

David Sorkin, Myth-Breaker and Complexity-Maker

by Ethan Katz

Good evening. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Ethan Katz and I am an assistant professor of history and Judaic Studies at the University of Cincinnati. It is truly an honor and a privilege to be here. John Tortorice asked me to speak on behalf of David's students. I will of course discuss what David has meant to me and to many others as a teacher; I will begin, however, like any good student, by assessing critically some of the defining characteristics of David's scholarship, which have profoundly influenced my own intellectual orientation.

In the time allotted, I cannot possibly even begin to cover the enormity of David's contributions as a scholar. But I do want to say a few words. First of all, it hardly seems incidental that David spent his undergraduate years at this university, where his encounter with the late George L. Mosse, may his memory be for a blessing, was a formative one. In the broadest sense, David, like George, became a scholar who has always been thoroughly engaged at once in multiple fields of Jewish history as conventionally conceived and of European history more broadly. David has repeatedly used this dual perspective to rethink questions in both fields. Meanwhile, also like George, David has been, at various times, a practitioner of cultural, social, intellectual, political, and religious history. His work has ranged from detailed reconstructions of the social and cultural world of late eighteenth and nineteenth-century German Jewry, to comparative discussions of the intricacies of the political position of Jews across early modern Europe, to analyses of the intellectual and religious history of the *Haskalah*, or Jewish Enlightenment, to that of other non-Jewish philosophical and religious movements for

reform in early modern Europe. But perhaps most strikingly, when I assess David's body of work to date, I am reminded of a statement that he once made about George L. Mosse, wherein he described Mosse as a "myth-breaker." For, if I have to summarize David's approaches and contributions to these many fields of study, I would do so by calling *him* a "myth-breaker" and "complexity-maker."

The quality of "myth-breaker" can be identified in nearly all of David's major scholarly contributions. In his first book, *The Transformation of German Jewry*, David sought in part to dispel the image of German Jews in the early decades of emancipation as fixated on assimilation in a manner that pitted Germanness and Jewishness against one another, and that forced the unfortunate self-denial of the latter, leading later to self-hatred and eventually to anti-Semitism from the rest of German society. In this way, he punctured the negative teleologies of both the so-called Jerusalem school of modern Jewish history, and the *Sonderweg*, or special path thesis of modern German history. In his second book, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Religious Enlightenment*, David sought to complicate, and in a sense, to reconcile two legendary images of the German-Jewish Enlightenment philosopher: one of Mendelssohn as the *defining Jewish* thinker of modern times, the other as a secular philosopher emblematic of the abandonment of Jewish tradition in the modern world. David's third book, *The Berlin Haskalah and German Religious Thought: Orphans of Knowledge*, overturned two myths about the Haskalah, that it was a movement whose conception and progression was isolated to Jews; and, contradictorily, that its catalysts came from outside, rather than within Judaism.

His most recent book, *The Religious Enlightenment*, carries the critiques of these second and third books in a bolder and more thoroughgoing direction. It goes a long way toward destroying the mythical equation between Enlightenment and secularism that continues to inform not only much of historical scholarship on Europe since the eighteenth century but also many formulations in our contemporary political and cultural debates. Meanwhile, David has authored a number of important essays on emancipation in Jewish history that have disproven the image of a singular, German-centered path toward, of, and from legal equality for Jews in modern Europe. He is currently writing a long-awaited book-length history of Jewish emancipation across Europe, America, and the Middle East. This work promises to dispel once and for all a set of older, more simplistic, geographically restricted renderings of Jewish emancipation.

Whereas many scholars are content to deconstruct previous narratives, David has also done what is often even harder by forging new frameworks for apprehending the past in more nuanced ways. Thus I come to his role as “complexity-maker.” On numerous issues, David has offered new conceptual formulations that have done much to shape subsequent scholarly understanding. His first book included the apt notion of a “subculture” to describe the ideology and associational life that emerged among German Jews by the mid-nineteenth-century, shaped by the protracted nature of the emancipation process and characterized by “minority-group reworkings of ideas found in the majority society.” Another particularly influential conceptual term, formulated collaboratively with Lois Dubin, is that of “Port Jew,” to describe those Jews who migrated from Spain and Portugal and settled in Port Cities throughout Europe, the Mediterranean, and the New World, and who, through their political position, economic success, education,

cosmopolitanism, and even attire often exhibited key features of Jewish modernity at an earlier stage than many of their coreligionists. David has utilized the concept of the “Port Jew” to illustrate the multiplicity of Jewish paths of emancipation and modernization. In the year’s since David helped to formulate it, the term has generated its own growing scholarly literature and debate. Finally, his recent works have sought to reshape our understanding of the Enlightenment as deeply religious, pushing a robust and carefully defined notion of a “religious Enlightenment.”

As a mentor, David pushed me fruitfully in similar directions. Broadly speaking, I benefited greatly from his emphasis on Jewish history as a part of wider European history. He insisted that I receive rigorous training in the history of the Jewish experience but that I do so in concert with the wider training in French and broader European history this department could offer me so well. David’s little-known article on Fritz Stern as what he deemed a ‘historian of fate,’ a piece he modestly passed along to me as, in his words, “perhaps helpful,” in fact offered me an entirely new and invaluable set of conceptual tools for the subjects of Master’s Thesis. This in turn greatly influenced my first published article in Jewish history, about Stern’s fellow German-Jewish refugee historians George L. Mosse and Peter Gay. My dissertation research concerned the history of Jewish-Muslim relations in modern France. Most commentators had regarded these relations as utterly new; even in my hopes to historicize relations, I planned to begin my investigation in 1945. But David pushed me to go back further. He told me he had a hunch there were important, interesting things going on already in the early twentieth century. This advice reshaped for the better the scope, interest, and implications of my project. Likewise, David has repeatedly pushed me to think about

how my research may shatter the myth of a singular French universalism; and to replace this myth with a much more nuanced account of inclusion and exclusion in France.

Part of the way that David breaks myths and makes complexity so effectively in his scholarship is through his highly lucid prose. As my teacher, he insisted as well on the virtues of brevity and concision. After I had completed a draft my first body of significant writing on my dissertation, I gave it to David to read. He read it and then set up a time for us to meet to talk about it. As I sat down, David scratched his head and said, “So look, writing a dissertation is a learning experience...you’re incredibly repetitious; you write long sentences. I went through and line-edited this for you, but you have to do that yourself from now on, otherwise you’re going to write an 800-page draft and you’re going to wear out your committee. You have to be just ruthless in cutting.” Needless to say, I found the experience humbling. Yet in retrospect, I think it was the most important meeting I ever had with anyone about my dissertation. David was absolutely right. Heeding his advice made me a better writer and a better historian. In what some considered a minor miracle, my dissertation came in at under 400 pages.

David has shared similar lessons of myth-breaking, complexity-making, and prose-reshaping with numerous students, not only in our own department, but often also from the Hebrew University as the Mosse exchange has blossomed in the past decade under the leadership of David and of John Tortorice. In this way, he has carried on a Wisconsin tradition in Jewish and European history, long embodied by George Mosse and many of his illustrious doctoral students like Steven Aschheim, Christopher Browning, and Anson Rabinbach. This tradition has entailed the practice and teaching of scholarly rigor, innovation, daring, and eloquence.

Indeed, as another eminent scholar of Jewish history said to me in conversation some months ago, “David Sorkin is a giant.” But he’s more than that. A younger scholar, describing how David was an invaluable informal mentor to her during graduate school exclaimed: “David is a prince, an absolute prince.” A couple of years ago, meanwhile, one of David’s graduate students remarked to me with wonder, “Don’t you love David. He’s a person.” Now this may seem like a bit of comedown from giant or prince, but it reflects the fact that David, for all of his stature and achievements, constantly displays, alongside an unrelenting intellectual rigor, a rare degree of basic decency, generosity, and kindness. His ability to accomplish so much as a scholar and teacher, while remaining so grounded and so devoted to his family and friends makes him, for myself and for many others, a truly inspiring model. David, I know I speak for all of us in wishing the very best in your next great adventure.