ISRAEL DAVIDSON

1870–1939

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By LOUIS FINKELSTEIN

Professor Israel Davidson was not only an eminent rabbinic scholar; he was a member of the group of men who made America one of the foremost centers of Jewish learning of our time. There is a curious parallelism in the life histories of all the savants who have been engaged in the gigantic task of removing the sacred vessels from the tottering structure of European life to the safe haven of America. They all began as rabbinic students, spending their youth in the Yeshibot of Eastern Europe and acquiring an almost incredible mastery of rabbinic lore. Gifted with unusual physical endurance, they survived the ordeal of years of continuous study, working eighteen hours a day; and the even more severe ordeal of adjustment, as poor immigrants, to the life of the western countries to which they happened to come: Germany, England, or America.

In spite of the hardships they endured, each retained his genial personality and acquired new charm in his human relationships. "Do the eyes of all rabbinical scholars sparkle?" a young man once asked me, after he had been introduced to Professor Davidson and one of his colleagues. "There is a curious twinkle in the eyes of both of these scholars, which I have also noticed in their friends, but which is hardly to be found anywhere else!"

Professor Davidson's life history followed the typical pattern. It was different from those of his colleagues only in the extremes of suffering which he underwent in his youth and his student days, and the extremes of eminence he attained in his maturity.

The standard of Jewish scholarship which Doctor Davidson set for himself was the connecting link between Grodno, the Russian town where he began his Jewish studies, and the great American metropolis where he chose to live his life, New York City.

Israel Davidson was the thirteenth child born to David Wolf Movshovitz and Rebecca Cohen Movshovitz in the little village of Yanova in Russia on May 27, 1870. Since no other child had survived, his parents followed the local custom of naming their child "Alter," "The Old One," as a happy omen that he was to live to old age. Both his parents died before his fifth birthday, and he was sent to live in Grodno with an uncle, Rabbi Isaac Klebansky, who adopted him. Upon immigration to America, the boy had to determine upon a name, and instead of choosing between the family names of his father and uncle, decided to be Israel Davidson, i. e. Israel, the son of David. This is the history of a name which was to become known in every part of the world where Jewish knowledge is held in honor.

Grodno and its neighboring community of Vorstadt was a town of about 50,000 population, half of which was Jewish; a town famous for its Jewish academies and libraries. It is reported that, in his Hebrew-school days, young Davidson acquired his first interest in mediaeval Hebrew poetry from hours of browsing in the fine library of a fellow townsman. In the Heder, too, the boy Talmudist earned the first of many prizes which were to come to him for success in his studies. One day, when he outdid his schoolmates in answering the questions of his Rabbi, the latter summoned an old lady who sold "bob" (a type of broad bean which was considered a delicacy) and instructed her to fill the child's pocket as a reward for his acumen. To his friends he was known as Alter the Masmid, the diligent student. After the Heder, Davidson studied in the Grodno Yeshiva, and then went for a few years to the famous Yeshiva of Slobodka, a village near Kovno, now Kaunas, capital of Lithuania. Professor Louis Ginzberg, a colleague at the Jewish Theological Seminary, also attended the Slobodka Yeshiva, but at a later date.

In the year before his seventeenth birthday, when he made his decision to leave Russia, Davidson used to work all day over his books and, as was the custom, "boarded round" with the families of the town, skipping meals on

those days when no invitation had come for the scholars. The privations of the Yeshiva years, however, were good preparation for the voyage to America and the days when he had to subsist for a week on a loaf of bread and a few onions. His uncle was able to send him a little money which he spent on books. In his first years in America, too, he would always be tempted to purchase books instead of food. When he did not have money he bartered, as on the occasion when he traded his bicycle for the stack of Hebrew books found in his cousin's store. Everyone who knew him, in those early days, mentions two distinguishing and unforgettable characteristics — his preoccupied scholar's walk and his constant poring over books. In his later years, his home in New York was a library throughout, with books in every room. His respect for books was such that he never permitted a volume to be misplaced, or to be put in upside down, and never allowed any other member of his family to touch the books at all. The day before his death, he had taken ninety-eight books with him to his country house, and had spent his first hours there arranging the books near his desk, in anticipation of his studies the next day.

Lacking the required passport to study in Germany which was the first goal of the Russian students of his day, Davidson made plans for his escape to America. Among other preparations, he wrote to *Ha-Zefirah*, a periodical in Warsaw, and asked advice and references. The editors were so much impressed by his letter that they answered at length and advised him to write to Dr. Alexander Kohut in New York. Finally, equipped with a coffee-can, (to brew coffee) and overcoat, and a pillow, and with five roubles (about $2.50) sewed in his coat and five in his pocket, he joined a group of emigrants who were carted to the border. With them he managed to make his way to Hamburg, only to discover that the boat on which he had taken a ticket would not leave for a week. From his meagre treasury he paid for bread and enough herring to last the voyage. A householder of whom he had asked a glass of water required him to pay a pfennig for it. So

lasting a scar did this sordid act of pettiness leave upon him, that never in his subsequent travels through Germany would he approach the city of Hamburg. It was in Hamburg, too, that the change from his first five roubles was stolen from him.

With a bottle of whiskey, which he had been advised to take as a remedy for seasickness, his loaf and his herring, Davidson survived the seventeen day journey to America. He was landed at Castle Garden (now the Aquarium) in New York City on May 18, 1888. He entered America officially registered as a book-binder, for, when asked his trade by the immigration inspectors, he recalled that he had once bound a book. Even after a harrowing journey, with only one dollar in his pocket and with no word of English to help him in his encounters with strangers in a strange land, he was still able to draw upon the sense of humor which characterized his relationships throughout his life. The career chosen as a joke, however, was nevertheless later more than fulfilled. Davidson grew to know and love fine paper, calligraphy, leather bindings, and a well-planned page. One notices that even the popular editions of his own publications are models of the bookbinder's art, a result to be attributed to the infinite pains which he took in their physical preparation.

The experiences of Davidson's first day in America were probably similar to those of many another young immigrant. Upon leaving Castle Garden he met a *landsmann* who helped him find the house of a Rabbi whom Davidson had known in Russia. But the Rabbi had left the week before for Europe, and his landlady, herself poor, had no room for the lad. It was the second day of Shabuot, however, and Davidson heard his first real words of welcome to America from this kind lady, who said, "*Macht Kiddush*!" ("say Kiddush"). He devoured the entire *hallah* (Sabbath bread) which was offered to him.

"So green was I that the grass was no greener," said Doctor Davidson, describing his first days in America. He would make an amusing tale for his family and friends of his heart-breaking attempts at self-support. He tried peddling matches, shoe laces, and other notions at a profit of forty cents a day. Once he was told of a job in a grocery,

a business of which he had never heard, and presented himself with his letters of recommendation from eminent European rabbis, which his prospective employer could not read. "Even without Semicha (the rabbinical ordination), I will let you chop wood," said the groceryman. Davidson worked here from five a.m. to ten p.m. for fifty cents a week and meals, until the happy day when he dropped a basket of crockery and was dismissed, albeit without his weekly salary.

Abraham Dubowsky, from whom Davidson bought his peddling supplies, was a compatriot and a *shohet.* He had married the sister of Professor Morris R. Cohen. He gave Davidson a place to live and engaged him to teach Hebrew to his children. Both men attended the Suvalki Shule regularly and spent their evenings together in the study of Talmud. Davidson remembered the Dubowskys as a household where a hospitable meal was always ready for him. The Dubowskys suggested that he go to public school to improve what little English he had learned. With no knowledge of secular subjects like arithmetic and geography, Davidson entered the first grade of public school and completed the entire course of eight grades in one year. His teacher, whose aid Davidson frequently acknowledged, was a Mr. Scheimer. It was under Scheimer's guidance that Davidson laid the foundation for the beautiful English style which was to win for him recognition commensurate with his standing in the field of Hebrew.

For the next five years, Davidson attended City College; he received his degree, with honors in English, in 1895. He had exchanged his peddling work and the teaching, which he had undertaken at the Yeshiva Etz Chaim, for a night watchman's job in a blanket shop, and gave lessons in English at twenty-five cents an hour for his meals. Here he could study all evening and sleep with as many blankets as he wished, provided he rotated their use, so as not to wear out the stock of the shop.

At City College he was particularly drawn to Professors Mott, who taught English, Sims, mathematics, and Werner, German. Professor Mott, who saw the frightful struggle necessary for the boy to continue his studies, found a patron for him. Davidson, however, feared that a patron

might compromise his integrity as a student and refused the offer.

From City College, he went to Columbia University to study in the Department of Semitics under Professor Richard J. H. Gottheil. He received a fellowship which enabled him to complete his work for a Ph. D. degree in 1902. He also served, during these years, as secretary to Rabbi Gustav Gottheil of Temple Emanu-El, who took an interest in improving his speech and asked him to read aloud every day. This tutoring undoubtedly accounted for the lovely quality of Doctor Davidson's speech, in addition to his charming prose style.

Doctor Gottheil procured for Davidson the post of prison chaplain at Sing Sing and Dannemora prisons. Though the chaplaincy involved a good deal of weekend travel, it brought its recompense in the friendship between the Protestant chaplain, the Reverend Francis H. Pierce, and Davidson. Until Mr. Pierce's death, a few years ago, the two men conducted a correspondence which belongs in the category of English *belles lettres*. The correspondence ranged from a discussion of the term "kosher" to a consideration of cigars. "I learned long ago to appreciate a five-cent cigar as much as a fifteen-cent one," writes Doctor Davidson. "We Professors can afford to choose our friends but we cannot afford to choose our cigars." And he would even take lightly the subject of his own work. "I continue to write books which people continue not to read, but the proofreader and I are having a good time."

Some of the other friends of Davidson's early years, before he joined the Seminary group as an instructor in 1905, were Morris D. Waldman, David M. Bressler, Dr. Samuel Gruskin, Yehoash, and Joseph Eron. Davidson knew Israel Zangwill, Maurice Sterne, Sholem Asch, Max Weber, and other leaders in all branches of Jewish arts and letters. Sholem Asch was one of the few novelists whom he would read, although he liked to read detective stories for relaxation.

In 1905 began Doctor Davidson's formal career as scholar and teacher. In that year, Doctor Solomon Schechter, who had come to New York to assume the

presidency of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, invited Doctor Davidson to give up his chaplaincy at Sing Sing and to become an instructor in Talmud at the Seminary. Doctor Davidson was quick to accept this offer, for, in spite of the satisfaction which he derived from the human aspects of his work at Sing Sing, he was eager to begin the scholarly work which was closest to his heart.

It was necessary, however, for Doctor Davidson to search for some outside employment, to supplement the meagre salary which the infant Seminary was able to pay him. Shortly after starting his teaching at the Seminary, he accepted the position of Principal at the Hebrew Orphan Asylum, an office which he held until 1917. There must be many children who came to the Orphan Asylum in those years who remember with amusement the kindly young man, with the delicious sense of humor, who was continually puzzled by the newest theories in pedagogy. Doctor Davidson always had the technical scholar's suspicion of the ways of the pedagogue. When his young teachers told him that they were going to put into practice all they learned at Teachers College, and teach Hebrew by the "natural" method, he smiled tolerantly and told them to go ahead. After all, he knew nothing of the means of teaching; he knew only the desired end. But when he began to visit classrooms, and saw the "natural" method in operation, his sense of humor got the better of him, and at the next opportunity he told his teachers that he considered the "natural" method the most unnatural he had ever seen. It seems that, for purposes of this method, the teacher used to keep a supply of toys on hand, and when teaching a new word, instead of giving the children lists of vocabulary to learn, would merely indicate the object and its name in Hebrew. Thus it was easy to introduce the group to new nouns, but the teaching of verbs, adverbs, and prepositions often necessitated the construction of rather artificial situations. Sometimes the teacher would show the class a miniature house and a toy horse; then, setting the horse on the house, would say in Hebrew, and ask the class to repeat, "The horse is on the roof of the house." It is easy to see why the teaching of such a patently

absurd statement struck Doctor Davidson as anything but a "natural" method of instruction.

Doctor Solomon Lowenstein was the head of the Orphan Asylum during the period that Doctor Davidson was principal, and Doctor Davidson's friendship with Doctor Lowenstein and his family continued until his last days.

In 1906, Doctor Davidson added to his other positions, that of Cataloguer and Assistant Librarian at the Seminary. In spite of the fact that these three positions, necessary to assure him financial security, would have seemed more than enough to most men, Doctor Davidson found time in this period to edit and enlarge his Doctor's Thesis, and to use the material for the publication of his first book *Parody in Jewish Literature*, which appeared in 1907. This book shows many of the traits which marked Doctor Davidson's later writing. There is a lengthy preface in English, in which parody is defined, and distinctions made between the parody which seeks to destroy old standards by ridiculing them, and Jewish parody, which seeks to emulate the original rather than to disparage it. Particularly noteworthy is the fine English style of this and the later prefaces. Considered apart from the book itself, it is an excellent essay on one aspect of mediaeval Hebrew literature, of interest to the layman as well as to the scholar, and as easily comprehensible to the Christian student, whether or not he be a Hebraist, as to the Jew. Such prefaces as this have set a new standard in Jewish scholarship, and have opened to the ordinary scholar a field which was formerly restricted by language limitations to students of Hebrew. Doctor Davidson was particularly well fitted to be one of the pioneers in opening to all students the highly specialized field of mediaeval Hebrew literature. His love of his people and devotion to their religious ideals supplied the motive, and his profound scholarly insight supplied the tool, which, working together, enabled him to explain the greatness of the Jewish religion, and the unique merits of the literary expression which it found in the Middle Ages.

In 1904 Doctor Davidson had gone with Doctor H. G. Friedman, Rabbis Nathan Stern, Gerson Levi, Samuel Goldenson, and other friends of his Columbia days to

lecture at a Chatauqua meeting in Atlantic City. There he met Carrie Dreyfus, of Brooklyn, and, on the evening of their first meeting, he remarked to a friend that he was going to marry that girl. Following the introduction, there was a courtship, notable chiefly for the foundations which must have been laid in that period for the very happy home which was so important to them both in later years. Throughout his life, Doctor Davidson marveled at the Providence which had saved him from marrying until after he was established in the new world, and had thus spared him from the fate of many of his countrymen, who had been forced to give up their studies because of family needs. Such had been the fate of a *landsmann* of his who had been educated abroad in the same schools. This countryman, however, fell in love as soon as he arrived in this country, and to support his family, became a presser, and later a businessman, but could never develop his promise as a brilliant student. There was a close friendship between the two men and, after an evening spent together in escape from their respective problems, the great scholar used to wonder whether, in his friend's circumstances, he would not have shared his fate.

Because he was suffering from the nervousness which traditionally afflicts the bridegroom, and in order to be sure that he would arrive on time the next day, Doctor Davidson spent the night preceding his wedding in Brooklyn with Doctor Judah L. Magnes. Of course, he did arrive on time and, from 1906 to the day of his death, Davidson's life was woven against the background which only a happy home, an appreciative and understanding wife, and bright, devoted children can supply.

In 1914, Doctor Davidson went to Cambridge to work on some Genizah Mss. He spent two weeks in Cambridge, studying some two thousand manuscripts. On this trip, he made his first careful study of the Genizah material, part of which he later used in the Genizah Studies, published by the Seminary in 1928.

In 1915, Doctor Davidson took up the duties of Registrar and in 1917 he was appointed Professor of Mediaeval Hebrew Literature at the Seminary. He, therefore, resigned his post at the Hebrew Orphan Asylum to devote himself

exclusively to the duties of his administrative and teaching work at the Seminary and to his own scholarly research. It is easy to imagine how much this must have meant to him. Doctor Davidson had always felt that his outside work was a drain of time and physical energy, both of which he thought should be entirely expended on his studies. His feeling on this subject was no whit weakened by the fact that the three years since his European trip had seen the publication of two important books; *Sepher Shaashuim*, by Joseph ben Meir Zabara, and *Saadia's Polemic against Hiwi al Balkhi*, the latter edited from a Genizah fragment; as well as several scholarly articles. The *Sepher Shaashuim* has since been rendered into English, from Professor Davidson's edition, by Professor Moses Hadas, and published under the name "The Book of Delight, of Joseph ben Meir ibn Zabara" Nevertheless Doctor Davidson felt dissatisfied. The project of the Thesaurus was in his mind, and he knew that the work would require undivided attention and unrelenting application. His resignation from the post of principal at the Hebrew Orphan Asylum brought him nearer the day when he could start on this task in earnest.

The year 1919 saw the publication of Mahzor Yannai, a translation of another of the Genizah fragments. It is curious to consider how he came upon this book. The copy which had been recovered from the Genizah was a palimpsest; that is, it had been written, as was frequently done in the Middle Ages, on paper which had already been used for another book. The original writing contained the translation of the Pentateuch into Greek, made by the Roman proselyte to Judaism, Aquila, the disciple of R. Eliezer and R. Joshua. Some centuries after the first book had been written on this paper, a later scribe, who did not care for the translation of Aquila, wrote on the same paper the *piyyutim* (poems) of Yannai, the famous teacher of R. Eleazer Ha-Kalir. When the book, in its second form, had become badly worn, it was thrown into the Genizah at Cairo, where it remained until Doctor Solomon Schechter discovered it and brought it, together with other treasures, to England.

The professors at Cambridge were naturally more inter-

ested in the lost translation of Aquila than in the *piyyutim* which were written over it, and so they managed by the use of certain chemicals to destroy the later writing and bring out the original which lay under it. Fortunately, before destroying the later writing containing the *piyyutim*, they photographed the manuscript. No one, however, guessed what the later writing was. It was only when Professor Davidson studied the photographed pages that he discovered that they contained the work of one of the first great Hebrew poets of the Middle Ages; and the ancient singer, Yannai, was brought to life once more.

The glory which attached to Professor Davidson's remarkable discovery was in the end to fade before an even more amazing achievement, his compilation of the *Thesaurus of Mediaeval Hebrew Poetry*, the first volume of which appeared in 1924. This book marks a turning point in the study of the subject. It may be said of it that it literally introduced order where before there was naught but confusion. The fragments of Jewish liturgical and secular poetry were scattered among any number of volumes and magazines. The discoverer of a manuscript had no way of knowing whether a poem found in it had already been published; whether its author was known; and where he could learn more about it. Hence, any number of poems were marked as anonymous, because the acrostic containing the author's name had been destroyed through loss of part of the work. Various fragments of poetry belonging together were to be found widely separated from one another. Entering this field with the hardihood and determination of the pioneer, Davidson accomplished for it precisely what the Talmud maintains Rabbi Akiba achieved for the whole Jewish tradition: he systematized the material.

With his quaint modesty, Davidson did not fully appreciate the importance of his work. He would frequently say, "There are men who surpass their works; and there are others whose works surpass them. I belong to this latter class." And yet, he never realized the place his books, and particularly his Thesaurus, were destined to hold in Jewish scholarship. He knew, of course, how much labor had been expended on this monumental work; and he was also aware of some of the brilliant notes and identi-

fications, which glisten among its long lists of names and poems. But he had a passionate desire to commune with the masses of people. While he enjoyed his research work to the full, and never desisted from it, even when he was ill, he wished that he might have been the interpreter and the historian of post-rabbinic Hebrew poetry, rather than its discoverer and systematizer. He would have liked to have found the Thesaurus completed before he began his work, so that he might have built on its foundations a structure, not only impressive to the student, but also pleasant to the eye of the layman. Indeed, when he projected the work, he intimated that its fifth volume would be devoted to such a history of mediaeval Hebrew poetry. But the work of locating thirty-five thousand poems, classifying and identifying them, and producing the four magnificent tomes describing them, exhausted him. To undertake another great creative task, after he had finished this work, was impossible.

If Doctor Davidson did not fully appreciate his work, the rest of the scholarly world did. The appearance of the first volume of the Thesaurus brought Davidson world-wide acclaim, and appreciations of it appeared in scientific, and also in many popular magazines. Groups of Davidson's friends gathered to do him honor on the occasion; and at one memorable dinner, at which Professor David Yellin presided, Davidson found himself surrounded by a singular circle of Hebrew scholars, creative writers, and appreciative laymen. For almost the first time in American Jewish history, the modern Hebraist with his eager yearning for Hebrew poetry, the Jewish antiquarian with his eye for the treasures of the past, and the English- and Yiddish-speaking students of Jewish affairs, found themselves united by the common bond of admiration for a great work which met a deep need for all of them.

"Ten years have passed," Davidson wrote in the Hebrew introduction to the first volume, "since I began this work. At the time when the whole world was quaking with thunderous war, and every village and city was aroused by the noise of its soldiery and militia, I removed myself from the tumult of life, and entered into the great Temple — our past. Without, the sword was destroying, and from

all sides could be heard cries of victory, and cries of defeat; during all that time I walked the length and breadth of the Temple, searching each corner and crevice, seeking out each room and cubicle. While thousands and myriads of men were girding their swords on their sides, to fight one another, I was setting up memorials for the souls of our heroes of ancient days."

As the three later volumes of the work followed the first in rapid succession, the admiration of the scholarly world for the prodigious labor, the immense learning, and the systematizing ability of the author continually increased. In 1926, he was called to lecture at the Hebrew University at Jerusalem, and was granted a year's leave of absence from the Seminary to accept the invitation. While he was on his way to Jerusalem, Bialik arrived in America. Bialik was that unusual combination, the scholar-poet, who loved to resurrect the works of his predecessors even more than he desired to create new masterpieces. As part of his work, Bialik had undertaken the publication of the poems of Solomon ibn Gabirol, the magnificent singer of the eleventh century; and one of his motives in coming to America was to consult Davidson about his work! He was disappointed to find that he had missed Davidson, and yet it was possible for him to gain much from Davidson's work, even in the scholar's absence from America. One of Davidson's ablest disciples, Rabbi Joseph Marcus, was brought to Bialik by Mr. Isaac Rivkind, the well-known Hebrew writer and member of the Library staff at the Seminary. Marcus undertook to pursue researches for Bialik in the Seminary Library, and was able to render him invaluable assistance.

Davidson's journey to Palestine, and his return by way of Italy, Poland, Germany and France was almost in the nature of a triumphal tour. Everywhere he found people who had known him through his work and were delighted to have the opportunity of meeting him in person. To him, the year was a milestone in his life because he was able to study, at first hand, many of his beloved manuscripts, and because he too was delighted to meet the great scholars with whom he had previously been in correspondence. Nothing gave Davidson greater happiness than to feel that

his work was being studied and was useful. He used to tell of his surprise when, coming to the village of Kiryat Anavim in Palestine, he met a man at a house where he stopped for some refreshment. The man, who seemed to be a simple peasant, asked for the visitor's name.

"Davidson," he replied.

"From America?"

"Yes."

"Are you perhaps Israel Davidson of the Thesaurus?" the other continued, to Davidson's amazement and delight. For the first time he had met a person who assumed that a travelling Davidson, of distinguished mien, must necessarily be the Professor, who had done so much for the advancement of Hebrew literature!

On his return voyage from Palestine, Davidson visited bookshops, ever on the alert for old, unrecognized, or forgotten manuscripts, or for books to add to his library. He felt conscience-stricken about this extensive book-buying, and he promised his family that before they left the Near East, there would be purchases of quite a different order — oriental rugs, coffee urns, and the like. These promises, however, were never realized, for he continued to buy books; and Doctor Davidson's only concession to less scholarly tastes was to refer to certain of the more highly prized books as "our oriental rug" when showing the fruits of the year's visit to friends in America.

One amusing anecdote has survived from this European venture. The family arrived in Rome late one night at the beginning of August. When they came to their hotel, Doctor Davidson told the proprietor that they would remain until he had finished some work in the Vatican Library. Much to his chagrin, he was told that the Vatican Library was always closed for the month of August. Upon hearing this news, Doctor Davidson informed his family that if the report were true, they would not stay in Rome, but would leave the following evening. No amount of persuasion could budge him from this decision, in spite of the fact that his wife and his daughters had been eagerly anticipating a prolonged stay in the Eternal City. Since he remained obdurate, they made plans for what was probably the greatest day of sight-seeing on

record. When they returned home the following evening they discovered that their exertions had not been necessary, and that they were to have their prolonged visit after all. Doctor Davidson had gone to the Library in the morning, and, though it was officially closed, had managed to get in, and had found Cardinal (then Monsignor) Tisserant working there. The Cardinal had glanced up from his book, cried "Davidson!", given instructions to the guards that they were under no conditions to be disturbed, and the two of them had seated themselves to discuss years of scholarship. In the two weeks that followed, the two scholars were locked into the Vatican Library from morning till evening, working over manuscripts, discussing differences, and comparing interpretations. In the meantime, Doctor Davidson's family had a real opportunity to see Rome and enjoy its beauties.

Doctor Davidson made one more trip abroad, in 1929. On that occasion he spent most of his time in Germany, Holland, and Belgium, searching out the greatest Hebrew scholars, and devoting hours to research in various European libraries. He was entirely wrapped up in the Thesaurus at this time, and had no leisure for sight-seeing. Indeed, in Paris, when his family finally succeeded in wearing down his resistance and dragging him to the Louvre, he had barely stepped inside of the building and glimpsed the long walls, covered with pictures, when he said, "This is so enormous, that all one can get is an impression; let me go back to my work!"

On his return to America, Professor Davidson undertook the compilation and publication of the Genizah fragments of mediaeval Hebrew poetry, which he had undertaken to edit as part of the Schechter Memorial Volumes. The importance of these poems does not rest, as Professor Davidson correctly states in his introduction, "entirely on their quantity and novelty, nor upon the fact that their authors have been forgotten. A large number of them display real poetic genius and compare favorably with the best productions of their kind." The poems brought to light in this work have proven of great assistance to students of Jewish literature of the early Middle Ages, as well as to historians of that period.

Although this picture of Doctor Davidson's adult years seems to stress scholarship above all else, it would be quite false should this be taken as a true picture of his character. The Davidsons, when in New York, were always "at home" on Friday evenings and Saturday afternoons, and many were the visitors who came because they had been won by the human side of this great scholar. His genial humor, his wit, his sincere humanitarianism, and his sympathy and understanding were all qualities which attracted his many friends. Doctor Davidson had an easy tolerance of people. He was quick to admire their achievements and to compliment them on their successes. He never ceased to marvel at men who "did things", in politics or in business. If they failed he would excuse them on the ground that it is wrong to expect too much of human beings. The same tolerance, however, did not extend into his own field. There, a man was either a "great scholar, great scholar" or "a very superficial man." So frequent were these didactic pronouncements that most of his friends can imitate the little gestures which added emphasis to each statement.

Professor Davidson's most intimate friends were naturally his colleagues on the faculty of the Seminary. He always spoke with deep feeling of his relations with Doctor Cyrus Adler, the President of the Seminary. Because of Professor Davidson's duties as Registrar, he was naturally brought into closer contact with the President than other members of the faculty; and there developed a friendship between the two men that lasted throughout Doctor Davidson's life. When Doctor Davidson became ill, Doctor Adler urged him to spare himself both from his duties as Registrar and from his tasks as teacher. On one occasion when Doctor Davidson, in spite of obvious illness, made an effort to attend a faculty meeting, Doctor Adler wrote him: "I know how much you like to teach but I would not have you do anything at the expense of your health . . . You ought to be guided by your physician, but what I want to say to you is that, if it is not wise for you to give these lectures or do seminar work this semester, or even this year, you will understand that I and the rest of us consider your health to be the first concern of all of us.

I am sure that it is not necessary for me to say to you that should you, for reasons of health, discontinue lecturing, or seminar work, or both, it would not in any way alter your status as a full Professor of the Seminary . . "

Professor Davidson appreciated this kindness and courtesy, but his affection for the students and his interest in the Seminary would not permit him to desist from his work, so long as it was physically possible for him to continue it.

Professor Louis Ginzberg, the famous Talmudic authority, had been the friend of Professor Davidson since the former had come to America in 1899. He had been asked by Professor Davidson to add notes to Professor Davidson's edition of the Mahzor Yannai; he was a regular visitor at the Davidson home, and an intimate associate of Professor Davidson in all the latter's scholarly activity. Professor Davidson regarded his colleague with deep respect. I well recall the day when, as young students, Doctor Solomon Goldman and I spoke to Professor Davidson about Professor Ginzberg, and were told, "Professor Ginzberg is the crown of our head."

Professor Alexander Marx, the distinguished Librarian of the Seminary, was Professor Davidson's most intimate co-worker. In his preface to the Thesaurus, Professor Davidson records his indebtedness to Professor Marx, who had collected the large library without which Davidson's work could not have been carried out.

Doctor Davidson's relationship to many of his former students was a close one. He offered them sympathy and understanding, which they returned a hundredfold in the form of admiration, affection, and respect. An example of this is the following excerpt from a letter written recently by one of Doctor Davidson's former students, Doctor Max Kadushin, to Mrs. Davidson.

> "I was quite alone in New York when I first met Professor Davidson, strange to the world of scholarship, desperately in need of guidance and encouragement. As one of the greatest Jewish scholars of our times, he set standards which I never could hope to reach, but this only made the patience and kindliness he displayed

to a novice all the more admirable. How much he gave to those who gave the least gesture that they were willing to learn! And how deep was his sympathy with us who were struggling for a foothold in life, fatherly friend and teacher at once! Among the memories I treasure most are those long walks at night after Professor Davidson had laid aside his work, when, as we tramped down along Central Park, I came closest, I believe, to his spirit. Stories of his early adventures in New York, problems yet to be solved in the history of Jewish literature, evaluations of modern Hebrew writers, hints as to methods in scholarship, scintillating bits of humor, formed his conversation. Once he stopped still and said to me, 'Have you ever been alone with yourself? I do not mean just meditation and contemplation.' It has taken me a goodly number of years to realize what he meant and all its implications.

"Only last year I reread his earliest book, the one on Jewish parody. He could not have known how I treasure his books, each one perfect of its kind, the outward form matching the inward excellence, each sentence and phrase a lasting contribution. Professor Marx told me he was in the midst of a new work when he went. Is that not as he would have wished? But what an irreparable loss that he could not have finished it!

"I have certainly not put down all that I want to say; but it may mean something to you to know that his students can never cease to be proud that they were *his* students and will always be grateful for his precious friendship."

Of the scholars outside of the Seminary circle, Professor Davidson was fondest of Professor Shalom Spiegel, whom he regarded as, in a sense, his disciple. It was a fairly common occurrence for Doctor Davidson to look up from his studies at midnight and remark, "I must call Spiegel." In vain were Mrs. Davidson's protests that perhaps Spiegel might be asleep. Doctor Davidson would go to the telephone saying, "Even if he is asleep, it would be

worth waking him for him to hear this! It is most interesting!"

Doctor H. G. Enelow, the late Rabbi of Temple Emanu-El, was also very intimate with Professor Davidson, who was especially grateful for the scholarly interest which Doctor Enelow had taken in the publication of the Thesaurus. It was through Doctor Enelow, that Mr. and Mrs. Nathan J. Miller became interested in Professor Davidson's monumental Thesaurus, and undertook to provide the funds needed for its publication.

In addition to these scholars whom he knew intimately, he was attached to a number with whom he was only in correspondence, or whom he knew only from their books. I recall the day when I read of the death of Professor Samuel Poznanski, the famous Polish-Jewish scholar. Not knowing how much Poznanski meant to Doctor Davidson, I stepped into his study and said, quite calmly, "Professor Davidson, have you read of Poznanski's death?" Never will I forget the expression of horror which came over the face of Professor Davidson at the news; if Poznanski had been his near relative, he could not have been shocked more deeply. "Poznanski is dead, Poznanski is dead," he moaned again and again, as he held his head between his hands, and sank into his chair, unable to stand.

But it would be an error to suppose that all of Doctor Davidson's friends were scholars. Two of his closest friends, as already mentioned, were David M. Bressler and Morris D. Waldman. These two and Sarah Polansky, another friend of long standing, alone were privileged to call Doctor Davidson "Dad." Doctor Davidson shared with these three a profound interest in Jewish affairs, rare in a scholar. They shared too an appreciation of human values which enabled them to enjoy so close a friendship.

Another group of friends was Doctor Davidson's "Faculty," the doctors who had attended him since the beginning of his illness in 1931. His admiration for this group, which included Doctors E. M. Bluestone, Israel S. Wechsler, Harry Weiss, and Alfred A. Schwartz, is shown in part in the following brief excerpt from a letter addressed to one of them: "Whenever I come in close contact with the scientist it makes me feel that all literary work is but

like the blossom compared to the fruit." There is no doubt that this professional admiration was supplemented by mutual personal affection.

Several great works which Doctor Davidson had projected remain incomplete at his death. Of these, doubtless the most important was that for which he had been assembling material during many years: A Thesaurus of Hebrew Proverbs. He published specimens of the work he intended to do in this direction in the *Essays in Memory of Linda Miller*, which he edited. He had told Bialik of his plan, and the latter wrote him, urging him most strongly to carry it out. "I knew for some time of the Thesaurus of Hebrew Proverbs which is in your possession, and I think I even discussed it with you on one occasion. You ought not to delay the arrangement of this treasure and its publication."

Another Thesaurus which Professor Davidson discussed as recently as last summer was a Hebrew analogue of Roget's *Thesaurus of English Words*. There are a number of good Hebrew dictionaries, but no dictionary of synonyms. At the dinner arranged in his honor, on the occasion of the appearance of the *Thesaurus of Mediaeval Hebrew Poetry*, he stressed the need for such a work.

At the last meeting of the Seminary Faculty which he attended, Professor Davidson undertook to prepare an anthology of Mediaeval Hebrew Poetry for use by the students.

But, while his mind was whirling with these projects to be carried out in the distant future, he was particularly eager to complete his edition of the *Seder R. Saadia*, the ritual of prayer arranged by the famous R. Saadia Gaon of Sura, in the ninth century, which is now in print in Palestine. He was happy in the discoveries he made in the course of his work of R. Saadia's special views and profound insights; and it was with delight that he came to me, while I was preparing a study of the Ten Martyrs, to say that he had discovered a poem about them in the *Seder R. Saadia*.

Doctor Davidson's greatness will live in his works and in the many appreciations of them which have been written and which will be written by other later scholars.

But the human qualities which his family and friends knew and loved, these ultimately are lost, except to the fortunate few whose lives have been enriched thereby. It was pleasant to see the great savant, to whom every moment was so precious, unbend and play with a child, explaining difficulties to it, in language it could understand, and winning its affection by giving it his own.

Doctor Davidson has left many who are indebted to him for the privilege and pleasure of his friendship, for he excelled in the art of human living. It was a sad day for his colleagues when, standing before the former Seminary Building, at the summit of the hill at 123rd Street, between Broadway and Amsterdam Avenue, we saw him coming up breathless, though he was walking quite slowly. "I have a sharp pain here," he said, putting his hand over his heart. "It is nothing," we comforted him, "but see a physician." He saw a physician, and it was his first warning that his heart was failing. The fearful struggles of his early years, and the unremitting labors of his mature life, were demanding their payment in prescribed rest. The great care given him by his family and his physicians, and his strong desire to finish his self-assigned tasks, kept him alive for eight years. On Monday, June 26th, he came to the Seminary to bid us farewell. On Tuesday, June 27th, I received a message from him written the day before. As I finished writing my reply to it, the telephone rang. Mrs. Davidson informed me that Professor Davidson had died.

In the inside cover of his watch was the inscription, "It is later than you think." Once, addressing the students of the Seminary at a Commencement, he said, "There is an American proverb which I think is not only false but pernicious in its implication. America prides itself on having coined the saying, 'Time is money'. This is a false statement and leads to serious error. The only case in which time and money are alike is that there are some people who do not know what to do with their time and some who do not know what to do with their money, and still others who are so unfortunate as not to know what to do with either. But, otherwise, time is infinitely more precious than money, and there is nothing common between them. You cannot accumulate time; you cannot

regain time lost; you cannot borrow time; you can never tell how much time you have left in the Bank of Life. Time is life . . ."

The man who said these words — this man to whom time was of the essence, when he died left in the hands of one of his daughters a list of the scholarly work which he then had in progress, with instructions as to how each piece of research could best be finished, and who was best equipped to finish it. Certainly he was determined that his time should not have been wasted — that he should not have lived in vain.