

Rabbi Neil Gillman, z”l, and What Do We Believe?

Each Thanksgiving, millions of college students head home for a long-weekend – or more – to be with their families. I was no different, although the journey from



Manhattan to Teaneck, NJ was shorter than my regular commute home during high school.

No matter what the distance, those visits home can be invaluable check-ins with your family – as they were for me.

Thanksgiving was not only a time to enjoy my mother’s delicious New England Pot Roast (no turkey for us descendants of [Rabbi Tosfos Yom Tov Lippman Heller](#) who declared turkey un-kosher), but also a time to pause and contemplate.

During my first semester of college, as I was throwing off the yoke of Jewish observance in which I had been raised, I questioned my parents’ careers, “Why couldn’t you have been doctors or lawyers instead of a rabbi and a professor of Jewish Studies? At least then, we could afford a second car!”

The following year, I was modern Orthodox and could not help but declare that my mother’s wearing *tallit* and *tefillin* was “an anathema to God.”

Over the following Thanksgivings, I was less critical, becoming more inspired by the same unique synthesis of traditional Judaism and modernity in which I was raised. As I have shared that story over the years, I have glossed over a key experience on my journey. In between my Junior and Senior years of college, I participated in an internship with the federation movement, where I become friends with my future wife Sharon (pretty important!) and also had a powerful intellectual experience.

Since my mother was dean of the undergraduate program of the Jewish Theological Seminary, I tended to stay away from [JTS](#). I wanted to enjoy a separate life at Columbia and although there were shared Jewish and social pieces, I



tried not to mix those two worlds of academe – until that summer when I took Rabbi Neil Gillman’s famous introduction to Jewish philosophy course: [God, Torah and Israel](#).

Having been more and less observant than I was raised and having internalized a significant amount of doubt studying philosophy and biblical criticism, I came into the class with a specific question: how can I be observant if I did not believe in God and the Torah the way the tradition presents it?

And here’s the thing: Professor Gillman, whom I had known since I was a child, embraced my skepticism and doubt as if I had brought him a delicious Green’s chocolate babka.



He welcomed my questions, my struggles, as he did for so many other students over his half century of teaching at JTS.

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When my teacher, Rabbi Neil Gillman, passed away last week, a flood of memories has washed over me.

Neil was not just a friend, colleague, mentor, and teacher to me, but had an incredible impact on my own theology of Judaism.

Back then, I desperately wanted to be an observant Jew – I loved Jewish practice, ritual and observances – they were and still are the water from which I drink, but I did not believe, certainly not in the traditional sense of the word.

I did not believe that the Torah was written by God, nor that God intervenes actively in the physical side of human affairs; if that were the case, then where was God during the *Shoah*?

So, I was struggling to reconcile those two parts of myself: the heart, which loved the tradition and the head, which doubted large swaths of the narrative I had been taught.

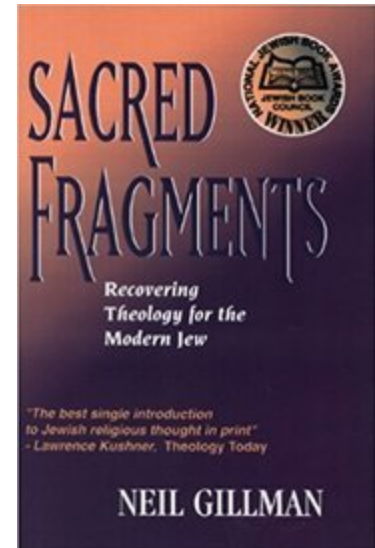
As it turned out, I was not the only one asking those questions. Many Jews were and Rabbi Gillman wrote about this in his influential book, *Sacred Fragments: Recovery Theology for the Modern Jew*. This book opened my eyes to new ways of thinking and reconciling my understandings with my practice.

As [Rabbi Gillman's obituary in the New York Times](#) this week, explained it:

“Rabbi Gillman’s breakthrough for thinking about divinity began with his notion of a “second naïveté.” Children conceive of God as perhaps a giant bearded figure in the sky, and Rabbi Gillman wanted his listeners to find ways “to rediscover that innocent sense of awe and wonder,” but in ways that made sense to them as adults, said Rabbi Julie Schonfeld, chief executive of the Rabbinical Assembly. [...]

“Consider the image of God portrayed in [the Torah] (this story),” Rabbi Gillman wrote. “God deliberates, is conflicted, has feelings, invites consultation, is willing to change the divine plan, is open to negotiation and needs to be true to previous commitments. Above all, God has an intense relationship with (an) individual human being(s).”

Those ideas inspired me, as they did for generations of rabbinical students. Whether the narratives in the Torah were literally true was much less important than “the values they conveyed.”



This is my copy of his book filled with my notes in the margins. I read and reread this book that helped me piece and re-piece my own thinking together.

I could not believe in a God who was literally intervening in the physical world. But I could have a relationship with the Divine Who could have a powerful impact on my soul, on my heart, on my mind, even though this God might not come down and save the millions who needed rescuing in the *Shoah*.

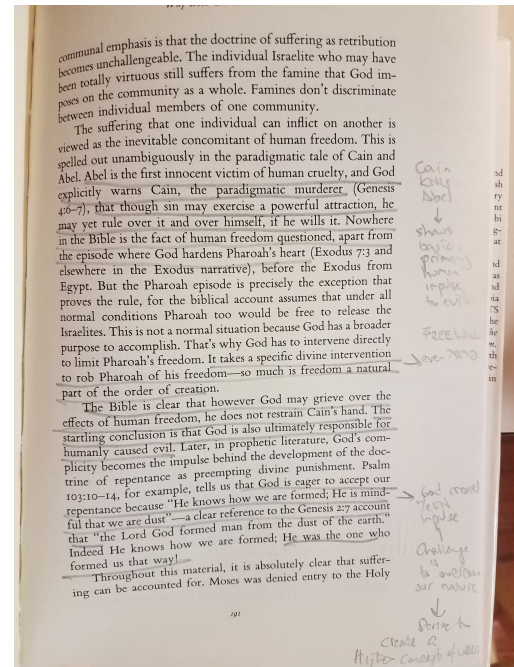
I could look at the narratives of the Torah through this lens. And Neil loved to do just that. He encouraged us to look behind the text – what could the Torah's portrayal of God and humanity teach us about ourselves.

Think about the opening of this week's *parashah* and Jacob's encounter with the mysterious assailant. Jacob is given a new name: *Yisrael* – the one who has striven with beings both divine and human. What does it mean to struggle with God? To struggle with belief? To struggle with being a moral human being?

Jacob had been struggling, as his fear of seeing his estranged brother overwhelmed him with anxiety. Perhaps his own guilt over his problematic behavior in swindling his brother out of his birthright and deceiving his father for the firstborn blessing has come home to roost allowing him to truly confront his behavior.

This narrative does not state that God did anything – it is subtle and nuanced. Jacob is faced with God's values in this nighttime encounter. It is his conscience where he most deeply senses God's presence.

And in that, we, modern Jews, are left with a most compelling picture – a God who helps us confront our own failures and helps us grow. Leaving this night of wrestling, Jacob is both weakened – evidenced by his limping, but also strengthened by



a new name that represents his growth as a person who has modeled *teshuvah* and change.

That allows for the stunning scene of reconciliation with Esau.

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But what made Neil such an effective rabbi was not merely his ideas and writings – though they were quite impactful, but it was his persona, his warmth. A round, cherub-like face with tufts of white hair reminiscent of both Albert Einstein and David Ben-Gurion, he had a smile that lit up a room. Like many who knew me since I was a child, he affectionately called me “*Dahveed*.” Sometimes added the phrase “at all,” to his speech with a Canadian accent to



which I cannot seem to do justice. “*Dahveed*, I do not understand what you are saying AT ALL!”

He smoked a pipe for years; you could smell his smoke in the halls of the Seminary. He would invite me into his office to talk, asking me what I thought, “what do you believe?” – pointing out inconsistencies, encouraging me to delve more deeply.

Years later in Rabbinical School, I took several of his Theology Workshop Seminars where I sat with Reform and Conservative rabbinical students – there he was totally in his element, comfortable with different theological standpoints, pushing and prodding us as we all explored both the tradition and our own thinking.

When he came to Emunah in 2008 as our Glatzer Scholar-in-Residence, he not only captivated us with his Torah, but he also opened up conversations that have continued for years.

Perhaps my favorite experience with Neil was serving as his TA, his teaching assistant, one year for a course on ritual. He opened up each ceremony in ways that were illuminating. He asked what was the message behind the ritual or behind the texts

in any rite. What is the theology of *brit milah*, circumcision, the wedding? His approaches to ritual and liturgy are the same ones I teach to this day.

In fact, my *dvar* Torah on *Sukkot* about the ritual of waving the *lulav* and *etrog* along with the *piyyut* we recite about God and ourselves needing to be saved is right from Rabbi Gillman.

He was not always the most strict of all my teachers at JTS; he was more on the left-wing of the spectrum. But he was still quite traditional in his practice. I remember his telling me that he could not reach one piece of *schmutz* in the back of his fridge after he had already taken the fridge apart and cleaned it out for *Pesah*.

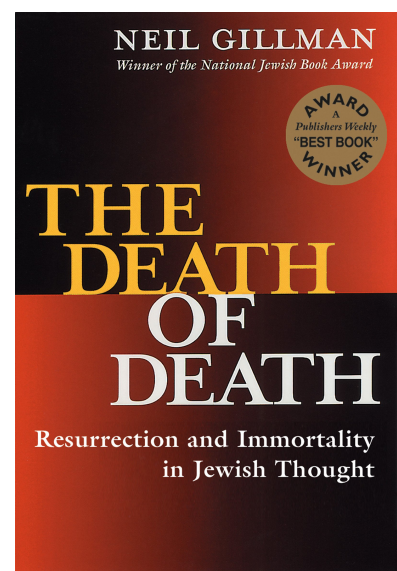
Knowing that his theology allowed him to leave it and that actually, the *halakhah*, Jewish law, also has leniencies since this was not an edible piece of *hametz* – leaven, forbidden on *Pesah*, he decided not to take apart his fridge again and went to sleep. But he could not fall asleep. So, at one in the morning, he got up, took apart the entire refrigerator to reach this one spot. He felt better.

Sometimes it takes a deep adherence to a tradition, even to a “myth,” as Neil sometimes called it, to find and feel the deep power of its narrative.

Neil did this also in his study of death. His essential book, *The Death of Death*, explains what our tradition presents about the afterlife. This was a core belief of his and one that I teach as well.

Indeed, Neil wrote the following about our patriarch, Jacob:

“Jacob never contemplates any form of life after death. Notions such as the resurrection of the dead or the immortality of the soul are unknown at this stage in the development of biblical religion. Whatever immortality Jacob is to enjoy rests in his association with kin, his family and his people. That includes us, for every year we return to and read anew the story of Jacob and his



extended family, their adventures, their intrigues, their fears, and their dreams. Jacob's immortality is assured through the bonds of our communal memory. [...]

Jacob lives on and will continue to live among us as long as we continue to recall his presence." (*Traces of God*, pp. 203-204)

While Rabbi Gillman's physical presence may have left us, his teachings certainly have not. I invite you to open up one of his books and start reading.

May his words, ideas, openness and encouragement never leave us.

Yehi Zikhro barukh – may Rabbi Gillman's memory be for a blessing and may his words continue to influence us.