

Yochanan Muffs: Portrait of A Colleague and Friend

Enter his office, enter his home—the one among the clouds on Riverside Drive, Manhattan, or the one flush with the grass in Jerusalem's Old Katamon neighborhood—and there you will find him, sprawling in a chair, poring animatedly through a book, underlining and annotating in pencil. When he sees you, his boyish round face will beam a joyous welcome, his eyes will sparkle with the hint that he has a flash of insight to share with you. He does. When he reads, talks, or teaches, fresh ideas dart like comets. Yochanan's stunning brilliance has turned every student, every teacher, virtually everybody he has met, into an instant admirer. His ebullient gregariousness has turned so many students, teachers, colleagues, acquaintances into friends. Yochanan and his wife of nearly twenty-five years, Yocheved, a woman whose estimation by Yochanan as "the greatest woman in the world" will find few if any demurrals among those in the know, have a staggering number and array of friends. Their homes have been no less open to the old and the new than their minds. Their fires provide warmth no less than light.

Yochanan Muffs' genius surely owes plenty to nature, but it enjoyed plenty of nurturing along the way. His parents exposed the Jewish Theological Seminary's Professor of Bible and Rapaport Professor of Philosophies of Judaism to Bible and God-talk at a tender age. As a schoolchild in Flushing, Borough of Queens, New York City, where he was born on June 3rd, 1932, he was frequently brought to the Metropolitan Museum of Art by his teachers. Relics from the ancient Near East immediately impressed him, and his extraordinary inquisitiveness led to wide reading, from books on archaeology to Arabic grammar. In his early teens, Yochanan studied Hebrew and Judaica at the Marshaliah Hebrew High School, a unique locus of enlightenment where his principal was the great Rabbinics scholar Max Kadushin and his teacher a young man who would become the great Jewish historian Gerson D. Cohen. Already as a youth, Yochanan, who could read an entire Hebrew dictionary at one sitting, had mastered the varieties of classical Hebrew. Do you remember seeing a young man walking the streets of Queens and Manhattan talking to himself in medleys of Biblical verses and lines of Bialik's poetry? That was Yochanan.

Yochanan continued to study humanities at Queens College and Judaica at the Jewish Theological Seminary. "We read *Faust* in German line by line" at Queens, Muffs says, "following exactly the same method that I was used to from H. L. Ginsberg's classes in Job" at the Seminary. "The unity of method in secular and religious studies did not escape me," he adds, "especially when I found remarkable similarities between *Faust* and Jewish mysticism." After graduating Queens College, he entered the Seminary's Rabbinical School, where he fell under the influence of Saul Lieberman in Talmud, H. L. Ginsberg in Bible, and Shalom Spiegel, his pedagogical model. In 1954 he himself began teaching at the Seminary.

Meanwhile, Yochanan pursued a Ph.D. in ancient Near Eastern studies at the University of Pennsylvania, where he studied with E. A. Speiser, Samuel Noah Kramer, and Franz Rosenthal. Yochanan had already advanced in Arabic, having studied privately with Meir M. Bravmann and at Columbia with Arthur Jeffery.

Muffs' academic career took flight with a dissertation, suggested by Speiser, on the Aramaic legal documents from Elephantine. Yochanan was intrigued by the earthly, metaphoric nature of ancient Semitic juristic idiom. The technical expression "my heart is satisfied," sliced right out of life, became the core of a sweeping and versatile analysis of extraordinary longitude and latitude in which the examination of the phrase in focus illuminated a world of legal rhetoric. He received his degree in 1964. Supported by a Lown Fellowship at Brandeis University, from which base Yochanan wove himself into Boston's academic network and befriended such scholars as Thorkild Jacobsen and Harry A. Wolfson of Harvard, Yochanan prepared his dissertation for publication. It first saw light in 1969 in Brill's *Studia et Documenta* series, edited by Benno Landsberger. The broad interest of *Studies in the Legal Papyri from Elephantine*, in spite of its seemingly narrow topic, led to reprinting by Ktav and perennial quotation in works on ancient law and Semitic philology.

As Muffs continued to teach and rise in rank at the Seminary, he wrote and continued to write numerous original essays and scholastic studies, some of which he prepared for publication in journals and *Festschriften*, but most of which he has not worked up for publication; he has, however, shared them with both students and colleagues. Most of the published writing, and two of the previously unpublished studies, were collected, edited, and printed with some expansions in a volume published cooperatively by the Jewish Theological Seminary and Harvard University Press in 1992, *Love and Joy: Law, Language and Religion in Ancient Israel*.

A debilitating disease that Muffs has been overcoming for over twenty years has kept him from making all the academic rounds in North America. For that reason, his persona has not been as familiar as it would otherwise be. In Israel, and in Jerusalem in particular, where Yochanan and Yocheved spend summers and sabbaticals, Yochanan is truly famous and beloved among colleagues. Characteristically, he has thrown his arm around the up-and-coming as well as the highly placed scholar. Needless to say, his magnetic genius has attracted droves of enthusiastic students, and he has raised up many disciples. Several scholars who did their doctoral work elsewhere were first motivated by him. Muffs has given, quite literally, hours and hours a week to many a student eager to follow and ready to keep up with his dashing mind, and he has afforded invaluable help, counsel, and encouragement to younger colleagues, too. Although he knows so much more than the rest of us, and is so much sharper to boot, he never pulls rank. He listens, he learns, he changes his mind. He does not signal his approval by half-heartedly saying "O.K."; he shouts out "Marvelous!" and gives you the confidence you need to go on or try something new. Yochanan Muffs is not only incredibly endowed—and we haven't even mentioned his art of mimicry, his wit, and his piano-playing—he is a fabulous blessing in our midst.