

From The Parnas:

By Mark I. Wolfson

This coming Shabbat, we welcome Professor Yechiel Schur as our Scholar-in-Residence. Prof. Schur will speak on Friday night and also Saturday at lunchtime. His topic will be Torah and Science in One Place: The Life and Work of Rabbi Elijah Mizrahi.

Prof. Schur teaches Medieval Jewish History at the University of Pennsylvania. He works at the Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies. The Center is located at 420 Walnut Street, just a few blocks from Mikveh Israel. As it turns out, the closeness of our two institutions goes much deeper and longer than mere physical proximity.

For the history of the Center and insights into its relationship with Mikveh Israel, we turn once again to our good friend Arthur Kiron, who wrote his Masters Degree Thesis on "The Creation of Dropsie College" in 1994, and in 2000 wrote "The Professionalism of Wisdom: The Legacy of Dropsie College and Its Library" for the 250th anniversary of the Penn Library Collections.

The Center began its long history in 1907 as the Dropsie College of Hebrew and Cognate Learning. It was founded by several prominent and scholarly members of Mikveh Israel, and was named after its benefactor, Moses Aaron Dropsie (1821-1905). Dropsie was born in Philadelphia to Jewish father, though his mother was Christian. He and his sister were formally converted to Judaism when he was 14 in a ceremony which included a ritual immersion in the Delaware River. Dropsie went on to become a wealthy lawyer and investor. He never married, and upon his death in 1905 bequeathed his entire estate to the establishment of a college which would promote the instruction of the Hebrew and Cognate Languages and their respective literatures. He further mandated that "there shall be no discrimination on the basis of creed, color or sex".

Dropsie was a disciple of Isaac Leeser, minister of Mikveh Israel from 1829-1850. It was Leeser's lifelong dream to establish a college for Judaic Studies, one which left a strong impression on Dropsie and many others in the congregation, including Mayer Sulzberger who became the founding president of Dropsie College. Judge Sulzberger was the first American Jew to hold judicial office in Pennsylvania.

Sulzberger brought into the planning process his younger cousin, Cyrus Adler, who was a Penn alumnus, and also held a Ph.D. in Semitics from Johns Hopkins. Adler was a disciple of Sabato Morais, the Italian-born Minister of Mikveh Israel from 1850-1897. It was Morais who realized Leeser's dream by establishing Maimonides College in 1867, the first American Jewish Theological Seminary and then the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1886. All of these influences and education enabled Adler to lead and shape Dropsie College as its president from 1915 until his death in 1940.

One of the most important and prominent features of Dropsie College was its vast library. Sulzberger himself was a great book collector and contributed many rare books and manuscripts, including Bibles from the 1400's and 1500's, as well as Samaritan Hebrew manuscripts. The collection started with 4000 volumes, and grew with the donation of Isaac Leeser's 2400 volume library from the Hebrew Education Society, and a large donation from the Joshua I. Cohen collection, reputed to have been an outstanding collection of Judaica and Hebraica. Adler was also able to acquire fragments from the famous Cairo Genizah. The library eventually grew to over 180,000 volumes by acquiring notable collections through donations, purchases and bequests.

Over the next few decades after Adler's death, Dropsie College and its library suffered many setbacks and an overall decline. The final straw came in 1981 during an arson attack on the 43rd anniversary of Kristallnacht. The firemen who doused the flames inadvertently turned ancient cuneiform tablets to mud and destroyed rare books. Under the stewardship of new president David M. Goldenberg, himself a graduate of Dropsie, the school and the library began a renaissance. Goldenberg hired professional librarians to automate and modernize the library, and started a campaign to identify and fill gaps in the library's holdings. In 1983, with the major involvement of philanthropist Walter H. Annenberg, Dropsie moved to Lower Merion and became the Moses Aaron Dropsie Research Institute and later the Annenberg Research Institute.

In 1988, the Institute, with funding provided by Annenberg, moved to a beautiful new building in its present location on Walnut Street, just blocks from its founding parent Mikveh Israel. It merged with the University of Pennsylvania in 1993, becoming the Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, under the direction of David Ruderman. The dream of Mikveh Israel Ministers Isaac Leeser and Sabato Morais, followed by the leadership of Mikveh Israel leader Cyrus Adler, who together led our congregation for over 110 years, now lives on in the superb institution of the current Center and is the centerpiece of the renowned Judaic Studies Department of the University of Pennsylvania.