Lawrence Troster

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Introduction

LAWRENCE TROSTER

This issue of *Conservative Judaism* honors Neil Gillman, originally my teacher, subsequently my colleague, and always my friend. I feel honored to serve as guest editor for this special issue, which features articles that in one way or another document the degree to which Neil Gillman has had an almost unparalleled impact on the Jewish Theological Seminary—his professional home for half a century—as well as on the Conservative movement and the rest of the Jewish world. Neil’s influence extends far beyond the corner of 122nd Street and Broadway!

Neil Gillman was born in 1933 in Quebec City, where he grew up in an observant family but received only a minimal Jewish education. Later, he attended McGill University in Montreal, where he studied philosophy. After hearing Will Herberg lecture at the local Hillel House, Neil was prompted to seriously study Judaism for the first time. He soon came to know some of the leading Montreal Conservative rabbis, including Samuel Cass, Maurice Cohen, and Wilfred Shuchat, all JTS alumni, who influenced his decision to attend JTS after he graduated from McGill in 1954. After his ordination in 1960, Chancellor Louis Finkelstein invited Neil to stay at JTS as a part-time adviser to rabbinical students. This was the first of several administrative roles he held at JTS, which eventually culminated in his appointment as dean of the Rabbinical School. (He was also given some limited teaching responsibilities and was invited to join the faculty from the start.)

At the urging of Dr. Gerson Cohen, Neil continued to study philosophy in a doctoral program at Columbia, and he received his PhD in philosophy in 1975. Later, during the chancellorship of Dr. Ismar Schorsch, Neil left

administrative work and began to teach full-time. He served on the search committee that chose Professor Arnold Eisen as the successor to Ismar Schorsch, and he has served JTS under these four successive chancellors.

When Neil began to teach full-time, he began to publish prolifically. Articles, reviews, monographs, books, and contributions to Jewish newspapers poured out from his pipe-smoke scented office. His book-length works include: *Sacred Fragments: Recovering Theology for the Modern Jew* (winner of the 1991 National Jewish Book Award in Jewish Thought), *Conservative Judaism: A New Century*; *The Way Into Encountering God in Judaism*, and *The Death of Death: Resurrection and Immortality in Jewish Thought*.

Neil has always been deeply involved with the intellectual life of the Conservative movement. He was one of the members of the commission which produced *Emet Ve-Emunah* (“Truth and Faith”), the first official statement of the beliefs of Conservative Judaism. He also participated in the two most important ideological and halakhic controversies in the Conservative movement in the last forty years: the ordination of women, and the ordination of homosexuals. His own reflections on both these controversial issues helped bring both debates to constructive conclusions.

Neil’s extensive teaching has included countless adult education courses, scholar-in-residence weekends in Conservative and Reform communities throughout the country, conferences, conventions, and colloquia. Neil has always considered teaching lay people to be one of his central responsibilities as a scholar and theologian. His contact with the laity also gave Neil a first-hand look at how his ideas were playing out beyond the walls of JTS and allowed him to take the spiritual pulse of the North American Jewish community. What he learned “out there” influenced what he taught his rabbinical students and what he wrote. Indeed, most of his published works have not been directed at an academic audience, but at lay people in search of a Jewish theology rooted in tradition and sensitive to modern issues and sensitivities. Indeed, Neil’s insight that true theology arises from those “who share a sense of tradition that has become problematic and yet holds out the promise of renewed meaning” derives directly from the challenges he accepted in his role as adult educator *par excellence*.¹

¹ *Sacred Fragments: Recovering Theology for the Modern Jew*, p. xxvi.

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The essays in this special issue were solicited from some of Neil's former students and from colleagues at JTS. While some are tributes written on the occasion of his retirement, the majority of essays are original pieces of scholarship that were influenced by Neil's "torah." This wealth of material is a small reflection of the creativity that has been inspired by the teaching of Neil Gillman and the twin pillars upon which it rests: the worth of honest theological discourse, and the devotion to the truth, wherever it may lead.