

CHARLES LIEBMAN 1934-2003

Charles Liebman, one of the most distinguished scholars of contemporary Jewish life, died suddenly on September 3, 2003 from a massive heart attack. For almost forty years, his writings—fourteen books and over a hundred articles—shaped studies of Judaism in the United States and Israel.

Liebman did not train in the field of Jewish studies. He majored in economics at the University of Miami, went on to study political economy at Johns Hopkins, and received both his M.A. and his Ph.D. in political science at the University of Illinois. His first scholarly publications dealt with suburban politics. But by the time he came to teach at Yeshiva University in 1963, his interests had shifted to religion. In 1964, he published “A Sociological Analysis of Contemporary Orthodoxy” in *Judaism*, and “Orthodoxy in Nineteenth Century America”—a memorable critique of Moshe Davis’s *The Emergence of Conservative Judaism*—in *Tradition*. On the strength of the former, Milton Himmelfarb commissioned Liebman to write a full-scale survey of Orthodoxy for the *American Jewish Year Book*.

“Orthodoxy in American Jewish Life,” spread over seventy pages of the 1965 *American Jewish Year Book*, established Liebman’s reputation and became one of the most widely read and influential articles in contemporary Jewish scholarship. Overturning a generation of wisdom concerning Orthodoxy and its future, Liebman exuded optimism concerning American Orthodoxy’s

vitality and pronounced Orthodoxy to be “on the upsurge.” In pages filled with provocative insights drawn from the sociological study of religion, he described the full spectrum of Orthodox Jews, from the “uncommitted” to the “sectarians” as well as a wide range of Orthodox institutions. All subsequent scholarship on American Orthodoxy builds upon the foundations that he laid down.



Liebman’s article displayed many of the characteristics of his subsequent work: wide reading and research, an incisive mind, graceful writing, an unwavering commitment to truth as he saw it, and a strong contrarian streak. He went on to publish three subsequent highly influential *Year Book* articles: “The Training of American Rabbis,” “Reconstructionism in American Jewish Life,” and “Leadership and Decision-making in a Jewish Federation.” He also published, in 1973, a perceptive, if pessimistic, assessment of American Jewry entitled *The Ambivalent American Jew*, concluding that American Jews were torn between

two incompatible sets of values: “those of integration and acceptance into American society and those of Jewish group survival.”

In 1969, Liebman made *aliyah*, and from then onward he made his academic home at Bar-Ilan University, where he founded the Department of Political Studies and also served as the director of the Argov Center for the Study of Israel and the Jewish People. At Bar-Ilan, he produced a series of influential studies of Israeli society including *The Civil Religion of Israel* (1983) with Eliezer Don-Yehiya, *Religion and Politics in Israel* (1984), *Two Worlds of Judaism: The Jewish Experience in Israel and the United States*, with Steven M. Cohen (1990), and *The Jewishness of Israelis*, with Elihu Katz (1997). He never abandoned his interest in American Jewry, however, and continued to write and lecture in the field, never fearing to risk controversy and often conveying messages that his audiences shuddered to hear. A series of distinguished stints as visiting professor—at the Jewish Theological Seminary, Brown, Yale, Trinity, the University of Washington, the University of Michigan, New York University, and the University of Chicago—kept him in close touch with developments on the American Jewish scene.

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For his entire career Liebman was both scholar and activist. He not only consulted virtually every major Jewish organization but worked to shape policy

in both Israel and for American Jewry. He taught, befriended, advised, and encouraged many younger scholars in the field, reviewed and criticized their work, and sometimes collaborated with them on books and articles. In 2003 he was awarded Israel's highest honor in his field, the Israel Prize in political science.

In a revealing autobiographical essay, published in *American Jewish History* in summer 1991 in response to a wide-ranging symposium dealing with his

life's work, Liebman characterized himself as "something of a misanthrope." He theorized that "this misanthropy, this lack of ease or lack of at-homeness, wherever I am," underlay his research agenda. In fact, as Lawrence Grossman observed at the time, the connection between the man and his work was even deeper, for Liebman personally embodied many of the communal tensions that he wrote about: universalism versus particularism, scientific objectivity versus passionate commitment, and halakic discipline versus private conscience.

At the time of his death he was collaborating with Yaacov Yadgar on studies of "traditionalists," ethnicity, and nationalism in Israel, as well as secular Jewish identity and secular Judaism in Israel.

He will be sorely missed.

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AJS 35

**December 21–23, 2003
The Sheraton Boston Hotel
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