# LEHRHAUS

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## Articles:



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# Judaism in a New World: The Pain, the Paradox, and the Prayer

Dov Berkovits

In this short vignette—a late summer afternoon, an elderly Jew and his children, perhaps his grandchildren—my father, *z"l*, Rabbi Prof. Eliezer Berkovits, captures something formative in the passage of the generations in the modern history of our people. In doing so, we are invited to enter a timeframe familiar to many of us and to contemplate its underlying meaning. Along with that, we are granted a unique insight into the soul of one of the leading Jewish philosophers of the twentieth century.

**My Father's Views**

My father was criticized all too often for his outspoken views regarding the challenges facing Orthodoxy—and its failures—in a revolutionary period in Jewish history and in the development of modern civilization. He was among the first leading figures in American Modern Orthodoxy—perhaps the very first—to raise a number of central issues that required creative thinking and determined action on the part of rabbinic and educational leadership. He was especially concerned with challenges to the *halakhah* that reflected fundamental questions of human morality in contemporary society. He toiled again and again to offer solutions to those questions based on the depths of Torah consciousness and the clarity of halakhic thinking.

To enumerate just of few of the issues that, in my father, *z"l's* view, constituted the challenge to the survival of a vibrant Modern Orthodoxy: the need to allow autopsies that could create the medical knowhow to save lives in the future, and in hospitals on the other side of the globe; the need for a halakhic policy in the area of conversion that would create consensus among all the denominations; the need to respond constructively to the nascent awakening of feminist consciousness among committed women; the need to create a halakhic solution that would solve the communal tragedy of "*agunot*;" and, above all, the need for formative thinking in the areas of halakhic concern in the daily running of the modern state of Israel so that taking responsibility for one of the miracles of modern Jewish life would not be left only to those not committed to the *halakhah*.

Many of those issues, for which my father was often criticized as someone who was undermining the bastions of halakhic Judaism, are now central planks of Modern Orthodoxy and Religious Zionism, important features on the agenda of large segments of rabbinic and educational leadership.

But how can that groundbreaking worldview be reconciled with what appears to be a nostalgic description of the "old Jew" with his head covered by a "traditional *yarmulka*," "his face adorned

with a long graying beard," "engrossed in a '*sefer*' from traditional Jewish literature?" Does that depiction sound like that of a revolutionary visionary, of a profound thinker and philosopher? Perhaps it conjures up someone more like a high school teacher or a rabbinical sermonizer trying to convince young Jews as to the critical importance of preserving the age old tradition?

To understand what seems like an untenable paradox in the perception of the modern Jewish reality, we need to turn to another fundamental aspect of my father's thought.

**My Father and the Moderns**

The "open minded" Jews who today understand the need to confront the issues that my father raised in the 1950s and 1960s of the last century are guided by an inner motivation, a belief in the basic values of western humanism. In contrast, although my father, *z"l*, was widely read and deeply understanding of the major figures of western thought, he was sharply critical of what he saw as the defeat of the human spirit in the contemporary interpretation of that humanism.

I recall our Thanksgiving dinners, dressed as for a *hag*, reading *Tehilim* together, thanking Hashem for the humanizing gift of Democracy and the aspiration for tolerance and common understanding. However, in the darkest corners of modern European civilization, there was also Nazism. For my father, that monstrous human creation was not a local aberration of the spirit, but the inevitable result of hundreds of years of incessant hatred towards those who represented an unseen Presence in human history, a Presence that demanded human accountability.

But more than that, my father saw the weakness of the western democracies. He wept, as none could rise up and wipe out Nazism in its early stages. Mark Gottlieb has described poignantly what was at the source of that perception. Here is some of his language couched in terms of my own understanding of this critical area in contemporary human culture: The lack of will to confront evil—then as today—to respond to the absolute moral command to act in the face of indescribable evil, is an indication of the collapse of western civilization. The salient values of democracy and equality have become an ideology, a religion, of human relativism. That has led to widely accepted social norms of permissiveness, a systematic attack on the boundaries of personal identity and often a rampant nihilism. As my father might have put it, "the world has abandoned its moral moorings and by doing so has put humanity itself at risk."

All too often, human sensitivity and responsiveness to the "other"—values at the heart of what once was the bonding of Judaism with western humanistic values—has become the very source of the abandonment of the "image of God." The deep wellspring of meaning and purpose in human life has been replaced by a digital distraction culture centered on preserving "I-ness" with almost no limits and by human despair so endemic in the drug culture. My father, *z"l*, identified the seeds of that sense of meaninglessness and despair in the emptying of the search for personal meaning in life so much a part of modern western humanism.

**My Father's Spirit for Humanity**

What is the solution to the crisis of meaning and value in human society? What universal vision might redeem the human spirit? My father, *z"l*, believed that such a redeeming vision of hope for the human spirit could only come from the ongoing human encounter in the fullness of life with the Eternal Word. Only the inspiration that comes from the prophetic tradition and the underlying meanings embedded in the Talmudic interpretation and development of that tradition could touch the human soul in a way that would reawaken the search for meaning and purpose as a defining factor in human civilization.

In what he referred to as a world of revolutionary transformations, as a post-Christian world, a world in which closed traditionalism cannot offer succor so needed for the restoration of the human spirit—it is amazingly Judaism itself—renewed once again—that can provide the spiritual nourishment needed by so many.

In that context, the *halakhah* was the powerful tool honed over generations to provide the "creative wisdom in applying the Torah to the daily realities of human existence, its realization in the innumerable concrete situations through which the Jewish people passes in the course of history" (*Not in Heaven*). The state of Israel is the unique expression of a "people made to fulfill a God-given task in history … [it brings to] the fruition of the idea as a 'deed' that encompasses the whole of human existence … [a] faith that seeks realization in economics, social morals, politics, and in every manifestation of human life" (*Faith After the Holocaust*). Above all, there is the Jewish language of the continuous renewal of the human spirit:

> Judaism is in love with life, for it knows that life is God's great question to mankind … Just as Torah shapes life, so does Torah shaped life, in its turn direct and thus unfold Torah … and so on to eternity; Torah leading life and Torah-led life unfolding Torah. This is the inner meaning of the partnership between Torah and prosaic, every-day existence; and out of the partnership emerges a Judaism capable of unlimited development (*Toward Historic Judaism*).

**My Father's Blessing**

Let's now turn back to the scene my father describes as he walked, perhaps alongside my mother, Sali, *a"h*, two worlds side by side, the world of the elderly Jew reading a *sefer* in his chair and nearby the world of a group of children absorbed in reading newspapers. What a blessing! Reading newspapers! Today, the group of children would be sitting each one with their cellphone, lost in a private world, without the gift of interaction that creates knowledge and without the experience of intimacy and love that brings with it the promise of personal growth and of compassion and hope for human society.

There is a clear sense of pain in the description of the scene—there is no communication between the generations. But more than that. For my father, there was deep sense of loss; the loss of a

genuinely human and moral culture, a unique form of "Jewish genius, influenced and influencing, [that] created new values in religious thinking, philosophy, literature, etc." The elderly Jew does not signify a closed age old tradition, but an age old tradition that held the promise of the continual rediscovery of Judaism.

And the children—what of the children? They represent the pain of a world gone adrift, in meaningless moral limbo, unable to find the anchor for a life of growth, of personal meaning and purpose.

The short vignette ends with a question: What will be? What will come of a society in which there is no sense of permanence—no holding together of past, present and future? But there is also a dream, and in the dream an unspoken prayer and these are the words of that prayer: May we be blessed anew to "ponder what others before us, saints, prophets and teachers thought and taught; and now and then put the good book down for a while and to think our own thoughts and dream our own dreams, stimulated by the book."

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# Neil Gillman and the Postmodern Moment: A Student Reflects

William Plevan

Rabbi Dr. Neil Gillman died on November 23, 2017, having been ill for several years after cancer treatment. Gillman spent his entire career at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in New York, as the dean of the Rabbinical School and as a Professor of Jewish Philosophy.

This essay is one student's attempt to articulate an appreciation for Gillman, his contribution to contemporary Jewish theology, and how his work might shed light on the value of the terminology of postmodernism for our own time. In this sense, it contributes to and broadens, I hope, *The Lehrhaus*'s recent series of articles on Rav Shagar and postmodern Jewish theology.

Gillman's most significant work of Jewish theology is his 1990 book, *Sacred Fragments: Recovering Theology for the Modern Jew*. Only a year later, Eugene Borowitz, professor of Jewish theology at Hebrew Union College, the Reform movement's rabbinical seminary, originally published *Renewing the Covenant: A Theology for the Postmodern Jew*. A leading thinker of Reform Judaism, Borowitz drew on the discourse of postmodernism in the service of calling for a retrieval of tradition.

Gillman, a Conservative Jew and certainly more of a traditionalist thinker than Borowitz, categorized his own work as modern, yet his approach to theology touches on elements of the rhetoric of postmodernism and religion that was taking shape at that time, even as he did not embrace that particular label. To understand and appreciate Gillman's contribution, I will discuss some of Gillman's early philosophical influences, which also point to some commonalities with Borowitz, who himself died under two years ago.

Neil Gillman was born in Quebec City, Canada, and studied philosophy at McGill University in Montreal. While raised in a traditional Jewish home, his path to the rabbinate and a career teaching Jewish theology was inspired with an encounter with Will Herberg, the noted Jewish social thinker and existentialist theologian.

Under Herberg's influence, Gillman was introduced to the Jewish religious existentialism of Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, both of whom were also major influences for Borowitz. Borowitz and Gillman both understood themselves as working in the tradition of covenantal theology, which emphasized the centrality of a dialogical relationship with the divine.

And for both, the themes of existentialism gave voice to the fact that modern Jews could not evade the uniquely modern condition of radical individuality in their theological self-understanding. Borowitz's earliest book was a guide to religious existentialism, and Gillman wrote his doctoral dissertation on the French Catholic existentialist theologian Gabriel Marcel.

The existentialist emphasis on a personal confrontation with personal belief and meaning became one of Gillman's core commitments, as much or even more in the teaching of theology than in the theology itself. The hallmark of Gillman's teaching was the crafting of a personal

theological statement, a task to which he provided a guide in the final chapter of *Sacred Fragments*. In addition to being a typical final assignment in almost any Neil Gillman class, under his influence the personal theological statement became and remains a standard part of the application to the Rabbinical School at JTS. Neil's insistence that modern Jews clarify their own theological commitments in a personal way gave a generation of rabbis, cantors, educators, and lay students the opportunity to discuss their qualms and questions about classical Jewish theology, explore new possibilities, and renew their faith from the "sacred fragments" of traditional images of God.

The individualism at the heart of existentialist philosophy certainly reflects a modernist sensibility. On this point, Borowitz arrived at postmodernism as a corrective to such individualism in Reform Jewish theology, in favor of a greater role for communal norms and rituals rooted in, if not completely governed by, halakhic traditions. But for Gillman, who was already committed to traditional observance, the centrality of community was a given in his Jewish theology, his existentialist orientation notwithstanding. In this sense, much of Gillman's theological work, with its twin emphases on community and individual existence, might be best seen as an attempt to reconcile the influence of two of his teachers at the Jewish Theological Seminary, Mordecai Kaplan and Abraham Joshua Heschel.

Kaplan was a pragmatic rationalist and a naturalist theologian who founded Reconstructionism, which eventually broke off from Conservative Judaism. Kaplan's modern Jewish theology sought to explicitly incorporate the sensibilities of modern science and humanism. He proposed that we think of God as "the power that makes for salvation," the reality that makes it possible for human beings to achieve flourishing, self-actualization, and social harmony.

Heschel was a traditionalist, the scion of a Hasidic dynasty, and refugee from Eastern Europe who insisted on the continuing power of the personal God of the Biblical prophets and classical Jewish texts. For Heschel, Kaplan represented everything that was wrong with modern theology because it placed God in the service of human needs rather than insisting, as the prophets had, that humanity is called upon to meet the needs of God.

Gillman revered both of his teachers and incorporated their insights into his theology in a way that straddles the modern and postmodern, though Gillman usually stayed away from the terminology of postmodernism or postmodernity. It could be said that Gillman's head was with Kaplan and his heart was with Heschel, but that requires some explanation.

Gillman followed Kaplan's theological naturalism because he did not think we could fully retrieve the pre-modern conception of God as a supernatural personal being. At the same time, Gillman understood that for many, himself included, Kaplan's naturalistic theology did not capture the emotive or spiritual power of lived religious experience, both in traditional Jewish ritual and in the everyday world.

Heschel's poetic writing and teaching taught him to appreciate the way that the images and metaphors for God in the tradition allowed us to experience the divine within the world, to "see God," as Gillman often put it in explaining his debt to Heschel. This recognition of the limits of theological naturalism was Gillman's nod to the postmodern moment. The modernist confidence that new conceptions of God rooted in the sciences would surpass traditional ones, Kaplan's

understanding of God as an impersonal "power" being a prime example, was no longer sustainable as an account for theology.

Gillman's own understanding of this tension revolved around the philosophical issue of religious epistemology, how we make knowledge claims about God, which was the subject of his dissertation on Marcel. Kaplan's naturalism suggested that a human community like the Jewish people creates new metaphors and images for God as they evolve and develop.

The problem Gillman saw was that it made it seem like the community could just say that God is whatever they wanted God to be. What was lost here was the debt to the past and the centrality of revelation that Gillman appreciated in Heschel's thought. At the same time, Gillman did not fully embrace Heschel's traditionalist theological idiom. Still a naturalist, he insisted that his own view acknowledge the break that modern thinking represented from the past even as he sought to retrieve the treasures of its thinking.

To achieve this balance, Gillman turned to two concepts that his students would typically remember as his unique contributions to their theological education. The first was Paul Tillich's notion of religious language as mythical, in the sense of "a structure through which a community organizes and makes sense of its experience" (*Sacred Fragments*, 26).

The concept of myth allowed Gillman to affirm the central role of the Jewish tradition's classical personal imagery for God in shaping our theology (his heart with Heschel) without having to claim that the tradition itself is rooted in supernatural revelation (his head with Kaplan). Because myth is inherently communal, Gillman's approach anchors theological claims in the literature of the Jewish past and the communal strivings of the Jewish present.

However, sometimes the classical language of the tradition ceases to be compelling, and these myths become broken. One of the most important parts of Gillman's teaching was helping students work through their difficulty with certain troubling images for God that were rooted in gender hierarchies or abusive forms of power. But Gillman also counseled that just because we don't take classical metaphors for God literally does not mean they lose their power.

Here, he looked to Paul Ricoeur's notion of second naiveté to explain our relationship to these metaphors from the tradition. While the "literal" belief in God as a Parent, Ruler, or Warrior might be untenable to modern Jews, they can embrace a stance of second naiveté that acknowledges their distance from the original understanding of these images while integrating them into their religious lives through prayer, study, and other forms of spiritual reflection.

By introducing the concepts of myth and second naiveté to Jewish theology, Gillman captured the spirit of the burgeoning postmodern moment. Gillman's reluctance to use that rhetoric may have been because he did not seek to usher in a new era called "postmodernity." Rather, he sought to move past the modernism of Kaplan and others who believed that the modernity could only bring inevitable moral and intellectual progress.

Here, too, his heart was with Heschel, who saw that modernity had unleashed humanity's inhumanity more than bring meaningful moral progress. Gillman could be seen as postmodern in being a critic of modernism within modernity without seeking to move past it. In embracing this tension between modernity and its limits, and in striving to give the Jewish past a voice on

new terms, he revolutionized theological education for his students and inspired a generation of teachers of Torah.

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