



## Daniel Jeremy Silver Collection Digitization Project

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### **MS-4850: Daniel Jeremy Silver Papers, 1972-1993.**

Series III: The Temple Tifereth-Israel, 1946-1993, undated.

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When Men Burn Books: Reflections on My Study of the  
Maimonidean Controversy, 1965.

#152

MEN WHO BURN BOOKS

THE TEMPLE  
October 31, 1965

Rabbi Daniel Jeremy Silver

One of the platitudes of modern conversation is that religion is unsettled and frightened by scientific advance and by any change in the philosophic climate. Spinoza's excommunication is cited usually as the prototype of ecclesiastic repression. Spinoza's trial is set alongside the trials of Gallileo and Bruno, the Index and Inquisition, the tribulations of the Pilgrim fathers and of Ann Hutchinson and Roger Williams as proof of a pattern of clerical suppression. It is true that many religious bodies have a long and unfortunate history of censorship and Watch and Ward activity. Nor can we say that all such activity is medieval, over and done with. I read, just this last week, of five Baptist ministers in Binghamton, New York who protested to the local High School because its theatre was presenting "Inherit the Wind." The ministers argued that this play's espousal of the doctrine of evolution ran counter to Scripture, and, lo and behold, in this grand and glorious year of 1965, the eighth year of the space age, the play was cancelled. Newspaper reports emanating out of Rome tell of an abortive attempt by some liberal cardinals to do away with the Holy Office, the agency within the Roman Curia which has been responsible for the control of books and ideas. The point here is that their attempt was abortive.

The vestiges of clerical thought control are still with us. As a Rabbi, and as an historian, I need not, even if I could, defend the

record of other religious institutions in the area of censorship. One of the unfortunate by-products of our ecumenical age has been a sloppy togetherness which has led many to assume that all religious organizations respond and act in the same way; that we have a single set of social ends and a single philosophy of how these ends shall be achieved. Nothing could be further from the truth. Each of the grand old faiths has its own set of priorities. Sometimes our priorities clash and are quite opposite. To cite only the case in point; classical Christianity, in both its Catholic and Protestant forms, always has limited rather narrowly man's philosophic options. Christianity, through confession and council decision, time and again has set out black on white its world view, its philosophic attitude, and even the logical system to which believers must subscribe. The profession of correct belief is an integral and essential element in the Christian drama of salvation. We Jews have traditionally been far more tolerant in the areas of philosophy and creed. There were many valid theological approaches to Judaism and the Rabbis were given great leeway and freedom in their choice of approach. In all of our history I know of no synod, no council, no group of Rabbis or congregations who banded together and said "You must subscribe to the views of Galileo", or "You must deny the Newtonian theories", or "You must subscribe to Aristotelian logic or some other philosophy. Only if you do, only if you argue your faith in these terms can you be a good Jew." We Jews, of course, had our particular instructions. Woe betide the Rabbi who set himself against the concensus in a matter of communal discipline. When it came to practice, we drew

the line. But in matters of thought and metaphysical speculation, Judaism has a remarkable record of tolerance. I know of no Rabbi who ever faced down any scholar and insisted that he accept a particular view; that he deny, for instance, that the world was round; that he deny, for instance, that the sun is the center of the planetary system or that he deny that the theory of evolution was in fact, fact.

What then shall we make of the Spinoza affair? It is unique - the exception that proves the rule. What explanation can we give? History provides an explanation derived from the realities of minority status. Spinoza was one of the brilliant generation of Dutch philosophers who taught deism and pantheism. Spinoza taught of a God who was and a God who is but who can have no immediate contact with man. Spinoza's God did not listen to prayer nor answer prayer; and most crucially, Spinoza's God could not have had an only begotten son. Spinoza and the other pantheists drew to themselves a large number of disciples; and the divines of the Dutch Reformed Church, who saw confusion and disbelief being sown among their congregations, brought pressure on the Jewish congregation to silence the most brilliant exponent of these new doctrines. The Synagogues of the sixteenth century in Holland were made up largely of Jews who but a generation before had fled from the horror of the Spanish Inquisition. These Synagogues were not prepared to stand against the will of the religious leaders of the one community which offered asylum. Recently, historians have been studying again the details of the Spinoza episode. Unfortunately, their work has been hampered by the adamant refusal of the remnants of

Hasidism lived most of his adult life in Egypt. The young Jews of

the Sephardic congregation of Amsterdam to release the records of the two confrontations between Spinoza and the Kehillah. Proof again, if proof be needed, that one suppression, even if it is buried in the dim past, leads to another, till even today, a community is afraid to reveal events which occurred three hundred years ago.

Reading this literature, my interest was peaked by another instance of Jewish thought control. History tells us that in the year 1232, in the small walled-city of Montpellier in the Province of Southern France, a Papal Inquisition, led by Dominican monks, whose job it was to censor heresy and preserve orthodoxy, put the torch to the philosophic works of Moses Maimonides at the request of three Rabbis of that community, Solomon ben Abraham, David ben Saul, and Jonah Gerondi by name. We, who call ourselves the people of the book, have been remarkably respectful of the book and, indeed, of all books throughout our history. This episode is the only known incident in which Jews sought the destruction of books. No Jewish book ever bore a Jewish Nihil Obstat, an official certificate that it was free from religious and doctrinal error. We have respected the Word. We have respected the written word. We have respected the thoughtful word, whether it be in Scripture or in any literature. How then, explain this one falling from grace.

The familiar retelling of this episode is as follows: Moses Maimonides was the pre-eminent genius among medieval Rabbis. Around the year of 1198 or 1200, Maimonides completed the third and the last volume of his philosophic masterpiece - The Guide to the Perplexed. Maimonides lived most of his adult life in Egypt. The young Jews of

Egypt, the brightest among them, as the brightest of their young Arab compatriots routinely were taught by their tutors, the sum and substance of Greek philosophy and Greek science. They read Aristotle, Plato, and Hippocrates, and their own philosophers Avicenna and Averroes based their systems on this legacy. They were familiar with the intricacies of Greek thought. This thought was second nature to them and inevitably it raised questions as to the truth of their Moslēm or Jewish tradition. How, for instance, could the Bible speak of a creation in time? Had not Aristotle taught, and Aristotle was the master philosopher, that matter is eternal. If God, they asked, is all wise, all knowing as the philosophers insist, and indeed as the Bible insists, how can religion insist that man has freedom of will? Must not God know man's choice of good or evil even before he makes it? Tradition, Muslim and Jewish, promised a glorious reward for the good man and a paradise beyond, but the philosophers insisted that the world beyond was of a purely spiritual nature. God is pure being. God is pure spirit. How then, can the Bible speak of God as talking directly to Moses and to the Prophets? These were the questions routinely raised by the brightest of the Jewish youth of Egypt. These questions required an answer. Moses Maimonides wrote his three volumes of philosophy in defense of his faith to show what was the most profound teaching of scripture and how, in fact, this deepest and truest of scriptural meanings was wholly congruent with the best of Greek thought. There was no argument between science and religion, between philosophy and religion, in fact they taught a single truth - they only approached

could he believe this and that? They misinterpreted the bulk of his

it from different angles. Such was Maimonides' fame that within two years after the completion of The Guide... it had been translated from Arabic into Hebrew and it had been transported from the eastern reaches of the Mediterranean, west to Spain and to southern France. France had a quite different cultural climate than Egypt. In Egypt men read Aristotle. In France there were probably not half a dozen men who had ever opened a single page of Aristotle. Egypt had just passed the climax of the long and brilliant Arab medieval civilization. France was just emerging from the darkest of the Dark Ages. Maimonides brought answers to the questions raised by Aristotle. In Marseilles and Montpellier men had not even heard of the questions. Students read the questions which Maimonides stated in order to answer, and they raised these questions to their teachers and many of these lacked the philosophical background to provide decent answers. There was great confusion. There was a certain sowing of disbelief.

Let me give you a modern analogy. In 1953 the Missionary University in Tokyo invited the famed European Protestant theologian Emil Brunner to deliver a series of lectures. I was privileged to attend. The audience was composed largely of U.S. Army chaplains and American missionaries, decent young men and women, but academically innocent. Brunner's philosophy is based on the newest insights in psychology, in sociology and in philosophic thought. He is one of the most orthodox of the current crop of Protestant theologians, yet I remember leaving that hall and overhearing the conversations of these chaplains. They wondered about Brunner's orthodoxy. Was he not preaching and teaching heresy? How could he believe this and that? They misinterpreted the bulk of his

and explication, his name would be erased from every communal

teaching, lacking the learning with which to digest it - lacking even an understanding of the problems with which he was wrestling. So it was with the Guide for the Perplexed. In France it did not guide men from their confusions but into confusion. Our histories tell us that there were a number of Rabbis who would not brook patiently this kind of dissent and the most fanatic of these, Solomon, David and Jonah, whom I have cited, finally denounced The Guide For the Perplexed to the heresy hunters in their city and it was burned by church authority.

So goes the history. Frankly, the fact that it stands out as a unique episode makes it suspect. I began to wonder whether, in fact, these Rabbis would have acted in this way. I had read the literature of the period. I knew the caliber of the men who were Rabbis in this age and they were not obscurantists, nor fundamentalists nor fanatic. They were decent people although lacking the Aristotelian disciplines. I began to research the literature. I asked myself whence came the first report that these men, in fact, did denounce The Guide....to the Inquisition? I found to my surprise that the first report of this act was not made in Montpellier, nor in the month and year of the burning of the book, but several months later and by a traveler six hundred miles distant. To understand the importance of this fact you must understand the crime of Malchinut. Malchinut is the crime of treachery. It is the crime of denouncing a fellow Jew to Christian authorities or of denouncing to Christians the teachings of our faith. Malchinut was a capital offense. Malchinut's treason jeopardized the safety of an entire Jewish community. At the very least, Malchinut would expect vilification and excommunication, his name would be erased from every communal

record and every document. No one would dare base an argument on a Malchin's opinion. Yet, I discovered that each of these Rabbis, whom history labeled a Malchin, was, in fact, cited as a competent and dependable authority long after the event. Imagine if Benedict Arnold were cited by a nineteenth century jurist in support of his constitutional views and you will have the improbable situation which I found. There was more. I found that one of these men, Jonah Gerondi, was appointed twenty years later to the most influential and important pulpit in all of Europe, that of the illustrious Aljaman of Toledo. Imagine, if you will, Benedict Arnold being elected the second president of the United States. It simply was not probable. These men were declared innocent on the testimony of their contemporaries. Our history had been written largely on the basis of one man's hearsay, which no one had bothered to check carefully. Frankly, I felt that I had performed a Mitzvah by freeing the memory of these three men from the cloud of disrepute and dishonor which had hung over them for these many years.

Now what actually happened? I discovered that in Montpellier in the twelve hundred and thirties, there was an active and fanatic Catholic Inquisition busy impounding foreign ideas before they could enter Europe and contaminate Christendom. This was a century in which the culture of Greece, translated and refined by the Syrians and especially by the Arabs and the Jews, was being transhipped into Europe, which had heretofore known nothing of Aristotle and of his successors and predecessors. Churchmen in Montpellier, which was close to the

sea coast, had set themselves up as custom officers to see that none of this literature would come into Europe because all of it, they believed, sowed confusion. Maimonides' Guide to the Perplexed was cast into the flames along with Aristotle, along with Avicenna, along with Avveroees - as another dangerous and suspect tome.

There is a paradox here worth noting. Within fifty years of the burning of these books, the Catholic Church would turn around and declare the doctrines of Aristotle pre-eminent. Through the work of Thomas Aquinas, Aristotelian philosophy was declared to be the only adequate undergirding of Christian thought, and, indeed, it has remained so almost to our day. There is a second paradox worth noting. Again within fifty years, the Pope would give to the Jewish Community of Rome a certificate which stated that he or some of his cardinals had read Maimonides' Guide to the Perplexed, and that with one or two exceptions they had found this book to be helpful to anyone who would adopt a serious and advanced faith.

Now to unravel one historical riddle, is to expose another. A second question inevitably comes to mind. Why did this traveler, eight hundred miles away from Montpellier believe, on hearsay evidence, or conceive the idea that Solomon, David and Jonah had denounced the Guide to the Inquisition? An answer is readily available. For some years before 1232 Solomon and his two younger disciples had been busy seeking to remove The Guide... from general circulation among Jews, to see to it that it was chained to a reserved book shelf from which it could be taken only by graduate rabbinic students; men who would know what Maimonides was seeking to do; men who had had the constancy of faith not to be

unsettled by the questions that Maimonides raised. Solomon's activity has been described as fanatic, bigoted, obscuretist. I doubt it. Unfortunately, Solomon and David have left us little by way of a literary inheritance, but such as we possess show us decent, honest men, honorable, if timid in their intellectual horizons. Jonah, on the other hand, has left us a rich literature and as I read it I found a man who was not only wise and tolerant, a keen moralist and fine preacher, but a man who was at least aware of most of the philosophic currents of his day. As I read more of the literature I found that some of the Rabbis of Spain were men who were fully grounded in the Greek thought and yet agreed with Solomon that these books should be taken out of general circulation. If he was not a simple-minded fanatic what was the basis for Solomon's activity? The answer, I believe, is to be found in a crisis of survival which faced the Jewish community. The Jewish communities of Spain and of southern France led a rather tranquil and settled existence in the tenth, eleventh, twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. Then their world opened up under them. These years, just before the burning of the book, were the years of the Catholic reconquest of Spain. These were the years in which a brutal suppression of Provencal civilization by the Catholic Church, the so-called Albigensian Crusade, undercut and destroyed a thriving and humane civilization in southern France and eastern Spain. This was the age of the militant church, belligerent in its theology, belligerent in its missionary activity. In 1215 another Vatican council, not unlike the present one in structure, but quite unlike it in spirit, the fourth Lateran, ordered that every Jew must, hereafter, wear upon his garments a yellow badge of shame. Jews were ordered

by that same council of 1215 to cease and desist from all cultural and social contact with their Christian neighbors and to open their synagogues once a week to a Christian missionary who would address the congregation. It was a command performance and a fine opportunity of a cleric to fish for souls. There were created at that time, especially in Spain, a number of schools, designed primarily to train Dominican and Franciscan missionaries to catch **the** Jewish soul and bring it to the baptismal font. Whom did they catch? They caught clever but not profound young men. Those who are quick to question but lazy about finding answers. Those who were eager to belong and careless of loyalties. Some of these too clever men became converts and turned with vengeance against the birth community. They spread terrible lies about the Jew. Some became teachers in the missionary schools. And, so it was, that men of the caliber of Solomon sought to protect the Jewish community from itself. What happened?

Solomon failed, as all who seek to suppress knowledge, must fail. He failed to win the assent of the majority of the Jewish communities of the day. They said 'if you repress knowledge, if you seek to suppress as fine a book as is The Guide to the Perplexed by as fine and pious a man as Maimonides, you will unleash far worse devils than any that now stalk across the land'. The Jewish community is imperiled, it must protect itself, but suppression is not the way. The issue was never resolved. The tragedy of 1232 taught the Jewish communities that they could not afford a battle between free speakers on one side and suppressionists on the other. There was a far greater

We hardly recognize them. Most of us, I believe, are tempted to play Solomon to attack and damn every element in our modern society which has

danger without, a violent church, a violent community seeking to destroy the very existence of the Jewish community and Judaism. Judaism in southern France and Spain fell to the elemental business of survival. Such is the history.

Has this history any meaning? I am not one who believes that history repeats itself. Our world is quite another world from that medieval, walled-in, narrow, religiously turbulent world of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Thank God that it is. But I wonder if every rabbi does not at one time or another, face the predicament of Solomon. After all, what shall we teach in the curriculum of our religious schools? Shall we teach only that which is wholesome, self-evident in the Jewish tradition, or must we not play the devil's advocate and raise the questions as to the efficacy of prayer, as to the reliability of Scripture, as to the meaning of the ancient prayer formula, which will be raised by philosophy courses and by the general culture? Our instinctive answer is that we must show our young people the depth and the sophistication and the subtlety and the modernity of Judaism to guide them from their perplexities. But, what shall we do with the young people, and there are many of them, who lack a philosophic turn of mind, whose minds cannot grasp conceptual thoughts? How many questions shall be raised and what kind of answers shall we give?

I wonder if each of us as parents does not face the predicament of Solomon? We raise our young people in wholesomeness, we teach them to be well-behaved and to be well-mannered and then they leave home and they come back unshaven, unkempt, prophets of the most extreme doctrines. We hardly recognize them. Most of us, I believe, are tempted to play Solomon to attack and damn every element in our modern society which has

led to this beatnik, this strange almost unrecognizable young man and young woman - the theatre of the absurd, existentialist, philosophy, the marches and the counter marches, the picketing and the placarding. We make vacation time a lecture and finger-pointing session. We tell them what we think of what they are doing and that if they do not straighten up, their future will be ruined. And, of course, we only succeed in driving them further into their passion. If Solomon's concern has any meaning, it must lead us to the understanding that reason must be its own remedy. That we must somehow have faith in the mystical power of truth.

Now morality is not an infinitely plastic thing. When our young people or anyone violates what we consider to be right, we have our own judgments to make. Religion is not an infinitely plastic thing. Judaism is not all things to all men. Judaism cannot accept all that is reported today as philosophical, or as believable. But must we not go out and understand the world to which these young people are reacting? Must we not at least winnow the wheat from the chaff, grasp the questions that they are asking, talk, debate, engage in dialogue not monologue, help these young people and ourselves come to a fuller and wiser understanding of the meaning of life.

וְעַתָּה בָּרוּךְ הוּא יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ Come now and let us reason together.

This was the good advice of the prophet of Israel. This is the advice of Solomon's history. I give it to you again this morning as good advice.

Amen.

To-day Spencer is seldom used, but most everyone knows that  
he was a committed ally of the Jewish Community of America, one of  
the contemporary leaders almost rel. as if it is intellectually  
restless - always fearful of misadventure, Spencer's loyalty is  
also an excellent test, evidence of rel. determination & function,  
and loyalty to the Reg + the organization, has been of value, and  
of the highest order  
some institutions, steps as the primary steps of the organization

Supervisor  
many facets to be seen in the history of community in Wash + Wash  
activity, and not at all the time of the past  
no more than the past has been able to do with the same resources

that in August NY - 5 months ago was intended  
the presentation of the work of the group. The days  
before of the meeting of the group had been very slow  
working - a series of delays had been experienced, there was  
some attempt made at the organization to do any work

the Half Office under the direction of the group to do any work  
but did not set off the process - The results of the process  
of the group will be seen in the future - 2 months

rel. complete entire process - 2 months ago - 2 months  
not and not refused the values of the organization,  
2 months ago you that not all rel. values have been adopted  
similar attitudes toward values and others, to be accomplished  
we are to bring all of the together - as if all rel. values

please the same and to be sure to do the values.  
No attitude needed by more members -  
the organization is not the same, just has more members  
and is not the same, just has more members  
and is not the same, just has more members











kind of trouble before it can clean center.

To make one right is to give right - Why were

Sol, David, & friends involved as uninvolved? - Because they  
had been for some time involved at work, try to get the  
response from Central Committee & invited to a round  
table which had the training, be involved that to involve M's  
meeting.

Sol had tried for months to get the committee  
Fr. & George to express a view on the work of the Committee by  
which we were not allowed to submit statements, we  
were intended of our attitude at committee - it had been  
very to express our view on the work of the committee  
on a regular & to be involved in the work of the committee  
could not be involved in the work of the committee.



These regarding which right - involved me. of  
did David we have some information - but such as we have at  
the meeting of the regular committee and which we do have -  
do not reflect the present on judgment, and for  
we, with our knowledge - a member of the national sp. joint  
planning, movement, a member of which involved planning  
organizational and labor and purpose  
agreement with the union.

But, I found that we could not involve which did not  
fit, Sol, David, and friends were not involved in the work  
but involved in the work of the committee and which we do have -

was sent troubled by a critical outlet to journal several.

There were years of X<sup>th</sup> Reynard a sp. of the identity  
expression Abraham Lincoln - S. France - The spirit of the

Mr. Catty provided - for - conclude - very powerful, the  
Church was referred, theological belonged, belonging

minority - until the 13<sup>th</sup> cent. the founder of European  
was reluctant entirely, then to believe Church was dead

the fact to use distinctive books, upon for see id.  
intended it was not to be permitted X<sup>th</sup>

missionary to be applied, and was not used  
wishes to be seen in missionary and was quite skilled at

own work - it was not to be seen in the middle of  
love and preparation of M<sup>s</sup> Church, and

challenged been found in the middle of the day, and  
was referred by the author to be revised.

So, and, found was not found in the middle of the day  
condition of the mission was referred to be revised - but

the referred of the mission could be revised - if  
the fact could be kept constant - if by some and fact is

that fact which was not found in the middle of the day - 54  
attend did not so as challenged was not in the middle of the day -

was referred to be revised was not in the middle of the day - 54  
a fact of the mission was not found in the middle of the day -

should be revised at least in the middle of the day - 54  
should be revised at least in the middle of the day - 54



Will be hearing the noise of the sea become noise - The  
suppression of the freedom of thought & speech which was the  
goal of the League & Committee & was the same  
time for a fully used - So is in the 1!





W among <sup>about in future</sup> ~~the news here~~ ~~period~~

should we encounter - need - judic - understand these  
persons - secondary the draft - reading the hand of under  
just - submitted in order for present under just  
can have in recognition.

~~jud. as not an independent plastic piece - the affair -  
we believe - in order - to control - in Residence -  
The issue is not plastic - should we - in order -  
seek to maintain our WRHS archives - to do so  
Christian records based on WRHS archives - to do so  
which is not plastic - should we - in order -  
you do not know the extent to which you are able to  
maintain - to pay the cost of the archives!~~

it is trivial to pay sol. rule - to maintain it  
when consider the importance of the archives - but sol.  
failure will cost us more in the long run than the cost of the archives  
now attitude because we are not able to maintain the archives  
by our own means - we are not able to maintain the archives  
recuper of our own means - we are not able to maintain the archives  
now, let us know the cost of the archives!



To look out the names set back - x 15 in need of a closer  
 form has sought to limit a number of placemaster options - x 15  
 before the books in big conferences - The next books in internal  
 also had has quite been a number free regions in multiple phases  
 2 hours of your journal articles papers related papers in the 1960  
physic of model series - They have been used in the last of an  
matter of law practice, groups would be able to read my medical  
any had appeared to be in the question - without any of  
suppression - but when we set up against an  
unreliable opinion in matter of antibiotic law - in an open  
note



Spang's work in the 1960s was in the area of antibiotic law  
jud. many times in the 1960s was in the area of antibiotic law  
Believe that the idea of antibiotic law was not in the 1960s  
General entirely but the idea of antibiotic law was not in the 1960s  
no journal articles was found to report for any of the 1960s  
the could be used in the 1960s as well as in the 1970s  
planning system or any other system was not in the 1960s  
Spang and judicial work was not in the 1960s as well as in the 1970s  
Antibiotic and judicial work was not in the 1960s as well as in the 1970s  
Spang and judicial work was not in the 1960s as well as in the 1970s  
Spang's work was not in the 1960s as well as in the 1970s  
but with antibiotic law was not in the 1960s as well as in the 1970s

# Kaddish

Friday OCT 29 - 65

Sunday 31 - 65

Those who passed away this week

RACHEL COPELAND  
ESTELLE LERNER

ALBERT KOGAN

PAGE # 1

## Yahrzeits

HELEN GOODMAN ALTMAN  
WALTER P. DEUTSCH  
MAX M. ROTHSCHILD  
EMANUEL M. MANDEL  
MORRIS VERNON BROWN  
HELEN M. SILBERBACH  
L.A. BRAHAM  
ADOLPH RITTER  
ROSE RICHMAN UNGER  
ESTHER LEBBY  
HERMAN OPPER  
HELENE R. HIMMEL  
SAMUEL STERN

SOL DORSEY  
HILDA W. KROHNGOLD  
DR. JACOB SIEBERT  
SADELLE KLEIN  
SAM HARRIS  
RACHEL MILLER ELLBOGEN  
JACOB H. ALTMAN  
COLEMAN SPITZ  
HEDWIG HENRY  
BECKY ROSENTHAL  
SIMON FOX  
EDWIN H. WEIL



# Kaddish

Friday \_\_\_\_\_

Sunday \_\_\_\_\_

Those who passed away this week

PAGE NO. 2

## Yahrzeits

PAULINE WEINSTEIN LOCKWOOD  
MARY O. SHAPERO  
JEAN YOELSON LEVIN  
JOSEPH W. SCHIFFER  
RABBI MOSES J. GRIES  
EDITH G. ZEMAN  
MAX PAUL MEYER  
HARRY D. KOBLITZ