Festschrift Darkhei Noam: An Introduction

It is a pleasure and an honor for us to present this Festschrift to Norman (Noam) Stillman as he prepares to retire from the University of Oklahoma, move to Jerusalem, and begin the next stage in a remarkably productive—and influential—career. This Festschrift is a tribute to our colleague and friend in appreciation of his lifelong commitment and contribution to the field of Judaic Studies in general and Sephardi/Mizrachi studies in particular. With his publications in several languages, public lectures, and teachings in the United States, Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa, Stillman has established himself not only as a rightful successor to the great orientalists Shlomo Dov Goitein and Bernard Lewis, but also as a leading authority in his own right on the Jews of the Muslim world as well as on Islamic history and culture.

Norman Arthur Stillman (b. 1945) grew up in suburban New York and received his B.A. (magna cum laude) in 1967 and Ph.D in 1970 in oriental studies from the University of Pennsylvania. Here, Norman Stillman met his mentor, Shlomo Dov Goitein, the leading Geniza scholar of his generation. The meeting would become a life-changing event for the young Norman. Goitein convinced Norman to change his name to Noam and, thankfully, his academic interest from archeology to Oriental Studies. Under Goitein’s direction, Noam wrote his doctoral dissertation on 11th century economic-cultural Jewish-Arab interactions. Noam was also a post-doctoral fellow at the Jewish Theological Seminary. Like his mentor, Noam possesses staggering erudition and practices meticulous, exacting scholarship. Unlike “Fritz” Goitein, who remained something of a Yekke in Jerusalem and Philadelphia, Noam immersed himself more fully in the Arab culture. Noam’s intellectual development may have been initially guided by Goitein and others, but by age twenty-five Noam had already completed his doctoral dissertation. His cultural journey to Sephardi/Mizrachi culture was mediated by his late wife and longtime professional colleague, Yedida Kalfon Stillman, Professor of Near Eastern History and Languages. They met in Israel during Norman’s visit as a Fulbright scholar, one of the many prestigious scholarships he garnered in his career. Yedida, who was born in Morocco and grew up in Israel, became Noam’s guide to the Moroccan culture of the modern world. This journey has played so large a part in Noam’s experience it is easy to forget that great familiarity with the modern Middle East is not required, or even typical, of a trained medievalist. The Stillmans collaboration produced numerous projects. Together they published an English edition of Samuel Romanelli’s 17th-century Hebrew classic, Travail in an Arab Land (University of Alabama Press, 1989), and edited From Iberia to Diaspora: Studies in Sephardic

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Noam is a man of many parts and preternatural abilities: linguist extraordinaire, indefatigable researcher, facile writer, energetic lecturer and sage program director. Whether discussing Israeli music and film, Arabic dress, a particular scholarly interest of Noam's late wife Yedida, the politics of the modern Middle East, major centers of European research, Noam has been there, done that, and brought back stories to prove it. While Noam likes to point out that he was trained as an Orientalist, he is also a master of Jewish historiography, and not only in his own field. It is not surprising, therefore, that Stillman served as the editor of the AJS Review, the journal of the Association for Jewish Studies from 1989–1999, the premier journal in the field.

Yet it is within his own field, Sephardi/Mizrachi studies, both medieval and modern, to which Noam has made his greatest scholarly contributions. His two volume anthology, The Jews of Arab Lands: A History and Source Book (Jewish Publication Society, 1979 and 1991), which was nominated for the National Jewish Book Award, and The Jews of Arab Lands in Modern Times (1991) remains standard fare for college classes and, as a recent visitor to the University of Oklahoma joked, kept Jewish Publication Society afloat in its lean years. That is certainly an exaggeration, but a permissible one. The volumes remain, after 30 years, the best source collections of their kind and the introductory essays have stood the test of time remarkably well. In recent years, Noam expended an enormous effort as the Executive Editor of the award-winning five-volume Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World (Brill Academic Press, 2010), and he continues in that role for the up-datable and expanding online edition. It would be hard to imagine that this work can be superseded. So we were not surprised that the publishers and editors at Brill willingly extended their support to this project, in part, no doubt, as a thank you to this edifice of scholarship (and of organization, mentoring, diplomacy and patience).

Noam has mentored or helped mentor a generation of international scholars. He taught at New York University, 1970–73, the State University of New York at Binghamton, 1973–95, and from 1995 at the University of Oklahoma, where he was the Schusterman/Josey Professor of Judaic History. Academic honors and recognitions quickly followed. They include membership in Phi Beta Kappa, the SUNY Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Teaching, the SUNY-Binghamton award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching. He received the Ohio State University Melton Center's Distinguished Humanist award in the spring of 2000.