

# Remembering Louis H. Feldman

RENOWNED EXPERT ON FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS

On 27 Adar, March 25, the world's greatest expert on the writings of the first-century Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus, left this world at the age of 90. Professor Louis Feldman, *a"h*, taught Classics at Yeshiva University for over 60 years. If you would have asked him what his greatest accomplishment was, he would have pointed to his many students who occupied positions as professors, rabbis, and *roshei yeshivah*. Indeed, he was privileged to teach generations of those who went on to serve as rabbinic and intellectual leaders of the Jewish community.

Professor Feldman would not have bragged about his amazing contribution to scholarship and its importance for Judaic Studies and ancient literature and history. He authored a magnum opus bibliography of scholarship about Josephus, translated part of Josephus' writings, and wrote book-length studies on Judaism in the Hellenistic world. He covered Josephus' interpretation of figures in *Tanach*, commented on Josephus' summary and retelling of the Torah, researched the image of Moshe Rabbeinu in the works of the Alexandrian Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 BCE-40 CE), studied the commandment to remember Amalek, and produced hundreds of scholarly and popular articles. Many of these works demonstrated his broad familiarity with traditional Jewish sources as well as his deep understanding of them. As these volumes were coming out, one after the other, I remember his wife Miriam, *tibadel lechaim tovim*, saying to me, "Can you believe how much my husband is publishing!" Throughout his career she supported him in every possible way, as did his children, Moshe Feldman, Sara Reichman and Leah Schachter, and their families.

I had the privilege of knowing him and

cooperating with him in scholarly endeavors for over 40 years. It was as if we had a standing date to meet every year at the airport on the Motzaei Shabbos before Thanksgiving when we flew together, invariably on the latest plane, to participate in the annual meeting of the Society for Biblical Literature. In December we were always together at the meeting of the Association for Jewish Studies, the premier American scholarly organization for our field. Our wives became friendly and often spent time together accompanying us to conferences.

Invariably, I would meet Louis the next morning at *minyán*. His devotion to *Yiddishkeit* was uncompromising. He was a regular speaker at *shuls* as well, sharing his great knowledge and the insight he gained from studying the ancient world and applying it to contemporary Jewish issues. At the same time, in the world of classical scholarship he was among the most respected scholars in the country. He received his bachelors and masters degrees at Trinity College in his hometown of Hartford, where he was born in 1926. He went on to receive his doctorate in classical philology from Harvard University and joined the faculty of Yeshiva University in 1955, where he served as Abraham Wouk Professor of Classics and Literature. Along with his teaching, he received a string of research grants from prestigious foundations and was a fellow of the American Academy for Jewish Research, an organization of distinguished Judaic Studies scholars. For years he conducted a summer seminar supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Professor Feldman highlighted the extent to which many Jews in the Hellenistic period, the latter part of the years in which the *Bayis Sheini* stood, remained



loyal to Judaism even when they understood it through the glasses of Hellenistic culture. In this respect, he showed over and over that Josephus adhered to the *mesorah* even while taking the literary and historical perspectives of Greek historians into consideration. His point was not simply that Josephus wrote in a Hellenistic milieu and in the Greek language in which there were standard literary expectations, but rather that in certain ways Josephus sought to bring Jewish history into the context of Hellenistic culture, while never surrendering the fundamental beliefs, practices and principles of Judaism.

This devotion to Josephus might seem strange to some members of our community, since Josephus is often perceived as a traitor who defected to the side of the Romans during the Jewish revolt against Rome in 63-73 CE. In reality, Josephus was a failed commander of Jewish rebel forces in the Galil. He surrendered to the Romans in order to save his life. But he then began to publicly argue for the surrender of the Jews to the Romans, saying that it would prevent the destruction of the *Beis Hamik-*

dash.

Josephus witnessed the destruction of the *Beis Hamikdash* in Yerushalayim and chronicled the history of the failed revolt as well as the internecine fighting among Jewish factions that contributed to the *Churban Bayis Sheni*. This infighting is described by the Talmud in the passage so many of us study every Tishah B'Av regarding Kamtza and Bar Kamtza (*Gittin 55b-56a*).

Josephus was even present (or claimed to be present) as the last embers of the revolt were extinguished by the Romans at Masada in 73 CE. Yet Josephus, often in the 10th century adaptation and translation from Latin into Hebrew known as *Sefer Yosifon*, has throughout our history served as the basic source of information for much of *Bayis Sheini*-era Jewish history. (Although we know that Josephus' name was Yosef ben Matisyahu, the author of *Sefer Yosifon* was often identified as Yosef ben Guryon.) Yosifon was quoted by Rashi and the *Ba'alei Hatosfos*, so how could anyone argue with a devoted Torah-observing Jew dedicating much of his life to the study of this classic Jewish text?

Professor Feldman continued teaching until he finally had no choice but to retire. Those last years coincided with my three-year stint at Yeshiva University, where I served as Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education, so I saw him often. After his retirement, he moved to California to be with one of his children. I had the fortunate chance to see him one last time when he came for a day to Chabad's National Torah Retreat last August, where his son-in-law, Dr. Edward Reichman, and I were both speaking. There he was rightly welcomed in front of some 1,200 participants as "the world's leading authority on Josephus."

It was my privilege to serve as a coeditor with him, along with James Kugel, for a three-volume collection of *Bayis Sheini*-era Jewish literature that occupied much of

his time during the last years of his active scholarship. I remember his asking at a meeting of the publisher, the Jewish Publication Society, for a guarantee that if one of the editors passed away before the publication of the work, the common publisher's convention of placing a cross after his name would not be followed. Needless to say, the JPS editor immediately responded, "We don't do that!" But Professor Feldman did indeed live to see the completion of this, his last major work, and spoke briefly at the book launch event.

In discussing his own work, Josephus (*Antiquities* 14.1-3) wrote that "the principal goal that authors ought to aim at, above all the rest, is to speak accurately and to speak truly for the satisfaction of those who are otherwise unacquainted with such matters and who are obliged to believe what these writers inform them of." This was the goal of Professor Feldman throughout his career, to investigate texts and literary and historical questions as deeply as possible, bringing to bear modern scholarly methods and traditional texts. His prodigious knowledge of Jewish and Classical literature enabled his unique scholarly contributions. Josephus could not have asked for a better prepared, more qualified, or more devoted lifetime student.

Josephus himself wrote that "All of us have mortal bodies, composed of perishable matter, but the soul lives forever; it is a portion of the Divine housed in our bodies" (*Jewish War*, 3.372). Professor Feldman managed to nourish that heavenly spark and thus ensure that his contributions to the Jewish community and to the study of ancient Jewish literature and history will continue to inspire future generations. ●

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