

At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on February 13, 2007, the following tribute to the life and service of the late Isadore Twersky was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.

ISADORE TWERSKY

BORN: October 9, 1930

DIED: October 12, 1997

On October 12, 1997, when Isadore Twersky died, Jewish studies lost one of its giants, and a remarkable chapter in the history of the field came to a close.

Several seemingly antagonistic traditions coexisted in this complex and enigmatic man. Isadore was the descendant of a long line of Hasidic masters and was moored in their tradition. At the same time, he was a quintessential Harvard man: born in Boston, he attended Boston Latin, entered Harvard in 1947 and (with the exception of an undergraduate year, at the Hebrew University) never left.

Isadore was reserved, but made a powerful impression; his bearing was courtly and dignified; he commanded respect and got his way with a whisper. He held himself and others to exacting standards. In the late sixties and seventies, when Jewish studies at American universities were booming, but immature, Isadore championed rigorous standards of textual competence. His position was not popular, and has not triumphed in toto; but it bolstered the professionalism of the field, and remains one of the pillars that sustains it.

Isadore's hasidic forbears were famed miracle workers. Our only miracle story about Isadore—of the rock yielding water variety—comes on the authority of Henry Rosovsky: As founding director of Harvard's Center for Jewish Studies, Isadore brought acclaimed Israeli visitors to Harvard with what seemed, from University Hall, to be near-invisible budgets. One of his abiding achievements as an academic statesman was nurturing the relationship between Judaica scholarship in the United States and Israel, indeed, throughout the world.

Isadore was a star pupil of the legendary Harvard historian of philosophy, Harry Wolfson. He could easily have followed in his teacher's footsteps, making his reputation by documenting Jewish contributions to Western thought. Instead, he did something risky: he launched his academic career with the first serious book on a medieval talmudist, or for that matter any talmudist, written at an American university.

Western thought had, to put it gently, shown little appreciation for the talmudic tradition. Isadore had no patience with that prejudice. He considered the talmudic tradition central to the Jewish experience, and was determined to give it its due. For a young, untenured scholar, writing when the status of academic Jewish studies was still precarious, it was a bold, even defiant move. It sounded a theme that would continue to characterize his work as a scholar, teacher and academic statesman: Judaica scholarship should reflect the realities of Jewish cultural history, not the tastes and fads of the academic crowd.

Despite his vast scholarly range, Isadore was a true “hedgehog”: his work was informed by a few master-themes. As a student of the talmudic tradition, his attention would invariably turn to the historical relationship of talmudic law to *other* disciplines. He discovered a crucial key to the understanding of these relationships by exploring what he termed the “tense dialectical relationship” between law and spirituality. This was a subject on which Isadore wrote with transparent engagement: Jewish law, in his words, “is the . . . manifestation . . . of an underlying . . . spiritual essence. . . . Tension flows from the painful awareness that manifestation and essence sometimes drift apart, from the sober recognition that a . . . normative system cannot regularly reflect . . . or energize interior, fluid spiritual forces. Yet if the system is to remain vibrant it *must*.”

Here is where the other disciplines entered into the picture. Isadore showed how mysticism and philosophy, pietism and biblical studies, all attempted in different (and often incompatible) ways to keep the law rooted in spirituality—to ensure that it was infused with inner meaning. This was a fresh and fruitful way of viewing Jewish intellectual history. It allowed him to look at different fields, which had always been studied disconnectedly, in relation to one another.

Isadore is best known for his work on Maimonides. Some thought it odd that a Hasidic scion should devote himself to the study of that arch-rationalist. But Isadore was able to uncover the passionate quest for spirituality in Maimonides’ rationalism, and show how it connected to Maimonides’ other passion—the law. His mature work focused on Maimonides’ great code, where law and philosophical spirituality most clearly intersect.

But what is clear now, was not always clear: Maimonides the lawyer and Maimonides the philosopher were studied as if they were two different men, by different sets of specialists, each group ignorant of the work of the other. Isadore overturned that old fractured view of Maimonides work; and the field has never been the same. This new integrated view was at the core of his magisterial *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides*.

Isadore did decisively depart the ways of his Hasidic forbears in his commitment to a broad general education and proud membership in a community of scholars comprising all of the disciplines. That commitment provided a second overarching theme that animated much of his writing on Maimonides: the quest for a unity of Jewish and general learning. Isadore

succeeded in describing Maimonides' synthesis so eloquently and convincingly because it resonated within him. In discussing the medieval Jewish controversy over philosophical rationalism, he minced no words:

The whole debate revolved around Maimonides—and in many ways still does. For Maimonides represents a type of mentality . . . concerning which neutrality is impossible. In the final analysis, two conflicting ideal types were juxtaposed: a traditional puritanism which is distrustful of secular culture and insists on the absolute opposition between divine wisdom and human wisdom; and religious rationalism which is convinced of the interrelatedness and complementarity—indeed the essential identity—of divine and human wisdom, of religion and culture, and strives doggedly for their integration.

Neutrality is indeed impossible, and Isadore stood with Maimonides.¹

Isadore can serve as a model to any human being struggling with a challenge that is fast becoming universal. He showed how one can be passionately committed to one's own tradition while embracing *all* human wisdom, whatever its source.

Respectfully submitted,

Jay M. Harris
James L. Kugel
Bernard Septimus, Chair

¹ Only once did I (Bernard Septimus) hear Professor Isadore actually *speak* of emulating Maimonides. Isadore, most of you probably know, had a "second career." Like his Hasidic forbears, he stood at the head of a community of worship and study, one in which I was privileged to participate. This is not the place to discuss his rabbinic role, but I cannot pass over it in complete silence. Isadore once remarked to me that he had always been determined to emulate Maimonides by refusing to accept payment for the rabbinate. That selfless service set the tone for the emergence of a remarkable community—without politics, officers, membership dues, or any of the institutional trappings of synagogue life. It was held together by a common commitment to prayer, study, acts of kindness—and by the riveting character and learning of the man at its center.