

Ranon Katzoff: A View of Rome from Jerusalem

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Ranon's father, Dr. Louis Katzoff, devoted his entire life to Jewish education: immediately upon receiving the title of rabbi he was appointed to fill the newly-created post of campus rabbi at the University of Pennsylvania. His job was to create an appropriate and comfortable environment for Jewish students, but he did not neglect scholarship, writing a doctoral thesis—about Jewish education, of course—while serving as the rabbi of Congregation Bnai Abraham in Easton, Pennsylvania. When he moved to Chicago, he continued his work as an educational leader, first at the College of Jewish Studies, now Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership, and then at the North Suburban Synagogue in Highland Park. He wrote copiously on the subject of Jewish education,¹ nor did retirement stop him: he moved to Israel, where he founded and edited *Dor LeDor*, the periodical of the World Jewish Bible Society. When he had only a few days left to live, he spent time studying Talmud with Ranon's son Binyamin, and affirmed that now he was ready to die, having achieved the dream—one might almost say his life's goal—of studying Talmud with his grandson. The wife he chose could not have been more

¹ A few of his writings are collected in A. KATZOFF, ed., *Louis Katzoff: an American Jewish Educator*, Jerusalem 1989.

appropriate to that goal: born in Jerusalem, Adina Abramowitz had an intellect and an energy that matched her husband's. Her field was psychiatric social work, and like her husband, she preached what she practiced, and taught both in America and in Israel.² As I write this she has lived a hundred and one years, and has not wasted any of them.

What else would one expect from a son of Louis and Adina Katzoff? What could their son have been if not an observant Jew and a scholar? True, the generation in which Ranon grew up saw many children of pious and learned Jews become less pious, less learned, and less Jewish than their parents. And true, the Talmud itself³ observes that it is rare for the children of Torah scholars to be Torah scholars themselves. But the dedication and personal example of Louis and Adina Katzoff had their effect, and their son Ranon inherited both their intellectual energy and their religious dedication.

Like his parents, Bar-Ilan University both contributed to and witnessed the success of his education. It was here, when the two- and three-year-old university was a small, new but enthusiastic institution, that he realized that his true interest was the study of Judaism. Academic study was what he wanted, and Departments of Jewish Studies were not thick on the ground in the 1950's. The closest thing available was Classics, and the closest thing to the Talmud that Classics had to offer was Roman law. Not, perhaps, the most obvious of matches, but a successful one, as he demonstrated at Northwestern (B.A. 1960, M.A. 1962) and Columbia (Ph.D. 1968). And since Roman law still isn't Talmud, he studied at the highly regarded Skokie Yeshiva as well, which ordained him as an orthodox rabbi in 1964. Not one to hide his principles, he eventually stopped attending the departmental luncheons at Columbia when he realized that upon his arrival the discussion inevitably turned from Greco-Roman antiquity to the question of why he wasn't eating the same food as everybody else.

During his time at Columbia, he married Charlotte Pearlberg, now in the Philosophy Department and Gender Studies Program of Bar-Ilan. Her reasons for choosing him she summarizes in a single sentence: "He was tall, dark, and handsome, and the biggest *talmid chacham*⁴ of them all."

He taught for a while at the City College of New York, but his heart was in Israel, and also in Israel was David Sohlberg, who was looking for people to turn his courses on antiquity into a proper department. "The only thing

² For more information see her autobiography, *A Child of the Desert*, Israel, 2000.

³ *Bab. Ned.* 81a.

⁴ A *talmid chacham* is a scholar, but one who uses the Hebrew term is speaking not of classical expertise but of Talmudic scholarship.

to look for,” Prof. Sohlberg advised me years later, “is excellence.” “Excellence” has since become an ill-defined academic catchword—“the way the Calvinists use the term ‘grace’”, as Ranon once put it—but Ranon Katzoff never disappointed the department, which he headed for many years, nor the Humanities Faculty, whose dean he was from 1998 to 2002. In both positions he maintained both his scholarly standards and his religious principles politely but unflinchingly. Not one to allow academic *kudos* to take the place of Torah learning, he has taught a weekly Talmud class throughout his career in which he has been the teacher of numerous students who are themselves not lacking in intellectual achievements.

He has held other positions—president of the Israel Society for the Promotion of Classical Studies, editor of their journal *Scripta Classica Israelica*, fellow of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton—but what is important to the classical world is not his *cursus honorum*, but his scholarly achievement, and in this area he has done what very few people in his or in any generation have done, seeing the Roman law through the eyes of the Jewish and the Jewish law through the mirror of the Roman. This is not to say that there are no other such scholars; the names of Aaron Kirschenbaum and Alfredo Mordechai Rabello come immediately to mind, and no doubt there are others. But for every Katzoff, Kirschenbaum, or Rabello, there are ten times as many who are willing to express opinions while knowing only one of the two fields intimately. There is nothing illegitimate about this, but the kinds of insights that occur to a person *peritus utriusque legis* can rarely be matched by the person who knows one of the systems from the outside only.

There are many examples that could be chosen, from any stage in his career. Even before immigrating to Israel, he published in the prestigious Hebrew journal *Sinai* a note⁵ recognizing a Hebrew-Greek pun where Talmudists would not have recognized it and Hellenists would not have seen it. Years later he took on a well-known oddity, the supposed family relationship between the Spartans and the Jews that seems to have been propagated by the high priest Jonathan.⁶ Ranon Katzoff could see, as few people could see, what the parallel was between the position of the Spartans, whose Hellenic (and thus civilized) pedigree was impeccable despite their very idiosyncratic education and culture, and the position to which the Jews aspired. An interesting point in itself, but Ranon Katzoff, typically, went one step further, claiming that the asserted relationship was aimed not so much at the Greeks, with whom the Hasmoneans dealt not by propaganda but by guerilla warfare at first and

⁵ R. KATZOFF, “*Afes Zechariah*”, *Sinai* 67 (1970) 64 (in Hebrew).

⁶ R. KATZOFF, “Jonathan and Late Sparta”, *AJP* 106 (1985) 485-9.

later by diplomacy, as at the Hellenized Jews, whose willingness to accept the Hasmonean dynasty and its fierce condemnation of Greek worship required a carefully constructed ideology, strictly Jewish but firmly within the compass of the civilized world. Jonathan—or at least Jonathan as Ranon Katzoff understands him—was up to the challenge, and Sparta was his proof-case.

Or take another case, that of *P. Yadin 21* and *22*.⁷ In these odd (and almost identical) documents, Babatha, daughter of Simon, sells a large quantity of dates to Simon, son of Jesus son of Anan(ias?), for which he pays her with ... a large quantity of dates. Not a word in the document indicates why they should enter into such a peculiar transaction, nor is there a word, in these documents written in Greek, of halacha or any other form of Jewish law. No online search would reveal to a classicist or papyrologist what Ranon Katzoff could see: first of all, that what is being arranged here is what is called in halacha a *ḥakhira*, whereby a lessee undertakes to work a field (in this case, to pick the dates) on condition of supplying, out of the crop, a prearranged sum to the owner; and secondly, that another provision of the contract (in particular, the stipulation that Babatha will clear Simon's rights to the dates, and pay him twenty denarii if she fails to do so) indicates that her own right to the dates she is selling is uncertain. The dates, in fact, are not hers, but those of her late husband Judah, son of Khthousion, and Babatha is claiming them in payment for the "dowry and debt" owed to her. But why is the lease presented as a sale? Because, as a *talmid chacham* would know, Jewish law limits the rights to distraint on debt to landed property as opposed to movables—that is to say, she can take the dates *while they are still on the tree*, but would not be able to get them once they were picked. So she sells the dates to Simon, who will then pick them, and give most of them back to her in lieu of payment. The matter is more complicated than that—if you take the trouble to read the article, you will find that I have by no means done justice to its subtlety—but even this summary shows what Ranon Katzoff has consistently been able to do: to see the reality behind the form, and to recognize when the way that people are behaving reflects a legal mindset different from the form in which it is expressed.

In fact, he had been doing this throughout his career, and not only in dealing with Jews. In his very first published article, he took a claim of Vincenzo Arangio-Ruiz that new Roman citizens "although they tried to imitate Roman law ... diverged from Roman law either from ignorance or in adaptation to the differing local practice," and demonstrated how the phenomenon worked out

⁷ R. KATZOFF, "P. Yadin 21 and Rabbinic Law on Widows' Rights", *JQR* 97 (2007) 545-75.

in three papyri with which he was dealing.⁸ Almost forty years later he could see the Jewish scribe Germanos, son of Judah, maneuvering similarly in writing the agreement between Babatha and Simon.

It is not my intention, in this short piece, to summarize the scholarship and the originality of Ranon Katzoff; nor, if it were, could I do it justice. I would have liked, however, to have given the reader some idea of the intellectual excitement he imparted to his students and his colleagues, and the energy and the good humor with which he did so. That, alas, is also beyond me; only fictional characters can be captured in a few pages of prose. Ranon Katzoff, as original as he is, is by no means fictional; and those of us who have been privileged to work with him are pleased to offer him a small acknowledgement of our indebtedness to him.

⁸ R. Katzoff, "The Provincial Edict in Egypt," *Tijdschrift voor Rechtsgeschiedenis* 37 (1969) 414-37. The words in quotation marks are Katzoff's paraphrase, on p. 419, of Arangio-Ruiz.