5. Neil Gillman, *Sacred Fragments: Recovering Theology for the Modern Jew*

Eugene Borowitz, *Renewing the Covenant: A Theology for the Postmodern Jew*

Neil Gillman, *Sacred Fragments: Recovering Theology for the Modern Jew*, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990

Rabbi Dr. Neil Gillman (1933–2017) was Aaron Rabinowitz and Simon H. Rifkind Professor of Jewish Philosophy at the Jewish Theological Seminary.

In an age that places a premium on individualism and autonomy, obedience to arbitrary divine decrees does not come easily. For those of us who were not raised in observant homes, ritual observances demand a choreography that is unfamiliar and threatening. It is not easy for adults to begin observing the dietary laws, turn their kitchens inside out, and accept the social limitations that this discipline demands. It is not easy to begin putting on *tefillin* in a public forum such as the synagogue chapel, or to adopt the practice of ritual immersion after menstruation—just to cite a few more examples. How can we justify these dramatic changes in lifestyle, first to ourselves and then to our families and friends?

Is it any wonder that many of us prefer to view religion as a matter of faith and belief alone, as inwardness or emotion ("I'm a Jew at heart!"), or as affecting primarily our interpersonal, ethical behavior? We may accept the fact that religion can dictate giving charity, dealing honestly with our fellows, remaining faithful to our spouses, and avoiding gossip or slander. What more can it legitimately require of us? Isn't it enough to be a good person? (215–216)

There is no question that Judaism wants us to be "good people." In fact, according to Isaiah 1, Hosea 6:6, and most of prophetic literature, God wants us, *above all*, to be good people. He abhors the Sabbath and Festivals and Isra-

el's sacrifices when they are accompanied by flagrant violations of His moral law. Above all, He wants us to be concerned with the oppressed and the disadvantaged, with justice and compassion. His destruction of the Temple as punishment for the moral failings of the biblical community is powerful testimony to the hierarchy of values in prophetic religion.

But it is also clear that Isaiah is not denouncing the Sabbath, the Festivals, and the sacrificial cult themselves. After all, a later prophet, Ezekiel, prophesied at length about the rebuilding of the Temple, and the returning exiles did rebuild it with the explicit approval of that generation's prophets (Haggai 1:2ff). What Isaiah could not tolerate was the place that ritual has assumed in the life of the community. Jeremiah 7:8–15 is even more precise. The Temple had come to be viewed as a magical guarantor of security. The Israelites seem to have assumed that as long as there was a Temple, as long as the proper sacrifices were offered, they could do anything else they wished and still be safe, for God would never dare destroy His Temple. But He did—and in so doing, He said loudly and clearly that the Temple was created not for His sake but, rather, for the sake of a community of human beings. This seems to be the Bible's way of affirming what modern scholars have recently rediscovered: that ritual serves a powerful human—and not a divine—need.

The choice, then, is never between being a good person and a ritually observant Jew, but rather between competing ritual systems. Our problem is that we belong to multiple communities with multiple ritual systems. Sometimes our different communities cohere; we can have a kosher wedding dinner at the Plaza Hotel. But sometimes they don't; we can't serve shrimp cocktail at a kosher wedding. And then we have to choose. Who are we? Where do we belong? What is our identity? With that choice comes the choice of a ritual system. (242–243)

If we live in an age of communal fragmentation, anomie, and isolation, or rootlessness and emotional aridity, then more than ever we need ritual, even more theatrically performed than ever before—even if some of us no longer believe, as our ancestors did, that God explicitly commanded us to act in these seemingly arbitrary ways. If God did not command, then maybe we can discern a commanding voice in our very human nature and in our communal needs, and we may be prepared to hearken as obediently to this voice as our ancestors did to God's. (244)

Eugene Borowitz, *Renewing the Covenant: A Theology for the Postmodern Jew*, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991

Rabbi Dr. Eugene Borowitz (1928–2016) was Sigmund L. Falk Distinguished Professor of Education and Jewish Religious Thought at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion.

In my view, Jewish autonomy becomes the use of our freedom in terms of our personal participation in the people of Israel's Covenant with God as the latest expression of its historic tradition.

Two intensifications of general human sociality arise from this conception of the Jewish self. As in all religions, living in Covenant involves a human being's most utterly fundamental relationship, namely, that with God. Hence our religious communities and duties cannot be peripheral to our lives but must be at their center; anything less than profound devotion and commitment profanes our professions of Jewish faith. Moreover, because the Covenant was made primarily with the Jewish *ethnos* and only secondarily with the Jewish *autos*, the Jewish people, its local communities, families, and progeny, remain the immediate channels through which we Jews sacralize existence. Since modern life immerses us in an individualistic ethos, all contemporary Judaisms must stress the sociality of Jewish spirituality so that we may live in proper Covenantal duality. (224)

Jewish critics of personalistic revelation charge it with invalidating a critical characteristic of Judaism, *halakhah*. As a logical observation, the indictment has merit: one cannot derive a legal structure from a theory that ultimately reserves authority for the self—even the self in relationship. But I reject the normative principle that authentic Jewish continuity requires the halakhic process. Our people did not lack Covenant-faithfulness in the millennium before the rabbinic period, when its primary religious structure appears to have been priestly and cultic. This precedent allows for the possibility that the rabbinic structuring of Jewish life that proved so effective until the Emancipation may now need to be drastically altered. Positively put, do the radically changed Jewish social status and cultural ethos that resulted from modernization prompt us to devise a more appropriate way of framing Jewish existence?

Two interrelated considerations, one practical and one theoretical, lead me to say "Yes." To begin with reality, almost all Jews who have modernized

now consider Jewish law to be instructive rather than obligatory. Only the Orthodox and the few non-Orthodox ideologically committed to the necessity of *halakhah* discipline their lives by it. The remaining members of the caring community simply take for granted their right to determine what provisions of the *halakhah* they will and will not observe.

These Jews have negative and positive grounds for their insistence on autonomy. They do not believe God gave the Written and Oral Law and they remain unpersuaded that the Jewish desirability of the halakhic process should lead them to constrain their freedom by its rulings. Were there a non-Orthodox theory of revelation that indicated how God authorizes the corporate determination of individual Jewish duty, many might bend conscience to a newly flexible *halakhah*. But no one has yet provided one and the task seems presently undoable. The stumbling block remains the authority we have vested in selfhood. We have no compelling theories of corporate authority that still allow for something like the normativity we commonly grant to self-determination; mostly, we prefer to reason from self to society. (281)

COMMENTARY BY MICHAEL MARMUR

Neil Gillman's *Sacred Fragments* and Eugene Borowitz's *Renewing the Covenant* merit comparison for many reasons. Published within a year of each other by the Jewish Publication Society, these works brought European liberal streams of modern Jewish thought into the American Jewish mainstream. They both appeal to and epitomize a certain kind of reader: a postwar Western Jew rooted in modernity, compelled by Jewish affiliation, seeking a rationale for Jewish commitment.

Each of these works has had a palpable impact since their initial publication. JPS reports that sales for each of them have been impressive, Borowitz's work having sold some 5,500 copies, and Gillman's almost 15,000. Gillman's sales in particular are remarkable for a book of this kind. It is one of the most widely read books of Jewish thought of its era. Taken together, they represent the premier theological statements of the established non-Orthodox streams in the late twentieth century.

The true impact that these books and their authors have exercised on Jewish life in North America cannot be measured simply in terms of royalties. The primary reason for this is the role played by each of the authors in the formation of generations of non-Orthodox rabbis in America. Neil Gillman was associated with the Jewish Theological Seminary for over five decades, and

in the course of that time he helped mold the theological orientation of the Conservative movement. Eugene B. Borowitz played a similar role at the New York campus of the Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion. As well as his decades of service as a teacher at the College and his standing as the leading Reform theologian of his generation, Borowitz's role as the founder of *Sh'ma: A Journal of Jewish Responsibility* allowed to him to play a significant convening role for ethical discourse within the Jewish community across denominational lines.

These two men, then, lived in the same era and played comparable roles in their respective denominations. It is reasonable to predict that when the story of American Jewish thought in their era is told, Gillman and Borowitz will each command significant attention. Students who studied with them in a seminary setting went on to discuss and propagate their ideas with their congregants and in this way the key concepts of these books gained currency in non-Orthodox Jewish discourse in North America.

From amongst the canon of modern Jewish thinkers, both Gillman and Borowitz afford pride of place to two *zugot*, two pairs of contemporaries, who between them have helped define the agenda for contemporary non-Orthodox Judaism in America: Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber from the German context, and Mordecai Kaplan and Abraham Joshua Heschel from the American.

The influence of some others is common to both works. Both Gillman and Borowitz discuss Paul Tillich and Richard Rubenstein, and they both mention Arthur Cohen, Emil Fackenheim, and Louis Jacobs. It is in the discrepancies between the sources upon which they draw that something can be learned about their contrasting approaches. Maimonides is mentioned only in passing by Borowitz, but he figures prominently in Gillman's work, as does Judah Halevi, who plays no part in *Renewing the Covenant*. Gillman's palette includes Norman Lamm and Gershom Scholem, Harold Kushner and Will Herberg. Borowitz says nothing of these men in this book, but instead engages with the thought of Hermann Cohen, Leo Baeck, Ahad Ha'am, Michael Wyschogrod, and Arthur Green. To some degree these differences reflect denominational divergence and to some degree different intellectual appetites.

The authors also intend their books to serve different purposes. Gillman indicates at the very end of the work, in an afterword on "Doing Your Own Theology," his ambitions concerning the book itself. Suggesting that it may help individuals and groups as they struggle to formulate their own theologies, he notes that his work

> ... provides an outline of what our classical (i.e., biblical and rabbinic) sources have to say on a specific issue, traces some of the later formulations in medieval Jewish philosophy and mysticism, and outlines in more detail how contemporary thinkers have dealt with it. I suggest a set of criteria for evaluating each of these contemporary positions, and I conclude each chapter with my own position, indicating why it seems most adequate to me. (277)

Here in a nutshell is a description of the book's purpose and method. Gillman selects ten areas of theological speculation and with each of them he follows this approach. As he writes in the book's introduction, he hopes to engage his readers in a struggle for answers, and to provide them with tools to facilitate the struggle.

Gillman's choice of topics is remarkable, both for what it includes and for what is left off the list. He opens with revelation, arguing that "it is revelation that creates Judaism as a religion" (1). Taken together, these first chapters offer a discussion of the authorship, authenticity, and authority of Torah. The following five chapters all concern the central theme of classical theology—knowing, talking about, sensing, proving, and encountering God. The first of these chapters offers a broad grounding for the discussion, the second relates to the issue of symbolic language, and then empiricism, rationalism, and existentialism are discussed in turn.

The book's eighth chapter is an exercise in theodicy, asking why God allows suffering in the world. Theological responses to the Holocaust are discussed here, although unlike Borowitz's *Renewing the Covenant*, Gillman's work does not dwell on the impact of the Holocaust for the very possibility of doing theology. While chapter nine returns to the theme of ritual touched upon earlier in the work, the tenth and final chapter grapples with the end of days, a theme to which Gillman was to return in his 1997 work *The Death of Death*.

The issues represented here do not constitute a broad-ranging systematic theology. There is no place here for the people Israel, let alone for the modern State. Feminism is mentioned only in passing. There is next to no discussion of the encounter between Judaism and other religious traditions, and questions of political and social engagement are similarly de-emphasized. Instead of these and other possible components of an agenda of modern Jewish thought, Gillman offers his readers a way into a sophisticated modern discussion of God's essence, God's presence, God's expression, and God's promise.

No wonder, then, that the subtitle of Gillman's book is *Recovering Theology for the Modern Jew*. In contrast, Borowitz appended to the title of his book a

different descriptor: *A Theology for the Postmodern Jew*. In order to understand what Borowitz means by the term "postmodern Jew," it is helpful to review the structure of his work. Twenty chapters are organized into four parts, the first of which, "Jewish Religious Experience in Our Time," serves as a preface. This opening section sets out Borowitz's critique of modernity, described in the title of chapter two as "The Betrayer." Borowitz's postmodernism, then, is not a matter of abstruse formulations favored by literary theorists of the French school. Rather, it is born of a post-Holocaust wariness about the promises of progress.

The next section of the work, "A Postliberal Theology of Jewish Duty," spans approximately two-thirds of the book. It is further divided into two parts, the first offering a discussion of "God, the Ground of Our Values," and the second "Israel, the People That Creates the Way." The closing two chapters relate explicitly to the theme of covenant, which—as Borowitz points out in his Preface to the entire work—had been a theological preoccupation of his since 1961. The final four chapters of the work are gathered under the heading "The Torah Born of Covenant." In this way Borowitz includes what he describes as the holistic context of the God-Israel-Torah triad of classical Jewish theology, and manages to present these perennial themes in the light of his analysis of modernity and its discontents, and through the prism of his particular approach, covenant theology. In the words of Borowitz himself, *Renewing the Covenant* is "a comprehensive theology pivoting on my understanding of "Covenant," although he then hastens to add that the book "deals with but one aspect of my theology," as if to say the naive belief of a previous generation in the possibility of a truly systematic theology is one victim of our postmodern condition (ix).

Gillman makes no secret of his own theological views in the course of his book. He states, for example, that "[t]here is simply no religious authority outside of a halakhic system" (59). Nevertheless, the core purpose of his work is not to promote his beliefs, but to encourage theological discourse among the clergy and lay readers to whom the book is directed. The afterword, a guide to "Doing Your Own Theology," makes this explicit. His method, summarizing millennia of thought and focusing on prevalent positions among contemporary thinkers, offers a way in to serious wrestling with Big Questions.

Borowitz, in contrast is not trying to summarize, but rather to offer an exploration of his own reading of some key modern thinkers, and an explication of his own position. The difference in sales may be a reflection of this difference in purpose. *Fragments* can be used as a kind of roadmap for personal theological search. *Covenant* may contribute to such a search, but as a thick

and somewhat complex exploration of a leading theologian's point of view. The writing style of these two works also reflects this distinction—Gillman's prose is more accessible.

Gillman and Borowitz offer their readers examples of serious engagement with some of the great Jewish questions of the day. While Gillman's project is in essence to curate and convene an exploration of Big Jewish Ideas, Borowitz's primary goal is to express his vision of the postmodern Jewish self, living in covenant and striving to build a Jewish future. For most of the work, he speaks in general and theoretical terms, such as this formulation:

> Only when we end the distinction between our personhood and our Jewishness and understand ourselves as indivisibly Jewish selves, persons whose selfhood is inextricable from their participation in the Jewish people and its historic relationship with God, will we make possible a vigorous postmodern life of Torah. (181)

At the very end of the book, however, Borowitz offers some examples of how his covenantal approach to Jewish duty informs his stances on particular questions. He then outlines the reasons for his refusal to officiate at intermarriages. Here, then, is a Reform voice at the conservative end of the spectrum, a postliberal Jew in search of a grounding for the utterance of that least popular word in the liberal lexicon: no.

These two books appeared within a year of each other, and some twenty-five years later their authors died within a year of each other. In the intervening years both Gillman and Borowitz continued and deepened their endeavors as beloved teachers and respected writers, but more than any other of their works it is these two books which have come to epitomize their contributions to American Jewish discourse. With their passing, the mantle of serious, intellectual, pious, engaged, honest, and cogent non-Orthodox Jewish thought must pass to others committed to recovering theology and to renewing the covenant.