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Tribute to Rabbi Neil Gillman

WILLIAM H. LEBEAU

Rabbi Shimon ben Yehudah said in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai: “Beauty, strength, personal resources, honor, wisdom, the blessing of the silvery head of old age and children are *Na-eh la-tzaddikim v’na-eh la-olam*—enhancing to the righteous and to the world.” Rabbi Shimon supports his teaching with three verses from the Book of Proverbs: “The silvery head is a glorious crown achieved by the righteous life.” (Proverbs 16:31); “The glory of the young is their strength, the beauty of the old the silvery hair.” (Proverbs 20:29); and “Children’s children are the crown of the old and the glory of children are their parents.” (Proverbs 17:6)

Rabbi Shimon’s teaching appears as the eighth *mishnah* of the “*Baraita of Rabbi Meir*,” also identified as the sixth chapter of *Pirke Avot*. The *baraita* delineates qualities and blessings that provide a framework for considering Neil Gillman’s productive life during which he has enhanced the world and the lives of those he has touched as husband, father, grandfather, teacher, and friend.

Beauty

The beauty of his glorious, silvery crown is in place. Now is a most appropriate time for us to honor him; a time for him to enjoy the full measure of satisfaction that he deserves for his accomplishments. He has spent his entire adult life pursuing a relationship with God and the life of righteousness said relationship requires. Through his writing and teaching, he has taken us on his journey and guided us in our own pursuits.

There are many jewels in his crown, but it is clear to all of us who know Neil that his distinguished career would not have been possible without the support of his beloved Sarah. Her encouragement and wise counsel made it possible for him to realize his goals, both personal and professional, over the years of their life together. His daughters, Abby and Debbie, sources of his joy and recipients of his love and admiration, have returned his devotion to them in the greatest abundance. With their wonderful husbands, Michael and Danny, they have provided the gift of “Children’s children,” the vibrant, sparkling jewels that have in recent years added such sparkle to the crown of his silvery head.

Strength and Personal Resources

Neil’s appreciation for beauty led him to a keen awareness of God’s beneficent presence. His intellect and integrity made him equally sensitive to questions about God’s role in the world, raised by the human impulse toward conflict and its resulting chaos. The very challenge of addressing these contradictory images of God propelled Neil on his quest to find a personal understanding of God. He constantly sharpened his special facility for engaging with others in theological dialogue. Through those conversations and the relationships they produced, he helped guide people of all faiths on their religious journeys.

Neil prodded us to surmount obstacles in our faith when they threatened our resolve to continue on our paths in seeking to enter professional Jewish life. As effective and dedicated as he was with us, Neil also had a special energy he seemed to reserve for laity. He helped countless numbers of adults and young people connect to Jewish tradition in a serious way, which might not have occurred without his inspirational and sometimes controversial teaching. He made his exceptional commitment to them because of his love for God and his desire to encourage others to embrace Jewish practice and values. Few scholars of his stature have demonstrated as full a measure of devotion to teaching the lay community.

Honor and Wisdom

In the academic world, Neil is “Dr. Gillman,” but for those of us who know him best he is Rabbi Gillman who also has a doctorate in philoso-

phy. He pursued his scholarship to clarify his own embrace of Jewish tradition, acquiring extensive knowledge of rabbinic texts, biblical commentary and liturgy, as well as expertise in his chosen field of Jewish thought. We have been the beneficiaries of his investment of physical energy, intellect, and wisdom. His qualities and devoted efforts have earned him recognition and praise for his distinguished scholarship and leadership.

Personal Appreciation

My friendship with Rabbi Neil Gillman began fifty-one years ago when I first encountered him in our younger years. With gratitude, I maintained a close relationship with him throughout the years. I remain privileged to share experiences with him as both friend and colleague into our older age.

We first met in the summer of 1957 at Camp Ramah in Wisconsin. Neil was a rabbinical student serving on the camp staff and I came to Ramah that summer to work as a waiter. Ramah reserved the positions on the kitchen staff for those without strong Jewish learning or traditional Jewish experience: I easily qualified on both accounts. My Ramah experience would, I hoped, help me clarify the meaning of my Jewish identity and resolve some of my many questions about God.

From our first conversation, I was certain Neil could be of help. He was a rabbi-to-be, so I assumed that he must have resolved his own concerns about his Jewish identity. He quickly recognized my confusion, but surprised me by his reluctance to provide answers to my questions. Instead, he encouraged me to discover the answers for myself through my own Jewish learning.

His first suggestion was not a book on philosophy. He insisted that knowledge of Hebrew was the most essential tool for serious Jewish inquiry. He was tenacious in making certain that I understood that Hebrew had to be the focus of my efforts at camp. He provided me with a small notebook in which he was always insisting that I write down yet another word “I had to know.” The list on the pad grew rapidly. His encouragement throughout that summer provided an essential counterbalance to my frustrations with my slow progress. I so appreciated his help, but could not imagine then the influence he would continue to have on my personal and professional Jewish journeys.

My decision to apply to Rabbinical School was an outgrowth of my great admiration for Neil, as he inspired me by modeling what it means to embrace Jewish tradition while still clarifying one's Jewish identity. On a most practical level, I know that he was solely responsible for my admission to the Seminary. He was a member of the Rabbinical School administration in the position of advisor to students. It was Neil's responsibility to prepare all applicants for the Rabbinical School admissions process. On the day of my interview he introduced me to the most distinguished, very intimidating faculty committee that was to deliberate the merits of my application. He then left the room and returned to retrieve me and revive me after the committee concluded its interrogation. As we exited, I whispered that I knew all of my answers to the committee's appropriate questions were inadequate. Outside the room, shaken and certain of rejection, I began thanking Neil for his efforts on my behalf. At that moment Dr. Heschel, chair of my session, summoned Neil back into the room and closed the door. I imagined him chastising Neil for wasting the committee's time. When I opened the letter of acceptance that arrived three days later, it bore the signature of the Dean of the Rabbinical School, but Neil's advocacy was written all over it.

Neil would continue to be my advocate and friend. He supported me in many moments of doubt in Rabbinical School, as I struggled with Hebrew, texts, and unending issues of faith. He was also present in my life at times of my most significant personal *s'mahot*. He was the installing officer as I assumed my first pulpit. When I went to my second congregation, Neil and I became partners on the pulpit as we co-officiated for a number of years at High Holiday services. He continued to serve at my congregation as scholar-in-residence, always enhancing our dialogue about Conservative Judaism. He left a lasting impression stressing the importance of building a congregation where God's presence was manifest in the life of individual synagogue members and in the community as a whole.

When I returned to the Seminary twenty-one years ago, it was Neil's advice that was most important to me as I made my reluctant decision to leave congregational work. He reminded me that the Seminary and its teachers had given me the gift of understanding the beauty and power of living a traditional Jewish life. They made it possible for me to find such great fulfillment in my rabbinate. He urged me to return and contribute my energy to helping others find similar blessings in their lives.

Some Tensions

There were times in our relationship when some of the very qualities for which I have praised Neil led to tensions. During my student years he was relentless in urging me to not be afraid to challenge tradition or question sacred texts. I resisted because I was working so hard at finding an anchor for my beliefs. I just wanted a little less uncertainty. Still, even when he was most bold, I accepted his confrontation as the prompt of a friend and not the attack of an antagonist. His effectiveness in bringing me into his world of dialogue and discovery is central to the regard I have for him.

Still, I was disappointed when I first read *Sacred Fragments*. I could agree with reviewers of his book who extolled the value of Rabbi Gillman's work on Jewish thought. For example, in a complimentary review, Shalom Freedman wrote: "In his concluding chapter Gillman gives a set of prescriptions for helping the individual formulate his own theological views. In this chapter, and in fact throughout the book one senses Gillman's excellence as teacher and communicator, as one who really cares for those he is addressing. This is again a very good book from which it is possible to learn a great deal about Jewish thought."

Certainly, *Sacred Fragments* provided a thorough analysis of great Jewish thinkers, but still, I was saddened. I had always imagined that the day would finally come when Neil would write about the theological certainty he had found. I wanted him to produce a statement that we could all identify as "THE Philosophy of Neil Gillman." I knew so much of his wrestling with the tensions of his faith. As his great admirer, I wanted his life story to include a philosophical statement that would reveal, in accessible terms, his way to understanding God. I thought about those who would embrace his theology, saying they were *Gillmanians* in the way that so many identify as *Heschelians* or *Kaplanians*. Rather than offering me a glimpse of his unified theology, *Sacred Fragments* initially raised for me so many of the uncertainties I thought I had begun to conquer.

My disappointment in Neil's most significant work was momentary. *Sacred Fragments* is yet another example of Neil's academic integrity and strength. In the end, by insisting that we all remain prepared to write and re-write our personal theologies, he allows us to be *Gillmanians* as we, like him, continue our efforts to extract the meanings of Jewish tradition for our lives.

Neil teaches, with great love for tradition, that the vast quantity of biblical, rabbinic, philosophical, or literary texts and commentaries are not final authoritative statements of what God is or how we are to understand the words of Torah as suggesting only a single meaning. The inconsistencies between the commentators who offered different interpretations for the same sacred texts support his view that Torah (writ large), its interpretations and the compilations of Jewish thought throughout our people's history, is so much more than a single revered scroll. Collectively, they are all expressions of Torah comprising the holy fragments that remain part of a still unsolved mystery. Like pieces of *geniza* fragments, they invite scholars, rabbis, teachers, and lay practitioners of eternal future Jewish generations to become *Gillmanians* engaging in the ongoing construction project joining the many pieces of the most complex puzzle. Our efforts demand of us that we be satisfied when we join enough of the fragments of the puzzle to allow us to capture glimpses of God and human beings joined in the sacred covenant of partnership.

Neil Gillman received the coveted National Jewish Book Award for *Sacred Fragments*. I felt privileged to be a part of the excitement of the awards ceremony when friends and admirers honored Neil for his scholarship and for sustaining us in our religious quest.

The Teacher and the Student

Most of us who studied with Neil can remember that not long into our encounters with him we found it difficult to distinguish between teacher and student. The pattern was quite familiar. At the beginning of our relationships, he was clearly our teacher. He introduced us to the most significant Jewish philosophers. He would then elicit from us some statement of our own faith and doubts. His questions and critique of our thinking followed. He was clearly as interested in hearing our thoughts as he was in expressing his ideas. Then somewhere in the midst of our conversations, he began sharing his own uncertainties. At almost imperceptible moments, Gillman the Professor and the *Gillmanian* students seamlessly transformed the relationship of teacher and students into deep and meaningful friendships. Our shared struggles enriched us all.

We have been able to renew our friendships with Neil as we have welcomed him into our homes, synagogues, schools, camps, and retreats. There we watched with admiration as he began again the cycle of initiating new teacher-student-friend relationships with our constituents, as he challenged them to clarify their relationships with God.

Prayer, the Siddur, and Moments of Certainty

From my earliest contacts with Neil, I learned that experience, as much as thought, framed his Jewish life. I first began to *daven* with Neil at Ramah and ever since then, I have observed that his intimate relationship with one Jewish text, the siddur, was essential to his personal relationship with God. It seemed to me that his commitment to *davening* came initially not from philosophical thought, but from his acceptance of the mandate to engage in the daily practice of speaking with God. He also understood that using the text of the siddur for our conversations with God led to theological questions. What do we expect God's response will be to our praise, petition, and thanks?

To emphasize the connection he found between the experience of prayer and the challenges prayer brings to faith, Neil created an impressive array of courses. He teaches that prayer is about more than obedience to God. Regular prayer demands a commitment to pray and our intellectual struggle with the meaning of the words we utter in order to sustain our ongoing dialogue.

Davening with Neil on an almost daily basis for the past twenty years, I have always been moved when he has been the *sh'liah tzibur*. Especially on Shabbat or *hagim* as he leads the congregation, his prayers seem to emerge from an inner voice that in its gentleness and tentativeness expresses the depth of his encounter with God. These moments with Neil have been so important to me because the joy and satisfaction that his prayer conveys affirms the reward that one can hope to realize during daily davening. Despite all of Neil's angst about finality, he teaches me something of religious certainty achieved through his commitment to daily conversation with God.

As Provocateur

As I have said, Neil's teachings have rarely gone without criticism. I remember the suspicions of some men and women in my congregation when they

first encountered Neil as a teacher. They wondered about his loyalty to Jewish tradition as they listened to his challenge to loosen commitment to long held beliefs or theological assumptions. He disturbed them by portraying sacred stories as “myth.” They rebelled at his reference to the entire Torah as *midrash*, resisting what they felt was a provocative attack on their own commitment to Jewish tradition. They learned quickly that Neil did not hesitate to become even more provocative in response to their being annoyed. He could grow impatient at their resistance to a more fluid way of considering faith and theology. It was never clear to his audiences or even to me if he was truly impatient or just using impatience as a means of instigating.

Once when he was teaching in my congregation, I became aware of a congregant who appeared very restless listening to Neil suggest, for the third time, that every word of Torah was not written by God. It was clear that an eruption was imminent. Neil continued his challenge and repeated the word myth even more forcefully. My congregant finally screamed out, “Rabbi Gillman, I don’t think you believe in God at all. You think our entire tradition is only a myth and so God in your mind is also a myth.” Neil was very pained by the comment and left the *bimah*. A moment of high tension followed. A few in the crowd supported the congregant, while others were upset that a fellow congregant had treated a respected rabbi and scholar in such a disrespectful way. After a few moments, Neil returned calmer, but more determined than ever. He restated his challenge, insisting that involvement in the critical study of Torah would lead to clarity in our personal relationship with God and a stronger love for the meaning of Torah for our day.

The productive conversation that followed that tense encounter could have taken place only with a teacher who refused to let go of the tensions that will always emerge from discussions of faith and tradition in any theological debate. As Rabbi Gillman taught in that moment, Jewish faith is about confronting, with integrity, challenges to our early conceptions of faith. It is about being unafraid to consider modern scholarship, whether it brings opposition to or enhancement of our inherited tradition. Such openness is necessary if we are to join sacred fragments together to offer some clearer understanding of God and revelation.

He wrote of his frustrations in his article in *Sh’ma* magazine entitled,

“The Problematics of Myth.” He said, “My core issue was revelation. It continues to be, for me, the central theological issue: how one understands revelation determines how one deals with the authority of Torah on all matters of Jewish belief and practice . . . I could no longer believe that God literally “descends” on Sinai or “speaks” the words of Torah. If God were truly God, then God could not literally “speak.” But then what was Torah? Whence its sanctity? Its authority? More broadly, what was the epistemological status of any theological claim? Finally, as a rabbi, how could I justify teaching and advocating the bulk of Jewish practice, which, I continued to believe, remained central to any authentic understanding of Judaism? It was in this context that I reverted to the notion of myth.”

As he taught that day in my synagogue, his calling our founding stories myths did not mean that he found less veracity in Torah as a force for directing the way he lived his life as a Jew. I can imagine the scenario I described above having been repeated many times during Neil’s countless lectures in places around the world over the past fifty years. As determined as Neil has been to make the term “myth” understood in the context of Jewish commitment and belief, it has remained a statement antagonistic, in the eyes of many, to the sacredness of Torah. He clearly remains frustrated by the resistance to his use of the term.

As he continued in the *Sh’mā* article, Neil said, “To this day, my use of the term troubles many of my students. The main problem is that, in American parlance, a myth is synonymous with a fiction, a fairy tale, or worse, a lie—as in the common practice of contrasting ‘the myth’ with ‘the facts’ or ‘the reality.’ That conventional use of the term haunts me whenever I use it. . . . [I teach that] the biblical account of the event at Sinai should be understood as myth. This is what I mean by the term. There is no totally objective, human experience of the world. We construct reality from our simple perception of an apple to our most complex scientific theories. . . . We perceive the world not through our eyes but through our brain, which applies interpretive structures to what is transmitted to us through our senses. Those structures are analogous to myths. Structural myths are often accompanied by narrative myths; the former describes the structure, while the latter tells how it came to be. Freudian psychoanalytic theory combines both, as does astronomy; Genesis 1 and Exodus 19 are classical narrative myths. Myths, then, are not to be contrasted with facts. Instead, myths are

the means by which we identify the significant facts. The more elusive the facts, the more the data elude direct human perception, the more inevitable and indispensable the myth (as in string theory, psychoanalytic theory, the biblical account of the Exodus, creation, and eschatology). In all of these cases, the myth posits an invisible world to account for what it is that we do see. Myths then inform the work of scientists, historians, and theologians.”

Even if Neil’s provocative term has been responsible for critics’ concerns about his commitment to tradition, he can take satisfaction from his ability to stimulate the interest of people in the meaning of Torah through the many fruitful exchanges that his skillful teachings have generated. His courage to recognize the importance of his work has enabled him to continue to inspire deeper involvement in Jewish life for so many. So, in a more correct analysis, I would have to say that Neil has certainly explained his own theology. He has revealed it through the essence of what he wrote in “The Problematics of Myth” and in *Sacred Fragments*. My description of his interactions with students and my congregants also offers evidence of Rabbi Gillman’s contributions to the vibrancy of Jewish life. He has offered an approach to God and theology that provides the necessary religious energy needed to assure the import for today of our encounter with God, Torah, and our people’s tradition.

The Jewish Theological Seminary and The Movement

Neil has been a ubiquitous part of JTS and the Conservative movement for more than fifty years. He has been involved in almost every significant development in Conservative Judaism since he first entered the Seminary’s gates in 1954. His love for the Seminary and the movement is core to his being, and as with every significant love, there have been moments of difference and even conflict.

A chronicler of our history as a Seminary and as a movement in *Conservative Judaism: The New Century*, and in numerous articles and papers, Neil has provided history and vision. His observations of life from within JTS have provided his readers with a glimpse of the extraordinary achievements of JTS since its founding. He also wrote of times of animosity and dysfunction that existed within the faculty and administration. Neil’s analy-

sis also helped us understand how we have sustained the loyalty of a broad coalition of Conservative Jews over the years of rapid change in Jewish life in America. He demonstrates that our commitment to a centrist ideology and openness in the reading of Jewish texts represents the very best of what we call historic Judaism. I always understood Neil to say that the way we read texts and our openness is the very best of traditional Judaism.

Throughout his career, Neil Gillman has been a participant in the attempt to better understand the term, “Conservative Judaism.” He was one of the prominent voices serving on the commission that created *Emet Ve-Emunah: Statement of Principles of Conservative Judaism*. When the members of that Commission began their work, there was an impression among many Conservative Jews that a single Conservative ideology would emerge from the deliberations. This seemed to contravene Neil’s approach to Conservative Judaism. In the end, the commission affirmed his position of striving for definition and accepting openness. The Commission never adopted one binding interpretation of major issues such as God, revelation, or halakhah. *Emet Ve-Emunah* affirmed that there are a range of beliefs and practices which are authentic and appropriate among the practitioners called Conservative Jews.

Rabbinical School and Rabbis

From the day Neil began as a student, he has been the great champion of the Seminary’s Rabbinical School. At the same time, he has been ever ready to serve as its critic when it fails to produce students who reflect the Seminary’s ideological positions, or who fall short in their commitment to academic rigor.

As I mentioned, he began his work as a rabbi serving on the school’s administration. In one of his many positions with the Seminary community, he served the Rabbinical School as its dean. He provided the same kind of support to so many other students, as he gave to me. Neil told me that during his years as dean, some of the students called him “Make a deal Neil.” This nickname indicated his willingness and perhaps his inclination to tailor a student’s program to individual needs, an approach not necessarily favored by the JTS faculty. His vision for rabbinic education influenced the school far beyond his tenure as dean, and Neil never lessened his involve-

ment in the life of rabbinical students. His special sensitivity to students who were struggling with personal or academic issues encouraged them to turn to him with confidence in difficult moments.

Neil continued to be a vocal and important presence in the ongoing curriculum discussions at JTS. There were times during my years as dean of the school, when Neil and I served on the faculty curriculum committee together, that we disagreed over critical elements in the new curriculum proposal. As was the case with virtually all encounters with Neil, disagreements, even when intense, were just disagreements. When the confrontations were resolved or left as “*tayku*” (unresolved), but finished, friendship returned to *status quo ante*.

Neil has also been an important presence in the training of rabbis outside of his classroom teaching. Rabbis have sought his advice for consolation and *hizuk* in dealing with challenges in their communities. He has additionally remained an important teacher for rabbis, serving on the faculty for many Rabbinical Assembly conventions and Rabbinic Training Institutes.

Halakhah

His voice has carried great weight in the discussions of halakhah and the Conservative movement. Rabbinical students have regularly invited him to discussions on matters of observance. He was an important participant in discussions of women’s and gay/lesbian ordination. By his own analysis published in his article, “My Fifty Years at The Jewish Theological Seminary,” published in *Kolot: Voices of Conservative Judaism*, Neil wrote, “I have participated in two memorable ideological/halakhic/policy debates—on the ordination of women and more recently on the ordination of gays and lesbians. Both issues transformed the culture of the school and the movement, and both generated strong feelings among my colleagues and the student body. In both instances, however fiercely partisan the positions, the debates were conducted in a spirit of collegiality. My own sense is that both school and movement are enriched by the results of the debates.”

Speaking of debates, Neil became a popular sparring partner with Rabbi Joel Roth as they confronted one another on the place and meaning of halakhah within the movement. For the most part, Joel and Neil stood far

apart on many issues, including their position on the future of the movement. To our great benefit, they have taken their good show on the road and stimulated discussions on issues vitally important to our movement's future. Their friendship remained evident to all who observed them in their energetic disagreements. They were able to bring thousands into discussions of the importance of halakhah in Jewish life. Many who were caught up in the debate would not have been as interested in listening to both sides, had Joel and Neil been unable to demonstrate how their disagreements did not negatively impact their alliance together as friends and colleagues. They have modeled how Judaism has dealt traditionally with the tensions that always arise when changing societal conditions challenge the inherited halakhah.

It is on the issue of halakhah that Neil created controversy at a recent United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism Biennial Convention, by declaring that we are no longer a halakhic movement. Once again, I disagreed with my friend's position. It seemed to me that as he acknowledged in the quote I cited earlier from his autobiographical piece in *Kolot*, that the halakhic discussions surrounding the ordination of women and the more recent debate on gay/lesbian ordination enhanced our movement. His discussions with rabbinical students about personal practice begin so often with references to the movement's halakhic positions. I am not surprised when he takes positions contrary to existing practice, but I remain puzzled by his decision to negate the halakhic commitment which I believe continues to spark discussions on all of our practices and innovations in our communities and institutions. What is certainly clear is that, once again, his strong and provocative language did inspire a vigorous debate about how the Conservative movement means to represent itself if we continue to call Conservative Judaism a halakhic movement. Whatever anyone's position might be on this issue, it was clear that by capturing such attention, Neil continues to be an important force in our movement.

Parshat HaShavuah and The Jewish Week

A remarkable achievement that generated Torah learning and re-emphasized Neil's love for Torah was his publication of a regular *Parshat HaShavuah* commentary in "Sabbath Week," a column in New York's

Jewish Week. I found his thoughts profound and sensitive. Through his column, he was able to teach Torah with respect for tradition and in search of contemporary meaning to an audience far beyond the Conservative Jewish community. People from all walks of Jewish life read his columns with interest, found them inspirational, and, yes, often provocative enough to prompt responses to his thoughts.

I want to conclude my reminiscences and my praise of Rabbi Neil Gillman who has a doctorate of philosophy by reflecting on his life and teachings in the context of his words in *The Death of Death: Resurrection and Immortality in Jewish Thought*. It is certainly reasonable to think that in his later years Neil would want to devote time to thinking and writing about the meaning of death, just as he wrote so much about life. In *The Death of Death*, however, Neil offers us not a despairing discussion of life's end, but yet another addendum to his life-long efforts to grasp the potential for fulfillment in life at any age. For me, his words capture the essence of all that has animated his teaching. They reveal the source of his incredible energy that he has applied to his scholarship and to his rabbinate.

Neil wrote in his opening chapter, "This is not a book about death. If anything, it is a book about life. It is not about how to live, but about the meaning of human life. In our day, some consider the term 'meaning of life' to be trivial. Most of us regard that as a defense against having to address the urgency of reaching some personal understanding of this issue. Most of us are caught up in the routine of our daily existence, in each day that slips by all too quickly. It takes a special effort to step back, to look at our life experience as a whole, to seek some integrating factor, a principle of coherence, which might bring together the fragmented elements of our personal experience here on earth—and to make them whole. But to speak of 'the meaning' of human life is to speak also of death, for the fact that we all die is an inescapable part of our lives. The question then becomes, What is the place of death in our experience of life? How do we integrate the reality of death into our understanding of life?"

Toward the end of his book, in a chapter entitled "What Do I Believe?," he addresses his earlier words on the complexity of speaking about "the meaning of life" and also "the place of death as an inescapable part of our lives." He says, "To live with the constant awareness of that paradox is well nigh impossible, which is why most of us work desperately to deny it.

But such denial is increasingly difficult to maintain, as we age or become mortally ill. How I deal with my death is crucial to how I deal with my life. That is what lends the issue of my afterlife even greater urgency. Discussing the afterlife is not simply determining what will happen to me in some indefinite future; it affects how I live today. If my death is an integral part of the larger reality which constitutes my life, then to deal with my life demands that I deal with my death. Of course, I can also avoid the larger issue of my life's meaning; most of us do. But one who is not satisfied with simply living day by day without a broader purpose, without a sense of what it means to live as a human being, or of how a human life-experience coheres and acquires significance, will eventually have to confront his or her death and integrate that fact into the broader structure that constitutes the life that one is living. No more than any other human being do I *know* what will happen to me after I die. But what I *believe* will happen to me after I die affects how I lead my life today. That is why the issue of my afterlife presses upon me *now*."

Neil has spent his adult life trying to address his understanding of "the meaning of life," and the place of God in that life. He has done it living within the framework of Jewish tradition and by accessing the insights of Torah as taught throughout the ages. In his younger years he spoke more of the paradox of God's conflicting presence in this world and asking us what our theology is regarding this life. In his older years, he brought us new challenges to understanding life in the context of death. Both iterations speak about finding meaning in life.

Retirement

We have never spoken of "retiring person" and Neil Gillman in the same breath. We will not treat this moment of retirement as a moment when we expect any diminution of his energies or lessening of the ideas that will come from his fertile mind. Instead, we will look forward to new insights, new anxieties, new prods, gentle and otherwise, to continue writing our theologies in the context of our rich Jewish tradition.

Rabbi Shimon ben Yehudah said in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai: "Beauty, strength, personal resources, honor, wisdom, the blessing of the silvery head of old age and children are becoming to the righteous

and to the world. As it is written: The silvery head is a glorious crown achieved by the righteous life;” (Proverbs 16:31) “The glory of the young is their strength, the beauty of the old the silvery hair;” (Proverbs 20:29) and “Children’s children are the crown of the old and the glory of children are their parents.” (Proverbs 17:6)

The source of added radiance in Neil Gillman’s silvery crown is his amazing vigor that only seems to increase. He continues, with ever-growing effectiveness, to clarify his own religious thinking and influence ours. Again drawing on *Rabbi Meir’s beraita*, we can assume that Neil’s ongoing efforts will “*M’galin lo razei Torah v’na-a-se k’mayan hamitgaber u’kh-nahar she-aino fosek*—reveal to him mysteries of the Torah and make him as a stream that constantly renews itself; like a river that never ceases its flowing.” (*Pirke Avot*: 6:1)

With gratitude for his being our teacher and anticipating new insights that will continue to flow from his work we honor him with our deepest affection. We wish you, Neil, years of strength to enjoy the wearing of your beautiful crown surrounded by your family and every growing circle of friends.

Rabbi William Lebeau was, for twenty-one years, vice-chancellor of JTS and is the immediate past dean of its Rabbinical School. He previously served in the congregational rabbinate for nearly twenty-five years at The North Shore Jewish Center in Port Jefferson, NY and North Suburban Synagogue Beth El in Highland Park, IL.