as well as Christian participants. While he did not live to see that colloquium, it totally reflected both in form and in content his vision and historical emphases.

Back in 1953, at the conclusion of his study of the *Achavah* Club, Moshe Davis observed that “breadth of understanding and freedom of intellectual exchange is a spirit to be appreciated wherever and whenever it existed.” Seventeen years later, when the same article came out in Hebrew, Davis altered the final phrase, transforming the past tense (“existed”) into the present: “breadth of understanding and freedom of intellectual exchange are worthy of appreciation wherever and whenever they appear.”<sup>21</sup> The shift is both significant and revealing. Early in his career, through his historical scholarship, Davis illuminated a glorious moment in the past when the *Achavah* Club spirit “existed.” Later, through his extraordinary vision and administrative accomplishments, he made many more such moments “appear,” both in his own lifetime and beyond.

## NOTES

1. Moshe Davis, “Israel Friedlaender’s Minute Book of the *Achavah* Club (1909–1912),” in *Mordecai Kaplan Jubilee Volume* (New York, 1953), 156–213. A Hebrew translation appeared in idem, *Beit yisrael beamerika* (Jerusalem, 1970), 72–142.

2. Geoffrey Wigoder, “Moshe Davis and the Study of Contemporary Jewry: An Oral History,” *Contemporary Jewry: Studies in Honor of Moshe Davis* (Jerusalem, 1984), 11–12.

3. Jonathan D. Sarna, “Two Traditions of Seminary Scholarship,” in *Tradition Renewed: A History of the Jewish Theological Seminary*, edited by Jack Wertheimer (New York, 1998).

4. Davis, “Israel Friedlaender’s Minute Book,” 161.

5. Revealingly, the English title that he gave to the Hebrew version of his article was “Study Circle on World Jewish Issues: Minute Book of the *Achavah* Club.”

6. See, for example, the biographical note appended to *Contemporary Jewry: Studies in Honor of Moshe Davis*, 10, and the emphasis on this point in the biographical sketch that opens his *Darkhei hayahadut beamerika* (Tel Aviv, 1953).

7. Sarna, “Two Traditions of Seminary Scholarship”; idem, *JPS: The Americanization of Jewish Culture* (Philadelphia, 1989), 61–62, 165; Jeffrey S. Gurock, “From *Publications* to *American Jewish History*: The Journal of the American Jewish Historical Society and the Writing of American Jewish History,” *American Jewish History* 81 (Winter 1993–1994): 185–204.

8. Moshe Davis, *Yahadut amerika behitpathutah* (New York, 1951), xi–xiii; personal conversations with Jacob R. Marcus and Moshe Davis.

9. Davis, *Yahadut amerikah*, 318–19; idem, *The Emergence of Conservative Judaism* (Philadelphia, 1963), 326.

10. See especially Charles Liebman’s review essay in *Tradition* 6 (Spring–Summer 1964): 132–40 and the comments of Lance J. Sussman in his *Isaac Leeser and the Making of American Judaism* (Detroit, 1995), 246–47.

11. Lloyd Gartner, “Professor Moshe Davis hahistoriyon” (Professor Moshe Davis the historian), *Hadoar*, 24 January 1992, 16.

12. Davis, *Darkhei hayahadut beamerika*.

13. All of Davis’s publications to 1992 are listed in *Pirsume Moshe Davis* (Jerusalem, 1992).

14. Arthur Goren described the gathering at Peekskill as “the most impressive conference of historians ever held on the writing of American Jewish history.” See Arthur A. Goren, “A Golden Decade for American Jews: 1945–1955,” in *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, vol. 8: *A New Jewry? America since the Second World War*, edited by Peter Y. Medding (New York, 1992), 13.

15. Moshe Davis and Isidore D. Meyer, *The Writing of American Jewish History* (New York, 1957), 9–10; the proceedings were also printed in *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 46, no. 3 (March 1957).

16. Moshe Davis, ed., *Israel: Its Role in Civilization* (New York, 1956), x.

17. Moshe Davis, “Mixed Marriage in Western Jewry: Historical Background to the Jewish Response,” *Jewish Journal of Sociology* 10 (December 1968): 177–80; reprinted in Hebrew in *Beit yisrael beamerika*, 276–342.

18. Geoffrey Wigoder, “Moshe Davis and the Study of Contemporary Jewry,” 17.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Moshe Davis, “Centres of Jewry in the Western Hemisphere: A Comparative Approach,” *Jewish Journal of Sociology* 5 (June 1963): 4–26; the Hebrew version is in *Beit yisrael beamerika*, 241–75.

21. Davis, “Israel Friedlaender’s Minute Book,” 171; idem, *Beit yisrael beamerika*, 91 [translation and italics J. Sarna]. A concluding paragraph found in the English article was dropped in the Hebrew, making the quoted passage the last words of the chapter.