

OBITUARIES

Moshe Amit

1919-2017



Moshe Amit, one of Israel's most eminent historians and classical scholars, and certainly one of its kindest and most humane academicians, was born in Izmir, Turkey, to parents who traced their descent to fifteenth-century Spanish Jewry. His father owned a wine cellar, his mother was descended from a famous rabbinical dynasty. The languages spoken at home were Ladino and French. Moshe's outstanding intellectual gifts were recognized at early age. At fifteen he was sent to Paris to study at Alliance Française seminary for teachers. Having graduated from that high school with distinction, he was awarded a scholarship to continue his education in Paris. However, his plans were cut short by the outbreak of the war in 1939. Moshe judged it wise to return to Turkey, where he was called up for military service, even though Turkey was not formally at war. In the Turkish army Jews were barred from positions of command and administration and were only allowed to perform menial duties. Moshe later reminisced that they were referred to as 'Jewish dogs'. The victim of malignant anti-Semitism (he was once beaten up) and fearing that Turkey might enter the war on the side of Germany, Moshe made up his mind to desert — an extremely risky decision, since desertion was punishable by death — and emigrate to Palestine. What happened next verges on the incredible. Moshe bribed his military commander to grant him leave, boarded a train from Istanbul that made a stop at the Syrian border, and alighted there, leaving all his belongings behind. He then crossed the border through a gap in the fence of which he was informed in advance. Moshe taught mathematics at the Aleppo branch of Alliance Française for a year before moving on to Beirut (where he also taught at the Alliance Française). After meeting a representative of the Jewish Agency who was recruiting candidates for the nascent state of Israel, Moshe crossed the border to Palestine on foot from Marj Ayyun with the help of an Arab smuggler who served as his guide. He arrived in Kfar Giladi in 1944. To this day the elders of that kibbutz retain the memory of his arrival.

Moshe joined kibbutz Givat Brenner, working as a shepherd. His observation, which he would later impart to his students, that humans fail to notice the contradiction between the idyllic view of sheep in pastoral poetry and their ruthless exploitation in actual practice, stems from this chapter in his life. From Givat Brenner he was sent to kibbutz Givat Hashlosha to attend a seminary, and from there he came to Jerusalem. In 1946 he enrolled as an undergraduate at the Hebrew

University, Mt. Scopus, studying Hebrew Language, and Biblical and Classical Studies. After graduation he intended to teach, but his plans were cut short once again, this time by the Israeli War of Independence. Moshe served first in the Students' Company in Jerusalem, and later in the 5th Battalion of the Palmach (Harel Brigade), seeing action in Jerusalem and its environs.

Having completed his Bachelor's and Master's degree after the war, Moshe undertook doctoral studies in ancient Greek history under the supervision of Prof. Avigdor Tcherikover, at the time the doyen of ancient history and classical studies at the Hebrew University. In 1955 he was awarded a scholarship to pursue graduate studies in England. His supervisor at University College, London, was the celebrated historian and classicist, Arnaldo Momigliano. The subject of Moshe's thesis was 'The Piraeus and the Athenian Sea-People in the Fifth and Fourth Centuries B.C.', for which he obtained his doctoral degree in 1957. A more elaborate version of his thesis was published in book form under the title *Athens and the Sea. A Study in Athenian Sea-Power* (1965). It became the acknowledged starting point for all studies of Athenian sea power. Moshe's firm friendship with Prof. Alexander Fuks, which lasted until the latter's death in 1977, began when Fuks took interest in Moshe's book and kindly offered suggestions and criticism.

Moshe began teaching at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and also at its branch in Haifa which was to become Haifa University. He continued at the Hebrew University's History Department, and was swiftly promoted from lecturer (1962) to senior lecturer (1965), associate professor (1971) and full professor (1978). Moshe served as Head of the History Department and Chairperson of the Committee for Graduate Students until his retirement in 1988. His rich teaching, publishing and lecturing career was punctuated by sabbaticals at Oxford, Cambridge, London, Pisa and Harvard Universities, and at the CNRS in Paris. He was elected honorary fellow of the Society for the Promotion of Classical Studies in Israel, the Israeli Historical Society, and member of the Hellenic and Roman societies in London. He married Dalia in 1953. The couple had two children, Michal (born 1960) and Yehuda (born 1965). Moshe was greatly grieved by Dalia's untimely death (1991).

Moshe's publications touch on a wide range of subjects — justice and liberty, Alexander the Great and Eastern imperialism, propaganda through coinage, communication in the Roman empire, the meeting between Jews and Greeks, and more. All his writings sparkle with his originality and unconventional thinking. They are cited widely in the professional literature. His two Hebrew textbooks have become indispensable tools for anyone who wants to learn about the ancient world (*A History of Classical Greece*, 1984, and *A History of the Roman Empire*, 2002). Moshe's generosity is manifested through his editing, co-editing and preparing for publication a series of works whose completion was prevented by the demise of their authors: Tcherikover's *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews* (1959) and *The Jews in the Greek and Roman Worlds* (Hebrew, 1961), Fuks' *Social Conflict in Ancient Greece* (1984, with Menahem Stern), and Menahem Stern's *Studies in the History of Israel in the Second Temple Period* (1991, Hebrew, with Isaiah Gafni and Moshe David Herr).

I consider myself fortunate to have been a pupil of Moshe and even more to have become his friend. We spent many hours together roaming the streets of Jerusalem, Cambridge, London, Athens and Paris, discussing many issues, but especially those concerning history and human nature. I would like to share three incidents which, although small and seemingly insignificant, throw light on Moshe's character. For, as Plutarch, whom both Moshe and I admired, put it,

...the most glorious exploits do not always furnish us with the clearest discoveries of virtue or vice in men; sometimes a matter of less moment, an expression or a jest, informs us better of their characters and inclinations, than the most famous sieges, the greatest armaments, or the bloodiest battles whatsoever.

(*Life of Alexander* 1, trans. J. Dryden)

The first event took place at a seminar I attended while pursuing my Master's degree at the Hebrew university in the early 1970s. It was the beginning of the academic year and I had no inkling of the unusual gifts of the 'new teacher' (Moshe had just returned from a Sabbatical). We read historical texts in the original Greek, some one or two pages per week. Having a rather high opinion of myself, one day I dared to question Moshe's interpretation of what we had read the previous week. I was reaching for my copy of the text to prove my case, when, rather than argue with me, Moshe closed his eyes and recited, word for word, the entire document in Greek, thus indicating gently but incontrovertibly, that I was wrong. It was a revelation that Moshe had perfect photographic memory, and I wondered why he made a secret of it.

The second incident occurred when we attended a conference in Paris and visited the Musée d'Orsay in our free time. Misled into thinking that Moshe's encyclopaedic knowledge was confined to ancient texts, and that in the field of modern painting he was as much of a novice as I was, I was completely flabbergasted when I realized that he was able to relate to the pictures like a walking encyclopaedia. He knew when each one was painted, under whose influence, and the state of mind of the painter at the time of painting. He also provided me with a whole series of anecdotes that threw light on the artist's character.

The third incident concerns his book *Great and Small Poleis. A Study in the Relations between the Great Powers and the Small Cities in Ancient Greece*, published in 1973. In the concluding passage, rather than ending with a great flourish, as scholars are apt to do, Moshe modestly calls upon the reader to judge its merit. This could be a sign that he belittled the book's importance, and indeed, when Moshe was up for promotion to full-professorship, one of the committee members took him at his word, suggesting that a book whose importance is not even recognized by its author is not worth much. This remark carried so much conviction that it nearly put an end to his promotion. Moshe's modesty nearly cost him his academic rank. But then, like the divine interventions in ancient texts, Fortune's wheel turned once again. Moses Finley, the hyper-critical Cambridge professor of ancient history who was to become my own doctoral supervisor, published a review of Moshe's book which praised it to the skies. The upshot was that Moshe was not only promoted to full professorship but gained immediate recognition as one of the most original and ground-breaking historians of the ancient world.

One might say that this small episode turned into a glorious exploit.

Gabriel Herman