

Perpetual Motion

By Shai Secunda
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One day many years ago, I returned home to a bewildering message scrawled on a Post-it note: “Dr. E. wants you to call him back immediately. Something about . . . orangutans?!?!” There was no question *who* had called. “Dr. E” was Yaakov Elman, my teacher, mentor, and, as we like to say in academe, *Doktorvater*. Yaakov was an expert and pioneer in the study of the Talmud in its Iranian context, and his career had been so capacious—spanning from meteorology to Assyriology, biblical interpretation, Dead Sea Scrolls, Hasidic thought, rabbinic literature, and Zoroastrianism—that for a moment I had to consider the possibility that this was no game of telephone and that my teacher had taken up primatology. As it turned out, Dr. E. had made progress not on *orangutans* but on the *Nērangestān*, a Middle Persian text devoted to the laws of Zoroastrian worship.

Professor Yaakov Elman passed away in Brooklyn, NY, on 17 Av 5778 (July 29, 2018). He left behind a towering scholarly legacy. Staggeringly fluent in Talmud, he was also one of the few truly voraciously hungry intellectuals left in a professionalized academia. He combined a Hasidic heart with a *litvishe kop*, a critical academic sense with the creativity of an original tosafist. Yaakov wrote copiously about times, people, and places distant from him and from each other—the fabled ruler of the ancient Persian Empire Darius the Great; the early 20th-century Reform German rabbi Benno Jacob; a medieval Catalan thinker known as the Meiri; a radical 19th-century Polish Hasidic master named Rabbi Tzadok Ha-kohen of Lublin; talmudic rabbis such as Rava and Abaye; and late antique Zoroastrian priests bearing names such as Sōšāns and Gogušnasp. With his black velvet yarmulke, white beard, and *payis*, Yaakov spoke excitedly of those long-buried and largely forgotten Zoroastrian sages as if they were close friends. The entire motley crew he studied was brought into endlessly fascinating conversations with one another in the vast halls of his brilliant mind, just as he cultivated an astoundingly diverse group of close, real-life companions that included yeshiva heads, professors, Christians, Muslims, atheists, Zoroastrians, and Jews of all denominations.



Yaakov Elman. Photo courtesy of Yeshiva University.

Yaakov's first day job, after he finished City College in 1966, was in meteorology. Eight years later, he moved on to the S. Rabinowitz Hebrew Book Store on New York City's Lower East Side, where, as manager for just more than a decade, he held court for a stream of traditional and academic scholars who sought his wisdom as much as they shopped for Hebrew books. From there he went on to publishing, serving as associate editor at Ktav for more than 15 years. During that time, he also pursued a doctorate at NYU, and then, well into middle age, he became a professor at Yeshiva University.

Even within the confines of his chosen area of academic study (Talmud) Yaakov's chief accomplishment was ambulatory. While his early work was strictly philological and focused on topics such as the [relationship between the early rabbinic compilation known as the Tosefta and the Babylonian Talmud](#), he moved on to ingeniously combine Iranian and talmudic studies in a hybrid that became known as Irano-Talmudica. Yaakov was not the first scholar to realize that studying Babylonian Jewry's Persian context could illuminate the Babylonian Talmud, but he is the one who built it into a real movement of flesh-and-blood people from different fields, working in close relationships. These pairings proved fascinating, productive, and, at times, hilarious.

Yaakov began this Irano-Talmudic stage of his career at age 50, on a fellowship at Harvard. There he befriended professor Oktor Skjærvø, a tall, wry Norwegian master of Indo-Iranian languages. Oktor and Yaakov, the brilliant, *heimishe* patriarch of a large Orthodox family, soon became inseparable, spending many hours each day studying Middle Persian in Skjærvø's large, book-lined office. Occasionally attending faculty parties in the evening, they appeared as the ultimate odd couple. And Yaakov became close with his "fellow" graduate students, chiding one Harvard couple to tie the knot after many years of dating (they did not) and ensuring that a Zoroastrian student wore his *sudreh* and *kusti*—a ritual belt and shirt resembling Jewish tzitzit—on the day of his comprehensive exams (he did).



Oktor Skjærvø, Yishai Kiel, and Yaakov Elman. Photo courtesy of the Center for Jewish Studies, Harvard University.

Traveling the world for Jewish and Iranian studies conferences, Yaakov became a tireless evangelist for reading the Talmud alongside Middle Persian texts, regularly launching into detailed discussions of Zoroastrian law and describing it, to the astonishment of many, as “halakhic,” “rabbinic,” and “strikingly parallel” to Jewish law. He became an ongoing associate at Harvard, and his reading group with Skjærvø expanded to include a growing cast of characters, such as a visiting University of Tehran professor and Yaakov’s own Talmud students (including me). The tiny field of Old Iranian studies, which had been languishing due to lack of interest, gained tremendously from the sudden, unexpected infusion of these Talmud scholars.

Back in Washington Heights, Yaakov’s Yeshiva University classes expanded with students who had come to hear a talmudic genius talk about Zoroastrianism and its significance for understanding the Talmud. And regular, nonacademic devotees of Jewish texts caught wind of what was happening and began to follow Yaakov’s work from beyond the ivory tower. It is difficult to capture the exhilaration of that time, when one could feel the vibrations of a major shift taking place at the traditional, talmudic core of Jewish studies. One can now legitimately divide Talmud scholarship into two periods—BE, before Elman, when Talmud research focused on the text and its development, and AE, after Elman rewrote the curriculum of talmudists to include the languages and literatures of communities neighboring Babylonian Jewry, especially the Persian-speaking Zoroastrians, who ruled the powerful Sassanian Iranian Empire.

Yaakov’s establishment of Irano-Talmudica also faced considerable trials and tribulations. He suffered a near fatal car crash in early 2004, which landed him in the hospital for the good part of a year. Soldiering on, he conducted class via conference call from a hospital bed flanked by

teetering piles of books. (It took the Mount Sinai hospital staff some time to learn how to accommodate a patient whose uninjured work ethic made him function like a waylaid army general.)

The academic politics could be even more debilitating. Reluctant to retrain and retool, some classically trained talmudists argued loudly that the Greco-Roman language and culture they had studied in graduate school were somehow more important than Iranian languages and culture for understanding the Babylonian Talmud and its world—despite the fact that the Talmud was composed under Iranian rule, not Roman. And then there was the occasional, hard-hitting review attacking various claims and interpretations of the Irano-Talmudic school. Yaakov's strategy was always to fight fire with fire and to push ahead with more research. But the academic battles took their physical and emotional toll. In the end, a compelling scholarly movement built on human relationships could also be rocked by the inherent vulnerability of human relationships.

Yaakov was a man of limitless intellectual curiosity, ambitions, and passions. Like all creatures born of woman, he was destined to die, as the rabbis have it, “with not even half his desires fulfilled.” Still, that cup was nearly half full. Chief among his numerous accomplishments across Jewish (and non-Jewish) studies is the now-basic expectation that scholars of the Babylonian Talmud acknowledge the Talmud's Iranian context. What also remains is the lingering dynamism of a man who never ceased to learn and think and write and teach and grow. May his memory be a blessing to us all.