

## Professor Avraham Holtz (z"l)

Today we honor the life and career of Avraham Holtz. Dr. Holtz was professor emeritus of Hebrew Literature at JTS in New York and was ordained as a rabbi and received his doctorate from JTS. He also taught and served as Chair of our Department of Hebrew Literature and as Dean of Academic Development. He was an Honorary Member of Israel's Academy of the Hebrew Language and published several articles about aspects of the Hebrew language in the Academy's various publications.

Avraham was part of a cadre of younger, native-born scholars teaching at JTS in the 1960s who in retrospect proved to be harbingers of the explosion of Jewish studies in higher education in the United States. Interestingly, when Avraham expressed an interest in studying Hebrew literature for his doctorate, Chancellor Louis Finkelstein expressed surprise that such a bright student preferred the modern poet Chaim Nahman Bialik to his favorite ancient sage, Rabbi Akiva. Thanks to all of us, Avraham pursued his passion! His ultimate object of lifelong fascination was the Nobel-prize winning Israeli author SY. Agnon, and he painstakingly worked to recreate the life that Agnon wrote about. Professor Holtz produced the fully annotated and illustrated edition of Agnon's *Hakhnasat Kallah, The Bridal Canopy*, the first critical edition of a Hebrew novel. He had been working for decades on a parallel edition, fully annotating Agnon's *T'mol Shilshom, Only Yesterday*, which is perhaps Hebrew literature's most significant novel of Eretz Yisrael.

I remember inviting him to present to my undergraduates his work on these critical editions. Students were riveted by his enthusiasm and excitement for his topic and awed by his painstaking attention to the tiniest detail. He'd track down a photo of the type of pants, hat style, and utensils that Agnon was describing and, in the process, recreated the world that Agnon wrote about.

He was an incredible scholar, a demanding and charismatic teacher who loved the Hebrew language, liturgy, Hebrew literature, and conveyed that love and sense of rigor to his students.

My late husband Gershon Schwartz took a liturgy course with him as an undergraduate. To pass the class, each student needed to recite the *Ashre* flawlessly. If you got anything wrong including the accent on the word, you had to start from the beginning! I think of Professor Holtz every time I recite the *Ashre* and chant "*aromimha' elo-hi hamech.*" Not "*aromim'ha.*" Professor Holtz cared so deeply about the Hebrew language, and he wanted all his students to care as much as he did – to show that love by being exacting about getting the precise pronunciation right.

Professor emeritus Judith Hauptman remembered him as an intense and charismatic teacher with a command of Hebrew that was unparalleled -- "so excellent and fluent that it could make your jaw drop. It was a privilege to read any text with him--whether it was a classic poem, a midrash, or an Agnon story. For Avraham the literature was his life's blood."

His students always felt seen. He brought the same intensity of focus that one brings to Torah study to his study of Agnon, to his devotion to liturgy and language, and to his students.

Professor Marjorie Lehman shared her recollections of him, “He was so approachable and lovable and brilliant--there was never a literature question that he could not answer. He was also worried always about the younger generation of professors that started to teach at JTS, like me. He wanted the more senior professors to teach more so that we could teach less—simply because he wanted us to have time with our families and also time for our research. I remember him well, sitting on the 8th floor, eating his lunch and just making himself available to any of us who had a question. Such a special man.”

I end fittingly, by quoting Agnon’s reflections on the Mourner’s Kaddish, that he wrote for the very first Yom Ha-Zikaron (Israel Remembrance Day) in 1949.

Agnon concludes that the Mourner’s Kaddish reflects a diminished world. When we recite it, we pray not only for our own loss but for the diminishment of divine glory as well. We certainly feel that today, as our world – the scholarly world, the Jewish world, the JTS community – is diminished along with God’s glory by the death of Avraham Holtz.

Yehi Zikhro Barukh. May his memory be for a blessing.