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# Herbert Zafren (1925–2005) Remembrances by David Gilner, Linda Lerman, Menahem Schmelzer, Yaffa Weisman, Laurel Wolfson

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# Remembrances of . . .

*Herbert C. Zafren (1925–2005)*



(Photo courtesy of Klau Library, Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, Cincinnati)

Our tradition teaches that when we recount the good deeds of the deceased, when we speak of their learning and wisdom, we are not to engage in hyperbole. Therefore, when I state that Herb Zafren “wrote the book” on Judaica librarianship, I do not mean to imply that he was its sole author. But surely, he was its lead author. And certainly, he was the father of the *science* of both the study of the Jewish book and the administration of Jewish libraries. Let me speak first of the *science* of the book. In 1953, Herb founded the journal *Studies in Bibliography and Booklore* and its companion monographic series *Bibliographica Judaica*, with the intent, and I quote, “to reintroduce the study of the *Book* into the realm of scientific research.” Both of these publications testify to his own successes spanning half a century. But the very numerous acknowledgments in print by two generations of scholars of Judaica bibliography that testify to Herb’s influence on their own work are surely the highest of accolades. The American Jewish Periodical Center, established by Herb in 1955 to preserve and disseminate American Jewish periodicals and newspapers on microfilm, was among the first such programs in American libraries—and was *the* first such program in the Jewish world. Herb insisted that the Klau Library, Cincinnati, become a founding member of the first automated shared bibliographic database—the Ohio College Library Center, now known by its acronym OCLC. When cataloging Hebrew in the vernacular first became available on the Research Libraries Information Network, he transferred all three of our American libraries to the Research Libraries Group.

Let me now turn to the science of Judaica libraries and their administration. Herb certainly understood the importance of collection size in a research library. In 1950, when he came to the Cincinnati library, it had some 100,000 volumes, collected over its 75-year history. By 1964, when he oversaw the publication in book form of the *Dictionary Catalog of the Klau Library, Cincinnati*, the size of the collection had doubled to 200,000 volumes. And over the next thirty years, it grew at only a very slightly slower rate, so that when he retired as Director of Libraries in 1994, it stood at more than 400,000 volumes. Of course, books need buildings for their storage and their use. Herb paid meticulous attention to the design and the construction of the College-Institute’s four Libraries: the Klau Library, Cincinnati; the Frances-Henry Library in Los Angeles; the Klau Library in New York City; and the Abramov Library in Jerusalem.

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\*Remarks delivered at a memorial held at Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, Cincinnati, August 5, 2005.

When Herb became Director of the College-Institutes Library system in 1968, he introduced the principle of “one Library in four locations” which has guided operations for almost 40 years. And his labors to introduce scientific principles of library management extended beyond the confines of the College-Institute. Herb played a key role in uniting Jewish librarians into a single organization, and he became the founding President of the Association of Jewish Libraries. He also served as the first President of the Council of Archives and Research Libraries in Jewish Studies, and returned to serve a second term when CARLJS again needed his strong leadership. After the *Guttman Affair* (Zafren, 1989), the Judaica Conservancy Foundation turned to Herb to be its first President. But what is most important, Herb made sure to raise up a new generation of leaders in Judaica librarianship. Four HUC–JIR librarians have served the Association of Jewish Libraries as its President and our Deputy Librarian, Ms. Laurel Wolfson, is currently its Vice-President/President Elect; the current President of CARLJS is also an HUC–JIR librarian.

While “what” and “how” were both important questions to Herb, “why” may have been the most burning of questions for him. Which brings us to the question “*why* do we speak of the deeds of the dead?” One of many possible answers was given by Moses Maimonides in his great compendium of Jewish law, the *Mishneh Torah*. Maimonides informs us that eulogies are in fulfillment of what Rabbi Akiva identifies as the greatest of moral principles, “And you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” I can testify that Herb truly loved his coworkers. In his role as Director of Libraries, he strove tirelessly for their benefit. He never advanced himself at anyone else’s expense. He fought tenaciously for his staff. When in 1991 he was forced to lay off two employees, Herb wept. Herb hired numerous individuals whom most other administrators would have rejected out of hand. Some of them did not work out, some were a sterling success; but he gave all of them a chance. There is an old Latin motto: *Bonus liber, bonus magister*, which may be translated “A good book is the best teacher.” In Herb’s life, we can see a still greater truth: *Bonus liber, bonus magister / Bonus vir, optimus magister*; “While a good book is a good teacher, a good person is the best of teachers.”

May his memory be an inspiration to us all.

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SOURCE: Zafren, Herbert C. (1989). “From Hochschule to Judaica Conservancy Foundation: The Guttman Affair,” *Jewish Book Annual* 47 (1989): pp. 6–26.

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LINDA P. LERMAN

**H**erbert C. Zafren will be remembered by many in AJL as a bright, witty, successful, opinionated, respected colleague, librarian and administrator, and longtime Director of Libraries at the Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion. He was certainly that, and so much more to those of us who worked side by side with him at the Klau Library or on one of so many cooperative projects. We affectionately called him “Herb” or referred to him as HCZ. Although his health had been failing for the last couple of years, his passing brings such sadness.

Herb was a self-defined *apikoros* who took great delight in defending opposing viewpoints as a means of clarifying issues. He readily took the lead on so many projects, working together with colleagues to achieve greater goals to improve resource sharing and create an attractive future for Judaica librarians. His many achievements were recounted to AJL members at the 1990 AJL Conference (Jerusalem) when I presented Herb with AJL’s Life Membership Award. He was very moved by the collective acknowledgement of his contributions to the Association, the profession, and as a leading force for the future of Judaica librarianship.

Herb was one of our great teachers and mentors. One of his joys was mentoring librarians he had brought to HUC’s various campuses as leaders in Judaica librarianship. No matter how far we traveled from the nest in Cincinnati, we were still his “children.” The reunions at annual conventions were always memorable. He strongly supported and encouraged his staff’s involvement in local and national professional organizations—especially AJL, to which he was so dedicated.

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**H**erbert Zafren, of blessed memory, was for me the model of the perfect contemporary Judaica librarian. In his openness for the most up-to-date technological and managerial innovations, he was among the first—if not the first—leaders of a major library of Hebraica and Judaica who departed from the purely bibliographic and bibliophilic approach to the management of a large collection of Hebrew books.

The modernization of Jewish librarianship in the United States was in a large measure due to the pioneering efforts of Herbert Zafren. He was a powerful advocate of practical thinking and planning. As a result of the execution of his plans, the extremely rich and varied library of Hebrew Union College deservedly gained the reputation of a highly organized, well managed, maintained, and preserved, and most accessible resource for students of Jewish learning everywhere.

Reaching beyond the leadership of his own library, Herb was deeply involved in the work of the associations of Jewish libraries and archives. His pragmatic attitude became most manifest in his presiding over the meetings of Jewish librarians and archivists, beginning with the 1960s. I consider the meetings led by Herb that I was privileged to attend as a training ground, where the participants received lessons in pragmatism, common sense, and realistic thinking concerning the work of Jewish libraries and archives in America. Almost always respectful to others, even tempered, but firm in his determination to achieve the goals ahead, Herb guided us to realize how essential it was to introduce sound new practices into our work in Judaica librarianship and archival management.

But it would be totally mistaken to portray Herb only as a highly effective and successful library executive. He had a deep interest in Jewish studies and in the history of the Hebrew book, and he played a significant role in the dissemination of knowledge and scholarly research. His editorship of the journal, *Studies in Bibliography and Booklore*, and of the series *Bibliographia Judaica* (published by the Library of Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion) made lasting contributions to Jewish scholarship. In his own scholarly work, Herbert Zafren explored aspects of the history of Hebrew typography, and his learned studies greatly enrich the literature of Hebrew booklore. As the director of the great library of Hebrew Union College, as a pivotal figure leading the organizations of Jewish libraries and archives,

and as an original and creative scholar, Herbert Zafren placed his deep and lasting imprint on future generations of Judaica librarians. He will be remembered with gratitude, respect, and admiration as a true guardian of the Jewish cultural heritage.

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Prof. Menahem Schmelzer of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (New York), previously served as director of the JTS Library.

**H**erb Zafren had a vision for the Frances-Henry Library at Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, Los Angeles, which established it in its new home back in 1971. The scope and the depth of the Frances-Henry Library today are a testimony to that vision, but when I first met Herb, back in the early 1980s, I knew nothing about it.

I was a starving student, eking out a living as a “student-schlepper” at the Library. He didn’t say much to me then, as we were not formally introduced—just nodded and went on to deconstruct the current theory of library growth expounded by the Los Angeles Librarian, Harvey Horowitz. As I found out later, this was one of his favorite exercises and challenges. You would bring up an idea, a theory, a wish list—and he would proceed to take it apart methodically, allowing you to defend your position by responding to well-placed questions, keen insights, and that glimmer of a smile, reflected only in his eyes, that you really had to know was there . . .

I caught that smile early on in our interactions, and I was never intimidated by the process. (I could never convince Harvey Horowitz that that smile was there. To this day he thinks that I was very brave in my conversations with Herb.) I remember one such conversation, as my duties in the library expanded and I was permitted to have opinions and express them. I convinced Harvey to let me talk to Herb about bringing **A COMPUTER** into the library, and make use of that brave new world out there. The Internet was in diapers, but there was something very alluring about the concept. So, on Herb’s next visit to Los Angeles I approached him about it, and just like a true convert, I had all the right arguments pre-packaged and ready to go. Herb was relentless in his questions. I was stubborn in my answers. And as our discussion heated up, I could feel Harvey cringing in his chair. I didn’t know who would fire me first, Herb or Harvey. The next budget year, however, I got “my computer,” but my smugness didn’t last very long. It turned out that Herb had already decided to get a computer for L.A.—he was just curious to hear what I had to say about it! Strangely enough, that made me feel even better—I knew that I could bring up any idea with him, and leave it to his good, quiet judgment. I never regretted it.

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\*Remarks delivered at a memorial held at Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, Cincinnati, August 5, 2005.

Herb was incredibly supportive while I was struggling with my dissertation. As it was nearing completion, he told me one day: “Get your Ph.D., take two years off from school, and then I am sending you to get a library degree.” I, of course, disagreed with him about the need to get such a degree. At that point I was well into my second decade of working in the library, and just as with the computer, I thought I knew everything I needed to know about the subject. I lost the argument, I am happy to say. I just won a longer reprieve. Three years later, I enrolled at UCLA’s Library and Information Studies program, and never looked back. Today I know that he was preparing me for my next career move—becoming the Director of the Frances-Henry Library after Harvey’s retirement.

And speaking of retirement, his own made it possible for our relationship to become less formal. During his visits to L.A. following his “official” retirement, as well as at the AJL conferences, I found myself talking to him about matters other than librarianship, and enjoying his company in a quiet, pleasurable way. The old smile was there, but now it was allowed onto the lips and the corners of the mouth as well. And this is how I will remember him: friendly, gentle, and courteous.

I would like to thank Miriam, Ken, and Edie for asking me to participate in today's remembrance of Herb.

You may have heard from others about what a fine and caring mentor, teacher, and colleague Herb was to so many Judaica librarians. On behalf of the staff of the four HUC–JIR libraries, we will all miss his presence, both personally and for the vast reservoir of knowledge and experience that he was always so willing to share.

But I would like to share some of my memories and experiences as his friend. I feel privileged to be included in that group, especially when you consider the mitigating factors—after all, he was thirty years older than I, had been my boss for years, and was not a small influence on my choice of career (for which I have since forgiven him).

Our friendship was composed of all of those elements previously mentioned. But I had the experience of seeing other sides of him (once I could get past the cultivated curmudgeonly image).

One of my first work encounters with Mr. Zafren was very shortly after I was hired. Working at the circulation desk in the evening, I had brought my crocheting to pass the time. As Mr. Zafren was leaving, he asked me stop the needlework; I protested that I had nothing else to do, but was quelled with a look. The next day, I was told in no uncertain terms that I could do almost anything else at the desk, but I could not do needlework. That experience took several years to overcome, and I have obviously never forgotten it. Many of us in the library had similar experiences, but the more recently hired staff experienced a more mellow, less-demanding, individual.

For many years, Herb, and later David, encouraged me to stretch professionally. We had many talks about the advisability of becoming a librarian, and I finally decided to pursue an MLS—but no guarantee of a job after graduation! Well, Herb did hold David's job for me after his promotion to Deputy Librarian, and I'm still here. This seems a good time to add something that we discovered a few years ago. I began my career at the Library on August 25, 1980. It became a running joke that he had no idea what a great birthday present he had gotten that year. This year will be my 25th anniversary at HUC, and would have been Herb's 80th birthday.

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I could not ask for a more caring and understanding person to talk through a problem, whether personal or professional. To have the benefit of his wisdom and experience became increasingly meaningful as my own parents began to age. We spent many lunch hours eating, walking, and above all, talking—sharing memories and experiences of family, friends, and work. For Herb, I think that I was someone neutral, but who cared very much, to be a sounding board as age and illness began to take their toll. For the same reasons, we spoke about my hopes and aspirations for my family and career. Herb would get to the heart of the matter by urging me (sometimes not so gently) to unflinchingly face the facts and make the decision based less on emotion and more on reality.

Herb directly or indirectly touched the lives of many Judaica librarians, either through his position as Director of Libraries here at HUC, or through his involvement in professional organizations, most notably the Association of Jewish Libraries. Part of the legacy of Herb's mentoring for the profession of Judaica librarianship is the responsibility to continue that tradition with others, and to be generous with our knowledge, experience and time—time to listen as well as impart knowledge.

Some of us were fortunate enough to get to know him personally as well as professionally. And I was lucky enough for him to have become one of my most treasured friends.