

FAITH AND COMMITMENT

**Discovering and Appropriating
an Integrated and Practical,
Personal and Professional
Jewish Theology
from the
Writings of Eugene B. Borowitz**

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Senior Project

***In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for Rabbinic Ordination***

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This project is dedicated to my father and my mother

**Irving Stanley Heath, z"l
Shirley Louise Anderson Heath, z"l**

from whom I learned the most about Faith and Commitment.

*This project has come to fruition
through the faith in me and commitment to me shown by*

**Akeasha Branch and Alexia Branch
Sarah Boyd Heath and Dr. Stefano Migliuolo**

Rabbi / Dr. Peggy Berman De Prophetis

**Rabbi / Dr. David Greenstein
Rabbi Cherie Koller-Fox
Dr. Ora Horn Prouser
Rabbi / Dr. Bernard M. Zlotowitz**

The Leadership and Members of Congregation Agudath Achim, Taunton, MA

תהלים יט: ח-יב	Psalms 19:8-12
ח תּוֹרַת יְהוָה תְּמִימָה מְשִׁיבַת נֶפֶשׁ עֲדוֹת יְהוָה נֶאֱמָנָה מַחְפִּימַת פִּתִּי:	8. The teaching of the Lord is perfect, renewing life; The decrees of the Lord are enduring, making the simple wise.
ט פְּקוּדֵי יְהוָה יִשְׂרִים מְשַׁמְחֵי-לֵב מִצְוֹת יְהוָה בְּרָה מְאִירַת עֵינָיִם:	9. The precepts of the Lord are just, rejoicing the heart; The instruction of the Lord is lucid, making the eyes light up.
י יִרְאַת יְהוָה טְהוֹרָה עוֹמֶדֶת לְעַד מִשְׁפָּטֵי-יְהוָה אֱמֶת צְדָקוֹ יַחְדָּו:	10. The fear of the Lord is pure, abiding forever; The judgments of the Lord are true, righteous altogether,
יא הַנְּחֻמָּדִים מִזָּהָב וּמִפָּז רָב וּמִתּוֹקִים מִדְּבַשׁ וְנֹפֶת צוּפִים:	11. More desirable than gold, than much fine gold; Sweeter than honey, than drippings of the comb.
יב גַּם-עֲבָדָךְ נֹזֵהר בָּהֶם בְּשִׁמְרָם יַעֲקֹב רָב:	12. Your servant pays them heed; in obeying them there is much reward

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Project Introduction

Faith, according to Fowler,

. . . is not necessarily religious nor is it to be equated with belief. Rather, faith is a person's way of leaning into and making sense of life. More verb than noun, faith is a dynamic system of images, values and commitments that guide one's life. It is thus universal: everyone who chooses to go on living operates by some basic faith.¹

Both Borowitz² and Fowler³ point to Paul Tillich's 1957 work, Dynamics of Faith, in which

Tillich asks his readers to consider "what values have centering power in their lives?" Tillich states that "the 'god-values' in our own lives are those things that concern us ultimately."

Accordingly, the last unit of chapter 5 of Borowitz's Renewing the Covenant is entitled "Where is the Ultimate Ground for Our Commitment?"

He [Tillich] suggested we will best understand our effective faith if we ask ourselves what in fact is our ultimate concern—in the Torah's language, what is it that we 'love with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our might'? As we make our most fateful decisions, sacrificing lesser for greater goals, what does our most basic concern turn out to be?⁴

In a later work Borowitz wrote that "most people are more shaped by doing and subsequent reflection than by working out a mature theology of duty by which they then seek to live."⁵ My encounters with, and subsequent conversion to, Judaism occasioned both, such that my doing and subsequent reflection led to my search for an intact, mature theology of duty

which I could work through and appropriate, followed by more doing and reflection. My rabbinical senior project provides me the opportunity to re-visit my appropriation of the covenant theology developed and expounded by Borowitz in Renewing the Covenant and as further explicated in follow-up writings since that time (1991). My project provides a forum in which I can become more fluent in covenant theology—broadening the theological basis for my own life and its ultimate concerns, to a theological basis which will support the exercise of my rabbinic authority and leadership in a congregation full of many lives and ultimate concerns, most often not in full view—either not known or unknowable.

When I encountered Judaism and moved towards choosing it as the religious system which provided me a mature theology of duty by which to live, I tested my already existing operational theology against the new voices from the Jewish theological world. I participated in what H. Richard Niebuhr describes as

. . . the search for an overarching, integrating and grounding trust in a center of value and power sufficiently worthy to give our lives unity and meaning [for] we are concerned with how to put our lives together and with what will make life worth living we look for something to love that loves us, something to value that gives us value, something to honor and respect that has the power to sustain our being.⁶

Having discounted at age 16 the Judaism of Herman Wouk in This Is My God,⁷ I accepted at age 41 the Judaism of Borowitz in Liberal Judaism.⁸ Recognizing through doing and subsequent reflection my, at the time, operational theology, I narrowed my study of the breadth of Jewish theological thought to contemporary liberal Jewish theologies. I was already religiously liberal, just not Jewish. The more I read in Liberal Judaism, the more my head and heart proclaimed, “yes!” Upon finishing the last pages I accepted his invitation “to enlist in the liberal Jewish elite.” While sounding rather presumptuous that one could move directly into the “elite” of

another religion, it became then and remains my goal. Here is Borowitz's invitation – a standing one which I renew for myself and regularly offer to others.

I have written this book [Liberal Judaism] because I would like to enlist you for the liberal Jewish elite. I am convinced the future of American Judaism is tied to the fate of its religious liberalism, so I have tried here to make its message clear. To be sure, I have dealt only with the intellectual side of being a devoted liberal Jew. There are many fine resources available to help you *determine what you might now do*. It is my hope that thinking more deeply about your Judaism will deepen your dedication and strengthen your resolve. If that only makes you a more steadfast member of the Jewish community, that is already a Jewish accomplishment. More helpful for the realization of our Jewish dreams would be *your decision to make your Judaism the very core of your being*. From there a blend of Jewish search and action would gradually flow into everything you do. If all of us who care this way and now cannot easily find one another would reach out to the others who feel for Judaism as deeply as we do, a new effective religious force would be introduced into liberal Judaism. At the least, it would counterbalance the assimilation and inertia which, unopposed, debilitate our community life. But it might also lead our community in the creation of a vital American Jewish liberal spirituality. Such hopes are not grandiose for a people with our experience. Their realization depends upon the will of individuals; *the Messianic Age begins with you* [emphases added].⁹

In my search throughout Judaism for the mature theology of duty by which I sought to live, I struggled to answer what Fowler calls the

. . . questions of faith [which] aim to help us get in touch with the dynamic patterned process by which we find life meaningful [and which] aim to help us reflect on the centers of value and power that sustain our lives. The persons, causes and institutions we really love and trust, the images of good and evil, of possibility and probability to which we are committed—these form the pattern of our faith.¹⁰

Fowler enumerates the “questions of faith” which can guide reflection.

- What are you spending and being spent for? What commands and receives your best time, your best energy?
- What causes, dreams, goals or institutions are you pouring out your life for?
- As you live your life, what power or powers do you fear or dread? What power or powers do you rely on and trust?
- To what or whom are you committed in life? In death?

- With whom or what group do you share your most sacred and private hopes for your life and for the lives of those your love?
- What *are* [emphasis in original] those most sacred hopes, those most compelling goals and purposes in your life?

Professionally I encounter now, and will continue to encounter, people who are in some way enmeshed in these same questions. They may have settled on answers long ago and are acting on them, they may have experiences which cause them to reconsider their answers, they may resent being asked to reconsider their answers, or they may be despairing of ever finding answers. Having been in all of these positions personally makes my professional rabbinic sensibilities and responsibilities a little easier to manage.

The shape and nature of my own maturing theological work and Jewish commitments find explanation in Fowler's "stages of faith." His descriptions and examples of each stage and of the tensions which bring movement to another stage not only offer personal enlightenment, but also ground my meeting of others. It helps me give them room to be who they are, where they are—not assigning labels as much as providing a wider scope of understanding so that my expectations of relationships don't devolve into Professor Higgins' "why can't a woman be more like a man?" level of obtuseness and frustration. My fluency in covenant theology—what it is, what it is not, from where it derived, how it evolved, what it demands and where it deals with unresolved paradox—offers an intellectual framework of coherence, challenge and integration—certainly personally, but especially professionally. Recognizing full well the geometrically increased number of people whose lives are affected by my actions (or non-actions), my words, my values, my beliefs and my outlook, I seek the assurance of a mature theology of duty worked out in plain view—one I can reference in text and can incorporate into the vast moral and spiritual legacy of Judaism of which I am now becoming a teacher.

My theological work includes a recognition that not everyone accepts Borowitz's propositions. William E. Kaufman repudiates Borowitz's covenant theology in many regards, not the least of which is his concluding complaint that

. . . The empirical reference of Borowitz's thought is for those who already have faith and are seeking to clarify its nature. . . . The pragmatic value of Borowitz's theology is that it may help to strengthen those who already possess the faith he urges. Those who can readily experience the reality of God's will, without difficulties of interpretation, will find Borowitz's theology of practical value for them. Moreover, those who share Borowitz's antipathy towards scientific naturalism will also find Borowitz's thought congenial. But, those who seek precision of terminology and a theology which takes into consideration the difficulty modern man experiences in the struggle for faith will see little understanding of their problem and, hence, sparse pragmatic value in the theology of Eugene Borowitz.¹¹

His remarks bring me caution, but do not dissuade me from what I find true for myself and what I am willing to teach as true to others regarding the realities of liberal Judaism, the potential for Jews in the 21st century to engage in discerning God's will individually and corporately through our historic, yet ever-new covenant with God. Borowitz continues to expend his life on the behalf of Jews who refuse to surrender to self-indulgent secularity. I am proud to have a forum to in which to spotlight his work and to demonstrate how well I believe he has "read" the nature of the world in which we live and the possibilities of our own faithful response.

¹ James W. Fowler, Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Question for Meaning (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1981), back cover.

² Eugene B. Borowitz, Renewing the Covenant: A Theology for the Postmodern Jew (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 81

³ Fowler, Stages of Faith, 4.

⁴ Borowitz, Renewing the Covenant, 81.

⁵ Borowitz, "'Halakhah' in Reform Jewish Usage: Historic Background and Current Discourse," Studies in the Meaning of Judaism (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2002), 449.

⁶ Fowler, Stages of Faith, 5. Referenced as the following: H. Richard Niebuhr, “Faith on Earth,” unpublished manuscript of seven chapters, intended originally for publication with what became Niebuhr’s Radical Monotheism and Western Culture (New York: Harper & Row, 1960). For a summary of “Faith on Earth” see James W. Fowler, To See the Kingdom: The Theological Vision of H. Richard Niebuhr (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1974), chap 5.

⁷ Herman Wouk, This is My God: The Jewish Way of Life (New York: Little Brown & Co, 1992 [reprinted from 1959 first edition]).

⁸ Eugene B. Borowitz, Liberal Judaism (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1984).

⁹ Borowitz, Liberal Judaism, 466-467.

¹⁰ Fowler, Stages of Faith, 3-4.

¹¹ William E. Kaufman, Contemporary Jewish Philosophies (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1976), 104.

Introduction to Eugene Borowitz

Succinct biographical information about Eugene Borowitz may be found in The Blackwell Dictionary of Judaica:

Borowitz, Eugene (b. 1924). American theologian. He was born in New York. He became a professor of education and Jewish religious thought at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in 1962. He is the author of numerous books about contemporary Jewish thought and has served as visiting professor at various universities, including Princeton, Columbia and Harvard.¹

The *Afterword* to Renewing the Covenant provides a longer introduction to Borowitz in his own words.

While writing this book I often became conscious of the stream of personal history flowing through me onto these pages and thus into the future.

My father grew up in the home of his maternal grandfather, Hershel Ahron-Yena's, who was a Slobodka *musmakh*, *moreh horaah*, ordained and certified to give others ordination. My great-grandfather had served as Rav of Sokoly in Lomza *gebernyeh* and then had a small *yeshivah* of his own there. My father reported that Hershel hated Hasidim and would cross the street if he saw a Hasid approaching. Loving Hershel, my father steered me gently toward the rabbinate and claimed that, if he looked away when I spoke in a synagogue, he could hear Hershel.

My mother met my father in the United States, having immigrated here from Koroscmezo, Hungary, a town she believed was somewhere near Jassy. Her father had died sometime after World War I, and when I got around to asking about him as I got older, she recalled very little. I was named after him, *Yehiel*, "God will live," a prophetic name for an American boy who would grow up wanting to be a Jewish theologian and would spend much of his life explaining that God was not dead. The only thing my mother remembered about Yehiel's Jewish practice was that each *Shabos* he would put on a *zaydeneh kapoteh*, a silk kaftan, and, I think she added, a *shtraymel*.

I am, then, the product of an intermarriage between Litvak rationalism and Hungarian Hasidism. Perhaps that explains my determination to be as rational as I can about what I know to be my nonrational Jewish faith. In any case, from time to time as I wrote I would muse about what Hershel and Yehiel would make of the Judaism that I, who bear their influence, have given exposition here. But I was far more concerned about my grandchildren's generation. They may be as Jewishly different from me as I am from Hershel and Yehiel but I hope that I will help them move confidently into their Jewish identity even as my parents and

their parents did for me. *Zekher tzadik livrakhah*, “the memory of the righteous is for blessing.”²

A decade later Borowitz begins a new anthology of his recent work with the section “Fragments of a Spiritual Biography.” The initial paragraphs and then highlights from subsequent paragraph openings offer additional insights to Borowitz and the life which informed his published works.

. . . much of my Jewish religious life derives from an ambivalent impression of my Ohio childhood. I liked being Jewish. I even enjoyed religious school and going to services. But it exasperated me that my teachers and my rabbi could never explain Judaism in any way that made sense to me. When I discovered philosophy and the social sciences were not any smarter, I decided to become a rabbi.

Then my ambivalence intensified. I loved the Hebrew Union College in theory but only occasionally in practice. Once again, my teachers left me badly disappointed. Along with my two close friends, Arnie Wolf and Steve Schwarzschild, I figured I had better build my own sort of Jewish faith and find my own way of explaining it. And that is what I am doing.

A consequent student experiment was critical. I was not worried about my intellectual life. That came easily to me. But making personal contact with God was strange to my American upbringing. So I decided to try to learn to pray, not just the daily College service but by myself. That way there would be no dodging God. Besides, I and some others of my classmates wanted to be more Jewish. We knew we were modern. What bothered us was how to be Jews. Another lifelong quest. So I tried to learn to pray alone from a prayer book. I started with the Union Prayer Book and worked with it for some years. Later, I pushed my religious growth further by extending my davenning through gerrymandered siddur services. Daily prayer has been the bedrock of my Jewish life – and a continual judgment.

. . . Sometimes I am troubled that I have not been overwhelmed by the problem of evil Humanly, I simply find that I cannot rail at God for long. . . I have also been spared great personal tragedy I struggle with many of the things that bother other rabbis. People do not seem to care very much about Judaism. Regardless of my best efforts, they do not take it very seriously or find my understanding of it very compelling My greatest spiritual shock has come from the intense loneliness I feel as a Jew My sense of isolation is intensified by my strong commitment to the notion of Judaism as a community religion. . . . I have some partially effective strategies to alleviate my solitariness I try to create community wherever I can. My greatest challenge is to transform my classroom from the rigid, hierarchical one of my school years to one of inter-personal exchange, while not sacrificing the demands of Jewish learning. . . .

Mostly I have learned a new aspect of Jewish Messianism. Of course, I hope for justice and look forward to peace. I still aspire to the ultimate vindication of the Jewish people and, through it, of all humanity. But now, too, I long for redemption from the *galut* of loneliness, for that day when we shall all be one as persons and one community – for only on that day will God be in our lives as God, to God, is God.³

Borowitz reports⁴ that it took him thirty-plus years to develop a systematic overview of the field of Jewish theology and that he finally set down a major statement of his view in Choices in Modern Jewish Thought: A Partisan Guide (Behrman House, 1983). Borowitz then reports that as he updated this work and a second edition was issued, he realized that he had

. . . also been devoting considerable effort to clarifying my sense of my Jewish faith and the intellectual manner in which it might be best communicated. At first, what I came to call religious existentialism seemed adequate for that role because its embrace of the whole person and not merely of mind made it possible to talk about God in relationship with persons and not as an abstract idea or concept. Yet it was of little help in speaking of the truth of being not a person-in-general but a Jew-person/a person-Jew, in short, a Jew. Realizing that the radical intellectual individualism of most Western thought in our time was the impediment of a fuller statement of my Jewish theology did not come easily. Somehow, about the time that I published my description of the field of Jewish theology, I came to realize that I needed to speak in terms of the (religious) sociality of the self and then, in turn, to discover that the language of the emerging world of postmodernism made it possible to do so cogently. A decade's deliberation then brought me to a major statement of a new Jewish theology for our time, *Renewing the Covenant, a Theology for the Postmodern Jew* (Jewish Publication Society, 1991). In the decade since, this relational vision of Jewish faith has proved most stimulating, given me greater insight into Jewish belief and practice both as expressed in our traditional literature and in our own lives.

Moving Into the Territory

Borowitz's latest collections of writings include Studies in the Meaning of Judaism published in 2002. The chronological ordering of this collection demonstrates that Borowitz “worked at creating an academically credible field called Jewish theology (. . . Jewish thought) and, simultaneously, sought to inaugurate a new and less inadequate manner of understanding and validating the truth of contemporary Jewish belief.” His early “questions about the general

nature and content of contemporary Jewish belief and its validation” resisted the mid-20th century intellectual answers which “scorned religious belief while confidently preaching reason.” Rather than sign-up as another agnostic, he “became convinced that only belief could now found, even mandate, our strong sense of personal and human values.”⁵

In the Preface, Borowitz advises the reader to take one of two tacks in approaching the collection of papers:

The chronological arrangement of the articles mixes the more descriptive with the more substantive articles—as do many of the papers themselves. Nonetheless, it has the special virtue of allowing a patient reader to see how, in this discipline, a scholar struggled to overcome incomprehension and inched ahead as the accretion of insight only slowly appeared.⁶

From both my personal and professional points-of-view I am propelled through the “dynamic, developmental nature of the ideas presented” in the collection, though it won’t surprise those who know me that I was first the “reader who prefers to follow the steps to the goal in terms of a more global sense of the journey” and skipped ahead to the “ending” by reading the final entry in the collection—“A Life of Jewish Learning: In Search of a Theology of Judaism.”⁷

In this collection Borowitz “metaphorically divided the papers into four stages of a journey” and then “briefly introduces each of these stages and hopes that his comments as our tour guide will make the intellectual trip more pleasurable.”⁸ Not only is the trip more pleasurable, but it is more rewarding because Borowitz provides landmarks, maps and connections. As someone who has bought the proverbial ranch, I am more interested in describing the property than in recounting the downside of the purchase—a downside which may or may not exist and which I have yet to discover. This may be a failure of thinking, or of experience, or of nerve, but it is not the task of this project. The task of my project is to describe the landscape, to summarize what I found. I know that I meet myself and others in the development of ideas; I see where I might be stuck in a prior generation’s thought, but I can also

comprehend the evolution of thought to the position I appropriated. I am heartened by Borowitz's description that

. . . The intellectual process, much like life, does not proceed with linear efficiency. Rather, thinkers lurch forward, they hope, prompted as much by external circumstance—an invitation to speak here or write something there—as by internal purpose; even orderly thinkers entertain a jumble of impulses.⁹

It is not within the scope of this project to outline my own external circumstances and internal purposes and I would only hope at least to present my work in the guise of being an orderly thinker, when I recognize in myself the jumble of impulses that inhabits my enterprise.

I will continue to assess, over time, how long I can stake my claim on this Borowitz “ranch,” but I come to the work with confidence that the discovery of gopher holes, cow patties and rattlesnakes will not mean that I’ve “lost the ranch,” but rather than I’ve discovered what for me – and I think for Borowitz as well – is an inherent ambiguity in the entire enterprise. I have enough humor and humility to believe that God is chuckling throughout my earnestness. I have enough confidence in Borowitz and his intellectual work to be one with him as he reports that “It helped that I started out with more questions than with certainties. And, I have been content to accumulate partial insights and be patient until I gained a more rounded vision.”¹⁰ I, too, started out with more questions than with certainties, but took much longer to be able to dispense with the need for certainties and to be comfortable with partial insights.

The titles and descriptions of the sections of my project as it deals with Borowitz's work come directly from his own comments and writings.¹¹ Access to Borowitz's writings has been greatly enhanced by the extensive bibliography which exists for his lifetime of writings. Amy W. Helfman, a former associate librarian with the Klau Library of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in New York prepared a bibliography of all the writings of Borowitz entitled *A Life in Covenant: the Complete Works of Eugene B. Borowitz, 1944-1999*. This bibliography

includes all of the book reviews written by Borowitz for Sh'ma: The Journal of Jewish Responsibility, a publication which Borowitz founded. Borowitz updated and extended the bibliography for the publication of Studies in the Meaning of Judaism (2002) so that it is current through the year 2000. The more than 300 entries in the bibliography are listed chronologically and may be accessed online¹² as well as at the end of the book. The online version has, as of this writing, been updated and extended through 2004.

Additional Background Information

One of the challenges of studying philosophy, theology and religious thought is that of terminology. Borowitz gently includes definitions through examples in much of his writing. In order to provide a head start, some critical terms are defined for reference in an Appendix. Biographies of major thinkers with whom Borowitz dialogued in his writings appear following the definition of terms.

¹ Dan Cohn-Sherbok, The Blackwell Dictionary of Judaica (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 67.

² Borowitz, Renewing the Covenant, 301.

³ Eugene B. Borowitz, Judaism After Modernity: Papers from a Decade of Fruition (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, Inc., 1999), 3-6.

⁴ Eugene B. Borowitz, Preface to Studies in the Meaning of Judaism (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2002), xvi.

⁵ Borowitz, *ibid.*, xv-xvi.

⁶ Borowitz, *ibid.*, xvii.

⁷ Borowitz, *ibid.*, xvii.

⁸ Borowitz, *ibid.*, xvii.

⁹ Borowitz, *ibid.*, xvii.

¹⁰ Eugene B. Borowitz, Judaism After Modernity: Papers from a Decade of Fruition, 4.

¹¹ As presented throughout Studies in the Meaning of Judaism and will be noted as they appear.

¹² <http://www.huc.edu/faculty/faculty/borowitz/index.html>

The Idea of God

Borowitz's convention speech "The Idea of God" appeared in the 1957 CCAR Yearbook. I selected it as an important text because of my professional work with teen and adult students using Sonsino and Syme's book, Finding God: Selected Responses.¹ Their presentation of "ideas of God" ranges from Biblical concepts through current theologies. Beyond the God presented in the Bible and rabbinic literature, they include the Jewish thinkers/writers Philo, Maimonides, Luria, Spinoza, Buber, Steinberg, Kaplan, Fromm, Heschel, Reines and additional contemporary voices. Sonsino and Syme summarize that there are

. . . a number of logical conclusions that we can derive from our study: (1) numerous and varied God concepts are valid within Judaism. . . (2) though classical theism may be the most common Jewish theological position, it is by no means the only one possible. . . (3) no single interpretation qualifies as "the" Jewish God concept. . . (4) our ideas of God can change . . . (5) we, individually, and Jews as a whole, need to engage in more extensive study of Jewish options for belief.²

In all settings where I used this material there is a palpable sigh of relief, as if people had been holding back from having to admit that they didn't believe in God, especially, and most often, the God encountered in the most frequent of their liturgical experiences—the High Holy Days.

Interestingly, the idea of God they experience in the Haggadah is so overrun with the human historical narrative, they don't experience a collision of their own idea of God with the Biblical and rabbinic exposition encountered during the prayers and readings at their Passover seders. The High Holy Days are much different. Many congregants report feeling like they are trapped with ancient images of God which they find difficult to translate into their own lives.

For Rosh Hashanah 5766 I presented my congregation with a sermon on the idea of God which was buttressed by the outline of Borowitz's 1957 article and by the Sonsino and Syme material. Included in the sermon was a handout which the ushers distributed at an appropriate

point mid-sermon. The handout consisted of an 8 ½ x 14 inch, two-sided page of the appendices from the Sonsino and Syme book; appendices which offer, for each of the thinkers in their text, succinct answers to the following questions:

- What is God's nature?
- Is there only one God?
- How can I know God?
- Does God have a special relationship with the Jewish people?
- What does God "want" from people?
- Can I have a personal relationship with God?
- How can I explain the presence of evil in the world?³

From the opening paragraph of Borowitz's article, "The Idea of God", it is clear that Borowitz is making a presentation to his rabbinical colleagues in a time period of forty-five minutes or less. He was invited "not to speak about God, His greatness, His Holiness and His praise, but only, about the idea of God."⁴ Imagining that we are there in the auditorium in 1957, listening to Borowitz deliver his paper, we now hear his opening remark. We can only wonder how it was received, for, having taken the stage and completed his paper's title "The Idea of God," his real opening statement arrives: "It is clear that Judaism requires a belief in God."⁵ If I were comparing, contrasting, and arguing with Borowitz, I might stop right here and be diverted from my task. However, my project's emphasis is to track my appropriation of Borowitz's covenant theology and my discovery during this rabbinical school project of material broader than I encountered personally, 15 years ago.

Borowitz goes quickly from the title question to the question behind the question. First, the question: "what kind of idea of God, what sort of mental construct or intellectual picture of Him does Judaism deem necessary? What is the Jewish idea of God?"⁶ Now, the question

behind the question: “how will we recognize the Jewish idea of God when we find it? . . . What are the criteria by which we may determine whether this formulation rather than that is truly the Jewish idea of God?”⁷ Borowitz considers this work to be an “investigation of ideational form” and of

. . . first finding the place of the idea of God within the structure of Jewish religion as a whole, remembering that it is not belief in God, or the reality of God, or the existence of God with which we are concerned, but only the idea of Him which we create. Once we have found the relationship of this idea to the other elements of Judaism, we will then be able to establish the criteria which we seek.⁸

Borowitz begins in earnest by first looking at how Christianity and Theravadin Buddhism deal with the matter of the idea of God. He concludes by recognizing that, having shown that

. . . Christianity is focused upon redemption from sin as Buddhism in both branches is devoted to release from suffering [so, then the question is] what is it that Judaism is centered upon? What is the axis, the pivot, of the Jewish religion?⁹

His answer should surprise no Jew:

I think we must respond, not an idea of God, but the life of Torah. The root religious experience of Judaism, it seems to me, is not the negative one of escape from sin or suffering. It is the positive one of hearing God’s commandment that we serve Him, as a people and as single selves. It is the sense that God wants us to act in Godlike ways. It is the feeling of mitzvo [sic]. It is Torah.¹⁰

Telling us that it is “concepts of Torah, not their ideas of God, that separate Reform, Orthodox and Conservative Jews,” Borowitz reminds us that “Jewish intelligence has dedicated itself to the never ending effort to make more precise the definition of how God would have us live.” Through Torah and subsequent halakha a Jew experienced the binding authority of how to live life. Borowitz points out that “ideas of God as such do not come with the domain of halakha. Their place is in another realm of discourse, the realm of aggada.”¹¹ He concludes that in Judaism

. . . all efforts to speak of God must be understood as aggadic speaking, and all Jewish theology must be conducted in this domain. The freedom of the aggada,

then makes it a contradiction in terms to speak of “the” Jewish idea of God. Judaism has but one God; but not one idea of Him.¹²

Having been asked to speak about the “idea of God,” Borowitz advances to the core of his exposition, one that carries through his work and drives his continuing engagement with thinkers and writers inside and outside the world of Jewish theology and religious thought. His first major conclusion states that

In Judaism an idea of God is judged by the way it operates in the life of the individual Jew, and, by appropriate additional standards, in the life of the Jewish religious community. . . . For the individual Jew, first, his idea of God must be such as to make possible for him the life of Torah. It is not enough to think about Torah. The Torah must be done, continually. A fully adequate Jewish idea of God would move the Jew to fulfill the Torah by showing him the cosmic authority from which it stems and the deep significance of the acts it requires. . . . Yet, Torah is not meant to be carried out in isolation. It is given to a community, to a people, to Israel. A Jewish idea of God must also then imbue the Jewish mind with an assurance of the value of the continuing existence of Israel, the Jewish people.¹³

His second major conclusion fleshes out the first by continuing with his description of how this Torah which “must be done”¹⁴ “transformed the Hebrews into Israel . . . kept Israel alive and unified. . . and fashioned its distinctive character.”¹⁵ Borowitz then moves to the question of Jewish particularity and answers it with Covenant.

But why should Israel have the Torah and be a people of Torah? Because Israel felt that between it and God there was a mutual pledge, a bond, a Covenant, by virtue of which Israel became somehow His people, and He became their God. Israel exists as Israel because of its relationship with God. Whatever the Jew understands by God, it must make some kind of Covenant between that God and Israel possible; it must make Israel’s continuing dedication to Him reasonably significant; it must explain Israel’s suffering and make it possible for the individual Jew to intertwine his destiny with that of his people. To the extent it inspires him to be faithful to the Covenant among the Congregation of Israel it is an acceptable Jewish idea of God—but let his idea of God be such that it negates the value or significance of Israel as a continuing religious community, and it moves outside the sphere of Jewish belief.¹⁶

Borowitz’s third conclusion moves back to the individual, to the how, to the relationship with God of which he just spoke.

Yet one thing more his idea of God must do for the individual Jew—it must make life with God possible for him, not just as a member of Israel, but as an individual as well. Life with God—the life of piety, when we see all our experiences in the perspective of their Divine dimension; the life of faith, when despite what happens to our plans and hopes, we know His rule has not been broken and we are not deprived of His presence; the life of prayer, when we turn and speak to Him out of the fullness of what we are and long for, knowing we shall always find His strength and inspiration. An idea of God which will not let us speak to Him, nor let Him be of help to us in meeting the varied experiences of life is not an idea for Jews. But insofar as it makes possible for us a rich and intimate relationship with God, the idea is welcome within Judaism.¹⁷

Summarizing all of these three prior conclusions into one brief paragraph, Borowitz states:

The life of Torah within the congregation of Israel in the presence of the Lord, this is what a Jewish idea of God must make possible. This is the standard by which an individual Jew's idea of God is judged.¹⁸

My Rosh Hashanah sermon moved through these three conclusions and onto the summary. The handout from Sonsino and Syme gave people a chance to see the wide variety of ideas of God within Jewish tradition. This handout was popular enough to require reprinting for those who lost their copy or who wanted one to send to a friend or absent family member. The challenge embedded in my Rosh Hashanah sermon came from Borowitz's first conclusion (emphases added):

For the individual Jew, first, his idea of God must be such as to make possible for him the life of Torah. It is not enough to think about Torah. The Torah must be done, continually. A fully adequate Jewish idea of God would move the Jew to fulfill the Torah by showing him the cosmic authority from which it stems and the deep significance of the acts it requires. . . . Yet, Torah is not meant to be carried out in isolation. It is given to a community, to a people, to Israel.¹⁹

I challenged everyone to reconsider their idea of God, to determine if it leads to a life of Torah. I challenged everyone to wrestle with the idea that there is a cosmic authority who/which/that requires action. I especially challenged everyone to recognize that their individual struggle must be carried out in community. For myself, I find the challenge, not surprisingly, to be that of leadership. I am the one who is expected to be able to teach about how

a life of Torah can be lead, to be able to answer questions of doubt and uncertainty regarding cosmic authority (Borowitz's term) with commanding power (my term), and to be able to gather this work together within expanding concentric circles of community—with all Israel, beginning with our own instance thereof.

The middle of these three abilities— answering questions of doubt and uncertainty regarding cosmic authority with commanding power—often proves to be the greatest challenge, while also the most subtle. I have not researched and hence have not found whether or not anyone has considered where the intersection of Howard Gardner's "seven intelligences" and apprehension through one or more of them regarding cosmic authority and commanding power might lie. Using Gardner's "intelligence" of interpersonal relationship, Borowitz presents Martin Buber as a Jewish theologian who "has said far less about God [than Mordecai Kaplan], though far more about how God may be known." This question—how God is to be known, and thus, how we are commanded—is for me, and I think for many of my congregants—"the" question.

With Buber for a foundation, Borowitz states:

Most of our knowing is of things. We inspect them, peruse them, gather our sense impressions and unify them into concepts about things. Most of the time we know persons in this way—their hair, their height, the birthmark on the cheek. But not always. On occasions we cannot predict or produce at will, we meet them not as objects, but as selves. At such times all that I am and all that you are, Buber says, stand over against one another in complete mutuality. No words need pass between us and yet there is real understanding. No data or concepts are communicated for what I now know is you, as you now know me. It is a separate kind of knowing characterized by its immediacy, intimacy and privacy. It is the kind of knowing in which I participate as a whole or not at all. Hence it cannot be observed or accurately recorded, but only experienced.²⁰

With this description about knowing human persons, Borowitz continues that "we know God in this way, meeting Him even as we meet other persons, encountering Him in the midst of life."²¹ Borowitz then continues to tell us that

. . . to know God in this way is not to indulge in mental delusion Nor is this some kind of mystic union or absorption into the great ineffable One. . . . Nor is the fact that one cannot put what he has experienced into literal terms or exact ideas to be taken as a sign that this knowing was simply irrational.”²²

Given Buber’s rejection of all definitions of God, “even refusing to say that God is a person” we still find that “we know that we meet Him as we meet persons . . . that God lets Himself be a person for the sake of the encounter.”²³ Having met God as we meet persons, will this provide us with what Borowitz claims is [emphases added]

A fully adequate Jewish idea of God [that] would move the Jew to fulfill the Torah by showing him the cosmic authority from which it stems and the deep significance of the acts it requires?²⁴

Certainly “the cosmic authority from which it [the Torah] stems” grounds God’s commands to us and our commitment meets such commands as we “fulfill the Torah.” For each of us, our idea of God must bring us to the knowledge and understanding—rational and experiential – such that, just

as the knowing of other persons makes us wish to do things for them, so the encounter with God leaves us with a sense of commandment and commitment.²⁵

Borowitz continues that

This is a particularly liberal understanding of Torah, for God is the Eternal Thou, who may be met in every age.

Israel’s covenant with God was the result of such meeting. In the history of man, only Israel had such an encounter with God as a people and not merely as a collection of individuals. Israel pledged itself as a people to proclaim in history the Sovereignty of God by serving Him alone. From generation to generation Israel renews its continuing commitment to God and their covenant.²⁶

While recognizing that “this makes the role of Israel in history unique,” Borowitz reminds us that “Buber’s primary religious emphasis is on the individual’s personal relationship with God.”²⁷ This relationship comes about through prayer for “to pray to this God is to reach out for the dialogue, or at least to speak to One we know is real and near.”²⁸ Most importantly,

from my point of view, “to have faith in Him is to know between the moments of encounter that He is not lost, that in another moment we may meet Him again as the Source of all that is.”²⁹

All of this brings me back to my being able to lead people in living a life of Torah. In the worship I plan and lead, in the classes I present, in the life I lead, in the counseling I offer, in the casual conversations of friendship and business—can I and how do I evidence my personal relationship with God? How do I evidence that a personal relationship with God is possible for others? And, what about those for whom appropriating Borowitz’s covenant theology runs totally counter to their understanding of Judaism and how they have chosen to live a life of Torah? Borowitz expects that “future generations [he is speaking from 1957, remember] may well reject this formulation.”³⁰ I expect that my congregants may well do the same during my tenure.

I can only answer as Borowitz answered, that such a rejection will “never [be] on the grounds that it created a barrier between them and their God.”³¹ I agree with Borowitz that “it does not show us God, but only where He may be found.”³² Returning to his earlier presentation on the aggadic source for ideas of God, Borowitz reminds us that

though spoken of in modern terms, this God Buber points to is not so different from the God pictured in our tradition It is aggadic, not only in form and language, but in its very content as well. . . . surely we must say to him [the one who rejects our formulation of God], *Eilu divrei Elohim chayim*, these are the words of the living God.

Without time—remember this paper was a forty-five minute presentation—to apply the criterion he developed in the paper to ideas of God from various Jewish thinkers past and present, Borowitz concludes that “our purpose, however, was only to make the standards of judgment [about ideas of God] clear.”³³ He gives his hearers the charge: “now let each one refine the instrument that he may use it in his own search for the most adequate Jewish idea of God.”³⁴ Borowitz wonders if we can “be satisfied religiously with only the search and not the

solution?”³⁵ His response is that “we can, if we will remember that the search cannot be ended now, for history is not yet ended.”³⁶ He points to the “day Elijah comes preceding the Messiah, and answering all our questions.”³⁷

This again is the test of rabbinic leadership—dealing personally and professionally with uncertainty. Standing with people in their uncertainty, accepting my own uncertainty, and recognizing that uncertainty is an inherent part of the enterprise. The questions Sonsino and Syme proposed may seldom be overt in my planned or incidental interactions with people in my congregation and others whom I serve. From my experience to date, these questions arise indirectly. Part of my work is to bring them to light and then to open a conversation where it is not so much I who has the answers but I who helps create a setting or helps someone discover an opening for his/her dialogue with God.

In the business world, objectives are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-based. My objectives in this regard—providing openings and occasions for dialogue with God—are specific, achievable and realistic; but I don’t believe that they are measurable or time-based – hence, my previous remark that uncertainty is inherent in the enterprise.

Even with uncertainty inherent in the rabbinic enterprise, I am encouraged in my work by the fact that for forty to fifty years Borowitz hasn’t “outgrown” what I found as the core of this paper. Some has been reworked or reshaped, but in large measure the core holds. For me, this makes appropriating his theological outlook and premises a sound proposition.

For me, no more compelling case can be made for knowing what God “wants” from us than in his response³⁸ to extended comments on his 1991 work Renewing the Covenant. The relational apparatus that Borowitz outlines in his 1957 paper “The Idea of God” is more explicit and, from my point of view, more practical in terms of using it as a tool to explain the answer to

the question. In the subsection entitled “Torah, God’s Instruction,” Borowitz begins by stating that

If Judaism values *praxis*, what we do, more than it values *doxis*, what we say about what we believe, then the questions David, Yudit, and others [in the collection of comments on Renewing the Covenant] have raised about relationship’s ability to command and, in addition, to generate law, are central ones for my enterprise.

Rationally, experientially and intuitively I agree with Borowitz when he asserts that

Anyone who has long been in a relationship with another—neighboring, friendship, work—will surely have realized that involvement generates responsibility and that the more intimate and long-standing the relationship, the more it commands me. The paradigm case is marriage. The spouse simply commands by being spouse rather than stranger. . . . When the demand is put into words, its specificity and the fact of its being spoken to me gives it great urgency. But even when no word is spoken, one knows that there are things one must, and others one must not do.³⁹

Entering the rabbinate at last in life rather than at first provides me the variety of relational experiences to ground his assertion in the reality of my life and in the many lives I have encountered. Does every Jewish thinker agree with this relational position? Certainly not. In the chapter entitled, “Knowing What God Wants of Us,” in Renewing the Covenant, Borowitz deals with critics and critical positions:⁴⁰

- Critiques of the Relational Metaphor
- Might Objects Disclose God to Us?
- Is There Direct, Unprocessed Apprehension?
- Prerational, Personal Religious Experience
- Can We Be Certain Now or Tomorrow?
- Can Personal Relationship Provide for Social Ethics?
- Can Relational Revelation Mandate Steady Jewish Action?

Borowitz concludes this chapter with a conviction that underlies his work

With so many Jews only willing to accept halakhah as guidance, I am convinced that we have come to an end of the period when Jewish living could still be disciplined by rabbinic halakhah. By contrast, I believe that the relational theory of revelation [emphasis added] generates the possibility of creating its own pattern for giving form to Jewish life—its own “halakhic” structure.⁴¹

He then asks the question he knows others will immediately ask of him: what about Sinai? If we are in a relationship with God not unlike our relationship with a spouse where we know, without words ever being spoken, what we are to do because it is embedded in the relationship itself, what happens to the revelation at Sinai? “Does this theory of revelation so normalize God’s commanding presence as to rob it of appropriate awesomeness and diminish the revelation at Sinai?”⁴² Not according to Borowitz.

We cannot reclaim Sinai’s power without reaffirming the most extraordinary miracle of the Bible—God personally communicating the Ten Utterances (and later writing the commandments as well as giving the Oral Torah).⁴³

Borowitz refuses to leave God’s communication at Sinai in the distant past.

For moderns and postmoderns alike, the Sinai experience must be brought into the common range of human experience. The relational theory of revelation enables us to do so unreductively. It “explains” by presence how God and people communicate and it recognizes that this can happen to nations on special occasions. It also appreciates those uncommon moments when encounter occurs with such fullness that our lives can never be the same—and Sinai was just that for our people. No longer a miracle, it remains wondrous enough to draw the Jewish spirit to existence in Covenant.⁴⁴

And, he argues against his critics that

I do not see it as a defect in this theory that identifying revelation with genuine relationship renders communication with God an ongoing, everyday occurrence. This is simply the reality behind common piety. Even we ordinary Jews know that now and again we stand in God’s immediate presence and find ourselves specially obligated because of it.⁴⁵

The rabbinic intern-soon-to-be-rabbi in me picks up his next statement as a call to arms, a challenge for my rabbinate and an obligation to God and my community.

High on my list of things I wish for in Jewish life today is the existence of more Jews who regularly share such ordinary intimacy with God. The simplicity of

these encounters will refresh the appreciation of the genius of the prophets, psalmists, and other biblical authors whose spirituality could not borrow, as ours does, from the prior experience of millennia. They broke new religious ground with such success that their words still inspire and instruct people the world over. Our little touch of revelation does not entitle us to hope that anything we discern will have the equivalent depth and staying power. Nonetheless, it will do what Jews have always known revelation to do: direct us to our duty as participants in the Covenant.⁴⁶

When Borowitz speaks of a “rich and intimate relationship with God,” people may know from personal experience or at least from personal desire, intimate relationships. Borowitz’s “paradigm case is marriage.”⁴⁷ He explains what most know; that

. . . unarticulated demands have a greater power than the spoken ones, for there is something particularly reproachful about the spouse’s cries, “You should have known what to do,” or “If I had to tell you it wouldn’t be the same thing,” or “If you really loved me, you would have known.”

This telling experience furnishes us with a metaphor for what happens between us and God in the Covenant. No wonder Rosenzweig spoke of revelation as love. When through the religious life one builds an intense and long-lasting intimacy with God, one knows one “must” not stain the relationship by one’s behavior, but one “must rather dedicate oneself to acting as the loved One would want us to.”⁴⁸

The key phrase above for my rabbinic leadership is “through the religious life.” Education, example, and practice in community that supports personal practice—all these call out to me as areas where my work lies. Will my work make the following statement from the Shabbat morning Torah service true for myself and my congregation?

We are servants of the Holy One whom we revere and whose Torah we revere at all times. Not upon mortals do we rely, not upon angels do we depend, but upon the God of the universe, the God of truth, whose Torah is truth, whose prophets are truth, and who abounds in deeds of goodness and truth. In Him we put our trust; unto His holy, precious being do we utter praise. Open our hearts to Your Torah, Lord. Answer our prayers and the prayers of all Your people Israel for goodness, for life, and for peace. Amen.⁴⁹

Whether in this traditional formulation or perhaps in its more contemporary rendition?

Blessed is the Name of the Master of the universe. Blessed is Your crown and Your place. May Your love be with Your people Israel forever. In God I put my trust and for God’s holy and glorious Name I utter praises. May You be willing to

open my heart to Your Teaching, and fulfill the wishes of our hearts for good, for life, and for peace.⁵⁰

How Borowitz pursued his work is how that I humbly plan to pursue mine:

I suppose that is another reason that I am a theologian. I want to clear away the intellectual rubbish that so often keeps us from allowing a budding relationship with God to mature. And I want to provide as fine an understanding of the Covenant as a relationship as I can so that people will not only be attracted to it in theory, but to enter into it as a bond which directs their lives. Ideas are not the only, or often even the best way of carrying on this “dating service” but, without them, I think a community as educated and critical as ours is will not be willing to commit.⁵¹

I recognize all too well, with Borowitz, the distance many Jews have for any kind of commitment. Much earlier in this project, I mentioned accepting Borowitz’s call to be a part of the “liberal Jewish elite.”⁵² He preceded this call, the last paragraphs of his 1984 book Liberal Judaism, with a section on “The Varieties of Jewish Existence.” This section of his last chapter “Jews Who Do; Jews Who Don’t” serves as my reminder that his task and mine—encouraging Jews to more commitment—will be a struggle.

When Borowitz writes that he sees three varieties of Jews in our community, some of his description is dated because he is writing from a time when there was much more outward activity from many parts of the community—outwards toward Israel, toward Soviet Jewry, and toward American political causes. Twenty years later, though, much of his analysis still stands.

He writes that there are

. . . three sorts of Jews in our community. At our margin stands that large group who are indifferent to their Jewishness. They will not deny their origins but otherwise they ignore them. They are quite satisfied to be people, Americans. They would, of course, like to be good people but to do that they do not feel they need the aid of Judaism—and certainly not the disabilities which come from being Jewish!

. . . . the second variety of Jewishness I see among us are [Jews whose] ordinary Jewish activity is sporadic, depending on their life phase, their friends, their mood, or an intricate inner calculus of reward, guilt, boredom, nostalgia, and the like. Their knowledge of Judaism comes largely from magazines, speakers, and

trips; few read Jewish non-fiction, fewer still take adult education course, and only a minute number ever get much beyond a round of introductory courses. They want to be Jews but, on the whole, strengthening their Judaism is low on their lengthy list of life priorities.

At its best, the Jewish middle creates loyalists and leadership. Many Jews care deeply about their people and make considerable personal efforts to see that it continues. Without such a solid bulk of devoted Jews we would not have much of a community at all.

The glories of the Jewish middle are offset by its shortcomings, chiefly its uncertain and erratic motivation. . . . If our community life is to flourish, Judaism must speak to our daily lives. Most of the Jewish middle refuses to make Judaism the ground of its personal existence. So our community compulsively continues to speak of Jewish duty in terms of what we must do for others.

We confront this issue most poignantly when we inquire about the sense Jews of the middle have about religious responsibility. Perhaps they observe a ritual or two each week and occasionally attend the synagogue. They also have a devotion to family and a high sense of human dignity in dealing with others. Compared to the emptiness of many modern lives, that is praiseworthy. But this level of concern will not make our religion come alive or long keep its community vital.⁵³

Borowitz saw a small group of liberal Jews emerging who “are involved with Judaism primarily for their own spiritual welfare. They also hope it will become part of their children’s lives as the next generation seeks to model itself after its parents.”⁵⁴ This group is still very small. Many more are the “middle Jews” who “practice some aspects of Judaism for the sake of [their] children—children who quickly get the message that Judaism is not really for sophisticated adults.”⁵⁵

This minority of spiritually involved liberal Jews in various communities are Jews with

. . . other motives which power [their] contemporary Jewish life. These Jews attend synagogue not because of the social contacts, or to keep up appearances, or the rabbi’s personality, but because a believing Jew needs a community to pray and study with. They participate in Jewish community activity not because everyone expects it, or to maintain their social status, or because they enjoy power and prestige, but because they have a Jewish obligation to help other Jews. . . . they are as filled with doubts and certainties . . . what they importantly share is the will to make their Judaism the core of their existence and then let its influence flow out to all else that they do.⁵⁶

I see my first challenge not to be how to enlarge this minority by bringing the “middle” Jews into devoted liberal practice, but how to accept people for the kind of Jew they are at the current time without settling, with them, for the status quo. Many Jews in the “middle” see developing a relationship with God as part and parcel of moving into Orthodoxy and letting God—or more exactly, traditional observance, with all its rules and regulations—“run” their lives. Without a recognition that traditional observance is founded on a relationship with God, they find it difficult, if not impossible, to see that liberal observance is anything more than just not doing as much as their Orthodox brethren.

Hence my Rosh Hashanah sermon about “The Idea of God.” Working to introduce the fact that ideas of God are broad enough to not be a stumbling block to considering a relationship with God, I encouraged them to opt for a life of Torah which was founded in this relationship rather than in the remainders of mostly long forgotten practices, remainders often reduced to coming to synagogue twice a year, having a seder, getting kids through the bar/bat mitzvah, paying dues and doing their best to “do good”—a best which can be a struggle without a foundation of more than mostly a memory of vague general Jewish ideas. I challenged them not to let the fairly uniform presentation of God in the Machzor be a hindrance to their working through to other ideas of God, if they so needed.

¹ Rifat Sonsino and Daniel B. Syme, Finding God: Selected Responses (New York: UAHC Press, 2002) revised edition.

² Sonsino and Syme, *ibid.*, 168-170.

³ Sonsino and Syme, *ibid.*, 170.

⁴ Borowitz, “The Idea of God,” Studies in the Meaning of Judaism, 31.

⁵ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 31.

⁶ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 31.

⁷ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 31.

⁸ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 32.

⁹ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 33.

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- ¹⁰ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 33.
- ¹¹ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 34.
- ¹² Borowitz, *ibid.*, 35.
- ¹³ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 37-38.
- ¹⁴ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 37.
- ¹⁵ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 38.
- ¹⁶ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 38-39.
- ¹⁷ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 39.
- ¹⁸ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 39.
- ¹⁹ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 37.
- ²⁰ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 44.
- ²¹ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 44.
- ²² Borowitz, *ibid.*, 44.
- ²³ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 44.
- ²⁴ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 37.
- ²⁵ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 44.
- ²⁶ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 44-45.
- ²⁷ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 45.
- ²⁸ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 45.
- ²⁹ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 45.
- ³⁰ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 45.
- ³¹ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 45.
- ³² Borowitz, *ibid.*, 45.
- ³³ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 45.
- ³⁴ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 45.
- ³⁵ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 45.
- ³⁶ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 45.
- ³⁷ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 45.
- ³⁸ Eugene B. Borowitz, “‘Im ba’et, eyma—Since You Object, Let Me Put It This Way,” Reviewing the Covenant: Eugene B. Borowitz and the Postmodern Renewal of Jewish Theology edited by Peter Ochs with Eugene B. Borowitz (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000).
- ³⁹ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 163.
- ⁴⁰ Eugene B. Borowitz, Renewing the Covenant: A Theology for the Postmodern Jew (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 266-283.
- ⁴¹ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 282.
- ⁴² Borowitz, *ibid.*, 282-283.
- ⁴³ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 283.
- ⁴⁴ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 283.
- ⁴⁵ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 283.
- ⁴⁶ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 283.
- ⁴⁷ Borowitz, “‘Im ba’et, eyma—Since You Object, Let Me Put It This Way,” Reviewing the Covenant, 163.
- ⁴⁸ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 163.
- ⁴⁹ Rabbi Jules Harlow, ed., Siddur Sim Shalom: A Prayerbook for Shabbat, Festivals, and Weekdays (New York: The Rabbinical Assembly and The United Synagogue of America, 1985), 399. *Note:* The source text from the Zohar is in the first person singular. Interestingly, the new edition of Siddur Sim Shalom reverts to the more personal and correct translation of the text.
- ⁵⁰ ———, Mishkan Tefillah: The Siddur for Reform Jewish Prayer, uncorrected proof (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2004), 455.

⁵¹ Borowitz, “Im ba’et, eyma—Since You Object, Let Me Put It This Way,” Reviewing the Covenant, 164.

⁵² Eugene B. Borowitz, Liberal Judaism (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1984), 466.

⁵³ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 462-464.

⁵⁴ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 465.

⁵⁵ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 465.

⁵⁶ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 465.

Call to Commitment

In 1956 Borowitz's article, "Creating Commitment in Religious Schools," was published in The Jewish Teacher. In this article Borowitz wants to "up the ante" for Jewish education, noting that while "it is not so long ago that we Jewish educators would have felt happy if we were transmitting to each child the facts of Judaism,"¹ and recognizing that "there are many who would still consider this their sole goal," he suggests that

. . . a little reflection reminds us that there is a considerable gap between the mind and the soul. It is one thing to know the facts of history, the terms for ceremonies, and the words of our prayers, and quite another to want to live by them.²

At a time when suburban synagogues were beginning to flourish and Jews were experiencing unprecedented freedoms in daily life—at home, at school, at work and in the community—Borowitz reports that, confronted with negative attitudes towards Judaism, "Jewish educators and Jewish parents (the true Jewish educators) set to work to condition a generation of Jews positively to Judaism."³ It worked well, he writes, but it

. . . brought us to our present embarrassment. Is Judaism a psychological gimmick we use to counterbalance our sociological maladjustment, an emotional sinking fund we lay up to offset the deficits we incur by being different—a means to self-delusion by which we hope to achieve some peace of mind? Or is Judaism today what it was in the past, a faith to live by, a set of values to judge by, and our primary source of truth about God, man, and the universe?

If Judaism is more than a means toward adjustment, if it is more than an analgesic for our minority status, if it is an end in itself, if it is still meaningful, if it is still true, then we cannot settle for conditioning. Instead we require commitment.⁴

In many a quarter today, the view would be just as dispirited. Fifty years later, the adjustment is almost complete, the minority status insignificant and peace of mind evident, as Jews lead lives where, for many, the synagogue provides fee-for-services, such as education towards bar/bat mitzvah, weddings and funerals. Borowitz's call twenty years ago for a "liberal Jewish elite"⁵ has, for the most part, fallen on deaf ears. "Jews of the middle"⁶ pervade most

Jewish communities. However, regardless of the change in the American Jewish community, Borowitz's call to commitment does not lose its power in the fifty years since it was first proclaimed. Not because Borowitz is so prescient. The call retains its power because the call for commitment is as old as Sinai. Every generation needs its Borowitzes to assess where Jewish educators—parents and professionals—have gotten off track and been seduced into creating other goals for Jewish education than commitment, and to again push for commitment.

After assessing the contemporary situation in the mid-1950's, Borowitz continues by answering the question arising from his call for commitment: "what is meant by religious commitment?"⁷ His answer is clear:

We require a Jew whose Judaism is a part of his very self, his identity, his life—one whose Judaism is no separate bundle of feelings or emotions which stands apart from what he is. We require a Jew whose Judaism is not something special or additional in him, but an essential part of him, as inseparable from him as his sense of duty, his reaction to beauty and his attitude toward right and wrong. His Judaism is what he is, because he has committed himself, his life, his talent, his knowledge, his hopes, his fears to Judaism, and, through it, he will live out his days.⁸

Not only is his answer clear, it remains constant over the course of his writings. In 1963, writing about "Faith and Method in Modern Jewish Theology"⁹ he again works with religious commitment, but begins with "faith and method." His writing considers Jewish "faith" as observed in the methods of Mordecai Kaplan, Levi Olan, Hermann Cohen, Leo Baeck, Abraham Geiger, Martin Buber, Kaufman Kohler, Roland Gittelsohn, and more. His theme is "in which approach shall we today put our faith?"¹⁰ He writes that "my position is simple,"¹¹ because he believes that ". . . the general method of Jewish theology over these past hundred years no longer makes sense."¹² He pushes for having faith come first, before choosing an "intellectual medium,"¹³ because "if we had based our Judaism on that philosophy [and then] in its name we

had both justified and revised our Judaism”¹⁴ problems would inevitably arise, for were we to lose “faith in our philosophy, do we lose our faith in Judaism as well?”¹⁵

Now, why get sidetracked on discussing faith and method when we were looking at his 1956 article concerning commitment? Because his stance is that he wants “faith in Judaism to come before any other faith”¹⁶ and “to make this priority of faith in Judaism his methodological starting point.”¹⁷ Why is this so important? Because it “explains our great difficulty in dealing with our congregants”¹⁸—the congregants who are sending their children to religious school, who are infrequently attending services or participating in other synagogue activities. When a congregant comes to us, seriously ready to inquire about Judaism or when we feel we have an opening to encourage a serious investigation into Judaism,

. . . we are eager to tell him of its truth, but usually have great difficulty in doing so. The reason is clear. This man has a prior faith. The only way we can make ourselves understood and, hopefully convincing to him, is to translate Judaism into the terms of his prior faith. And that is just the trouble. Often his private faith is so constructed that it does not make possible a belief in God or, to him worse, an institutionalized religion. But whether he already has a hospitable or inhospitable point of view, we must recognize its priority in his life. We must talk to him in his terms and that is why we have such difficulty doing so to our own satisfactions.

The task of explaining one’s faith to a man with another faith has an old and honorable theological history. Its name is unfortunate. It is called apologetics. Much of our work, not only with intellectuals but with our members as well, is apologetic theology.¹⁹

Borowitz is unwilling to have apologetics addressed to those outside Judaism “be our primary intellectual task today.”²⁰ He wants to look within Judaism, to the Jews in its various communities, to Jews with little or sporadic commitment. “Before we devise a theology for the outsider, we must clarify what those inside the circle of faith share.”²¹ He is particularly interested in “the case of our more loyal members, those who have some faith in Judaism.”²²

This concern of Borowitz's from 1963 is the logical successor of the concern he expressed in 1956 about creating commitment in the religious school setting. Some percentage of parents, whom Borowitz rightly called the "true educators,"²³ are "those who have some faith in Judaism."²⁴ Rabbis and professional Jewish educators must first address the adults—the parents—if they are to hope to make headway with their students, for, as Borowitz noted, children "quickly get the message that Judaism is not really for sophisticated adults."²⁵ They recognize that Judaism plays a very small part in their family's life and that often it is not taken very seriously by their parents. Borowitz asks . . .

Why does their Judaism generally have so little impact on their lives? Why do we so often find it difficult to communicate to them the overwhelming importance of Jewish belief and observance?²⁶

. . . and then responds . . .

Here, too, the answer may be found in analyzing the level of their Jewish faith. They do believe in Judaism but they have other faiths of greater importance. As long as Judaism can be explained in terms of their private world of belief, they will accept it. We win their willingness to Jewish action when we explain it in their terms, say mental health or the image of themselves as good parents, dutiful children or loyal Americans. But let the demands transgress their private norms, say we suggest mid-week Hebrew, daily prayer or public agreement to racially integrated housing [note, this was written in 1963; add your own "hot button" current social issue], and Judaism has become a bore, a chore, a nag.

Here Borowitz opens the door to the frustrations of rabbis, cantors and dedicated lay leaders.

After three years as a rabbinic intern, moving out of the business world and into the world of "spiritual leadership," his next paragraph catches me up short, making me look very carefully at how I have been leading, how I have been creating expectations for myself and for the congregation I serve, and how I have been assessing the members of the congregation.

That is the danger of marketing Judaism in the consumer's terms, of our informal apologetics. We are covertly endorsing the private faith by which our member lives. We never shake him loose from his more basic faith. We never make Judaism the foundation of his faith, and he lives out his days, using Judaism when it suits his purposes, rejecting it when it does not.

I have been involved in conferences, workshops, online discussions and conference calls dealing with “public space Judaism”—meeting unaffiliated and disengaged Jews in the marketplace, hoping to attract them to Jewish institutions. In the midst of major discussions on the concentric circles of participation – first in a “safe” public space such as making Purim masks at a display in a craft store, an event which can be “stumbled across;” to, second, attending a film at something “officially” Jewish; to, third, actually braving crossing the threshold of a synagogue or Jewish community center – a brief comment was made that once all this “marketing” rounded up reluctant Jews and conditioned them to feel comfortable moving into the world of institutionalized Judaism, there had better “be something there” for them – not that the outreach group was doing any work on figuring out what that “something” was. Even without an “off-the-shelf” manual of programs and strategies ready to hand newly ordained rabbis and cantors, Borowitz’s admonition focuses the work, for

Unless we make Judaism primary in our lives and in the lives of our people, we shall not have accomplished that first step on which all the rest of the journey depends.

Here again, we are back to commitment. Borowitz goes on to discuss the difficulties liberal Judaism is encountering, that

We [the leaders of liberal Judaism] taught them [our Jewish constituents] that Jewish tradition was not absolute, but that they had the duty to reach their own religious conclusions.²⁷

Having thus been taught and conditioned, the logical outcome is that

They have transformed this, mostly unconsciously, into a whole view of life. They have made their selfhood the ultimate source of their religiosity, and their individuality the determinative principle of their faith. They confidently judge such truth as comes to them from without in terms of their goals and their predilections. They may occasionally find themselves confused and troubled, and this may turn them to Judaism for help. But, mostly they seek a new fad, a new recreation, for they cannot abandon their operative faith that they personally know more about man and his destiny than does Judaism.²⁸

Once again, the struggle is defined: “as long as Judaism is not primary to the existence of our people we cannot hope to see their inertia and apathy disappear.”²⁹ How to make this happen, how to make Judaism primary to the existence of our people – one person, one couple, one family, one congregation at a time – is the pressing question. Borowitz answers part of the question in his paper on creating commitment in religious schools. His answer belies the title of the article for it is not commitment that we create.

No principal, no teacher, no human being can “commit” another to a religion, a faith, a way of life. Commitment comes from within. It is something you will, consciously or unconsciously—and as the will is finally free, so genuine commitment must be freely arrived at. It cannot come from without at the insistence or persuasion of another. It is for yourself that you are being asked, and only you can give it.³⁰

Any syllabus or teacher’s guide which suggests that we “teach” commitment or “transmit” it in our religious schools is mistaken.³¹ We cannot create commitment,

We can only hope to create a situation in which commitment is possible, or better still, likely. The inner act itself remains beyond us. . . . [and] since the very nature of what we desire is personal and subjective, what will be helpful or decisive for one person may be meaningless for another.³²

And, should we need reminding, we must recognize that “commitment is not a catechism” nor is it “intellectual indoctrination,”³³ In fact,

. . . words are not decisions, nor does committing phrases to memory commit the self to God through Judaism. Verbalization remains our best rationalization for not bringing our children to true commitment.³⁴

Acknowledging both the difficulty and the desirability of the goal of creating commitment, Borowitz first offers that “commitment can be caught from one who already has it.”³⁵ He stresses that “it is not as important to teach Torah as to be Torah,”³⁶ and, thus, “teacher’s role is crucial.”³⁷ In our search for professional competence in ourselves as rabbis and cantors and in school principals and teachers, we must recognize that “competence is no

substitute for personal commitment,³⁸ and that “the most important method or technique of religious education is the being, the person, the soul of those who represent it to the child.”³⁹

The remainder of the article continues in this vein—commitment comes before everything. Borowitz offers words of comfort to teachers that apply to everyone engaged in leading a committed life and fostering commitment to Judaism:

The truth of teaching in so personal a field [as religious education] is that we and our students alike cannot tell whether we have succeeded or failed, for what the individual in the depth of his being selects and saves from all that we offer him is mostly hidden from us and often from him as well.

And if this be but small consolation and seems but an attempt to save our defeat from being complete, then we must reply that Jewish religious education cannot fail despite us, though it can hardly succeed without us, for God requires Israel. It is He who says that Israel shall exist and serve Him. Indeed He is the true religious educator of us all, for history is no more than His classroom and we, all of us, His recalcitrant students.

If we are devoted to Jewish religious education, it is because we have faith in Him and His purposes, because we know we want to help Him—as difficult and unlikely at that seems—because working with Him, we cannot fail.

From the calculating, the hardheaded, the realist point of view, Jewish religious education cannot succeed. From the standpoint of faith it cannot fail.

Commitment, then, is not only the goal, it is the means, the motive and the source of hope as well. [emphasis added].⁴⁰

From 1956 and 1963, we move into 1971 and another era, one Borowitz deals with in “The Postsecular Situation.”⁴¹ He opens this paper with a great deal of assessment of the Jewish situation, dealing with premodernism, modernism, rationalism, secularism and existentialism. He finally concludes: “all that is history. . . we must move on beyond these great, accomplished systems to the area of experiment and creativity.”⁴² The vitality and diversity of this “experiment and creativity” make it difficult to judge the validity and outcome of the efforts. He pulls together a common denominator when he writes that

What seems to be central to the serious Jewishness of an increasing minority of our community is their recognition that they cannot remain as dependent upon the

surrounding culture as they once were. The point is not that the culture has nothing to offer them or that they do not want to be acquainted with it . . . Rather, having been through all that the society has to offer, having sampled all its goods, indeed having contributed in overwhelming measure to the creation of a better civilization, has now brought some Jews [in 1971] to believe that traditional Judaism may have something to teach in its own right, that rather than always genuflecting to what modern man and modern science and modern culture say, one of the most useful things Judaism could do would be to stand up to them, correct their excesses, and shape their values.⁴³

The faith that was “not Judaism” which Borowitz told us we would have to deal with⁴⁴ as we attempted to encourage Jews to increase their commitment to Judaism is fading.

The major hopes of the past twenty-five years [prior to 1971—essentially since the end of World War II] are now being brought into question. For the overwhelming segment of American Jewry, it was hope in secularity. They were willing to give up much of their Jewishness to benefit from the many good things that the American style had to offer. Now they have come to realize that, for all its benefits, there are many things wrong with American society. . . . It is obvious that the problems are inherent in the system itself. . . . That the root difficulty is that there is little or nothing in the secular approach to things today which is productive and empowering of human value. The civilization is in crisis because all its major instrumentalities are value-free or even antihuman. No amount of going to college or reading books or attending theater or buying paintings will give us the kind of human beings we need. The dream that the cultured man would automatically be an ethical man, in some biblical sense of that term, has collapsed.⁴⁵

In a new setting, a different time; with much proverbial “water under the bridge” since 1963, here in 1971 Borowitz looks around and tells us that liberal Judaism hasn’t made any progress in securing committed Jews.

We really believed that we could win autonomous, modern man to religious faith and practice by changing the old, imposed forms of our faith and making them essentially voluntary and self-commending. There was a period of time when the innovations were met with great enthusiasm and it seemed as if a new mood had been created in the ancient faith. But our experience in the long run has been deadly. Orthodoxy, Conservative and Reform alike show pervasive apathy. Nonobservance of whatever standards are set is common and an air of irrelevance is generally felt.⁴⁶

For all the encouragement in the 1956 article for teachers to model commitment and for all the push in the 1963 article on faith and method of encouraging Jews such that “making Jewish faith

primary, calls us to justify ourselves when we dissent from it”⁴⁷ Borowitz now reports in 1971 with no better “news” about Jewish commitment in America.

Our experience is that, although liturgical, and hierarchical and clerical tinkering may be useful, indeed necessary, to make it possible for modern men to take their religion seriously, they themselves do not resolve our problems. Having tried them all, the time comes when one must turn back to the questions of faith and belief. And when the culture can no longer be a surrogate for the old tradition, the time has come to bring one’s tattered social attainments with one and take another look at the commitments of one’s fathers.

Borowitz says that he is “unable to dictate a solution”⁴⁸ but that he can “point out three areas in which some directions begin to take shape”⁴⁹ – areas that will begin to address the problem balancing secularity and tradition. His first direction relates to “belief in God,”⁵⁰ his second direction relates to the “defense of Jewish particularity,”⁵¹ and the third direction brings us back to the central point that carries us through from 1956 to 1963 to this article in 1971:

The collapse of confidence in the culture has opened up the possibility that the old Jewish way of life may have more to commend it than the generations panting for Americanism ever realized. It is difficult to see in the culture surrounding us any institution which will produce masses of consistently humane people that the Judaism which passed through modern experience did and does produce, at least for some little time yet. But if those values are to be transmitted with sufficient power to resist the pernicious effects of the American culture, then perhaps they need not only the grounding of Jewish belief but the warmth and habituation of a rather traditional Jewish practice.⁵²

Thirteen years later⁵³ in 1984 Borowitz reports basically the same phenomenon as he did in 1971. He states that

My hope for American Jewry is based on the recent spontaneous, grass roots rise of Jews who are deeply devoted to Judaism. Their commitment, for all its faltering experimentalism, has led to acts of learning, observance, ethics, and piety and these characterize it as a spiritual elite.⁵⁴

Sixteen more years later⁵⁵ in 2000 Borowitz remembers this period similarly and expands it to be the “late twentieth century” as he writes

The late twentieth century has indeed been a time of the loss of the faith we moderns passionately espoused, of ourselves as the only god worth following.

That was disturbing indeed and such a blow to our egos that we hid our psychic turmoil behind the soothing modern notion of the death-of-God. Now that our overblown human self-idolization has died, it has made possible a healing human tzimtzum, a self-contraction that has made some room for God in our lives. I believe we come to God these days primarily as the ground of our values and, in a non-Orthodox but nonetheless compelling fashion, as the “commander” of our way of life.

Something similar could now also be said of the value of Jewish tradition and practice to us. Once we realized we were not always smarter than our forebears, once we admitted that our individuality had its limits and our community might yet have much to teach us, particularly how to judge that which should be rejected or fought in our society, Jewishness took on a new value to many Jews. And with a real God involved not only with us as persons but with our people—as well as, from a Jewish point of view, with all other peoples—the concept of Covenant, of having a personal and folk relationship with God, as against merely a concept of God, became deeply appealing.

Discernment remains key in my rabbinic work. Very specifically, among the people whom I serve, “how are they making room for God in their lives?”⁵⁶ When will God become a ground of their values? Do they arrive and remain in the community believing that it has much to teach them?

My Rosh Hashanah sermon on the idea of God, my now clear recognition that commitment is more caught than taught, my new understanding of how faith in God and a life of Torah meet up against pre-existing faiths, and my acknowledgement of the trap of marketing Judaism – all are first steps – steps in the process of my discovering and appropriating a personal and professional Jewish theology from the writings of Rabbi Dr. Eugene B. Borowitz. I pray that I will be faithful to my rabbinic task of increasing the number of Jews who are “open to the voice of Jewish tradition as read in the light of contemporary Jewish experience.”⁵⁷

Borowitz provides a firm foundation for my task of “helping our people become increasingly sensitive to what the Presence of God ‘requires’ of them.”⁵⁸ I hope to nourish ideas of God that lead to faith in God, that provide a foundation for people leading lives of Torah, and that foster commitment to being fully Jewish in the postmodern world.

Finally, along with Borowitz, I believe that

. . . When we can get our adherents to see themselves fundamentally as Jews as well as persons, sharers in their people's historic Covenant with God, we may hope their recontextualized "autonomy" will prompt them to listen to their people's guidance as well as to the individual, still, small, voice within. With the caring, doing minority among our people persisting and slowly growing, that is not an unrealistic agenda.⁵⁹

¹ Eugene B. Borowitz, "Creating Commitment in Religious Schools, Studies in the Meaning of Judaism, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2002), 17.

² Borowitz, *ibid.*, 17.

³ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 18.

⁴ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 18

⁵ Eugene B. Borowitz, Liberal Judaism, (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1984), 466.

⁶ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 463.

⁷ Borowitz, "Creating Commitment in Religious Schools, Studies in the Meaning of Judaism, 18

⁸ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 18

⁹ Eugene B. Borowitz, "Faith and Method in Modern Jewish Theology," Studies in the Meaning of Judaism, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2002), 69-84.

¹⁰ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 78.

¹¹ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 78.

¹² Borowitz, *ibid.*, 78.

¹³ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 78.

¹⁴ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 78.

¹⁵ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 78.

¹⁶ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 79.

¹⁷ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 78.

¹⁸ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 78.

¹⁹ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 78.

²⁰ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 78.

²¹ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 78.

²² Borowitz, *ibid.*, 80.

²³ Borowitz, "Creating Commitment in Religious Schools, Studies in the Meaning of Judaism, 17.

²⁴ Borowitz, "Faith and Method in Modern Jewish Theology," Studies in the Meaning of Judaism, 80.

²⁵ Borowitz, Liberal Judaism, 465.

²⁶ Borowitz, "Faith and Method in Modern Jewish Theology," Studies in the Meaning of Judaism, 80.

²⁷ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 81.

²⁸ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 81.

²⁹ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 81.

³⁰ Borowitz, "Creating Commitment in Religious Schools, Studies in the Meaning of Judaism, 21.

³¹ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 21.

³² Borowitz, *ibid.*, 21.

³³ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 21.

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- ³⁴ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 22.
- ³⁵ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 22.
- ³⁶ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 23.
- ³⁷ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 23.
- ³⁸ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 23.
- ³⁹ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 23.
- ⁴⁰ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 29-30.
- ⁴¹ Eugene B. Borowitz, "The Postsecular Situation," Studies in the Meaning of Judaism, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2002), 133-148.
- ⁴² Borowitz, *ibid.*, 142.
- ⁴³ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 142.
- ⁴⁴ Borowitz, "Faith and Method in Modern Jewish Theology," Studies in the Meaning of Judaism, 81.
- ⁴⁵ Borowitz, "The Postsecular Situation," Studies in the Meaning of Judaism, 143.
- ⁴⁶ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 144.
- ⁴⁷ Borowitz, "Faith and Method in Modern Jewish Theology," Studies in the Meaning of Judaism, 82.
- ⁴⁸ Borowitz, "The Postsecular Situation," Studies in the Meaning of Judaism, 145.
- ⁴⁹ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 145.
- ⁵⁰ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 145.
- ⁵¹ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 147.
- ⁵² Borowitz, *ibid.*, 148.
- ⁵³ Borowitz, Liberal Judaism, 464.
- ⁵⁴ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 464.
- ⁵⁵ Eugene B. Borowitz, "A Life of Jewish Learning: In Search of a Theology of Judaism," Studies in the Meaning of Judaism, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2002), 409-410.
- ⁵⁶ Eugene B. Borowitz, "'Halakhah' in Reform Jewish Usage: Historic Background and Current Discourse," Studies in the Meaning of Judaism, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2002), 430.
- ⁵⁷ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 430.
- ⁵⁸ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 430.
- ⁵⁹ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 430.

Difficulties and Resolutions

In January 2006 I met with Eugene Borowitz at Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion in New York City. While waiting to meet him, I stood outside his classroom. Class was over and students were changing rooms, getting ready for their next classes. I overheard most of a conversation between Dr. Borowitz and a young, beginning rabbinical student. She was distressed that the previous day – the Fast of Tevet – had not been observed by the faculty. She knew this was so because she had seen faculty members leaving a meeting that day and observed the obvious remains of food on the table and the side buffet. In his initial response he pointed out existence of varying levels of observance within the college community. Rather than send her to a text, he sent her to experience by suggesting that she undertake a practical experiment.

She could consider that a particular food – say pickles – was not to be eaten by students and faculty for a week. She was to garner support for this ruling throughout the college with a reasoned argument. She should solicit compliance on a person by person basis and with general announcements. She should pay attention to if, how and why she was or was not able to gain agreement from everyone. She should be clear and obvious about her own adoption of the practice. She should especially pay attention to why people chose to opt out the practice.

This brief exchange illuminated for me what I discovered in studying his writings. He was asking this student to discover for herself the difficulties of faith and commitment. Her practical experiment would help reveal, in a small way, how difficult fostering commitment can be.

When Dr. Borowitz and I settled into our conversation spot in the student lounge, I sought advice for my pressing concern – how to build a Shabbat-centered community – how to foster commitment to our foundering Shabbat morning minyan. I had a vision and a plan that I

wanted to review with him in light of what I learned about faith and commitment from my investigations for this senior project. Based on his writings about working with people who have prior faiths (in self, in culture, in their own world view), I wanted to know more about how to address people through these prior faiths. He smiled, and then laughed. He told me I had the wrong person. He dealt in theories. My questions were not of his realm. I should speak with Dr. (Lawrence) Hoffman.

I was disappointed. I thought I had a “live one.” Someone, finally, with whom I could converse; who could take my challenge of leadership and, with me, discuss it in his terms of “Ideas of God” and “Call to Commitment.” I wanted practical theology and that is not Borowitz’ field. Did I know this? Of course, if I had been asked outright; but, I was caught up in the exigencies of my own rabbinical situation and, encouraged by what I had been so carefully studying for this project, I forgot the focus of his work.

In similar fashion, others have missed the focus of Borowitz’ work. Peter Ochs, editor of *Reviewing the Covenant*, in describing responses to *Renewing the Covenant*, states:

In this volume, Rabbi Borowitz’ fellow academics receive his recent work in the academics’ privileged language of love, which is a language of intense intellectual analyses, challenge, response, and dialogue. . . . General readers may need to brace themselves here and there, since the academics gathered here have been stimulated to bursts of rather abstract thinking, but more rigid academics may need to brace themselves as well, for the abstract is wedded on these pages to the concrete, the philosophic to the empirical, the conceptual to the moment of faith.¹

To these academic friends and colleagues Borowitz has the same smile – and maybe laugh – that he had for me. They weren’t looking for or discussing practical theology, but philosophy from the secular academy. For them, too, he must set the record straight and so believes that it will help him respond [emphases added]

. . . to the specific issues raised by my colleagues if I first briefly indicate what I think I was doing in my book [ed. *Renewing the Covenant*], for that is the

conceptual context of what I now have to say. Some facts about me personally also have a bearing on my approach to these matters, so I will begin there.

I am a rabbi, a seminary professor, and my primary reference group is not the secular academy, but the believing, practicing community of non-Orthodox Jews, no matter which labels they apply to themselves. That will help to explain why *Renewing the Covenant* is a work of apologetic theology. That is, it seeks to mediate between believers like myself and those who are inquirers, perhaps semi- or occasional-believers.

. . . Norbert [ed. now referencing authors of essays in *Reviewing the Covenant*] correctly indicates that I also seek to create a bridge between academic thinking about belief and the minority of believing non-Orthodox Jews who seriously want to think about their faith, a sub-community critical to the ethos of every group. Apologetics seem inevitably to disappoint people in each of the communities addressed. Some outsiders always complain that you haven't properly accepted their truth. Some insiders feel you haven't been true enough to the faith (David and Susan) while others feel you might have used a more effective way of accomplishing the apologetic task (Edith, Tom and Norbert, with Yudit in both groups, and Peter trying to show what makes us all an intellectual family). Essentially what we are debating in this book is what might constitute the most effective apologetic language for our time.²

The “believing, practicing community of non-Orthodox Jews” who “seriously want to think about their faith” – this is his “primary reference group.” However, it is not mine. My primary reference group is much different and consists of his defined “Jewish middle.”³ It is this group to whom my Shabbat-centered community plan was addressed. It is quite a lovely, well-thought out program, but with chagrin I must admit it showcases the fact that I had failed to internalize one central thesis of his writings on commitment – that Torah is often much more caught, than taught. I was working on the assumption that a well-laid out congregational plan, with contingencies covered and generousities built in for people's varying dispositions and inclinations – well, that such a plan could be improved through conversation with Borowitz to the point that it would be bound to succeed. Once I realized that I must look to myself, then and discover just what it is that I “am” which can be profitably caught, I had to ask myself, “How am I working to create an opening for Torah to be caught from me?” This “catching” would come

before attempting any buy-in for my plan. I needed to look as well to how I was working with congregational leaders to so organize our communal life that there would be anyone on the receiving end.

This ongoing struggle in the concrete, practical realm of applied theology makes it difficult to step back into the philosophical. It helps to recognize that Borowitz deals with the philosophical on his own terms, terms which inform my “practical” in ways I have not discovered elsewhere. Witness his statement about

. . . calling God an / the Absolute, albeit a Weak Absolute. My philosophic colleagues are aghast at my oxymoron and would like me to provide some conceptual clarity of the description of God as Absolute.⁴

Borowitz admits that he was being “midrashic / heuristic, not spinning out tightly cognitive claims.”⁵ What am I to do with this? How can I fit Borowitz into the Sonsino and Syme “ideas of God” framework? What do I do with this statement?

Used figuratively, “absolute” usefully marks the rather desperate search of people these days to find something stable to hold on to: to hold on to, no matter how bizarre it may be and no matter how costly (in dollars and cents, too). Jews, those fervent modernizers, show the same phenomenon. By calling God an absolute, I only meant to call attention to the importance of the anchoring function of God in our lives. Any postmodern Jewish view of God, in my view, would have to provide for God’s effectively exercising this role.⁶

“The anchoring function of God in our lives” – might this be what could be caught from me? How would I – how could any Jewish teacher working towards fostering commitment to Judaism – demonstrate that such commitment in our own lives was anchored in God? That God was an Absolute? Then comes the more difficult question – is my commitment anchored in God? I believe so, but I must be sure it’s not just a “desperate search to find something stable to hold onto.”

Borowitz addresses a related criticism when he writes of God's redemptive power. His critics want to know – though I can more readily handle the practical implications of this question – how

. . . can I say that God is involved with particularly beneficent events, and then not also involve God in the terrible things that happen in history? . . . Overwhelmingly, believing Jews were able to accept the fact that there are some things that we just cannot understand, probably because they were grateful for all the goodness they did in fact receive, beginning with life. The pious live, not always easily, with God's inscrutability. Philosophers care too much about rationality to accept that "answer." And they cannot easily accommodate the insight of believers' old and current suggestion that, if the clumsy locution is permitted, history is "lumpy" and God's saving acts are sporadic.⁷

Here is something to reckon with in the hospital room and sermon writing workbench. For Jewish communities and Jewish individuals struggle with the need to know "why?" Can living in the tension of "God's inscrutability" be "caught" to good effect? How would I demonstrate that?

Nowhere do God's saving acts appear more sporadic than in the Holocaust. Borowitz addresses his critics who believe that

. . . since those terrible days we must operate with displaced and decentered faith. This phrase and its equivalents are frequently repeated by thinkers today, and they convey the understanding that since the Holocaust, we cannot believe in God as we once did. I demur from this position. I do not believe God is the central problem of post-Holocaust theology – a radical revisionism . . . [which] none of my critics represented here [in *Reviewing the Covenant*] found . . . worthy of comment or refutation.

Here again is dialogue in academia which informs me personally and informs my work. How will I include the Holocaust in what I teach? In what our religious school teaches? How will God be portrayed in the telling? Borowitz' position speaks of the importance of the Holocaust and its influence on our religious thinking.

Belief in God cannot die for people who don't really believe in God's existence to begin with By mid-century, the overwhelming majority of modernized Jews were agnostic, if not atheist. What they believed in, what functioned as their

“god,” was not *Adonai* but humankind and its capacities. They built their lives on education, politics, business and culture – not the God of the 613 commandments. As the [20th] century drew toward an end they began to realize, in a subterranean, postmodern way, that their secular “god” had failed them and that a messianic faith in humankind is ludicrous. . . . That is why I do not make the Holocaust, or the problem of theodicy, central to my thinking about God, though it is fundamental to my teaching about human nature and our need for God’s help.⁸

Built into the event of the Holocaust is the Jewish sense that it is unlike any other human tragedy, whatever scale, whether haphazard or systematically planned, that it is a unique event in history, that happened to a unique people.

The Holocaust as unique history of a unique people highlights Borowitz’ struggles with “philosophy’s universalism” and the “unique significance of Jewishness.” He believes that insistence of such uniqueness

. . . is critical to my determination not to be a philosopher in the present philosophic climate. In some bedrock, primal fashion, I and others like me know that the existence of Jewish people in Covenant with God is a matter of unique cosmic significance. Any way of thinking that doesn’t readily allow me to express and validate that truth cannot be the medium by which I will explain Judaism to others. Until someone creates a rationalism that can give particularity a primacy Jewishness has in my life, I cannot be a first-level rationalist. . . .

. . . most rationalism is resolutely secular and so constructed that the Covenanting God of Israel is as good as ruled out *ab initio*. I also cannot accept a system of thought which will devalue, if not rule out, what I and others like me know to be the ultimate ground of our existence. So, I practice theology but, in the present intellectual situation, not philosophical theology.⁹

With God as the “ultimate ground of our existence” what can be done about the majority of Jews who live their lives outside a dogmatic belief in God, as it is built into the belief system of Orthodox Judaism, who find “other rationales for the Law”¹⁰ tepid? Borowitz certainly recognizes that

. . . most Jews are too critical and questioning to accept classic Jewish law as binding because they are told it is, if not God’s revelation, the established historic structure of Jewish living.¹¹

We are back to my difficulty – building a Shabbat-centered community; rebuilding the Shabbat morning minyan; and finding an entry point into my congregants’ lives to open the conversation about faith and commitment. With my congregants fully in tune with most of their 21st century Jewish peers – not accepting classic Jewish law as binding based on either revelation or the established historic structure of Jewish living, I believe the resolution to my difficulties is harder than I had hoped for.

For Borowitz

. . . the theological root of the difficulty for the non-dogmatic theories [of accepting Jewish law as binding] is the depth of our commitment to the religious validity of the self’s rightful part in any rule-making. Only a living relationship with God, I insist, can hope to demand that we work out our individuality as part of the Jewish people’s Covenant with God.

The great contribution of Covenantalized decision-making will not be *keva*, but its emphasis on *kavannah*, intention. What transpires between us – God-Israel-me – is here a matter of consciousness as well as of act. When our doing grows out of a consciousness of self-in-relation, that inwardness will shape our persons as well as be a commanding power in our doing.¹²

Why is this “harder than I had hoped for?” Two reasons.

The first is that Borowitz sees this “self-in-relation” struggling to find others with whom to align in the “formulation of communal norms for Covenanted Jewish living.”¹³ I’m already working in community doing just that – working towards the formulation of communal norms for . . . wait . . . “Covenanted” Jewish living. That is why the resolution is “harder than I had hoped for.” Borowitz admits the struggle and I live it in my leadership role.

The second is integrating the “most recently read” into the framework of an “appropriated Jewish theology” from Borowitz. The conversation constantly expands through reading and study. Where would the conversation go next if David Hazony entered the conversation as he writes about Eliezer Berkovits? What would I need to do with the following

in light of the Borowitz' statements above? It needs investigation! [Emphases added in order to highlight relationships to the above material from Borowitz.]

Berkovits' most important work, however, may be his exploration of the nature of Jewish morality – an effort spanning a half dozen books and many essays, which offers a comprehensive approach to Jewish faith that includes both respect for traditional law as a binding norm and a belief in the normative supremacy of the values and vision articulated by the prophets.

This he achieved through a careful examination of the rabbinic and biblical literature, which led him to reach three important conclusions about Jewish morality:

- (i) that the halakha as presented in the Bible and Talmud is primarily about moral values rather than rules, and that any attempt to reduce it to a fixed set of rules violates its essence;
- (ii) that Jewish morality, as expressed by the prophets and as impressed upon the halakha, is concerned fundamentally with the consequences of one's actions rather than the quality of one's reasoning or intention; and
- (iii) that Judaism understands morality not only as a discipline of man's intellect or spirit, but no less as an effort which must be incorporated into the habits of his physical being, through the vehicle of law, if it is to achieve its goal of advancing mankind in history.¹⁴

The focus of this project did not center around moral values, but on faith and commitment. I looked at how Borowitz support my rabbinic enterprise at the engagement level. I can see I haven't gone far enough yet. I think I agree with Berkovits that the "consequences of one's actions rather than quality of reasoning and intention" are the "concern of Jewish morality." What then do I do with Borowitz' "Covenantalized decision-making emphasis on *kavannah*, intention?

My resolutions remain small and new difficulties present themselves because the study, the inquiry and the investigation do not end. An action-reflection-adjustment model is called for in my work. I must seek conversation partners. I must remember what I've learned and not fall back into convenient modes of action. I must do and listen and do and listen again.

¹ Peter Ochs, ed., “Preface,” Reviewing the Covenant: Eugene B. Borowitz and the Postmodern Renewal of Jewish Theology, (Albany: Statue University of New York press, 2000), viii.

² Eugene B. Borowitz, “Im ba’et, eyima—Since You Object, Let Me Put It This Way,” Reviewing the Covenant, 145-146.

³ Eugene B. Borowitz, Liberal Judaism (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1984), 462-464.

⁴ Eugene B. Borowitz, “Im ba’et, eyima—Since You Object, Let Me Put It This Way,” Reviewing the Covenant, 158.

⁵ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 158.

⁶ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 158-159.

⁷ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 159.

⁸ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 160.

⁹ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 160-161.

¹⁰ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 166.

¹¹ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 166.

¹² Borowitz, *ibid.*, 166-167.

¹³ Borowitz, *ibid.*, 167.

¹⁴ David Hazony, “Eliezer Berkovits and the Revival of Jewish Moral Thought,” Azure, Summer 5761 / 2001, 24-25.

Appendix

Defining Terms

Some critical terms are defined below, all as excerpted from A World of Ideas: A Dictionary of Important Theories, Concepts, Beliefs and Thinkers.¹ The page numbers for each entry will be listed in the entry itself rather than in the endnote. While this is a general dictionary and does not incorporate a Jewish view or usage of these terms, the definitions, analyses and interpretations provided set the stage for learning the terminology which, naturally, appears frequently in Borowitz's work. These terms are, thus, presented in their most basic, cultural usage. As needed for his writings, Borowitz qualifies, expands and updates these definitions in his usage of these general terms.

- Deconstruction – A poststructuralist approach to criticism primarily identified with the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. Initially associated with literary criticism, it has been taken up in many other disciplines. Indeed, Derrida himself uses the term “text” to include any subject to which critical analysis can be applied. Deconstructing something means, literally, “taking it apart”—on the one hand, drawing out all its threads to identify its multitude of meanings, and, on the other, undoing the “constructs” of ideology or convention that have imposed meaning on it. The process of deconstruction inevitably, and intentionally exposes inconsistencies and contradictions. This leads to the conclusion that there is no such thing as a single meaning in a text, nor can it claim to express any absolute truth. . . . Derrida charges [that] language has been habitually used to construct world-views based on metaphor, ethnocentric assumptions, and biased “binary concepts”—rationalism/irrationalism, nature/culture, even speech/writing. Derrida identifies this condition as logocentrism, the assumption of basic principles relying on a fixed, unquestioned ideological “presence” or “center” (92-93)
- Empiricism – The philosophical position that all knowledge derives from experience—from the direct observation of phenomena and from introspection. It thus contrasts particularly with rationalism, which identifies reason as the source of knowledge, and rejects the notion of spontaneous or innate ideas. While empirical “purists” may claim that all ideas arise only from experience, others object that complex thought and shared culture cannot derive purely from personal perceptions. Thus, a “softer” version of empiricism states that while not all ideas are causally connected to sense perception, anything we can call knowledge must be justified through the test of experience; this is the basis of the scientific method (114)

- Existentialism – Philosophical position holding that in an absurd universe without intrinsic meaning or purpose, people have unlimited freedom of choice and must take absolute responsibility for their actions. In such a world, the individual is obliged to find meaning in his or her own existence, not in any externally imposed doctrine. The most succinct statement of the position is Jean-Paul Sartre’s maxim “Existence precedes Essence”—our essential natures are developed through the choices we make in our lives. Our uncertain existence creates anxiety, or “existential dread,” the fear of nothingness that brings us face-to-face with our bondless, terrifying freedom and responsibility. In this predicament, the individual either chooses an “authentic” life or gives in to despair (127).
- Idealism – In philosophy, the position that ideas, not objects, are the basis of reality; the opposite of realism and materialism. The concept takes three general forms: that all of reality is a product of the mind; that we can have knowledge only of the contents of our minds; or that the material universe is an imperfect reflection of an ideal realm beyond our senses. The everyday connotation of the term relates to these meanings in the sense that an idealist is someone in pursuit of an ideal that is beyond the horizon but firmly grasped in the mind. . . . The “transcendental idealism” of Immanuel Kant held that ideas and knowledge result from the filtering of sense perception by the universal categories of the understanding preexisting in the mind, and distinguished between the experiential world of phenomena and the hidden world of noumenal, things-in-themselves. Hegel, in his “dialectical (or absolute) idealism” did not deny the substantiality of the world but saw both nature and human consciousness as manifestations of an absolute Mind or Spirit. . . . In all its forms, idealism posits “the union of the knower and the known.” The object of perception and the one who perceives it are not separate and distinct entities; either the known derives solely from the knower’s consciousness or both subject and object are dependent parts of some larger mind or spirit (190-191).
- Liberalism – Political, social, and economic doctrine that in its classic construction emphasized individual freedom, limited government, gradual social progress, and laissez-fair commerce. . . . The term has the same root as ‘liberty’ and implies freedom of conscience and action. Liberalism developed in the early 19th century as the ideology of the emerging middle class of merchants and entrepreneurs. It had its intellectual basis in the political philosophy of John Locke, the Enlightenment faith in human progress and rationalism. . . . Nineteenth-century liberals advocated religious tolerance, individualism, and self-reliance (231).
- Logical Positivism – Philosophical position derived from positivism that sought to apply the principles of logic, mathematics, and empirical science to all fields of thought The logical positivists maintained that all intellectual inquiry should be held to the same standards as scientific investigation. Paramount in this conception was the principle of verifiability, which states that for a proposition to be meaningful, it must be not only logically consistent but susceptible to empirical verification—not necessarily proven, but at least able to be tested. By this criterion, all metaphysical, religious, and ethical statements were banished as unverifiable and therefore meaningless. . . . The verification principle was almost immediately assailed as unverifiable itself and therefore meaningless by its own definition. But despite criticisms, logical positivism was widely

influential through the middle of the 20th century (having been developed in the 20's and 30's) (237).

- Modernism – Tendency in Western culture, especially in the arts, to reject traditional, forms and conventions in favor of innovation and experimentation, usually in response to perceived changes in society and technology. Modernism is usually identified as an artistic trend that began around the end of the 19th century and dominated cultural expression until World War II or after (assessments of the duration of its influence vary widely); but it is also associated with the Renaissance idea of modernity, which gained currency with the Scientific Revolution of the 17th century and ascendancy during the Enlightenment. That perspective repudiated the authority of the past—specifically, the view that Western civilization had reached its apogee in ancient Greece and Rome—and placed confidence instead in human progress through rationality and technological advances. In this sense, modernism represents, for good or ill, the victory of reason over inspiration, practicality over established custom, and, for some, alienation over human community (265).
- Natural theology- Understanding of the existence and nature of God derived solely from reason and observation, without recourse to supernatural revelation; often equated with natural religion, which presumes a universal religious impulse in humans a rejects miracles and divine providence. The idea holds that the evidence of the natural world is sufficient to prove the existence of God the creator (273-274).
- Naturalism – In philosophy, the position that all of reality is natural and nothing is supernatural. . . .Philosophic naturalism holds that only those things that are amenable to empirical investigation will produce useful knowledge. It rejects the idea of divine purpose and sees human beings as simply part of the natural world. The search for metaphysical ‘first principles’ or for the essential qualities of things is pointless because the ultimate character of reality is unobtainable. An outgrowth of empiricism, naturalism contrasts with viewpoints such as idealism and dualism, which separate the realms of matter and thought; it shares with phenomenology an emphasis on direct experience over mental abstraction and differs from materialism only in allowing for the possibility that reality may not be purely physical (274-275).
- Postmodernism – Artistic and critical tendency characterized by eclecticism, relativism, and skepticism, the rejection of intrinsic meaning and reality, the repudiation of progress and cultural cohesion, and an ironic embrace of ambiguity . . . is characterized, in succinct summary, by suspicion of metanarrative. For many, this stance is the distinctive attribute of late-20th century culture, giving this era the epithet “the post-modern age” (310).
- Rationalism – Philosophical position that reason is a more dependable path to knowledge than experience or observation. In this sense, it is the opposite of empiricism; however, since the Enlightenment the two approaches have also become allied in the view that valid knowledge, especially scientific knowledge, derives from sense experience informed by rational thought, rather than from non-rational sources such as personal intuition or supernatural revelation (333).

Identifying the Thinkers

In addition to terminology, there are the thinkers – the other voices with whom Borowitz is in dialog throughout his writings. The brief entries below will help flesh out later references to their thinking in Borowitz’s writings. They are presented here in alphabetical order with information coming from multiple sources.

- Martin Buber – 1878-1965 – German philosopher. Buber’s most famous work, I and Thou, published in 1923, outlines a religious philosophy of dialogue. . . . He argues that there are two fundamental attitudes that a person can take up toward the world. The first, I-It, is based on a detachment of the self from others in which knowledge is objectified. But in the second type of relationship, I-Thou, there is an encounter between the subjects in which each stands over against the other. Such an attitude is characterized by total presentness: the I addresses the Thou spontaneously and intensely. In a relationship of I-It, however, there is predetermination and control. In presenting this thesis, Buber stresses that he can offer no description of the I-Thou posture; it can only be pointed to. The attitude of I-Thou is a basic dimension of human existence in the world and a key to the concept of ‘relation’; it has the character of a dialogue and can only be properly understood through personal experience. According to Buber, both modes of being are necessary: individuals must move back and forth between the two attitudes. From I-It comes a refinement of knowledge and understanding necessary for dealing with the world. Yet in modern society I-It is eclipsing the I-Thou encounter. This is tragic, Buber believes, since a fulfilled human life requires the experience of I-Thou. What is required in modern society is a restored balance between I-Thou and I-It. Buber links this discussion to God who is the ‘Eternal Thou.’ For Buber, God is the only Thou who can never become an It. He is the unifying ground for particular Thous which makes possible all relationships. And, conversely, it is through the encounter with all things that God is met.²
- Herman Cohen – 1842-1918 – German philosopher. Although an exponent of Kantian idealism, Cohen deviated from the Kantian system in several respects. First, Cohen conceived of the noumenal world, not as an unknowable realm, but as a symbol of the human quest to reformulate theories on the basis of rational analysis and empirical research Second, in the sphere of ethics, Cohen maintains that the concept of immortality is a compromise with intrinsic ethical values. In his view, the function of the idea of God is to guarantee the realization of ethical ideals in daily life – it is the only ground for the belief that moral obligation can be actualized. . . . Modeling his philosophical writing on Maimonides’ Guide to the Perplexed, Cohen . . . seeks to redefine the principles of the Jewish faith in the light of human reason. . . . [and that] there is an inherent connection between the principles of critical idealism and absolute monotheism. . . . the central feature of the Jewish religion is God’s uniqueness, rather than his oneness; the difference between God and the world is essentially qualitative. God is the source of the phenomenal world; hence the idea of God is the precondition for scientific activity. Further, since Cohen believes that the universe is eternal, the idea of

creation involves constant renewal Similarly revelation, like creation, is not limited to particular historical events and thus human beings are the bearers of reason.³

- Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel – 1770-1831 – German philosopher. One of the most influential of the 19th century, whose thinking shaped Marxism and existentialism. Hegel was the first to view history—indeed, all of existence—as a dialectical process of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, through which two contradictory forces are resolved in a higher, more rational state. . . . He saw history as the progressive development of human understanding toward perfect knowledge. Civilization advances in stages, or “historical moments,” each of which is a necessary but incomplete step in the development of human consciousness, reason, and freedom. Since each stage is imperfect, its flaws give rise to opposing ideas or forces, and out of the resulting conflict comes a new, higher, and temporarily more stable stage. . . . This analysis was revolutionary because it placed change at the heart of the world, challenging the generally accepted notion of “eternal verities.” However, for Hegel history was not an endless cycle of change but an upward spiral that would lead inevitably to a final condition of Absolute Knowledge. Indeed, his philosophy of “absolute (or dialectical) idealism” saw human history as a rational progression in which all the subjective elements of understanding are purged, leaving only a pure, objective knowledge of the Absolute—God as pure thought, mind, or spirit. In response to Kant’s “categories of the understanding,” which he saw as ultimately limited, Hegel constructed an elaborate series of “categories of thought” tracing the progression of human understanding. The Absolute, he said, is approached by art, aesthetically, in the beauty of material forms; it is conceived symbolically in religion, whose highest manifestation is Christianity, with its central symbol of the spirit-made-flesh; but philosophy is humanity’s highest attainment because it comprehends the Absolute through reason.⁴
- Abraham Joshua Heschel – 1907-1972 – German/American theologian. Heschel was concerned with faith and its antecedents: the experiences, insights, emotions, attitudes and acts, out of which faith arises. According to Heschel, certain experiences and acts that are generally viewed as aspects of faith are also antecedents of faith. Wonder before the sublime mystery of nature, for example, is not in itself an aspect of the Jewish faith. Such wonder may occur prior to the emergence of faith – it can ignite the flame of religious fervor. Realities through which God is revealed—like nature and tradition—may be considered sources of faith even prior to the perception of God’s presence, insofar as they occasion the perception of, and response to, God. Such wonder then can be understood as an antecedent of the Jewish faith. When faith in God emerges, what were the antecedents of faith become aspects of the life of faith. Other expressions which Heschel claims give rise to faith, such as indebtedness, praise and *mitzvah* (commandment) might at first be considered aspects rather than antecedents of faith. Unlike wonder, which is a response to nature, indebtedness is a response to God. For Heschel, indebtedness is an antecedent of faith in that it prepares us to see the source of our ultimate indebtedness. After faith itself emerges, the sense of indebtedness continues. In this fashion what was an antecedent of faith becomes one of its central features. . . . Another experience that awakens the individual to God’s presence is a pervasive anxiety that he refers to as ‘the need to be needed.’ For Heschel, religion entails the certitude that something is demanded of human beings. When persons feel the challenge of a power

which is not the product of their will, that deprives them of self-sufficiency—then God’s concern for his creatures is understood. . . . Heschel stresses that it is the Hebrew Scriptures that offer a primary model for the authentic spiritual life. In his view, biblical revelation is not a mystical act, but an awareness of being confronted by God. . . . Distancing himself from the Aristotelian concept of an ‘Unmoved Mover,’ Heschel contends that through divine pathos, God is able to express His dynamic attentiveness to human beings. God, he maintains, is moved and affected by human action. . . . Additionally, through a life of holiness, the believer is able to gain a awareness of the Divine. This can be attained, he argues, by following the *halakhah* (Jewish law): a Jew is asked to take a leap of action rather than a leap of thought. He is asked to do more than he understands so as to understand more than he does. In Heschel’s view, the concept of ceremony denotes what we think, whereas the term mitzvah expresses what God wills. In his view, a Jew is required to adhere to law which is obtainable solely through reason. The commandments are disclosed to use from on high as points of eternity in the flux of temporality. Hence Jewish law expresses how human beings are divinely ordained to act. Here both intention and action are crucial—it is not enough to simply carry out the law in a mechanistic act. . . . Critical of the liberal assumption that human beings are capable of perfecting themselves without an appeal to forces greater than themselves, Heschel sought to recover the biblical tradition as an inward dynamic process.⁵

- Immanuel Kant – 1724-1804 – German philosopher. His critical philosophy undermined the status of metaphysics, revolutionized epistemology, and sought to provide a rational basis for ethics and aesthetics. His philosophical work was, in effect, an attempt to synthesize rationalism and empiricism, which until then had been almost totally at odds. Kant’s early field of study was science. . . . Originally a thoroughgoing rationalist, on encountering the empiricism of David Hume, his work was an attempt to develop a logically coherent basis for natural science that took into account Hume’s skepticism about the possibility of direct knowledge of things outside ourselves. . . . Kant set forth a new approach to epistemology, in which he proposed to reconcile empirical and rational knowledge – specifically, the tension between experiential knowledge (a posterior and synthetic judgments) and a priori and analytic judgments, which are independent of experience. . . . He denied the ability of pure reason to prove any ethical imperative, but accepted “practical reason” as the proper authority for moral action, necessary to control our unruly passions and to guide our behavior. The centerpiece of Kant’s ethics is a categorical imperative to behave according to an absolute principle of right, in contrast to the hypothetical imperative, in which behavior is determined by a desired outcome. . . . He believed in individual freedom – not license, but freedom to pursue moral “ends,” liberated by reason from the constraints of desire and selfishness.⁶
- Mordecai Kaplan – 1881-1983 – American theologian. In 1935 Kaplan published his major work, Judaism as a Civilization, which provided the foundation for the creation of Reconstructionism as a movement. In this work, Kaplan begins by assessing the main religious groupings of American Jewry. In his view, all of these movements—from Orthodox to Reform Judaism—are incapable of accommodating the Jewish heritage to the modern age; what is needed, Kaplan argues, is a definition of Judaism as an evolving religious civilization. . . . For Kaplan, a religion constitutes the concretization of the collective self-consciousness of a group which is manifest in spiritual symbols. Such

sancta inspire feelings of reverence, commemorate what the group believes to be important, provide historical continuity, and strengthen the collective consciousness of the nation. . . . For Kaplan, Judaism is something far more comprehensive than the Jewish faith—it includes the nexus of history, literature, language, social organization, folk, sanctions, ethics, social and spiritual ideas, and aesthetic interests. . . . In propounding his theory about the nature of Judaism, Kaplan advanced a radical theology consonant with a scientific understanding of the universe. For Kaplan, God should not be understood as a supernatural being, but as the power that makes for salvation. ‘God,’ he writes, ‘is the sum of all the animating, organizing forces and relationships which are forever making a cosmos out of chaos.’ In his opinion, the idea of God must be understood fundamentally in terms of its effect: ‘We learn more about God when we say that love is divine than when we say that God is love. A veritable transformation takes place Divinity becomes relevant to authentic experience and therefore takes on a definiteness which is accompanied by an awareness of authenticity.’ For Kaplan, God is a ‘trans-natural,’ ‘supra-factual,’ and ‘super-experiential’ transcendence which does not infringe the laws of nature. Such a conception is far removed from the biblical and rabbinic notion of God as the creator and sustainer of the universe who chose the Jewish people and guides humanity to its ultimate destiny. Such an interpretation of the nature of God calls for a reformulation of the spiritual dimension of the faith. Hence Kaplan argues that salvation must be understood in humanistic terms.⁷

¹ Chris Rohman, *A World of Ideas: A Dictionary of Important Theories, Concepts, Beliefs and Thinkers* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1999).

² Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *Fifty Key Jewish Thinkers* (London: Routledge, 1997), 25-26

³ Cohn-Sherbok, *Fifty Key Jewish Thinkers*, 30-31.

⁴ Rohman, *A World of Ideas*, 171-172.

⁵ Cohn-Sherbok, *Fifty Key Jewish Thinkers*, 57-59.

⁶ Rohman, *A World of Ideas*, 217-220.

⁷ Cohn-Sherbok, *Fifty Key Jewish Thinkers*, 74-76.

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