

WE REMEMBER OUR COLLEAGUES

ABRAHAM JOSEPH KARP 1921–2003

Arthur Kiron



Historian, bibliophile, rabbi, and beloved teacher, Abraham Joseph Karp was one of the giants of the world of the Jewish book and a pioneering scholar of the field of American Jewish history. Born in Indura, Poland, on April 5, 1921, Karp received his early education in Grodno, where he attended a “Tarbut” school that taught Hebrew language and culture. He brought with him to the United States in 1930 a deep love for Judaism and the Jewish people. He graduated from the Teachers Institute of the Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary in New York in 1939, and went on to receive a B.A. from Yeshiva University in 1942, graduating magna cum laude. His rabbinical ordination was conferred on him in 1945 by the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, where he was also awarded a Masters in Hebrew Literature in 1948, and an honorary doctorate in 1971. Rabbi Karp married Deborah Burstein in 1945 shortly before graduating from rabbinical school, and they had two sons, Hillel Judah and David Jacob. He served as a congregational rabbi in Kansas City from 1951 to 1956, and in Rochester, New York, at Temple Beth El from 1956 to 1971.

During his student years at the Seminary, Karp came under the lasting tutelage of Alexander Marx, bibliographer of Judaica par excellence, who set him to work cataloguing the distinguished personal library of Professor Ismar Elbogen. He acquired a profound and lifelong love for Jewish books and Judaica of all kinds. His personal collection, the joyous harvest of decades of devoted collecting, consisted of more than 10,000 printed books, including hundreds of rare, early Hebrew imprints, as well as manuscripts and Judaica handicrafts, such as textiles, sculptures, and paintings. His collection of Judaica Americana, today held at the JTS Library, is perhaps the finest private collection of its kind ever assembled.

Rabbi Karp’s collection, and his passion for collecting, became a foundation of his career as a historian. In studying history, Karp emphasized the primary source above all others as the most reliable witness to the past. Each book, each manuscript letter, each newspaper clipping, each scrap of historical evidence he could find became in his hands a kind of detective trail that invariably produced new and significant discoveries. He authored a seminal work about Jacob Joseph, New York’s first “chief rabbi,” was among the first to study Mordecai Manuel Noah in any real depth, and his basic research on the American Synagogue and the American Jewish prayer book was ground-breaking. Perhaps the culmination of his career as a collector and historian was realized when he was invited to curate an exhibition of the Judaica collections at the Library of Congress. The project blossomed into a classic, authoritative bibliophilic treasure entitled “From the Ends of the Earth” (1991), characterized by carefully selected visual artifacts, elegantly written prose, and beautiful final production quality.

Rabbi Karp held a number of academic positions, including a professorship of history and religion at the University of Rochester, from 1972 until 1991. He also taught as a visiting professor at

Dartmouth College and at the JTS. Karp frequently visited Israel, and served three times as visiting professor of American Jewish history at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem’s Institute for Contemporary Jewry. He retired as the Philip S. Bernstein Professor Emeritus of Jewish Studies at the University of Rochester and moved to Riverdale, New York, in 1991 to serve as the Joseph and Rebecca Mitchell Adjunct Research Professor of American Jewish History and Bibliography at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, until his death on November 24, 2003.

In addition to his academic life, Rabbi Karp also was dedicated to Jewish communal service. He was elected president of the American Jewish Historical Society from 1972 to 1975, and for many years served on the publications committee of the Jewish Publication Society of America, as well as on a variety of editorial and executive boards and advisory councils. Karp was the recipient of numerous honors, including the Lee M. Friedman Medal from the AJHS, and received an honorary doctorate from Gratz College in 1985. He authored, co-authored, and edited more than twenty books and over fifty articles, encyclopedia entries, and reviews. Among his best known works are his five edited volumes, *The American Jewish Experience* (1969), *Beginnings: Early American Judaica* (1975), *Golden Door to America* (1977), *Haven and Home* (1985), *The Jews in America: A Treasury of Art and Literature* (1994), and *Jewish Continuity in America* (1998).

Rabbi Karp frequently spoke about “squeezing” every detail out of a historical source and indeed, the same could be said about his zest for life. Abraham Joseph Karp lived with remarkable energy and passion. His memory surely will be for a blessing.

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