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Preface

Martin S. Cohen

Conservative Judaism, Volume 61, Numbers 1-2, Fall/Winter 2008-2009,
pp. 4-6 (Article)

Published by Rabbinical Assembly

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/coj.0.0013>

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Preface

MARTIN S. COHEN

When I first met Neil Gillman, I was a first-year rabbinical student at JTS and he was the dean of the upper part of what was then a two-tiered school consisting of the Graduate Rabbinical School, over which Neil presided, and a lower part called the School of Judaica. This was a long time ago. We were both thirty-four years younger than we are now. I was still very much a work in progress. But he wasn't quite his current self yet either: this was before *Sacred Fragments*, which appeared in 1992, and before *The Death of Death*, which followed five years later. But it was also before Neil's first book, the one on Gabriel Marcel, came out in 1980. This was a *very* long time ago!

Even though I was in the lower school and he wasn't, technically speaking, *my* dean, there was something about his office that called to me, something about the combined scent of pipe smoke (this was when smoking was permitted indoors at JTS) and the presence of all those stacks of books about to topple over, something about the slightly unexpected experience of finding the palpable weight of all that learning in such a little bit of space more intoxicating than suffocating. More than once, I crossed that threshold to announce my decision to withdraw from the school, to choose a different path in life. But Neil wouldn't hear of it. He was always there, just as he has been for so many others, as a kind of bulwark against despair. He understood his job as always to challenge, always to encourage, always to make it just that much harder to feel righteous about disengaging from the struggle to become a rabbi possessed of true intellectual integrity merely because the student in question was having some difficulty *really* believing something he—this was an all-male school in those days—

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felt obliged to appear to believe or to say he believed. The Zohar may have kept Pinchas of Koretz a Jew (although I suspect he may have been exaggerating just a bit), but it was Neil Gillman who, more than once, kept me in rabbinical school.

And now, after all those years, I am older than he was then and he is approaching his retirement from JTS. A friend of *Conservative Judaism* for many years, and also a long-term member of its editorial board, Neil Gillman's influence on this journal can hardly be charted, let alone accurately quantified. For as long as I have been part of bringing out *Conservative Judaism*, Neil Gillman has been watching over the editorial process, reading submissions and commenting upon them, providing sage counsel, criticism, and guidance, prompting us always to accommodate creative, unconventional writing, and always to be open to new ideas. Throughout the years I have served as steward of this journal, my path has been made immeasurably smoother and surer because of Neil's watchful presence. As all readers of this magazine should be, I am immensely grateful to him for all he has done for us. But as a rabbi, I am equally grateful to him for all that he did for me personally in the course of my years of study at JTS, and in all the years since then.

To salute Neil on the eve of his retirement, the editorial board voted more than a year ago to devote a full issue to essays that, in one way or another, would pay tribute to Neil's years of service to the Seminary, to our journal, to our movement, and to each of us individually. Our colleague on the editorial board, Rabbi Lawrence Troster, took it upon himself to serve as guest editor, working together with Neil to develop a list of people from whom to solicit essays, then writing to them and securing their participation. Larry is himself a contributor to this issue of the journal, but he has also written an introduction to the other essays we are including. Therefore, I will leave it to him to introduce them, and to write about the reasons for which he was personally so eager to take on this assignment.

All the members of the editorial board of *Conservative Judaism* join me in saluting Neil Gillman on the occasion of his retirement, and I conclude by addressing him on their behalf: Professor, we wish you many, many years of productive scholarship to come, many books and essays to write, and many opportunities to teach to familiar and new audiences. To paraphrase the liturgy: many people labor intensely in the world, but only a pre-

cious few are blessed with a lifetime of work that by its very nature secures them their place in the World to Come. In that sense above all, perhaps, your lifetime of study, writing, and teaching has been your great blessing, but your career at JTS has been a blessing no less to those of us who have studied with you, who have read your work, and who have been influenced by your thinking. We are all in your debt! And this number of our journal is our modest, but truly heartfelt, gift to you on the attainment of this great milestone in your life of service to us all. *Yiyasheir kohekhab* and may God grant you many, many more years of service to our people and of fruitful labor in the pursuit of knowledge.