There are a number of indications of the development of a scholar. One of these is the growing awareness of how much we do not know. Similarly, one sign of the advancement in many fields of Jewish studies is the admiration and often also the love felt for Moritz Steinschneider. We, the admirers of Steinschneider, form a small but select group. True, not all of us are as thorough as Moshe Idel, who, when writing his doctoral dissertation, consulted not only the published works, but also the handwritten notes in the margins of Steinschneider’s own copies. These annotated copies are kept in the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York and are available, on microfilm, in the Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts of the National Library of Israel in Jerusalem (formerly the Jewish National and University Library). Yet, we all share the high esteem with which we hold the intellectual powers of this unique giant and which has not waned even a century after his death. In so many cases we owe our own understanding to his knowledge and erudition. It is often the case that Steinschneider already knew what we have painstakingly “revealed.” Steinschneider will apparently never become a cultural hero in the popular sense, but he will always be a shining example for scholars in his fields of inquiry. In his lifetime, however, he was a kind of cultural icon for a small group of young people, Jewish students who came to study in Berlin and sought to establish or renew their Jewish identity through scholarly and sometimes also Zionist activity. Their memoirs reflect a personal side of Steinschneider which fascinated and charmed them.

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In this paper I would like to point out some of the reflections of this aspect of Steinschneider’s character and discuss his image as reflected in particular in the writings of another great Jewish intellectual, Gershom Scholem, who lived in Berlin a generation after Steinschneider.

Steinschneider’s personality was rich and multifaceted; scholarship was only one, albeit central, aspect of his life. He was a family man, with five children; he played the flute; he earned a living as an educator and administrator of a girls’ school. Although his scholarship was rigorous and even dry, one can sometimes sense the emotion and humor between the lines. His polemical style and criticism were certainly vivid. The combination of a strong personality, astonishing intellectual qualities, and devotion to scholarship, with a mild, witty, and communicative manner, was one of the reasons for the young Jewish intellectuals’ fascination with him. His enormous productivity was also an indication of his generosity and willingness to share his knowledge, qualities that also manifested themselves in the private seminar he held for young Jewish students (from both of the rabbinical seminaries in Berlin—the Orthodox and the Liberal) in his private apartment on 34 Wallnertheaterstrasse, near the Schiller Theater.3 Thanks to Steinschneider, these students encountered a new aspect of Jewish culture different than they had previously known.

There are several testimonies confirming this phenomenon. Reuven Brainin (1862–1939), a central figure in Jewish publishing and journalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, reminisced: “When I was near him I would sense the breath of another world, of which he was one of the last remnants, and it died with him.”4 Brainin coined the poignant characterization of Steinschneider as “a living citizen in the world of the dead letters.”5 He also relates that, before he met Steinschneider in person, he thought of him as

only an industrious compiler and only a dry bibliographer, that the quantity of his work is wondrous but not its quality, great only in the kingdom of pettiness. But after I encountered Steinschneider closely, his rich essence and his brilliant personality, I started to look at his books and work with a different eye. Certain books have brought me to their

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4 Reuven Brainin, Selected Writings (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Po‘alim, 1965), p. 208 (Heb.).