

Professor Yaakov Elman, in memoriam

The late Talmud scholar set out to analyze the glorious messiness, complexity, and depth of thousands of years of human endeavor



Professor Yaakov Elman, z"l

I met Professor Elman back in the late '90s, when, as a college student, I spent two summers at Ktav publishing house, where my Uncle Jerry Roth had long worked. I remember some of the work I did, but most of all I remember many dozens of hours of conversation with Professor Elman, then an editor at Ktav alongside his job as professor of Talmud and Bible at Yeshiva University. He was happy to talk about anything, but especially anything talmudic, and for a kid who had spent four years in a yeshiva and whose eyes were opening to the academic world, there was no better way to spend the summers. I left each day with homework, and looked forward to

continuing the discussions the next day. Later, I sat in on one class of Yaakov's, ostensibly on Midrash Halakhah (for the "ostensibly," see below), and have now been his junior colleague for a decade (and technically, and oddly, his department chair for some of those years).

After a 7(!)-year stint as a meteorologist, which his mother thought would be a good job for her intelligent but shy child, Yaakov managed a Jewish bookstore for a decade, during which time he also started writing book reviews in the field. Those reviews, characteristically incisive and insightful, attracted the attention of some of the leading scholars in New York, who also came to know his encyclopedic breadth from conversations in Rabinowitz Hebrew Bookstore. Professor Shnayer Leiman, Rabbi Shalom Carmy, and Professor Lawrence Schiffman convinced Yaakov to start his PhD, and at age 40, he enrolled in NYU.

I don't know whether he left his mark on the fields of meteorology or bookselling, but once he got rolling in Jewish Studies, nothing was safe. Yaakov was intellectually insatiable. He had intensively studied, and contributed to, essentially all of Jewish studies, from Assyriology (in which he did his MA at Columbia, and on which he published a few papers in JANES in the '70s) through biblical studies, the Dead Sea Scrolls (on which he wrote a few papers, including important studies of MMT), especially of course rabbinics — his book and other articles on the Tosefta, his many “conventionally” significant articles on midrash halakha, the Yerushalmi, and the Bavli from the '90s, and then his epoch-making studies of the Middle Persian background of the Bavli over the past two decades — but continuing on to medieval intellectual history with a series of articles on Nahmanides, and into the modern period, in studies of R. Zadok of Lublin, the Netziv, Benno Jacob, and his own teacher, Rav Hutner. (The relationship with the latter was never a formal one, but a deeply intimate and formative one for Yaakov.)

These were not just a series of individual studies, either. Yaakov saw all of this as a grand unrolling narrative, thousands of years of human endeavor that could be perceptively analyzed by one who took it all in in all its glorious messiness, complexity, and depth – as virtually no one but Yaakov did. He told part of the story in a 30-page article in *World Philology*, where he put rabbinic interpretation in its ancient context. As he was finishing that paper, he wrote to me that he had to shave off 3,000 words to meet the guidelines, but that he had also finished a draft of “a 200-pp monster on cognitive styles in Mesopotamia from 2500 BCE to 1000 CE,” and said that he now was ready to “do a book on cognitive styles from 2500 BCE to the present day.” I had to ask what a “cognitive style” was, but to Yaakov it was obvious: he literally was uncovering the minds of cultures long gone, piecing together how people thought.

I assume that book will never appear, but I am sure there will be plenty of posthumous writings. He wrote faster than most people read. The year that he wrote his dissertation, he wrote more than 1,000 pages of scholarship. It wasn’t only his own work that he was writing, either. He translated Daniel Sperber’s “Customs of Israel” from Hebrew into English, translated much of the Hebrew Bible as part of Aryeh Kaplan’s *Living Torah*, and helped in translating Benno Jacob’s commentary on Exodus from German. Yaakov’s mind never ceased to work, faster and with more profound insight than normal human minds. Over the past couple of years, when I wanted to call him at home, or in the hospital or rehab, to check on him, I had to block off a significant amount of time, because after a medical report, there was always a full report on what he was working on from his hospital room, complete with what he had already puzzled out and where he thought he had to go from here to understand even better. His thrill of learning was awe-inspiring: an insight into a text, or a thinker, or a school, set him aflame in a remarkable way, especially as his body was making his life so difficult for him. On that note, he commented recently that he had now learned to walk for the third time in his life — once when everyone else does,

then again after a horrific car crash about 15 years ago, and now after a brush with death. He was truly heroic in how hard he fought against the adversaries of ill health and bad fortune, and the fact that he was productive and innovative to the end, through it all, is a testimony to his tenacity and determination.

Yaakov's articles were sometimes frustrating, because they brimmed with the same excitement that his own thought and conversations did. I always felt that one had to read everything he wrote, whether or not the topic was of interest, because the topic was only where he *started*. Where he would wind up was anyone's guess. The same was true in his graduate classes, at least the one I sat in. Midrash Halakha was indeed the starting point, but since everything was interrelated, the class went in all sorts of interesting and unpredictable directions.

Editing Yaakov was, for that reason, not a fun task. A paper of his will appear in a book I am co-editing with my colleague, Iranist and historian Daniel Tsadik, and it took many hours for my more linear mind to grasp where Yaakov wanted to go, and then many more to try to impose some semblance of that structure on the paper.

Yaakov appreciated the efforts, although I'm not sure he thought it necessary. For him, the non-linear free-wheeling engagement with texts and ideas was far too exciting to try to constrain just for the sake of linearity. Despite this, he was a true mentor in the traditional academic sense, as well. His students who are now scholars in the field, Professor Shai Secunda, Dr. Shana Strauch, and others, will have to speak more fully to that aspect of Professor Elman.

Despite his patently obvious genius, and remarkable influence on the sometimes-staid field of Talmud, Yaakov was never sure that anyone was sufficiently paying attention. He appreciated the affirmation from people he respected, which was of course forthcoming. He never stopped reveling in the pleasures of being a old-fashioned *'illuy*: quoting a Tosafot in Zevahim or a Tosefta in Bava Batra from memory, for example. He was restless, always questing, always questioning, always

contributing, always doing great things and simultaneously building towards something even greater. The world of learning was, for Yaakov, endlessly fascinating and also fundamentally important. He accomplished astonishing amounts in his short career — which started late and has now tragically ended early — but there is no doubt that for this perpetual student, Yaakov's greatest legacy is that he always felt he had much more to do.