INTRODUCTION

Mark R. Cohen

Abraham (Avrom) Leib Udovitch, leader in the social and economic history of the medieval Middle East, guiding light in the study of the documents of the Cairo Geniza, activist in the search for peace in the Middle East, and teacher of many of the leading young scholars of the current generation, was destined early in his life for the career and research field he chose. He was born in Winnipeg, Canada, in 1933, to Russian immigrant parents. Yiddish was the primary language of his home and his parents sent him to a secular Yiddish day school. Later he attended a Lubavitcher yeshiva in Montreal for a few years but left it to continue high school in Winnipeg. He speaks proudly of his Yiddish background to friends.

While in Montreal he became involved in the socialist Zionist youth movement, Hashomer Hatzair (“Young Guard”). He spent a year in Israel on a Hashomer Hatzair kibbutz following high school, returning with solid knowledge of modern Hebrew. He planned to immigrate with Hashomer Hatzair to Israel in the mid 1950s. However, family reasons combined with the disruption of travel to the Middle East following the Suez war of 1956, prevented him from doing so. One of the planks of Hashomer Hatzair was a binational state in Palestine, in which Arabs and Jews would live side-by-side with equal rights. Early on the seeds of Avrom’s later activism on behalf of peace and justice in the Middle East conflict were thus sown.

He received his undergraduate education at Columbia University and the Jewish Theological Seminary, a dual-track curriculum in both regular university and Jewish studies. At JTS he was exposed to the great scholar of medieval Hebrew poetry, Shalom Spiegel. He once told me that hearing Spiegel expound on the symbiosis of Jewish and Arabic culture and the relative harmony between Jews and Muslims in the Middle Ages had a profound effect on him. It is easy to imagine

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1 I wish to thank Avrom’s daughters, Tamar Udovitch and Mim Udovitch, as well as his sister and nephew, Rochel Udovitch Berman and Josh Berman, for their assistance filling in some of the biographical material in this essay.
that Avrom, already influenced by progressive Zionism and its sympathetic approach to the Palestinian problem, became engaged by this distant mirror of a possible world of Arab-Israeli coexistence.

Graduate studies led him first to an MA in Near Eastern Languages at Columbia, then his doctorate at Yale. There, he came under the influence of the eminent Arabist Franz Rosenthal and of the great medieval historian Robert Lopez, and became their doctoral student. Lopez was interested in the economic history of medieval Europe, and Avrom wrote his dissertation on the economic history of medieval Islam. One of his acquired interests was Islamic law and he worked with Joseph Schacht after the latter came to Columbia. For his dissertation he investigated the Islamic law of commercial partnership. The book, *Partnership and Profit in Medieval Islam*, is a pathbreaking work, in which he shows that what had always been thought to be purely theoretical in classical Islamic commercial law reflected actual reality, as perceived in the documents of the Cairo Geniza. In this he followed the path of the great doyen of Geniza studies, Shelomo Dov Goitein. The Jewish merchants of the Geniza, Avrom claimed, followed practices almost identical with ones described in early books of Islamic law, particularly Hanafi law. He posited, further, that Jewish merchants and Muslim merchants followed one and the same “Law Merchant’ of the Medieval Islamic World”—the title of one of his early, seminal articles—and that these legal practices became assimilated to Islamic law. Today, with the recent publication of Arabic letters of Muslim traders from the same period as the Geniza, we have explicit confirmation of what Goitein and Udovitch sensed from the limited sources available to them when they wrote.

The seeds of contact with the Geniza blossomed in his later research. So did his relationship with Goitein, who came to Princeton and the Institute for Advanced Study three years after Avrom arrived on the faculty of Near Eastern Studies in 1967 from a position at Cornell. It was a relationship of scholarship and friendship that lasted until Goitein’s death in 1985, and the lives of the two men have some striking parallels.

Goitein, too, began his career as an Islamicist, studying at Frankfurt with the great German Jewish orientalist, Joseph Horovitz, and writing a doctoral dissertation on prayer in the Qur’ān. Like Udovitch,