

# PROFESSOR SHELOMO DOV GOITEIN שלמה (1900–1985)

This volume of the *Hebrew Annual Review* is dedicated to the memory of Professor S. D. Goitein, one of the most distinguished scholars and pedagogues of this century. Professor Goitein authored a library of books, articles and reviews (more than six hundred) in varied and multifaceted areas of the humanities. Among these are numerous studies in Bible and in Hebrew language and literature.\* The main focus of his life work, however, has been on two major fields: Judaic and Islamic studies, mostly published in Hebrew, English and German.

Professor Goitein was born in Burgkurgstadt, Germany, in 1900. He received his main education in Frankfurt and Berlin, which in those days, according to Professor Goitein, “vibrated with spirituality.” Education, he said, was simple then, and the moral standards and religious postulates were absolute. In the course of his long span of life, which “stretched between stagecoach and space flights,” he witnessed several cataclysmic events (two World Wars, the Holocaust, revolutions, the establishment of the State of Israel, etc.) that shook both the world and himself.

Professor Goitein’s deep interest in both Judaic and Islamic studies was already evidenced in his Ph.D. dissertation, *Prayer in the Qurʾān*, in which he scrutinized the literary forms of the Qurʾānic prayers in light of Near Eastern, Jewish and Christian patterns. As in most of his subsequent works, he contributed valuable new insights in this early study of his.

In 1923, Professor Goitein emigrated to Palestine and soon joined the Reʿali School of Haifa where he taught Hebrew and Bible. In 1928 he was invited by The Hebrew University of Jerusalem to teach Islamic history at the School of Oriental Studies (now the Institute of Asian and African Studies). Goitein accepted the invitation and later became the Director of this prestigious institution. A selection of his lectures in this area of Islamics is included in his *Islamic History and Institutions*. In 1936 he edited Vol. 5 of al-Balādhurī’s monumental historical work, *ʿAnsāb al-ʿAšraf*. This edition, which comprises more than five hundred pages, is regarded as a distinctive achievement of Professor Goitein’s studies of early Islam.

\* Goitein’s publications up to the end of 1974 were published by Robert Attal, “A Bibliography of the Writings of Prof. Shelomo Dov Goitein” (Jerusalem, 1975). This bibliographical work includes Goitein’s own “The Life of a Scholar,” an after-dinner talk, given at the Oriental Club in Philadelphia, on April 30, 1970.

Professor Goitein's encounter with Yemenite Jews, who had emigrated to Palestine, ignited his deep interest in this long isolated tribe, "the most Jewish and most Arab of Jews." His deep knowledge of both Arabic and Hebrew, as well as Biblical, Talmudic, midrashic and Islamic sources, enabled him to throw exceptional light on the historical ethnographic and linguistic aspects of this hitherto little researched Jewish community, making him the foremost authority in this area. His intensive occupation with Yemenite research resulted in numerous publications, the most striking of which are *Jemenica* (1934; repr. 1970), a collection of proverbs from central Yemen, and *Travels to Yemen* (1939), a Hebrew translation and edition of Habshush's *Ru'ya al-Yaman*, in which the author describes his experiences as a companion of the renowned French orientalist, Joseph Halévy, on his famous archaeological journey in Yemen in 1870. In 1941 Goitein published this book in its original Arabic with a detailed summary in English, a glossary, and a linguistic introduction. A selection of his articles on the Yemenite Jews has recently been published, entitled *Hattêmānîm (The Yemenites: History, Communal Organization, Spiritual Life)*; 1983).

While the list of Goitein's publications might constitute a volume in and of itself, his *magnum opus*, for which he achieved a particular distinction, is the five-volume work *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World As Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*. In this magisterial work, preceded by his *Jews and Arabs: Their Contacts Through the Ages* (1955) and *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders* (1974), Professor Goitein scrutinizes with an all-encompassing thoroughness and painstaking labor an enormous mass of variegated documents (commercial and court records, letters and other legal material) found in the Geniza of Fustat (Old Cairo), mostly originating from the High Middle Ages (tenth through the thirteenth centuries). The study of this unique depository of Jewish manuscripts (mostly written in Hebrew letters but in the Arabic language) provides us with valuable insights into the inner life of the Jewish communities of that particular period: their economic foundations, social structure, religious concepts and notions, interfaith relations, family and daily life, etc. Indeed, the findings of the Cairo Geniza have completely revolutionized our ideas about that Mediterranean society. This treasure is thus far our main source for the study of the Gaonic period in Jewish history and its aftermath in the Muslim world. Goitein's fully documented interpretation of these materials is accompanied by elaborate and extensive notes which reflect his characteristically keen insight, his inexhaustible attention to minute details, and the application of a rigidly methodical and scientific approach. This comprehensive

study helped to enhance not only our understanding of diverse aspects of the life of the Jewish communities of the High Middle Ages and their relationship to the Islamic world, but also the study both of Islamic civilization in the Mediterranean lands and of medieval Arabic.

Goitein's ideal, as he repeatedly stressed on various occasions, was to be an educator, not a scholar. He ended up by being both a distinguished scholar and a highly esteemed master teacher. From the day he emigrated to Palestine and until 1957, when he joined the faculty of the University of Pennsylvania, he was active in public education in one way or another. His books *The Teaching of Hebrew* (1958) and *The Teaching of Bible* (1965) are reflections of his pedagogical interests. Moreover, during his lifetime as a teacher at various institutions (Hebrew University, Columbia University, University of Pennsylvania, and the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton) he raised a galaxy of scholars, many of whom are now occupying distinguished positions at numerous academic institutions in diverse parts of the world. It would certainly be a commendable endeavor to collect and publish the countless stories that these former students relate with tremendous love and reverence concerning their "master," his warm relationship with them and his admirable performance in class. Such a story, related by Prof. David Blumenthal of Emory University, runs as follows:

At the University of Pennsylvania, our teacher, Professor Goitein, taught a course in advanced Arabic using *ʿAlf Layla wa-Layla* as the text. We would prepare and read out loud in class. Professor Goitein, however, because of his vast erudition would approach the text only as we sat down to study. One day, he opened the book and remarked, "I see that we are about to begin the section on the bridal chamber. As I am sure you all prepared it thoroughly, it will not be necessary for us to go over it together." As we disappointedly turned the page, Professor Goitein added, "Of course, you all noticed the use of the gunpowder image." And, with that, he launched into a learned discourse on the arrival of gunpowder in Egypt and its helpfulness in the dating of the story we were reading.

This intellectual *joie de vivre*, rooted in a careful attention to detail and infused with a warm sense of humor is, to my mind, the personal heritage of our teacher to each of us. Because of it, Professor Goitein was able to guide a very large number of students even in areas remote from his own historical interests. Thus he was able to follow the details of our personal family lives as well as our work. His professional legacy as a historian stands as an additional witness to his greatness.

Professor Goitein's ties with his students did not end with their graduation. He continued to stimulate them through his constant and active personal association with them and through his attendance at meetings of learned societies and congresses.

Professor Goitein was an inexhaustible fountain of knowledge, a great scholar and a man of rare force of character. He enriched various aspects of the humanities and became “the universally acknowledged master, the *ustādh*, of the Gairo Geniza” (Vryonis). His distinctive contributions to scholarship earned him numerous awards, prizes and honorary degrees. Among these were the Haskins Medal of the Medieval Academy of America (1970), the Ben-Zvi Prize for his contribution to the study of Oriental Jewry (1973), the Giorgio Levi della Vida Prize for Distinguished Contributions to Islamic Studies (1975), the Harvey Prize (1980) and his appointment, in 1982, as a Lifetime Laureate of the MacArthur Foundation. We deem it an honor to dedicate the studies contained in this volume to his memory on behalf of his many students and friends throughout the world. There are indeed few scholars who may vie with Professor Goitein in the extensive range of his activities and scholarly output and in the depth of his erudition.

יהי זכרו ברוך אכ"ר (May his memory be blessed, Amen).

Reuben Ahroni