

## **Interview with Dr. David Sclar, Exhibition Curator**

**Can you tell us how you first became involved with rare books and manuscripts, in general, and in particular, with the Hartman Family Collection?**

I started working with the Hartman Collection about fifteen years ago, when I was in graduate school studying Jewish History while also working for the Special Collections Library at the Jewish Theological Seminary. JTS has the greatest Judaica collection that's ever been assembled, and I was there for seven years. For part of the time, I worked for Sharon Mintz, and curated some exhibitions with her. She mentioned my name to a book dealer and one day I received a call saying that he had a collector who was interested in stories about the books. So I wrote one or two, and I believe that the first one had to do with editions of the Mishneh Torah by the rival Venetian Christian printers of Hebrew books, Bragadini and Giustiniani. A dispute between them led ultimately to issues surrounding confiscation and burning of Hebrew books.

**And thus began a long association and friendship with Robert Hartman?**

He apparently liked my writing. He invited me to see his collection Chicago and asked me to write about the rest. So, I started going through his collection and it was great. These were not pristine copies but reminded me of the books I worked with at JTS. They were full of inscriptions. The fact that they had larger stories to tell inspired Bob, and we connected over that. He's very family oriented and so am I. It took him a while to decide on what to call the collection, and we settled on "The Hartman Family Collection". The whole exhibition experience has been about life.

**Bob singles out Menahem Schmelzer as having been a tremendous influence on his love of books. Did you work with Dr. Schmelzer, as well?**

Whatever I say about Dr. Schmelzer would not be sufficient to describe him. You could say that he was the quintessential scholar and gentleman. His knowledge was unbelievable. And not just what the material is, i.e., the actual books. He had this feel that unless you're in it, you can't quite appreciate it – and I was fortunate enough to get that. I used to go to him to ask a lot of questions related to my work. I think he valued his position as JTS librarian for what it meant to be in a long line of Jewish scholarship. He loved what he was doing and was devoted to it. And he shared a Hungarian background with Bob Hartman.

**Can you share your feelings about the exhibition?**

There is, of course, the element of Maimonides – a once in a millennium individual. But the point of the exhibition is to bring up feelings and thoughts connected to Maimonides. This exhibition is about Maimonides and his impact. His words were so profound that they had an impact that continues to resonate with people – how they take his words and continue to react to them. Bob Hartman is such a person. He is humble and wants to share his love of Maimonides. Ideally, I think he would really want to keep the books open in the exhibition, available to all to see and touch rather than within enclosed cases.