

# Princeton University

Honors Faculty Members  
Receiving Emeritus Status



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The biographical sketches were written by  
colleagues in the departments of those honored.

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# Abraham Labe Udovitch



Avrom Udovitch was born in 1933, in Winnipeg, Manitoba, where he grew up. As an undergraduate he attended Columbia University, and concurrently followed a course of study at the Jewish Theological Seminary. He received his B.A. in 1958 and his M.A. in Near Eastern languages, also from Columbia, a year later. He obtained his doctorate in 1965 at Yale, where he wrote his dissertation on the Islamic law of commercial partnership. During his years of graduate study, his mentors in medieval and Near Eastern studies—all of whom became his friends and colleagues—were such extraordinary scholars as Robert Lopez, Joseph Schacht, Shlomo Dov Goitein, and Franz Rosenthal. Between 1964 and 1967, he taught at Brandeis and Cornell; in 1967, he came to Princeton where he has remained until his retirement, with visiting stints at various other universities and research institutes. His contributions to learning as a scholar, teacher, and administrator have been enormous.

His pioneering study, *Partnership and Profit in Medieval Islam*, published by Princeton University Press in 1970, and several articles on related subjects, represent a breakthrough in the understanding of the relation of Islamic law to everyday practice in the economic life of the medieval Middle East. It had been thought that in some areas (such as ritual, family law, and inheritance), practice reflected the *shari'ā*; that in some others (as in constitutional and criminal law), practice and law were far apart if not, often, disconnected; and that in commercial law, matters fell between these two extremes. Avrom's examination of the sources showed that Islamic legal theory in the commercial sphere was not at all divorced from the real world. As he made clear, Judeo-Arabic letters, contracts, and court documents from the 11th to 13th centuries, preserved in the Cairo Geniza, demonstrated the curious fact

that in that period the practice of Jewish merchants was in keeping with Islamic law as elaborated by scholars in the eighth century. The explanation for this, as Avrom showed, was that both those early Muslim legal texts and the Judeo-Arabic Geniza texts reflected the same reality: a widely recognized and historically rooted merchant's law that was neither specifically Muslim nor Jewish.

Avrom's many articles on the economic life of the medieval Near East and North Africa display the range and originality of his research. He has thrown fresh light—to mention only a few topics—on long-distance trade, the institutions of credit and banking in the medieval Islamic Near East, the informalism characteristic of the social and economic institutions of the medieval Islamic world, the duration of commercial voyages, the constitution of the traditional Islamic market place, and Jews and Muslims in Sicily in the 11th and 12th centuries.

From using documents to decipher the everyday life of people who lived a thousand years ago, Avrom moved to field work and the contemporary world for a book he and his wife Lucette Valensi researched together and published in 1984: *The Last Arab Jews: The Communities of Jerba, Tunisia*. Their study of these socially and culturally self-contained Jewish communities, the only ones in North Africa that had resisted both assimilation and migration, records and, through objective writing that yet connects with the reader's imagination, renders palpable the most varied aspects of life—from the social lives of men and women, through the astonishing fullness of ritualized time in a place where being Jewish is a “full-time activity,” to the life of the marketplace where Jews and non-Jews interact.

The roster of graduate students he trained, many of whom are now among the leading scholars of four continents in their fields, is dauntingly long. His former students still speak of Avrom's ability, in seminars and in advising sessions, to raise the stimulating question, to point out the illuminating connection, and, of course, to inspire enthusiasm for the work. Undergraduates, too, observed these qualities, and over the years Avrom supervised some of the smartest senior theses written in the department.

Throughout his career, Avrom played an essential role in fostering his discipline. He organized seminal conferences, served as editor for a great many books on medieval and Islamic studies, and has been coeditor for more than 30 years of *Studia Islamica*, one of the finest journals in the field. He was associate editor of the *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, and since 1978 he has been a member of the executive committee of the most important collaborative publication in the field, the *Encyclopedia of Islam*. In 1987 the Jewish Theological Seminary recognized his many contributions to scholarship by awarding him an honorary doctorate.

For 18 years, Avrom chaired the Department of Near Eastern Studies with extraordinary success. From the Middle East, Britain, and the United States, he brought to Princeton some of the world's foremost scholars in Near Eastern history and Islamic studies, making Princeton second to none in the field. His fundraising efforts also met with remarkable results.

Avrom, a card-carrying historian of the medieval world, has long had an active interest in modern Middle Eastern affairs. In the seventies, he served on various panels exploring the possibilities of peace in the Middle East, and became a member of the Council on Foreign Relations. His optimistic temperament and his studies of societies in which Jews and Arabs peacefully engaged in the give-and-take of daily life perhaps predisposed Avrom to take an active part in attempts to bring a just peace to the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. The International Center for Peace in the Middle East chose him and four others to form the delegation that went to Stockholm in December 1988 to meet with representatives of the Palestine Liberation Organization. At the conclusion of these meetings, Yasir Arafat issued a statement in which he stated publicly that the Palestine Liberation Organization accepted the existence of Israel as a state, and declared its rejection and condemnation of terrorism in all its forms. After some further negotiations with the U.S. State Department, Arafat restated the PLO position in a form that met previously stated U.S. conditions

to begin public diplomatic contact. In 1989 Avrom received the Jewish Peace Fellowship's Abraham Joshua Heschel award. "Speaking out critically but constructively," Avrom said on that occasion, "is the only way to be a true friend of Israel."

Avrom's many achievements are inseparable from his personal qualities: inexhaustible energy (his travel schedules alone can inspire fatigue); a view of the world that is cheerful without being prey to illusions; an extraordinary gift for conversation and friendship.

It is hard to see how the word "retirement" can apply to Avrom, except in the most attenuated sense. His contributions to the world of scholarship will continue. He and Lucette will continue their bi-continental existence in Paris and New York, where they have their children and grandchildren, and, we hope, in Princeton, where they have countless friends. The glittering cities have their claim, but we do want Avrom here. One needs a model for living with good will and gusto.