

Internationally recognized as the dean of contemporary Jewish religious thinkers, Dr. Eugene B. Borowitz has been associated with the College-Institute for over sixty years. As scholar, teacher, and mentor, he has guided generations of students into positions of leadership for the Reform Movement and *klal yisrael*. In an interview with *The Chronicle*, he recounted his life-long Jewish spiritual journey as a pillar of the HUC-JIR academic community.

“The first thing you have to know about me is that I am the result of an intermarriage between a Litvak and a *hassid*, and that may explain something of my intellectual stamp,” Borowitz explains. Tracing his ancestry to a paternal great-grandfather, a Lithuanian rabbi who

granted *smichah* (ordination) and was renowned as a *maggid* who lectured and

taught, and to a maternal grandfather who was a Hungarian *hassid*, Borowitz’s approach to Jewish religious thought can be understood as an amalgam of the rational and intellectual with the emotive and experiential.

Nurtured by Eastern European, Yiddish-speaking immigrant parents who settled in Columbus, Ohio, he grew up during the 1930s in a predominantly gentile world. “In those days, the Reform temple was very much like the Methodist church down the street,” he describes. “We belonged to the Conservative synagogue and, from early childhood, I liked it there. I kept pestering the rabbi and others with questions, and everyone thought I should become a rabbi.”

Borowitz was a commuter student at Ohio State University, where he joined a Jewish fraternity but lacked for meaningful Jewish intellectual mentors. On a campus with 15,000 students there was but one Jewish professor, who taught commerce and retailing. Observing Borowitz’s struggle to define a career direction, his father warned him, “If I leave you alone, you’ll go to classes all the rest of your life!” Borowitz initially concluded that he wanted to be with people and to work with ideas, and settled on teaching philosophy. “But as an undergraduate philosophy major, it became perfectly clear to me that they no longer had any significant answers and that they were in trouble,” Borowitz recalls. “How I managed to figure that out at age 18, I don’t know, because it turned out, as I have only learned in the past decade or so, the collapse of secular ethics took place in the last 50 years of the 20th century.”

During his high school and early Ohio State years, Borowitz had inquired several times about admission to Hebrew Union College in

Dr. Eugene B. Borowitz at 80: A Jewish Spiritual Journey at HUC-JIR

By Jean Bloch Rosensaft

Cincinnati. “The first time I wrote them, they said they didn’t take high school graduates, you have to have a year of college. The second time I wrote, with one year of college behind me, they said ‘we are now going to be a graduate school’ and turned me down. But when I was a college senior and the war approached, they contacted me and encouraged me to formally apply. In order to pass the Hebrew entrance exam, I went to HUC’s first-ever summer session, designed to accelerate students to get them to graduate early so they could go into the army and be chaplains. I passed and was admitted on probation.”

A family friend introduced Borowitz to Simon Lazarus, chairman of the nominating committee of HUC’s Board of Governors, who had put in a good word for his application. “It was pretty heady stuff – whenever Lazarus came to a Board meeting at HUC, he would look me up.”



Dr. Eugene Borowitz, Sigmund L. Falk Distinguished Professor of Education and Jewish Religious Thought, and his students at HUC-JIR/New York.

Borowitz received his B.A. from Ohio State University in 1943 and was ordained at HUC in 1948 – critical years encompassing the Holocaust and rebirth of Jewish statehood in Israel. “What most affected us was the fact that we had German-born classmates,” he recalls. “I still recall the occasion when Ernst Conrad got a communication from the World Jewish Congress official confirming that his mother had been killed at a

concentration camp. And there was passionate discussion about Zionism and the State of Israel, amidst those who were substantially non-Zionist or leftist and felt that one needed to deal with the broader human issues.”

Borowitz married his wife, Estelle, during his senior year at HUC (he had been her religious school teacher years before).

They are now celebrating their fifty-seventh year together and

are the parents of three children and have 5 grandchildren.

His first job after ordination was Assistant Rabbi at Temple Shaare Emeth in St. Louis, where he influenced numerous young people to go on to become rabbis and continued his scholarly interests by beginning work toward the Doctor of Hebrew Letters degree at HUC. He returned to HUC in 1950-51 to pursue the newly established Ph.D. program, but the Korean War intervened. “Having been in

(continued on page 26)

In *Renewing the Covenant* Borowitz argues that the major motivation for the invigoration of Jewish religious life in our time is the spiritual crisis that has beset all of western religion as a result of a growing recognition that a secular ground for values is no longer possible. Borowitz argues that the confidence our forebears exhibited in the power of the Enlightenment and the certitude they displayed about the adequacy of reason as a ground for human values can no longer be sustained. The utter evil of the Holocaust has forced Jews and others to a radical reassessment of the humanistic heritage of the Enlightenment and compelled many of them to face the limits of tolerance and relativism....

Yet, ethical foundations for distinguishing between good and evil – between the Nazi SS officer and his Jewish victim – must be constructed and moral absolutes must be maintained. The need to oppose evil resolutely means that ethical warrants for guiding human values and actions must be produced....In a bewildering world of choices and indecision, religion offers the surest compass for navigating the shoals of competing moral claims. In offering this analysis of the postmodern religious situation, Borowitz, in effect, is arguing that the desire on the part of many present-day Jews to affirm a normative ethics has led them back to God. However, unlike earlier Kantian approaches that marked the writings of men such as Hermann Cohen, Borowitz points out that the move from ethics to God no longer engenders an idealist

construction of God. Instead, this movement from the moral to the Divine in postmodern Jewish faith has been marked by a belief in a personal deity Who is at once transcendent and immanent....

Nevertheless, Borowitz is not prepared to retreat totally from the insights and affirmations of an Enlightenment world. The one survivor of modernist religiosity, in his view, is the concept of “the self.” Autonomy is so firmly rooted in the contemporary Jewish condition, so unalienable a right, that its surrender would be unthinkable.

Borowitz asserts that the ongoing affirmation of this concept remains crucial for present-day liberal Jews...In contrast to his modernist predecessors who “considered it axiomatic that contemporary Jewish thought must be constructed on the basis of universal selfhood,” Borowitz claims that in the postmodern setting it is essential to

“rethink” the meaning of this concept in Jewish terms. Simply put, “Jewish selfhood arises within the people of Israel and its Covenant with God.” It is a “self that is autonomous yet so fundamentally shaped by the Covenant that whatever issues from its depths will have authentic Jewish character. The secular concept of self must be transformed in terms of its Covenantal context.” For Borowitz, only a selfhood radically grounded in God and community can mandate postmodern Jewish duty.

[From “Eugene B. Borowitz: A Tribute on the Occasion of His 70th Birthday,” *Jewish Book Annual*, Volume 51, 1993-1994]

**Dr. David Ellenson on
Renewing the Covenant
by Dr. Eugene B. Borowitz**

Dr. Eugene B. Borowitz at 80: A Jewish Spiritual Journey at HUC-JIR

(continued from page 9)

school during World War II, it was my turn to serve my country,” he explained. For two years, he served as a navy chaplain at Bainbridge, Maryland, the boot camp for large numbers of Jewish servicemen from the Eastern seaboard, and simultaneously completed his Doctor of Hebrew Letters degree in Rabbinic Literature, with distinction, in 1952.

Although Borowitz sought a Midwestern pulpit after his military service, Rabbi Jack Rudin of Temple Beth El in Great Neck (a representative on the newly organized CCAR-HUC-UAHC Placement Commission) suggested a neighboring young community in Port Washington, New York. Pleased by this Long Island town’s resemblance to Columbus, Borowitz became the founding rabbi of The Community Synagogue and spent four wonderful years building that congregation. At the same time, he was invited to teach at the HUC-JIR’s New York School of Education – first at its satellite program in Great Neck (offering certification for Jewish educators teaching in Jewish religious schools) and soon after at the main campus in Manhattan.

Borowitz was appointed Associate Director of Education for Reform Judaism at the UAHC and, a year later, succeeded Dr. Emanuel Gamoran in 1957 as National Director upon Gamoran’s retirement. He earned his Ed. D. at Columbia’s Teacher’s College in 1958, after having already completed all but his dissertation in the Ph.D. program in philosophy of religion at Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary, thanks to the GI Bill’s tuition and stipend assistance. Borowitz recognized the priority of generating materials to help teachers in the classroom while at the UAHC, where “I got a chance to develop my lifelong love for publishing” while editing books, curricula, and educational periodicals. It was in 1962 that Dr. Paul M. Steinberg, then Dean of HUC-JIR/New York, offered

Borowitz a full-time, tenured faculty position as Professor of Education and Lecturer in Jewish Religious Thought. He taught education, midrash, literature, and religious thought courses and was a catalyst for change in the spiritual life of the campus, as well. Borowitz instigated the establishment of a daily service, which HUC-JIR had not had before and which has become a forum for students’ religious growth ever since.

While not by nature a politically minded person, Borowitz has nonetheless taken powerful stands at critical moments. Inspired by his own father, who racially integrated the first factory in Columbus, Borowitz felt compelled to join Albert Vorspan and Rabbis Balfour Brickner, Israel Dresner, Daniel Fogel, Jerrold Goldstein, Joel Goor, Joseph Herzog, Norman Hirsch, Leon Jick, Richard Levy, Eugene Lipman, Michael Robinson, B.T. Rubenstein, Murray Saltzman, Allen Secher, and Clyde Sills on a historic trip to St. Augustine, Florida, in response to Martin Luther King’s appeal to the CCAR conference in 1964.

“We stayed overnight in African-American homes and participated in a civil rights demonstration the following day, when fifteen of us were arrested for praying as an integrated group in front of Monson’s Restaurant and three of us were arrested for sitting down with black youngsters at the Chimes Restaurant. While in a segregated holding pen at St. John’s County Jail, we talked about why we were there, and I was asked to write it up. I took notes on scraps of paper that are now preserved in the American Jewish Archives. The ensuing document, *Why We Went: A Joint Letter from the Rabbis Arrested in St. Augustine, June 19, 1964*, became a front page story in *The New York Times*.”

Throughout the decades, Borowitz has witnessed the transformation of HUC-JIR, the Reform Movement, and American Judaism. “In my earliest years of teaching at HUC-JIR I was faced with a prevailing agnostic community on campus, which didn’t believe in the literal details of the Bible and tradition, felt that science and culture explained the world much better, and that involvement with God would require an involvement

with commandments,” Borowitz recalls. “This coincided with the move into the suburbs in the 1950s and 1960s and the realization that the neighborhood wouldn’t keep Jews Jewish and they had to do something about it – resulting in the synagogue boom. What’s more, this was a time when there was talk of the death of God and a kind of *faux* Jewish existentialism.”

“By the 1970s, I began to clarify my intellectual path, whose formulation coalesced by the 1980s through teaching, writing, and meetings with others who were similarly searching.” He vividly remembers two turning points in his intellectual journey. “The first, in the early 1960s, occurred while I was giving a lecture in Florida about different intellectual points of view about God and how one might think about God as a mortal person. A man asked, ‘Would you mind saying a few words about how you lived that or how we might live that?’ And that was a signal to me that something had changed – that there were some people who were now ready to take on belief and apply it to their lives.”

The next turning point was during a study retreat in California, in the early 1980s, where Borowitz was able to talk about belief questions with people who were not just intellectually curious, but interested in applying it to their lives. “A man talked about his personal experience with God, in having some intimation of the reality of God, something he didn’t fully understand but had contact with and a deep sense of. I realized then that the move toward religious belief was becoming personal and being taken into individual experience.”

At HUC-JIR, Borowitz was discovering this phenomenon amongst the students, as well. The Vietnam War years of the late 1960s and early 1970s had had a transformative impact on the student body. “The students entered the programs with a desire to change the world, and to do so through the Jewish community. They demonstrated a greater commitment to Jewish religious life and by the 1980s students began to talk about their personal relationship to God – a student sermon in the synagogue included mention of belief in God. Here it was, after twenty years

of teaching, I thought to myself, maybe the time has come. And, of course, that was the beginning of a new wave that has led to the interest in spirituality in the 1990s and the call for courses in philosophy and medieval mysticism, reinforced by the significant influence of Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman's landmark work in Jewish liturgy."

It was in 1970 that Borowitz founded *Shema: A Journal of Jewish Responsibility*. "Why don't we have a magazine where people can apply Judaism to current issues? Liberal, political, conservative, secular, orthodox – we were going to talk as a Jewish community where everyone was going to have their say, in short pieces, preferably dealing with one issue at a time, encompassing differing points of view and written by a broad range of contributors throughout North America. For 23 years, as its publisher and editor; and

on religious belief, to a book like *Jewish Moral Virtues*, co-authored by Frances Weinman Schwartz, addressed to lay learners." His titles include *A New Jewish Theology in the Making*, *How Can a Jew Speak of Faith Today?*, *Choosing a Sex Ethic*, *The Masks Jews Wear*, *Contemporary Christologies: A Jewish Response*, *Choices in Modern Jewish Thought*, *Liberal Judaism*, *Reform Judaism Today*, *Studies in the Meaning of Judaism*, *Judaism After Modernity*, and *Exploring Jewish Ethics: Papers on Covenant Responsibility*. The book that stands as the central statement on his theology is *Renewing the Covenant: A Theology for the Postmodern Jew*, in which he identifies the dialectical themes of Covenant and self, God and community, that he has emphasized throughout his theoretical writings. (See page 9)

field of contemporary Jewish religious thought and showing that it is a worthy academic enterprise. "The dividing line between the two streams of thought in Jewish theology, the rationalist and the non-rationalist, is that for the rationalists, human thinking determines the content of religion. For the non-rationalists, God has input into our religious situation. What I've tried to do is to rethink where the individual person in the relationship with God stands and is socially constituted, as part of the Jewish community."

"For teachers of a prior generation and for many in the community, ethics came first and religion rode on that, which resulted in extraordinary human activism. But the trouble is that most people began to think that that was all there was to Judaism or the religious life we need today. From the 1950s to the 21st century, we went from a situation where ethics seemed more certain than religious belief. But it turned out that the foundation for ethics – why people should be concerned about ethics, why it should have a compelling claim on their lives – had collapsed. That gave rise, on the right, to fundamentalism and, in the center and on the left, to the extraordinary search by people in recent decades for a new foundation for their lives. It has given rise to interest in meditation, mysticism, and *Kabbalah* – the very opposite of the former rationalist belief in knowledge and science. This has also given rise to the greater interest in liturgy, participation, and feeling and the conclusion that religious life has to be the foundation for ethical understanding and thinking. Now we go back to God's input, to a greater interest in the practice of Judaism as a foundation to the kind of lives we ought to lead. Instead of talking about the Prophets, people today talk about relationship with God."

In surveying HUC-JIR's evolution over six decades, Borowitz points to the shift from non-Zionism to Zionism and the establishment of the Year-In-Israel Program and its conversion of students into people with a living relationship to the Hebrew language. He also notes the College's role as a pioneer during the 1940s in the development of a

Why We Went: A Joint Letter from the Rabbis Arrested in St. Augustine, June 19, 1964

We came because we could not stand silently by our brother's blood...We came as Jews who remember the millions of faceless people who stood quietly, watching the smoke rise from Hitler's crematoria. We came because we know that, second only to silence, the greatest danger to man is loss of faith in man's capacity to act...We believe in man's ability to fulfill God's commands with God's help....In obeying him, we become ourselves; in following His will we fulfill ourselves. He has guided, sustained, and strengthened us in a way we could not manage on our own.... These words were first written at 3:00 a.m. in the sweltering heat of a sleepless night...scratched on the back of the pages of a mimeographed report of the bloody assaults of the Ku Klux Klan in St. Augustine.... In the battle against racism, we have participated here in only a skirmish. But the total effect of such demonstrations has created a Revolution; and the conscience of the nation has been aroused as never before. The Civil Rights Bill will become law and much more progress will be attained because this national conscience has been touched in this and other places in the struggle...Blessed art Thou, O Lord, who freest the captives.

then as Senior Editor from 1993 to 1997, this publication's office was my briefcase and contributors were not paid. In fact, the only author ever to be paid was the new Nobelist Isaac Bashevis Singer, who insisted on a token honorarium of \$25, saying "With me this is a matter of honor for the Jewish writer." As a writer of numerous articles for journals including *Commentary*, *Judaism*, and *The Journal of the Central Conference of American Rabbis*, and author of seventeen books to date, Borowitz notes, "I've been very concerned to be able to speak to many levels of readers, from a children's textbook, *Explaining Reform Judaism*, written with Naomi Patz, and a book for confirmation class students

Borowitz's authority has extended to drafting the Reform Movement's 1976 platform – as chair of the committee. This document acknowledges the significant changes in the Reform Movement since its founding Pittsburgh Platform of 1885 and the 1937 Columbus Platform. His book, *Reform Judaism Today*, is a commentary on this document, which positioned Reform Judaism at the center of American Jewish life. He also wrote the comprehensive article on Judaism for the *Encyclopedia of Religion*.

In summing up his sixty years of contribution to Jewish learning, Borowitz points to his seminal role in creating and shaping the

(continued on page 28)

Dr. Eugene B. Borowitz at 80: A Jewish Spiritual Journey at HUC-JIR

(continued from page 27)

relationship between psychiatry and religion and, with the rise of Jewish studies at universities in the 1960s, the displacement of the rabbi as the model of local scholar towards an enhanced role as pastoral counselor.

Borowitz praises his colleagues on the faculty. “One of the marvelous things about our school is our highly variegated faculty offering differing expertise, personalities, and points of view. As a scholar, one can’t think of oneself as learned if one doesn’t continue to be a student and a growing person. The hallmark of contemporary academic life harks back to the Talmudic argument – listening, critiquing, and, when possible, teaching with one another.”

Most recently, Borowitz has worked with one of HUC-JIR’s youngest faculty scholars with expertise in cultural criticism, Dr. Wendy Zierler (see page 16). They team-teach “Reel Theology,” in which film, television, and literature serve as touchstones for theological and moral conversation. This innovative course poses challenging questions: What religious or theological function can be performed by popular culture? To what extent can film, television, and contemporary literature provide occasions of transcendence, divine encounter, and religious/ethical exploration? What role can contemporary Jewish literature and film play in a curriculum of sacred study? As part of their assignments, students are required to select a work and show how they would apply this learning experience in a congregational or adult education setting.

Borowitz derives inspiration from his students, for whom he tries to be a role model “by trying to be a good Jew – somebody who cares deeply and thinks very hard about Judaism and practices it as best he can.” He sees the realities of the world in what his students say, what they ask, and what they want to know. “Our students are a leading indicator of the Jewish community.

They tend to be somewhat ahead of where the thoughtful, caring part of the Jewish community is going.”

As one of the foremost Jewish thinkers of the 20th – 21st centuries, Borowitz has been recognized by numerous honors, including the Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Foundation for Jewish Culture in 1996 and the publication of *Jewish Spiritual Journeys* – a collection of twenty essays written by colleagues and former students in celebration of his 70th birthday. He has received honorary doctorates from Lafayette College, Colgate University, and Gratz University.

Borowitz is the only Jew to have served as the President of the American Theological Society and is Vice President and Life Trustee of the Jewish Publication Society. He inaugurated the List Professorship of Jewish Studies at Harvard University in 1982 and has served as visiting professor of religion at Columbia, Princeton, State University of New York at Stony Brook, City College of the City University of New York, Drew University, Temple University, Teacher’s College of Columbia University, JTS, and Woodstock College (The Jesuit Graduate School of Theology).

Borowitz’s enduring inspiration can be found in the work and lives of his disciples. Rabbi Ellenson, his former student, recalls, “When, as a second-year rabbinical student at HUC-JIR in New York, I attended Eugene Borowitz’s lectures on ‘Modern Jewish Religious Thought,’ I was given a vocabulary to name and define the religious struggle I was then experiencing. Rabbi Borowitz said clearly and simply, ‘The problem of modern Jewish thought is one of how we affirm the best of what the modern world has taught us while simultaneously maintaining our commitment to the conventional tradition that is at the base of genuine Jewish belief and practice. In a sentence – how can we simultaneously be ‘modern’ and ‘authentically Jewish?’ It is the challenge of defining and understanding this dialectical interplay that lies at the heart of modern Jewish thought, and Eugene Borowitz has been foremost among Jewish thinkers of his generation in

explicating the nature and directions of the multiple responses that have been offered to meet this challenge.”

Now marking his 80th year, Borowitz’s research and publication are still going strong. He has just published two articles in *Conservative Judaism* and *Judaism*, respectively. He has completed a book on the linguistic logic of rabbinic theology, which is in the final stage of consideration by an academic publisher and publisher and is developing new projects with former students: another book with Frances Weinman Schwartz and a publication for Rabbi Ellenson. Borowitz expressed his hopes for the Jewish future when he received the National Jewish Book Award in the field of Jewish Thought in 1974 for *The Masks Jews Wear* and said, “We need to guide Jews in the difficult task of maintaining an intense loyalty to Jewish tradition, that is, of living by a deeply Jewish faith, while freely assessing the virtues of the various modern ways of interpreting it – and within this continuous dialectic process to find the personal and conceptual integrity of what it means to be a modern Jew.”

“As rabbi, scholar, professor, and *moreh derekh*,” says Rabbi Ellenson, “we honor Dr. Borowitz’s passion, commitment, and love for God and the Jewish people, and express thanks for all he has taught and will continue to teach. May the passion and the intellect with which Rabbi Borowitz has challenged and directed the Jewish community continue unabated for years to come, and may he go on, from strength to strength!”

