THE RELIGIOUS LEGACY OF MOSHE DAVIS
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I was very pleased and of course flattered that Lottie asked me to speak tonight. I wasn't sure why she turned to me. I didn't dare ask her "why" for fear she might reconsider the invitation. But I did think about it. Two reasons occurred to me. First, my family, my late aunt and uncle in particular, were very close friends of the Davis'. Their friendship goes back to the time the two young couples were dating. This probably provides me, by virtue of family association, with a longer relationship to Moshe and Lottie than almost anyone else who is here tonight. It also means that I experience Moshe's loss at a personal level. In other words, his death, isn't only a great loss to Jewish scholarship, to the study of modern Jewish history and contemporary Jewry, to the understanding of Jewish civilization, but it is personally painful to many people. Precisely because of Moshe's public prominence this personal dimension should not go unmentioned.

Lottie may have had an additional reason for inviting me to speak. I crossed academic swords with Moshe on one occasion. I was a young man. He was already an eminent scholar. It isn't unusual for young Ph.Ds to seek to establish their reputation by challenging eminent figures in their field. I don't think this is

what I did but Moshe had every right to suspect as much. He didn't. He invited me to discuss my differences with him in greater detail. We had a long, intense but friendly talk and we continued to disagree on one aspect of his seminal study, The Emergence of Conservative Judaism, an analysis of the Historical School of Judaism in nineteenth century America. I suspect that this may have had something to do with the invitation. I imagine Lottie invited me to speak because she knew that I would avoid, as best I could, the platitudes that are uttered, so often, at this kind of gathering. Lottie asked me to speak about his religious position. I truly hope that in expressing what I believe about Moshe I do not disappoint her or do an injustice to Moshe's memory by offending anyone present.

It has been said, indeed I said it myself, that one cannot be both a religiously serious person and a religious liberal. This may be true as a general rule but it wasn't true of Moshe. By religiously serious I mean two things. Someone who takes religious imperatives seriously -- not as something one adheres to because the imperatives, mitzvot in the Jewish case, are nice or comforting or aesthetic but because they are imperatives. I will further clarify this point in a minute. Secondly, Moshe was a religiously serious person in the sense that he acknowledged that religion had a legitimate role in shaping one's public life as well as one's private conduct. It is in this sense that I

understand the depth's of Moshe's religious Zionism. Of course the behavior and beliefs of so many who march under the banner of religious Zionism today were foreign to him. I'm not even sure he would recognize their credentials as religious Zionists. Chauvinism, xenophobia, ethno-centrism, denying the ethical and religious contributions of non-Jews was foreign to his very nature. But the Zionist imperative as an ethno-religious imperative which not only dictates the rhythms of one's private life but one's public agenda as well was something Moshe constantly affirmed. I will return to this point as well but I want to turn to the other side of Moshe's religious persona -- his liberalism.

Moshe was a religious liberal in at least two senses. First, he was tolerant and understanding of others who disagreed with him; avoiding the imposition of his own beliefs on others. But he was a religious liberal in a second sense as well. His understanding of the Jewish religion and the Jewish tradition was a liberal one. It not only allowed for human weakness but understood the very core of the tradition in an expansive and permissive manner. Sephardim in Israel were once notable for combining devotion to the core of the tradition with openness, a generosity of spirit and the ability to accomodate their religious commitments with modern life. Many of them now appear to have either abandoned the tradition or adopted the rigidity

and narrowness of spirit we have come to associate with ashkenazic religiosity. It was Moshe's hope that the Masorati movement could recapture the original Sephardic spirit and he was anxious that the movement include larger numbers of Sephardim.

Moshe's scholarly propensities were also part of his religious persona. I'm not referring to his scholarly research or his academic interests but to his scholarly disposition -- above all else the grain of skepticism that accompanied everything he did despite his commitment and passion to Jews and Judaism, to religion and tradition.

It was a combination of religious seriousness and religious liberalism that helps explain Moshe's concern with Christian attitudes toward Judaism in general and toward Zion in particular. We Jews don't, for the most part, engage in God talk. Academics in particular find talking about God a bit awkward. We are unlikely to ask ourselves, as did the Prophets, what does God demand of us? We are, if we are religiously serious, more likely to ask what the tradition or halakha demands of us. This was true of Moshe as well. Christians, especially Protestants are very different. And because Moshe was a religious liberal he appreciated the poignancy of the Christian question. He could understand that Zion and indeed Zionism in Christian eyes was something with parallels in the Jewish tradition but which could only be understood within the context of a Christian world view.

And he invited the collaboration of Christian friends and scholars in explicating this point of view; an enterprise which occupied much though by no means all his attention in the last decades of his life. It may have also had something to do with the establishment of the Lehman Institute on Religion and Ethics at the Jewish Theological Seminary, an enterprise in which Moshe also played a role, but a discussion of that aspect of his life takes me too far afield.

It was the religiously liberal side of Moshe that made him attentive to Mordechai Kaplan. Like many of his generation, Moshe had ambivalent feelings about Kaplan's theology. But he accepted the notion of Judaism as a civilization. Any one familiar with contemporary Jewish studies knows of Moshe's work in establishing the Center for the Study of Jewish Civilization in Jerusalem and the major role it plays in the advancement of Jewish Studies throughout the world - among non-Jews as well as Jews. Less well known is the link between this project and the work Moshe carried out almost fifty years ago, in collaboration with Simon Greenberg, in establishing the University of Judaism in California. Their hope, following Kaplan, was to create an institution where the totality of Jewish civilization would be studied. It was only in reading Debra Dash Moore's recent study of post-war Judaism in Los Angeles that I became aware of Moshe's key role in this regard. And it is only through Seminary gossip

that I learned of his critical role in formulating the ideology of Ramah camps -- an ideology which is embedded in the notion of Judaism as a culture or civilization. For the record, mention ought to be made of Moshe's lasting contribution in establishing the Institute for Contemporary Jewry at the Hebrew University although this is secondary to my main theme -- Moshe's religious stance.

Moshe was a Conservative Jew. But he was a particular kind of Conservative Jew and to understand this we have to understand his conception of the Historical School of Judaism about which he wrote so authoritatively. I referred earlier to the imperatives of Judaism, of the mandates of the tradition. But that is not quite accurate and I want to refine what I mean and in so doing elaborate Moshe's understanding of the Historical School and his own religious stance.

Moshe, we know, loved Jews and Judaism. But to say this is distort Moshe's basic position. Of course, in one sense, he loved Jews and Judaism. But in another sense he was too involved, too much a part of the Jewish people and the Jewish tradition to transform it into an object of love. We can only love something which is apart or separate from us. We love a person or an object or a tradition if we are capable of distancing ourselves from it; of assessing how we feel towards it. That was not Moshe's stance. His primary stance was not love, or for that matter admiration or

awe, but engagement. The Jewish people were his people and the Jewish tradition his tradition and how he felt about this people or this tradition was a secondary matter. Painfully aware that modernity means choosing, Moshe, in his own life, didn't really choose. His engagement with Jews and Judaism dictated the conduct of his life. And this, as I have come to understand, was his conception of the historical school of Judaism. This is what he believed the Conservative movement was or at least was meant to be.

The notion of "engagement" both limits and liberates. It limits us in one sense because it denies us the freedom to choose. The Historical School and in its wake the Conservative Movement is pre-modern. It doesn't pretend that Judaism is a body of amorphous and fluid doctrine subject to the private interpretation of the individual. There is such a thing as Judaism which exists independently of what we call it or what we make of it. But if we are truly engaged with Judaism, then that very engagement shapes the nature of Judaism. Jewish history or Jewish tradition do not command our allegiance because they are transcendent entities to whom we owe some moral obligation. They command our allegiance and our fealty because they are what we are. We shape the tradition as we engage ourselves with it -- as long as that engagement is honest and authentic. None of the founders of the Historical School and least of all Moshe Davis,

expected us to assume a posture or accommodate a morality external to ourselves and to our own conscience. On the contrary, they believed that through engagement with the tradition both our morality and the moral precepts of the tradition would evolve.

This is an exquisitely delicate process. It is not one that is confined to Judaic scholars although it is one in which they are especially suited to provide guidance. But the basic criteria is honest engagement and confrontation.

Such a stance, in turn, dictates one's attitude toward other denominations in Jewish life. Moshe recognized that many Orthodox Jews, both here and abroad, were really partners to his conception of Judaism. He welcomed them. My own disagreement with Moshe stemmed from his tendency to define them as Conservative Jews but surely this was done out of affection, admiration and the keen desire to share his struggle with them, their struggle with him. But he also recognized that the bulk of Orthodox Jews today were not engaged with Judaism. Their posture instead was one of submission. And submission, however admirable, is a process of disassociation and alienation. Moshe, like the members of the Historical school whom he studied, like classical Conservative Judaism, was convinced that Orthodox Judaism's interpretation of the tradition was wrong. But he retained a profound respect for Orthodoxy's commitment to the tradition and even some empathy with Orthodoxy's refusal to engage the

tradition; an enterprise fraught with danger; perhaps really only suitable, as David Weiss Halivni believes, to a religious and scholarly elite.

Reform Judaism, on the other hand, is an entirely different matter. An apt metaphor for Moshe's relationship to the tradition would be that of Jacob becoming joined to the Angel as he wrestles with him. Conservative Judaism, at least ideally, wrestles whereas the Orthodox inclination is to bow. The Reform simply walk away. Sidney Morgenbesser, about as sharp a mind and sharp a tongue as American Jewry ever produced, once explained to me why he had little regard for Mordecai Kaplan as a religious personality. "He gave up too easily on God" Morgenbesser explained. To paraphrase Morgenbesser, Reform have given up too easily on tradition. The test of the authentic Conservative Jew, if you will forgive that term, is that unlike the Reform Jew, he knows in his heart that he doesn't enjoy the option of walking away. It would mean the surrender of one's person.

It is no surprise that Moshe, like many of us, was distressed by the behavior of the Masorati movement in Israel which has so closely aligned itself with the Progressive movement. The two have become indistinguishable in the eyes of the Israeli media and this is a travesty of what Conservative Judaism meant to Moshe and to many of us here this evening.

Moshe Davis' contributions to the Jewish people live on, of

course, in the magnificent institutions which he established and nourished. His religious legacy is less well known. That doesn't make it any the less significant or relevant for the contemporary Jewish world.