

You Have Struggled and Prevailed – In Tribute to Rabbi Neil Gillman

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He wasn't my favorite teacher; and, truth be told, I don't think I was his favorite student (and I'm not even sure that he remembered my name), but Neil Gillman – one of the *gedolei hador*, the giants of our generation, the iconic professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary for nearly 50 years, who died over the Thanksgiving weekend at the age of 84 – changed my life.

I was a junior in college when Rabbi Gillman came to Beth Israel Synagogue in Ann Arbor and did a session for teachers in the religious school. He began by asking us to ponder four questions:

1. Who, or what is God?
2. What does God demand of you? Or: why should you keep kosher?
3. What really happened on Mount Sinai?
4. How should you teach Shavuot, the holiday designated as *Zeman Matan Toratenu*, the Season When We Received Our Torah?

Rabbi Gillman was friendly. I loved his goatee, which screamed Ivory Tower. But mostly, I was impressed that he asked questions I had been raised *not* to ask. My parents believed in Jewish education and the best schools in our area were Orthodox, so I was taught to read the Bible literally. Moses received the Torah on Sinai, but not just the Written Torah – also the Oral Torah; also the Talmud; even whatever good points we students brought up in class, those were also given on Sinai. I found Talmud study a little boring, mostly because it didn't seem relevant: what was the maximum height for your *sukkah*? Which books are you allowed to save if your house is on fire on Shabbat? I knew I was in trouble when my teacher tried to engage the class with a “real world” situation. “Real world situation, boys,” he said (the class was all boys). “What's going to happen if you are sitting in *shul* and someone comes up to you and asks if you are allowed to carry a rock on Shabbos? How are you going to answer if you don't pay attention?” That pretty much sealed the deal, and I switched to public school for 11th grade.

But here was Rabbi Gillman asking different questions and entertaining all kinds of answers. Maybe God isn't all-powerful, all-just, all-good, and completely in control of what happens in our lives. Maybe God doesn't really care if I keep kosher or observe Shabbat or give *tzedakah* or visit my elderly grandmother. Maybe the Torah was not actually dictated by God and delivered in a neat package on Sinai; maybe it was written by multiple authors and developed over time. Maybe these stories are not literally true; the Bible is not a historical record, but rather our national myth. Maybe.

But what really intrigued me was the fourth question. Because Rabbi Gillman understood “myth” in its technical sense. “Myth” does not mean “false” or “silly;” myths are *true* or, perhaps better,

myths teach truths. And so, if you assume that the Torah was not literally given at Sinai on the 6th of Sivan in the 2448th year after creation, you still have to celebrate Shavuot; you have to figure out what the story of Sinai means for the modern Jew. You have to take it seriously.

I had been raised to think that it all came together. *Either* God gave the Torah on Sinai, and it is literally true, and we are obligated to observe all of the commandments ... *OR* ... God didn't give the Torah on Sinai, and it is all a big lie, and the commandments are meaningless and not worth our time. But Rabbi Gillman offered a different perspective: God didn't give the Torah on Sinai, it is a myth ... *AND* ... we have to take it seriously, and we have to observe the commandments, and we have to teach, and we have to study, because it is *OUR* myth. That presentation changed my life.

Rabbi Gillman used a line at the Seminary, which I have repeated many times since: When it comes to theology, he said, the fundamentalist and the non-believer basically agree. I'll say it again: When it comes to theology, the fundamentalist and the non-believer agree.

The fundamentalist says: "What you see is what you get" – this is literal truth, and if you don't accept it, if you don't believe it, if you don't get the details right, then you cannot be a good Jew (or a good Christian or Moslem or any other religion). And the non-believer says: "What you see is what you get" – and I don't believe in what I see, so I reject it all. One accepts it and one rejects it, but they agree on what "it" is.

Rabbi Gillman taught that there is a third way, which is far more interesting. The title of his most compelling book, *Sacred Fragments*, is based on a talmudic tradition that the ark that our ancestors carried in the wilderness contained not only the Ten Commandments, but also the broken tablets that Moses had smashed when he saw the golden calf. When our sacred myths are smashed, Gillman taught, we cannot discard them. When ideas we were taught as children no longer hold true, we cannot walk away from them. We have to carry around the fragments; we have to piece them together in new ways; we have to take them seriously if for no other reason than they are ours – those broken fragments are sacred.

The most iconic image in today's Torah portion is that of Jacob wrestling with the divine being. The modern scholar E.A. Speiser suggests that this encounter was a test of Jacob's fitness for all that lay ahead. And the results were encouraging. Jacob struggled with mystery, and he prevailed; he did not falter. But the experience left a mark. The name change to Yisrael – "*ki sarita*, for you have struggled with beings divine and human, and have prevailed" – speaks to our own struggles with mystery and myth. The challenges of the modern world leave their mark, but we dare not walk away.

Take God. How can you believe in a God who allows Auschwitz or earthquakes or childhood cancer to happen? Rabbi Gillman's response? Well you tell me what you mean by God and I'll tell you if I believe in Him. Both the fundamentalist and the atheist believes that God is all-powerful and only allows things to happen for a reason. The fundamentalist finds answers to justify God; the atheist rejects God. And the rest of us are left to struggle with what it means to believe in a God who is present, but may not be as powerful as we once thought.

Rabbi Gillman comments on God as portrayed in the story of Abraham's negotiation to save Sodom and Gomorrah: "God deliberates, is conflicted, has feelings, 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."

I find meaning in this personal, call it human portrayal of God. I yearn to feel God's presence, I pray for strength in moments of crisis. Experiences with evil leave their mark, myths are broken, but we who want to take God seriously can learn to piece the fragments together in different ways.

Or mitzvot and halakhah / Jewish law. The Orthodox and the Reform agree on what Jewish law is. This is the way that the law was dictated to Moses on Sinai and one accepts it as written while the other says *halakhah* as unnecessary in the modern world. Quintessentially the Conservative rabbi, Gillman refused to accept the choice. The law developed over time; there are unquestionably human elements in the Talmud and the Torah. *AND* we have to take it seriously; we have to observe the law; there may be changes in the way the law is interpreted, but we are obligated. Even the human contributions to the history of interpretation are divine because they are the best we have; they are the closest we have ever come to experiencing God's will. And, says Rabbi Gillman, they are *ours*; we must observe Jewish law because Jews follow Jewish law; and when there is a conflict between the ancient law and the modern world, we must struggle to find a new balance ... without rejecting it entirely.

Or back to Sinai. The fanatic and the skeptic agree that the only way to read the story is as historical fact – one accepts and one rejects. But in that lecture, in his classes, in his books, Rabbi Gillman taught that a thinking person can take that story *seriously* but not literally. Sometimes it is a struggle, but we know from Jacob that it is possible to struggle with beings divine and human and prevail.

The world lost a giant last week, but his lesson on what it means to struggle and prevail, his legacy of the powerful relevance of ancient tradition for the modern Jew lives on. *Yehei zikhro barukh*, may the memory of my teacher, Rabbi Neil Gillman, HaRav Nahum ben Yitzhak HaKohen v'Rivka, always be a blessing. Shabbat shalom.