

Nathan Kaganoff's Legacy

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When Nathan Kaganoff came into his office during the difficult weeks following his final operation, it was usually to work on one of his bibliographies. This was, on his part, a conscious choice. At a deep level, he seems to have concluded that his bibliographical work would form his final and most lasting legacy to the world of scholarship.

The field of Jewish bibliography dates back to the seventeenth century when Shabbetai ben Joseph Bass, the first great Jewish bibliographer, published a volume entitled *Sifte Yeshenim* (1680), a classified, alphabetically arranged and annotated list of 2200 Hebrew titles covering all aspects of Judaica from law to folklore. Since then, only a small number of scholars have followed in Bass's wake, notably the pioneering Jewish bibliographer Mortiz Steinschneider. All told, the number of distinguished Judaica bibliographers from 1680 to our day may not exceed the proverbial seventy.

By all accounts, one of those select seventy was Nathan Kaganoff. What makes his contribution all the more significant is the fact that he concentrated in an area of Judaica bibliography that had never previously been cultivated in any serious and systematic way: The field of Judaica Americana, books by and about American Jews.

Dr. Kaganoff began his famous series of bibliographies entitled "Judaica Americana" in 1962, soon after he became the American Jewish Historical Society's librarian. Thereafter, this feature appeared in our journal twice a year without fail, always described, in Kaganoff's words, as "an annotated bibliography of monographic and periodical literature published since 1960 and received in the Library of the American Jewish Historical Society." The passive tense is deceptive and bespeaks Kaganoff's well-known modesty. For works were not simply "received" by the American Jewish Historical Society, he actively collected and acquired them. With all the determination of a first-class detective, he tracked down the most obscure references to books, pamphlets and journal articles, often locating items that would otherwise have escaped all students of the field.

Kaganoff began his work in something of a vacuum. In 1962 there were exactly two full-scale bibliographies in the whole field of American Jewish history: A. S. W. Rosenbach's antiquarian listing of works

published up to 1850, and Moses Rischin's scholarly inventory of the entire field of American Jewish history to 1954. Neither served Kaganoff's purposes, and he therefore designed his own format, one that continued to serve him well for the next three decades. Basically, he classified all publications as either general works or special studies, and then subdivided them into twelve different categories embracing everything from biographies to synagogue histories. Every item that he listed in his bibliography was carefully annotated, and many of these annotations were gems: pithy summaries that set forth an author's basic thesis in a few short words. The careful reader quickly learned to read between the lines, and to use the bibliography as a guide to what was truly important in the literature. Thus, in his own quiet and understated way, Kaganoff helped scholars to separate the wheat from the chaffe, the important scholarship from the "filiopietistic shmooze." This was a critically important step in the professionalization of the American Jewish history field as a whole.

Kaganoff could not possibly have imagined how monumental the task of compiling the standard bibliography in the field of American Jewish history would become. When he began, and for the next fifteen years, he listed between 150 and 200 items a year. By 1989–1990, the number was almost three times as large, approaching 600 annual items. All told, over the three decades of his producing "Judaica Americana," he listed about ten thousand individual items dealing with American Jewish history and life—items that but for him might easily have been lost and left unrecorded.

Had Kaganoff done nothing more as a bibliographer than produce his twice yearly "Judaica Americana" listing, his reputation would be secure. Surely that is accomplishment enough for one man who at the same time was involved in the myriad tasks connected with running a library, managing an archive, and editing a journal! But actually Kaganoff produced another invaluable bibliography every year: a detailed listing, published in the *Jewish Book Annual*, of all Hebrew books produced annually in the United States. Nobody knew more than Kaganoff about the history of Hebrew publishing and printing in America, and characteristically he took it upon himself to continue to record what was being produced—more and more volumes each year—so that future generations would have a permanent record, a comprehensive bibliography in which every book is painstakingly set down.

Kaganoff's interest in Hebrew and especially rabbinic books went beyond mere antiquarianism. In one of his many side projects, a scholarly article entitled "American Rabbinic Books published in Pal-

estine," he described and listed no fewer than eighty-one rare rabbinic volumes written by American Orthodox rabbis prior to World War II—more than anyone would have imagined to exist. In typical understatement, he described the article as "a modest attempt to add to our knowledge of American Orthodox intellectual achievements" (an irony, since the article is published in the "bicentennial festschrift" honoring the well-known Reform rabbi and scholar, Jacob R. Marcus.) But as even the casual reader discovers, the article is much more than a "modest attempt." It is replete with important data and fresh insights concerning American Orthodoxy and its history, and it demonstrates Kaganoff's complete and almost unique mastery of these rare and difficult sources.

For Kaganoff, however, this was but one of many areas of expertise. Another area in which he was an acknowledged expert was early American Judaica, volumes published prior to 1851. He himself authored an important supplement to what was then the standard listing of early American Judaica, adding no fewer than 199 items to those previously known. Late in his life, he spent a great deal of time studying the Soble Collection which brought to the American Jewish Historical Society many new items of early Judaica Americana. These included some unique and hitherto unrecorded titles that gave him exceptional joy when he discovered them.

Had Kaganoff lived, he would undoubtedly have continued his bibliographic labors. There was even talk of combining his many bibliographies into one comprehensive guide to the scholarly literature in the field. Now, sadly, that task (like so many others that he assumed over the years) is left to others. Yet the bibliographies themselves live on. They serve as Nathan Kaganoff's permanent legacy—a treasure trove for which all American Jewish historians must be eternally grateful.