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JACOB RADER MARCUS: AN APPRECIATION

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In one of his last writings, the late Horace M. Kallen declared that "all our living is the struggle to learn; all our learning is the struggle to live."¹ The statement sums up rather well the career of Kallen's younger contemporary, Jacob Rader Marcus, the Nestor of the Hebrew Union College faculty and founder-director of the American Jewish Archives. Jacob R. Marcus, his honors and prestige notwithstanding, understands very well what struggle, personal and intellectual, the life of a scholar involves. His career has been a remarkable identity of life and learning, an identity generating a formidably long list of publications in the field of Jewish history, more than a half-century of teaching at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, and the Archives, which has contributed so substantively to the illumination of the American Jewish experience and to the acceptance in Academe of American Jewish historical research.

Marcus's career, it is worth noting, has not been at all "ivory tower" in character. He has displayed an impressive measure of responsiveness to the changing scene around him and to the intellectual fluctuations of that scene. To cite only one—but a signal—instance, the fact that Marcus devoted two decades to the intensive study of Central European Judaica did not blind him to the potential of American Jewry and to the value of reconstructing the American Jewish past. In the days before World War II there were colleagues who viewed the very notion of American Jewish research with great suspicion, if not outright rejection. What, after all, was there to be studied of the raucous and inchoate community of

American Jews? Marcus, however, was undaunted by the prejudice. In 1947, he was able to persuade Dr. Nelson Glueck, the College's new president, to authorize the founding of the American Jewish Archives on the Cincinnati campus. This turned out to be a well-placed trust. The Archives has in the intervening years become a major center for historical research—at the same time that North American Jewry, catapulted out of the subordinate status reserved for it in the years prior to World War II, has moved to center stage in the Jewish life of this century to share the limelight only with the State of Israel.

Interestingly—I might say, even characteristically—enough, it is no apologetic or Carlylean notion of the Great Man of History which has guided Marcus in his inquiry into American Jewish beginnings. It has been, rather, a communal notion. He himself, in explaining the purpose of the Archives, put it this way:

The study of American Jewish history is primarily the study of the interrelationship and interaction, within the life of the individual Jew and the Jewish community, of the Jewish heritage and the American environment. . . . The American Jew with his composite background, stemming from Slavonic East Europe, or Germanic Central Europe, or Iberian Southwestern Europe, is now in the process of evolving a type of Judaism in this new Anglo-Saxon, Christian environment which will permit him to be all-Jewish and all-American. . . . Whether [American Jewry] has made any special "contribution" to American life is yet to be determined . . . [but] many of us are not particularly interested in studying American Jewish history from this viewpoint. Whether the immigrant Jew came in 1654 to New Amsterdam or in 1924 to New York, we seek to understand how he lived, how he worked, how he established his own cultural-religious community, and how he interacted to this novel environment, creating a new Jewish life and at the same time helping to give birth to a new American world.

He went on to emphasize the need to study American Jewry as a "community," "a fellowship . . . a closely knit ethnic-religious commonalty."²

To have opened up and made respectable a whole new academic discipline is in itself a rich achievement. The study of American Jewish history, however, cannot be thought of as merely or purely academic, not at any rate at a school whose primary function is to produce spiritual leaders for the American—ultimately for the world—Jewish community. What Marcus's effort has made possible is the further and extremely im-

portant sophistication of the rabbinate. Since American Jewish history had by the mid-1940s become part of the Hebrew Union College curriculum, the school could hope to produce rabbis knowledgeable in the historical and sociological unfolding of the community they were to serve. The school could hope to ordain rabbis whose own sensitivity to the American Jewish communal experience would help them to raise up a generation of American Jews sensitive to the obligations which history had imposed on them. "Know yourself—the unexamined life is not worth living," Socrates had said. Marcus understood and helped his students and colleagues to understand that this was especially crucial for people who would be called upon not only to develop their own community as fully as possible, but to encourage Jewish communal development overseas as well, particularly of course in Israel. Pride and filiopietism have never been absent from his desire to see the American Jewish past explored, but the pragmatic needs (and these include self-awareness) of American Jewry have been given equal priority.

To what degree has Marcus actually succeeded in inculcating his students with the sort of historical consciousness he thinks indispensable for a healthy and thriving Jewish life? This of course remains problematic. It is too soon to say, and as Horace M. Kallen wrote in the same essay to which I alluded before, "no one has yet succeeded in getting the universe to sit for his portrait of it." No teacher can ever fully gauge his effect on his students or be sure that his students find quite meaningful the commitment he is at pains to inspire in them. Even so, there is abundant reason to believe that Marcus's students (and the category includes a very sizeable proportion of the present-day Reform rabbinate) have appreciated his devotion to American Jewish research and have greatly admired the energy with which that devotion has been pursued. They esteem him as an apostle of humanistic learning, a scholar-teacher whose concerns are by no means confined to the dry dust of the past, but attempt some answer to the complexities of contemporary life and seek to evaluate the possibilities of the future.

As a former student of his and a present-day colleague both rabbinically and academically, I take the keenest pleasure in saluting him for his achievements and expressing the heartfelt wish that he be enabled to go on in undiminished charm and vigor *ad meah v'esrim*. For me, "J.R.M." remain initials of admiration and respect—capable of evoking from me a full and unrestrained measure of devotion and love.

NOTES

1. *Toward a Philosophy of the Seas* (Charlottesville, Va. 1973).
2. *American Jewish Archives*, Vol. I, No. 1 (June 1948).

