

Beloved David—
Advisor, Man of Understanding,
and Writer

BJ'S

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BROWN JUDAIC STUDIES

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Number 373
BELOVED DAVID –
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edited by
Naftali Cohn and Katrin Kogman-Appel

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A FESTSCHRIFT IN HONOR
OF DAVID STERN

Edited by
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Brown Judaic Studies
Providence, Rhode Island

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2024936963

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For David

דוד דויד יועץ איש מבין וסופר

“Beloved David—advisor,
man of understanding, and writer”

(1 Chronicles 27:32, translated midrashically)

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Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
AJEC	Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity
<i>AJS Review</i>	<i>Association for Jewish Studies Review</i>
ANRW	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt: Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der neueren Forschung</i>
BETL	Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologiarum lovaniensium
<i>BibInt</i>	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
BJS	Brown Judaic Studies
BTB	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CBQMS	Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series
CEJL	Commentaries on Early Jewish Literature
CRINT	Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum
DJD	Discoveries in the Judaean Desert
DSD	<i>Dead Sea Discoveries</i>
EJL	Early Judaism and Its Literature
FRLANT	Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
HUCA	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
ISBL	Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature
JAAR	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
JAJSup	Journal of Ancient Judaism Supplements
JANER	<i>Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions</i>
JAOS	<i>Journal of the Ancient Oriental Society</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JJS	<i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i>
JQR	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
JR	<i>Journal of Religion</i>
JSJ	<i>Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period</i>

JSJSup	Journal for the Study of Judaism Supplements
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series
JSQ	<i>Jewish Studies Quarterly</i>
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
MTSR	<i>Method and Theory in the Study of Religion</i>
OTL	Old Testament Library
OTM	Oxford Theological Monographs
RB	<i>Revue biblique</i>
REJ	<i>Revue des études juives</i>
RevQ	<i>Revue de Qumran</i>
ScrHier	Scripta hierosolymitana
SJLA	Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity
SJOT	<i>Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament</i>
StPB	Studia Post-biblica
STDJ	Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah
STVP	Studia in Veteris Testamenti Pseudepigraphica
SymS	Symposium Series
TSAJ	Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTSup	Vetus Testamentum Supplements
YJS	Yale Judaica Series
ZDMG	<i>Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft</i>

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Introduction

“You have reached the office of David Stern. I’m not available to take your call. At the sound of the beep, please leave all pertinent ... and impertinent messages.”

It was difficult not to be entertained by David Stern’s answering machine message in his office at Penn, by the joyous impishness and cleverness that one could hear in his tone of voice and that one could feel, even when he was not actually there.

With his infectious personality—but also his deeply erudite and wide-ranging scholarship, his broad generosity, his appreciation for others, and his collegiality and abundant encouragement—David has impacted and created lasting connections with so many. This volume is a tribute to a beloved friend, mentor, and colleague. It is evidence of a person with an extraordinary scholarly range and an ability to create a wide network of admirers.

The breadth of topics and time periods covered in this festschrift stems, in many ways, from the broad scope of David’s own research. In his publications, David has written about the Bible, Qumran, Second Temple literature, Midrash and other rabbinic texts and books, medieval writings and inscribed objects, and modern Jewish literature. He has also written plays and fiction. According to David, what ties together his scholarly production is the question of Jewish literary creativity, which he applies not only to the textual but also to the material dimension of Jewish literature. In the first half of his scholarly career, David’s work centered on two primary areas: midrash and other types of ancient biblical interpretation, as well as narrative in rabbinic and medieval Hebrew literature. In the second half of his career, he shifted to the material aspects of the most important genres of inscribed Jewish texts—talmuds, prayer books, haggadahs, and bibles. In his view, the materiality of a book involves the same kind of creativity as does crafting its stories, but, even more important, a

book's material shape has a direct impact on the way the text in the book is read and interpreted.

In addition to thinking about texts and objects, David has always looked at historical context, including questions of cultural exchange and appropriation. Jews have always been part of a larger surrounding culture, and the literary and material dimensions of their books reflect the ways in which Jews have interacted with the worlds in which they've lived. Jews have appropriated texts, genres, and cultural practices from those worlds, but they have also transformed and Judaized them. David's work is known for its sophisticated engagement with theory, but he has always stressed that theory is never an end in itself; rather, it provides a critical language and vocabulary to talk about problems that can open up our understanding and knowledge of texts and the objects on which they are inscribed.

Capsule History of David's Career

David Stern's academic career has been a journey filled with serendipitous twists and turns, shaped by many encounters, and by his creative talent and explorative spirit. David was born in Chicago, grew up in an Orthodox Jewish home, and was sent by his parents to Jewish day schools where he received—sometimes, willingly; sometimes not so cooperatively—the basic Jewish education that has served as the indispensable foundation for his subsequent career (which he is infinitely grateful to his parents for giving him). He is an identical twin, and his brother Josef is an even more distinguished academic than David (at least according to Josef). During high school, David became very involved in community theater in Chicago; he acted in the children's troupe of the Second City and in Paul Sills's Game Theater, and began to write plays, achieving success as something of a wunderkind with plays being performed in theaters in Chicago and off-off-Broadway.

Following high school and before beginning college, David wanted to take a break from school. Because a yeshiva in Israel was the only option his parents would fund him to attend, he went to Yeshivat Kerem B'Yavneh in Israel, while actually intending to get involved in the Israeli theater scene. The yeshiva staff, however, did not view David's extracurricular activities so favorably; as soon as the Rosh Yeshiva heard about his links to theater, he forbade David to continue, or gave him the alternative to leave the yeshiva. But this did not deter David. Eventually, he had a play produced and performed at the Khan Theater in Jerusalem, which he did under a pseudonym so as to avoid being found out. Despite having his attention elsewhere, the year in the yeshiva was a transformative experi-

ence for David. He found the intensive atmosphere of the yeshiva virtually theatrical, and he came to appreciate a dimension of studying Jewish texts he had never understood before. He began to see himself as a Jewish writer. He sought out the great writer Agnon as a model and actually managed to meet him, an encounter that later served as the basis of one of his first published stories.

After spending two years in Kerem B'Yavneh, David returned to America to attend Columbia College in New York City, where he majored in English, learned Greek and Latin, and studied classical literature. At Columbia, David's literary writing also shifted from plays to stories and a novel. Encouraged by professors at Columbia, he also began to write literary reviews (and later essays) for journals like *Commentary* and *The New Republic* (a type of writing that he would continue to do for much of his career). He also kept up his traditional Jewish learning by attending the Talmud *shiurim* at Yeshiva University given by the Rav (Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik) and Rabbi Aaron Lichtenstein. While he felt obliged to continue "learning," David acknowledges that, at this point in his life, Talmud did not speak to him. It was, as he puts it, "over my head."

After graduating from college and not being able to decide what to do with the rest of his life, David applied to graduate programs in comparative literature and was accepted at Harvard, but he deferred his admission to accept a year-long writing/traveling fellowship from Columbia. That year was transformative for David. Shortly before graduating, David had met Arthur A. Cohen, a novelist and critic, a publisher, a Jewish theologian, and a rare book dealer—a New York Jewish intellectual who lived outside any Jewish or academic institutional framework. He was, in David's words, "incredibly cultured and deeply sophisticated, extremely smart and educated, unconventional, and somewhat transgressive in his lifestyle." He took David under his wing, and decided to mentor him. He introduced David to Gershom Scholem by giving him a copy of *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. This was the first book David had ever read that showed him that Judaism could be truly intellectually exciting. Cohen followed by giving David works by other authors—Yitzhak Baer, Harry Wolfson, Franz Rosenzweig. Under Cohen's tutelage, David read voraciously. Until then David's intellectual world had been almost completely secular, and his Jewish learning (and life) almost entirely separate from it. Now the two began to connect. This moment of convergence was the beginning of the process that eventually led David to a career in Jewish Studies.

When David matriculated in the Department of Comparative Literature at Harvard, he was supposed to study Greek, Latin, and English. Edward Said, with whom David had become friendly toward the end of David's time as an undergraduate at Columbia, came to Harvard as a visiting professor in David's first year in Cambridge, and during that year,

the two bonded, partly out of a feeling of mutual discomfort with Harvard's hierarchical insularity. Like Cohen, Said had a major impact upon David's intellectual formation even though he was never formally his teacher in any of the fields in which David eventually specialized or taught. Nonetheless, he showed David the necessity of being personally, emotionally, not just cerebrally, engaged with one's intellectual and scholarly work. While doing coursework at Harvard, David also began to take a course every semester in Jewish Studies, almost always a Hebrew text course with Professor Isadore Twersky, the eminent Littauer Professor of Hebrew Literature. These courses invariably dealt with a more or less obscure text of relevance to medieval Jewish intellectual history, not a subject of intrinsic interest to David, though he always managed to find some odd or peculiar literary feature to pique his curiosity to the extent that he could write a paper about it for the course (some of which Twersky liked, some he didn't). More important for Stern's later career, during those years at Harvard, Alan Mintz, a friend of David who was then living in Cambridge, invited him to study midrash together. The two worked their way through Mekilta, Massekhet Shirta, using Judah Goldin's *Song at the Sea* as an accompanying commentary. This was the first time David had ever studied midrash, and he was immediately captivated—one might say entranced—by its inspired combination of commentary and poetry-like, almost fictive invention. Shortly later, after David completed his general exams, Edward Said nominated David for a prestigious Junior Fellowship in Harvard's Society of Fellows, and to everyone's astonishment (and especially David's), he received the award, which effectively gave him three years of freedom to write a doctoral dissertation. David was supposed to write on the topic of Medieval Religious Tragedy, but the experience of reading midrash had so enthused him that he decided to use his newfound free time to switch fields and write a dissertation on a literary approach to midrash, the specific topic to be decided.

As David recalls it, and as he has described the moment in several different essays, at the time midrash was an especially fresh and exciting field to be in. World-famous scholars and intellectuals, figures like Geoffrey Hartman, Jacques Derrida, and Frank Kermode, had suddenly become interested in midrash. As David has shown, midrash was not exactly what these scholars projected onto it, nor was their interest always long-lasting. Nevertheless, this moment of interdisciplinary excitement created a valuable opening for young Jewish scholars like David who became important interlocutors and sources of information for these famous senior scholars who were hungry for more acquaintance with classical Jewish literature. Ironically—or paradoxically—these senior scholars *outside* Jewish Studies (including Edward Said) were more supportive of David's interest in studying midrash from a literary perspective than were scholars within Jewish Studies. Isadore Twersky, David's offi-

cial doctoral supervisor at Harvard, originally pushed him to write about Maimonides's attitude to midrash, but that was not at all what interested David. After several false starts, he finally completed a dissertation on parables (*meshalim*) in Eikhah (Lamentations) Rabbah, a genuine literary study that focused on the intersection of narrative and interpretation. This thesis eventually became the basis of his first book, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (1991).

David's first job was at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles, where he taught for three years. He then spent a year teaching at Hebrew University, hoping to build a career there, but he ended up in a position at the University of Pennsylvania, where Judah Goldin had previously taught midrash. It was in these early years that David also published several influential essays on midrash, which he later revised and published in *Midrash and Theory* (1996). These essays, his book on *Parables*, and an infamous book review established him as a prominent figure in the growing field of midrash. During the same period, he also married Kathryn Hellerstein, a scholar and translator of Yiddish literature (today a professor of Yiddish at Penn), and had two children, Rebecca and Jonah.

At Penn, David also entered the second phase of his scholarly career, the study of book culture. This turn was, again, inspired by a personal connection with another scholar. In his telling, David had begun attending a faculty workshop on the history of the material text that was organized by Peter Stallybrass, a professor in Penn's English Department, and a friend of David's. David had begun attending the workshop simply because he found the talks fascinating; he had no background in the field and wasn't working in it. He thought of himself as a "lurker" at the seminars. After about a year and a half of David sitting there and lurking, however, one of the seminar's scheduled presenters canceled on Peter, leaving him with an empty week. Somewhat desperately searching for a replacement, Peter approached David and asked if he'd consider giving a paper. David didn't know how to respond. On the one hand, he felt that it would be impolitic to refuse, since after all he'd been attending the workshop for so long. Moreover, he felt honored to be invited, and he felt it would be valuable for someone from Jewish Studies to present a seminar in this emerging new field. On the other hand, David had no idea what topic he could give a seminar on. So he said to Peter, "I'd love to accept, but I don't have anything I can give it on." Peter responded, "Well, what about that book of yours? What do you call it, the Talmud?" "Yes." "It has that funny page format. Where does that format come from?" David replied, "I have no idea," and he agreed to give a paper on this very topic. The topic quickly became an obsession (much as the *meshal* had once been), and soon turned into a larger project of understanding texts in relation to the material objects on which they are inscribed.

Not long after giving the seminar at Penn, David was invited to give

the Stroum Lectures at the University of Washington in 1997, and he decided, somewhat rashly, to deliver three lectures on the histories of three books as material texts—the Talmud, the Prayerbook (the Siddur and Machzor), and the Passover Haggadah. This was the true beginning of David's education in the history of the Jewish book as a material object. It led him eventually to devoting fifteen years of research to writing a history of the Jewish Bible as a book, which was finally published in 2017 as *The Jewish Bible: A Material History*. He has still to complete the book based on the three original Stroum Lectures!

The eureka moment for David in this new field was the realization that we don't read texts. What we read are texts inscribed on a writing medium in a very particular way. A text itself is just an abstraction, a purely verbal construction of the mind; until it is inscribed a text does not materially exist. Moreover, the specific way in which the text is inscribed on the material object has a profound impact on how we understand the text—its words, the object, the meaning that both hold for the book's audience. Further, the book as object has a meaning in its own right, one that may go far beyond the words in the text alone. At first, David didn't see much connection between this new project on Jewish books and his earlier work on midrash and other types of classical Jewish interpretation that he had been studying for twenty-five years. But when he understood the impact of materiality upon textuality, he suddenly realized that they were profoundly linked. The two met in the practice and history of reading, which changed as the material book also changed in its physical shape and form. Stern's new project did not in any way contravene or supersede his earlier work. It simply added a new layer of richness and complexity to the literary object and its analysis, which further enhanced our understanding of its meaning.

In 2015, after teaching at the University of Pennsylvania for thirty-one years, David accepted a joint appointment as Harry Starr Professor of Classical and Modern Hebrew and Jewish Literature and as Professor of Comparative Literature at Harvard University, where he continues to teach Jewish Studies and the History of the Book.

The People

David's important contributions to scholarship are legion. His connections to scholars are equally manifold. The capsule history of his career highlights some of the well-known scholars who had a profound impact on him, and there are even more who have adored David and contributed to his development. At the same time, David himself affected and influenced so many people in so many different ways. The contributors to this

volume include former students who worked directly under his supervision; students whom he did not directly supervise but nonetheless mentored; colleagues; collaborators; a family member; and many scholars with whom his work was contiguous and with whom David formed a bond over their shared interests. Those who have published a chapter in this volume dedicate their contributions to scholarship in David's honor. They do so in friendship and love and true admiration. Thank you, David! This volume is a testament to your impact.

The editors would like to express an additional thank you to David Stern for providing an extensive interview for the biographical sketch and Kathryn Hellerstein for additional input. We would also like to thank Ezra Chwat for the idea to use a portion of the verse in 1 Chronicles 27:32—which we have interpreted midrashically—for the title.

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