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Renowned Biblical Scholar Nahum Sarna

Photo by Joe Marshall

Nahum and Helen Sarna standing in front of the "Brandeis Chair" in their home.

By Marlene Roberts
Staff Writer

WHEN JEWISH INTELLECTUALS refer to him, it is as if he had five names: Renowned Biblical Scholar Nahum Sarna. This high esteem is not limited to people from the Jewish community. *Who's Who in America 1996* gives more than three inches of tight, heavily abbreviated, small print text to "SARNA, NAHUM MATTATHIAS, biblical studies educator."

Sarna is known for his sections on Genesis and Exodus which appear in the Jewish Publication Society's *Commentary on the Torah*. The latest (and completed) edition was published last June. Sarna served as the general editor of the series and Chaim Potok served as the literary editor.

"In the last 30 years a lot of work has been done, so the understanding of the book of Exodus is greatly changed," Sarna said. "There are new archaeological materials and perspectives that deal with selected aspects of Genesis. In the revision, I tried to fill in the gaps."

In explaining the Bible, Sarna said the text was not always meant to be taken literally. One should "extract from the text the concepts that underlie the narrative," Sarna explained. An example of a phrase that cannot be taken literally is "humans created in the image of God." This was selected as proof that when a phrase is taken literally it is often a distortion.

"If we take this literally, we are constricting 'God,'" Sarna said. "What the text means is that human beings have free will, power over the material world and responsibility for their behavior and have to take the

Sarna believes education today needs to be rethought

Continued from Page 1A

At 11, Sarna entered an Orthodox Jewish school where he no longer was bored. He even won a scholarship to attend.

"People of my generation began studying Hebrew at age five," said Sarna. "I went to school until 4:30 and then to yeshiva until seven. Looking back, I cannot understand why I didn't rebel. I guess I thought it was part of the cosmic order."

Eventually Sarna would graduate Jews College in London with a rabbinical degree and then obtain a Ph.D. at Dropsie College in Philadelphia. Sarna's expertise in the Bible is in the ancient Near East from 2,500 BCE onward. Some of the languages Sarna had to master include Acadian, Phoenician, Aramaic dialects and Ugaritic.

Given the esoteric nature of Sarna's field and breadth of study, he was asked if he found it difficult to discuss his work with peers.

"There aren't many Jews in the field," Sarna said. "In Israel they have departments and first class scholars, including at Bar-Ilan."

In their Boca Raton home, Sarna and his wife of nearly 50 years, Helen, work as a team. Each is attentive when the other speaks and they fill in the blanks for one another when a hole appears.

Rabbi Kenneth Brander of Boca Raton Synagogue telephoned to ask if Nahum had found a book. Since Sarna was doing an interview, Helen — herself a librarian — found the book as she also announced it had been filed in a place where she wouldn't have placed it.

Speaking of books, Sarna pointed out a bookcase in the room holding approximately 75 volumes. All the books were written by Sarnas. Nahum Sarna has written five books and his younger son Jonathan, a professor of American-Jewish history at Brandeis University, and elder son David, a computer scientist and owner of a software company in New York, also have books on the shelf. Other relatives

are represented among the authors. Presently a cousin has a best-seller in England called *Korin*, which is about the shekel the Sarnas came from in Poland.

Helen Sarna, who holds a master degree in library science and several degrees in Hebrew literature, worked last year at Florida Atlantic University (FAU) as did her husband.

Helen was appointed collections manager of the Judata Collection at FAU's Winberly and Nahum became acting director of Judaic studies. He was well-prepared for the position after being the Dora Golding Professor of Biblical Studies and for six years the chair of the Department of Near Eastern and Judaic studies department at Brandeis University.

They each accepted their position with the understanding it would only be for one year.

In addition to what has been mentioned, Nahum is working on articles and lectures.

"I'm giving [a lecture] at the University of Connecticut on human rights in the Bible and a lecture for SUNY at Purchase on the Jewish interpretation of biblical text," Sarna said.

Sarna apologetically discussed how many hours he works each day. "I must admit, I cannot do much after 10 at night." He thought for a few seconds and added, "I can do 12 hours a day." He spoke with humility and resignation.

A member of Boca Raton Synagogue, asked if he was Orthodox, Sarna said he doesn't like to use the word "Orthodox."

"Orthodox is not a Jewish term," Sarna said, "it's a term borrowed from the church. It means 'correct opinion,' and I vigorously oppose such a notion. I prefer to be called Orthoprax, which means orthodox practice."

Discussing the denominations within Judaism today, Sarna noted that the Reform was moving toward tradition, the Conservative moving toward the left and within Orthodoxy, "although certain

parameters within it must stay" there was a change toward women — allowing them greater opportunities for education.

From 1951-1957 Sarna was the librarian at the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) and also an assistant professor at the Bible Teachers Institute. Asked what he was doing at a Conservative Institution, Sarna joked that the JTS was an Orthodox institution training Conservative rabbis for Reform congregations.

There is a regrettable separation in Judaism today, Sarna said, which is between the ultra-Orthodox and the other denominations of Judaism. "There is a terrific polarity in Judaism which will take another generation to come together again," Sarna explained. "The Holocaust had a lot to do with it. We had a generation where they were either survivors or children of survivors and they totally dissociated themselves with Western civilization. They can't identify with those who integrated in the Western civilization — who at the same time are totally immersed in Jewish tradition."

Having spent a lifetime teaching, Sarna said he tried to teach students how to study the Bible. "I try to show] what are the resources and messages that are pertinent to modern living and modern problems."

Education today, Sarna believes, needs to be rethought.

"The field of human learning has narrowed its cultural horizons which, to me, is a very bad development," Sarna said. "The university has to insist on a wider core of learning. People don't want to spend years to master difficult [scholarly knowledge.] People are looking for money; the American pursuit of material rewards."

"I have been teaching since 1951 at JTS, Brandeis, Yale and Columbia and I have seen the deterioration. The discipline of learning has been largely lost except for the yeshivas, where it is still maintained."

It's ironic to listen to Sarna speak so eloquently and at the same time imagine that a teacher once thought him retarded.

Week of JANUARY 7 - JANUARY 13, 1997

Page 5A

Continued on page 5A