

Isaac Rabinowitz

July 3, 1909 — September 11, 1988

Isaac Rabinowitz, the son of Bezalel and Lily Garowitz Rabinowitz, was born in Brooklyn, New York, and raised in Kansas City, Missouri. As a young boy, he was fortunate to receive excellent initial instruction in Hebrew. He subsequently embarked on an intellectual quest to resolve certain puzzling features of the Hebrew Bible, a quest that led him first to the University of California at Berkeley (B.A. in Greek, 1929), and then to Yale University (Ph.D. in Semitic Languages and Literatures, 1932), where he wrote a dissertation entitled, *The Syriac Versions of Tobit*.

At the time that Isaac received his Ph.D., the cultural climate in the United States made it exceedingly difficult for a Jewish scholar of Semitics to find an academic position. Isaac therefore turned his attention to Jewish education and communal service. Between 1933 and 1955, he held the following positions: counselor to Jewish students at Yale University (1933-34); director of youth education for the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (1935-38); Hillel director at the University of Michigan (1938-40), Brooklyn College (1940-44), and the University of Pennsylvania (1944-45), respectively; national director of B'nai B'rith Boys' Work (1945-46); and executive director of the East New York and Brownsville Young Men's and Women's Hebrew Associations (1946-1955). This work testifies to his life-long commitment to Jewish education and culture.

In 1940, soon after becoming Hillel director at Brooklyn College, Isaac met Alice Elson. The two worked together professionally for four years at Brooklyn College and later for the B'nai B'rith Youth Organization, where Alice served as national director of Girls' Work. Isaac and Alice married in September of 1946. Their thirty-nine years of marriage were filled with mutual love, devotion, and respect.

Although the academy had yet to open its doors to him, Isaac never abandoned scholarship. During the twenty-three years that he was engaged in the field of Jewish education and communal service, he pursued his academic interests with single-minded determination, finding time to conduct his research at night and on the weekend. When the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in the 1940s, Isaac was attracted to their potential for shedding light on the meaning of the Hebrew Bible. He took a special interest in the *Peshar*-texts, generally considered as commentaries, but which Isaac viewed as presagings of the holy words in the scriptural books to which they referred. His impressive record of scholarly publications enabled him to attain an academic position in 1955, when he was appointed associate professor of Jewish studies at Wayne State University.

Two years later, Isaac was appointed professor of Biblical and Hebrew studies at Cornell, where he became instrumental in establishing the Department of Semitic Languages and Literatures. He served as chairperson of that department from its inception in 1965 until 1970. At Cornell, Isaac regularly taught introductory and advanced courses in Biblical Hebrew in addition to occasional offerings in Aramaic, Syriac, and post-Biblical Hebrew literature. His most popular undergraduate course was “The Literature of Ancient Israel,” a year-long survey that attracted a wide range of students representing many departments in the College of Arts and Sciences.

Upon his arrival at Cornell in 1957, Isaac met Harry Caplan of the classics department, and the two became the closest of friends—true intellectual companions. It was at Caplan’s suggestion that Isaac began his translation of the *Sepher Nopheth Suphim* (*Book of the Honeycomb’s Flow*) by the Jewish-Italian Renaissance scholar, Judah Messer Leon. The *Nopeth Suphim* was the first attempt to write a classical rhetoric using examples drawn from the Hebrew Bible; it was also the first Hebrew book printed during its author’s lifetime. For more than twenty years, Isaac labored over this text, producing a Hebrew edition and annotated translation with a full critical apparatus. Published by the Cornell University Press in 1983, this massive tome has been widely and justly praised by its many reviewers as an exquisite example of meticulous textual scholarship and literary-historical insight.

Before his death, Isaac had completed a monograph entitled *A Witness Forever: Ancient Israel’s Perception of Literature and the Resultant Hebrew Bible*. In this seminal study, the originality of his scholarly vision emerges most clearly. Seeking to answer the question, “How were language and literature perceived in the culture that produced the Hebrew Scriptures?”, Isaac scrutinized the text of the Bible for clues that might shed light on what the scribes who wrote and edited the biblical texts believed about the nature and function of language and literature. On the basis of this investigation, Isaac developed a theory explaining the literary unity of the Hebrew Scriptures as they were understood by the men who assembled them. The key to this unity was the ancient Israelites’ conception of the nature and function of the “holy word” (*davar*) and their belief that the utterance of words created the phenomenal and physical realities represented by those words.

Though the quality and range of his scholarly writing is extraordinary, Isaac did not measure success in terms of the number of articles written or the number of books published. His inquisitive mind was driven by an intellectual hunger which valued knowledge and interpersonal fellowship as much as professional stature. Academic life, for him, was a lifelong process of wonderment and shared discovery—a process in which he was engaged with his students, his colleagues, and his readers. He was never too busy or preoccupied to listen, advise, read, or critique. With his younger colleagues he was ever the teacher, genuinely interested in questions and ideas, exacting in his

expectations, and gentle in his manner of imparting knowledge and communicating criticism. He was himself always the student, absorbed in learning something new, for no avenue of critical inquiry, no discipline or historical period was beyond the range of his curiosity and interests. By his splendid example, Isaac taught us how noble the career of the scholar could be.

By emphasizing Isaac's career as a teacher and scholar, we do not mean to diminish other aspects of his remarkable life. He was a loving husband, a caring father, a warm friend, and a true gentleman. He was also a talented athlete who was widely known and admired by his many friends at Teagle Hall, where for over thirty years he swam regularly.

The death of his beloved Alice in 1985 cast a pall from which Isaac never fully recovered. During the last years of his life he frequently spoke of the importance of the support and inspiration he had received from her. Isaac is survived by a brother, W. Gerson Rabinowitz of Berkeley, California; a son, Joel Bezalel Rabinowitz of Ithaca; two daughters—Susanna Rubenstein of Brooklyn, New York, and Abigail Geman of Amherst, Massachusetts; and seven grandchildren.

We will remember Isaac Rabinowitz as a warm, generous man and a consummate teacher who constantly strove to attain the very highest standards in his interpersonal relations and scholarship. His life's journey was a true intellectual quest, for Isaac was always propelled by a passionate search for knowledge and insight. May his memory be for a blessing.

Ross Brann, Steven Katz, David Powers