DAVID WERNER AMRAM
1866–1939
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By Louis E. Levinthal

When David Werner Amram died on June 27, 1939,* there passed away an outstanding American lawyer, law professor and jurist, a distinguished scholar, writer and lecturer, a devoted Jewish communal leader, an ardent Zionist advocate, a gentleman of truth and honor, of wit and wisdom.

Born on May 16, 1866, in Philadelphia, he was the son of Werner David Amram and Esther Hammerschlag. His father was a fairly well-to-do ship chandler, who later was the owner of the first Philadelphia matzah bakery. His mother was a saintly woman who founded the Jewish Maternity Hospital of Philadelphia and was a prominent figure in the religious and philanthropic life of the community of her day. Amram was educated in the public schools of his native city, received an intensive Hebrew training at home, and prepared for the University of Pennsylvania at a school known as the Rugby Academy. He entered the University in 1883 and, after graduation from the College in 1887, matriculated at the Law School, where he obtained his LL.B. in 1889. He also received an M.A. degree from the University the following year.

From 1889, the date of his admission to the Bar, until the end of his life he was keenly interested in the law, its practice as a profession and its study as a science. In 1903 he was appointed by the Judges of the United States District Court as Referee in Bankruptcy, an office he held to the time of his death. His adjudications as Referee were

*The death of Mr. Amram in 1939 occurred when the current Jewish Year Book was already in press. It was not until recently that the omission of a biographical notice in the next Year Book was discovered. We are pleased to pay this belated tribute to the memory of an outstanding American Jewish personality.
frequently accepted as controlling precedents by the appellate courts and cited with approval by text-book writers.

In 1906 he became lecturer on Bankruptcy at the University of Pennsylvania Law School and, six years later, was appointed Professor of Law, teaching Pennsylvania Practice in addition to lecturing on Bankruptcy. He remained a member of the faculty of the Law School until 1925, when ill health compelled him to retire. Many of Philadelphia's leading lawyers were students of Amram, and all of them testify to his rare skill as lecturer and to his constant kindliness and helpfulness. He achieved special distinction as an authority on practice in civil cases, and published two standard text-books on this subject.

What almost singled him out among the Jewish members of the entire American Bar was his thorough biblical and talmudic scholarship. It was after his admission to the Bar that he immersed himself in the study of ancient Jewish literature. The story is told that, once in trying a case in court, Amram was called upon by the presiding judge to state the Jewish law on the rather complicated question in dispute, and that he was compelled to admit his ignorance. It then dawned upon him that it was anomalous that he, a Jew, familiar with the common law, should be unlearned in the Jewish. He thereupon determined to study the Talmud, a task by no means easy for an adult. He enlisted the aid of the Rev. Dr. Marcus M. Jastrow, the scholarly rabbi of Rodeph Shalom, who was then working on his monumental Talmudic dictionary. For several years Amram, under Jastrow's inspiring guidance, devoted himself to the sources of Jewish jurisprudence. Dr. Jastrow's was probably the most profound influence upon Amram's attitude toward Jewish life and thought.

It was to Dr. Jastrow, his "friend and teacher," that he dedicated, in 1896, his first book, "The Jewish Law of Divorce According to Bible and Talmud." The author treats an abstruse and complicated subject with unusual clarity. This scholarly treatise, published when he was thirty years old, established his reputation as a penetrating student of comparative law and as an authority on the law of divorce. He contributed the articles, among others, on Divorce and on the Agunah (the deserted or forsaken
wife) to the Jewish Encyclopedia, and he delivered lectures on "Family Life and Biblical Law" and on "The Jewish Law and the Law of the State in Matters of Divorce," the former in 1897 before the Teachers' Institute of the Jewish Chautauqua Society, and the latter in 1903 before the Conference of Orthodox Congregations of New York City.

A series of Amram's articles contributed to The Green Bag, a legal magazine popular at the turn of the century, formed the substance of his next book, "Leading Cases in the Bible," published in 1905. He approached the Bible in a spirit of free scientific inquiry and, with striking originality and in a charming style, he illuminated the legal problems involved even indirectly in the biblical narrative. This fascinating book is of genuine interest to the students both of the law and of the Bible.

In 1899, Amram was married to Beulah Brylawski, a lady of rare intellectual attainments. Her articles in the Jewish Exponent, as well as some of her Italian studies in the Atlantic Monthly, are still remembered. It was with the assistance of his talented wife that Amram wrote what is generally regarded as his most significant contribution to Jewish scholarship, "The Makers of Hebrew Books in Italy," published in 1909. This work, which he dedicated to his intimate friend, Dr. Lewis W. Steinbach, gives a comprehensive account of the early history of the Hebrew printing press and of the Hebrew books produced during the infancy of the art of printing, particularly the work done by Gershom Soncino and of the Christian printer, Daniel Bomberg, who issued the first complete edition of the Talmud in the early part of the sixteenth century. This book, which is regarded as one of the most authoritative as well as attractive volumes in the field of Hebrew bibliography, contains numerous facsimile reproductions of the title pages of some of the incunabula described by the author.

Even after Amram became quite ill, his scholarly pursuits did not cease. With the cooperation of his older son, Philip Werner Amram, who later succeeded him as a member of the faculty of the Law School of the University of Pennsylvania, he maintained his interest in the reform
of court procedure and civil practice. He also developed an entirely new cultural interest. He became one of the outstanding Americanists as the result of his researches in Pre-Columbian Mexican and Peruvian textile designs and in Aztec pottery art forms, of which he made many beautiful reproductions.

In 1924 his wife died in the prime of her life. Nine years later he married Hortense Levy, the daughter of the late Louis Edward Levy, distinguished publisher, inventor and communal leader, and herself an active worker in Hadassah and other cultural and philanthropic agencies.

From his early youth, Amram was actively interested in Jewish educational and cultural institutions. From 1897 to 1901, he was the president of the Young Men’s Hebrew Association and for many years thereafter he was a leading figure at notable literary and communal gatherings under the auspices of the Y.M.H.A. He was also, from time to time, a director of the Hebrew Education Society, a member of the Publication Committee of the Jewish Publication Society of America, a trustee of Gratz College, a director of the Jewish Chautauqua Society, an officer of the Philadelphia Branch of the Jewish Theological Seminary, and served on numerous committees engaged in promoting the welfare of the immigrants in Philadelphia and also in the Baron de Hirsch colony in Woodbine, New Jersey. He helped organize, and was one of the guiding spirits of, the Pharisees, a group of young men, many of whom developed into outstanding communal leaders. It was before this society that Amram first read many of his literary compositions, notably the “Michael Levy” sketches dealing with the life of the recently arrived immigrants. His style of writing was always concise and incisive, often extremely witty, and not infrequently brilliant.

Amram was a frequent contributor to the columns of the Jewish Exponent and to other periodicals, and he delivered many occasional addresses. His articles and speeches covered a wide range of subjects, and each was the fruit of intensive study and deep thinking. Here we can mention only a few of his more significant uncollected writings of Jewish interest: “Some Aspects of the Growth of the Jewish Law” (1896), “Jewish Education” (1898),
"The Zekenim or Council of Elders" (1900), "An Injunction of a Jewish Egyptian Court of the Thirteenth Century" (1901), "Political Zionism" (1902), "The Decline of the Reform Movement" (1902), "Maimonides as a Codifier of the Law" (1904), "Ancient Landmarks in Jewish Literature" (1905), "Retaliation and Compensation" (1911), and "The Summons, a Study in Jewish Legal Procedure" (1919). The present generation of American Jews would be spiritually and culturally enriched if many of his serious writings, as well as some of his lighter literary compositions, were collected and made available in book form.

Amram was an enthusiastic adherent of the Zionist movement from its very inception under the leadership of Theodor Herzl. For several years he served as the chairman of the Philadelphia Zionist Council, as a director of the Federation of American Zionists, and as an editor of The Maccabean, the official American Zionist publication. In 1918 he delivered a notable address on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania, under the auspices of its faculty, on "A Jewish State in Palestine." In the same year he contributed to the Menorah Journal an eloquent and cogent argument for political Zionism (June, 1918, Vol. IV., No. 3). His scholarly article on "Geography of Palestine" constitutes the first chapter of "Modern Palestine," published in 1933 by Hadassah, the Women’s Zionist Organization.

When the American Jewish Congress conducted elections for delegates in 1918 and again in 1921, Amram received an overwhelming popular vote. Like Mr. Justice Louis D. Brandeis, he firmly believed in the need of democratizing American Jewish life. On the occasion of the eightyieth birthday of the Justice, in 1936, Amram contributed a biographical appreciation to the Jewish Exponent, in which he paid a glowing tribute to Brandeis’ passionate devotion to the well-being of the masses and to the ideals of social and economic justice, a devotion which Amram traced to Brandeis’ Jewish heritage and to the teachings of the ancient Hebrew prophets.

In his personal relations, Amram was a delightful companion, a scintillating conversationalist, a considerate friend, and a devoted husband and father. Scholarship was
a natural gift, and he was universally recognized as an authority in numerous and varied fields of learning and culture. But he was always modest and unassuming, disliking sham and show and avoiding publicity. Whatever honors came to him were always unsought. As a scholar, he was not bookish or pedantic or concerned only with delving into the remote past. He had a large and free outlook that took in the problems of the present and envisioned the needs of the future. His attitude toward anti-Semitism and Zionism was summed up as follows: "We cannot permit our loyalty to America and our natural and deep-rooted love for her to be defined and limited by anti-Semites. It is because we are free Americans that we may openly help in the establishment of a free Palestine."

In his life and in his work, David Werner Amram presented a perfect synthesis of the noblest ideals and aspirations of Americanism and of Judaism.