

Professor Rabbi Yehoyada Amir

Narrative Résumé

I was born in Jerusalem in 1954 to my mother, Margalit Amir (née Lissauer) and my father, Yehoshua Amir, a Liberal Rabbi and Professor of Jewish Thought. I grew up in the midst of the culture and society in Jerusalem and Israel, but I was also the product of the very different experiences my parents had brought with them to the country.

My paternal grandfather, Rabbi Menahem (Mannas) Neumark, PhD, completed his studies at the Orthodox *Rabbiner-Seminar* in Berlin in 1904, but refused to accept ordination from an institution that rejected any possibility of Biblical criticism. He was ordained to the rabbinate by the (Liberal) Union of Rabbis, and became the first rabbi of the Jewish community in the town of Duisburg, Germany, and its only rabbi during the pre-Holocaust period. He vanished in the Holocaust (Theresienstadt), but all his children sooner or later immigrated to the Land of Israel. My father was ordained by the Liberal *Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* in Berlin shortly before its destruction, and was among the last Jews to receive a PhD in Nazi Germany. After arriving in the Land of Israel, my father worked for many years as a teacher at *Ulpan Etzion*, the first Ulpan in Israel, before later serving as professor of Jewish Thought at Tel Aviv University and at other Israeli universities. For decades he was also one of the volunteer rabbis of the Conservative congregation *Emet ve-Emunah*, which served as a spiritual home for many German immigrants during this period.

My mother's origins lay in Dutch Jewry, including both its Ashkenazi and Sephardi wings and with both religious and secular leanings. She survived the Holocaust in hiding in the home of her first husband, a half-Jew who had converted to Judaism. My brother, their eldest child, was saved thanks to a family of Righteous Gentiles who adopted and raised him for a period of almost three years. In 1946 my second brother was born. They arrived in the Land of Israel before Israel's Independence War, after which they settled in Jerusalem. Following her divorce, my mother remarried, and from her second marriage my sister (1952) and I were born. My father and mother functioned as the parents and guardians of all four children.

As the son of a liberal-religious father and a proudly secular mother, and as a student in the public education system and a youth leader in the *Modi'in* troop of the Israeli Scouts, I enjoyed from an early age the freedom to choose my own way as a Jew and as a human, and to shape my own political, religious and social worldview. I was the only one of the four children who maintained an interest in my father's liberal-religious synagogue and worldview in these years. At the time, *Emet ve-Emunah* was one of just three Conservative congregations in Israel (alongside *Moriah Congregation*, another longstanding institution in Haifa, and the young congregation *Netzach Yisrael* in Ashkelon). A handful of other liberal

congregations were also active in this period (including, in Jerusalem, *Mekavshei Derekh* Congregation, which was unaffiliated at the time, and *Har-El*, the oldest Reform congregation in Israel, both of which are still active to this day). I was one of a small number of youths who grew up in the congregation, and accordingly one of an intimate circle of young Conservative Jews in Israel. As a youth I served as the congregation's *gabbai* and ran many of its activities. Among other innovations, I introduced sermons by women in the services, a previously unfamiliar practice that attracted considerable opposition within the relatively traditionalist congregation. In 1970, I joined the USY-On-Wheels summer program as a young Israeli participant – my first intensive encounter with American Conservative youth.

Summer 1972, after completing my studies at the “*Liyada*” High School, eight graduates from my year class decided to undertake a volunteering year (*shnat-sherut*) before joining the military service – a program that had hitherto been reserved for young kibbutzniks. I was one of three graduates of the Scouts within this group who campaigned to form a new framework for urban youths to operate within the Scout movement and alongside the traditional Nachal settlement groups. Our campaign resulted in the formation of *Garin Re'im* in Yeruham. The group included five kibbutznikim as well as the three of us, and blazed a new trail for urban youths that would later become an established channel for volunteering and creativity. This year reinforced my commitment to education, the inculcation of social justice, political involvement and multicultural integration. I manifested this commitment, among other ways, through the year I spent as coordinator of the *Lapid* Scout troop (1980). Based on the underprivileged Katamonim neighborhood of Jerusalem, this troop operated in Givat Gonen School, which would later redefine itself as a school in the spirit of Labor movement values.

I joined the military service right after the Yom Kippur War (1973) and served in the Artillery Corps, ending my period of regular service as a battery commander with the rank of lieutenant. During this period I also served as an instructor in the Artillery Corps' office training program and as a battalion fire commander officer. Immediately after my discharge, I was stationed as a battalion battery commander in the reserves, a position in which I served until 1981, when I left Israel to spend two years abroad. After returning to Israel, I was placed in a similar position in a different reserve battalion. During my final years of reserve duty, I served as deputy commander of the battalion and was a full-fledged partner in commanding and leading the battalion. I was retired from reserve duty at the rank of major. The many years I spent in command functions in the IDF provided an opportunity to develop my skills in the fields of leadership, management and social interaction with soldiers from diverse social, ideological and cultural backgrounds. These aspects were as important to me as the professional military side of my work, and this approach profoundly shaped by command style.

Shortly after I completed my regular service, the Peace Now movement was established. I became active in Peace Now just a few months after it was formed and participated in its first

delegation to North American Jewry in 1978 – several years after the American Jewish establishment had crushed the “Breira” movement due to its fear of any criticism of Israeli policy. I was one of the leaders of the movement for several years, and served as its treasurer for a few months. Since then, I have been involved at varying levels of intensity in a number of political and educational frameworks that seek to promote peace and social justice in Israel.

I undertook my academic studies, from BA through to PhD, at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Over the course of my studies, my research interest gradually came to focus on modern Jewish thought. Under the supervision of Professor Eliezer Schweid, I wrote my MA thesis (*The ‘Star of Redemption’s’ Epistemology of Faith*) and doctorate thesis (*Responses in Israel to Franz Rosenzweig: Akiva Ernst Simon, Shmuel Hugo Bergmann, Barukh Kurzweil, Yitzchak Julius Guttman*). In 1992 I spent a fruitful year engaging in research at the *Freie Universität* in Berlin, and in 1994 I received my doctorate degree.

During my MA and PhD studies, and for some ten years after receiving my PhD, I taught at the Department of Jewish Thought at the Hebrew University. During some of this period I also served as an adjunct professor at Ben Gurion University of the Negev and as head of the Department of Jewish Cultural Studies at Beit Berl College. As part of this latter position, I also served as the head of Beit Berl’s Center for Holocaust Teaching. I also served for two years as the head of a team that developed a unique Jewish studies curriculum at the Alliance School in Tel Aviv.

As I began my MA studies, I also joined the Conservative Seminary of Judaic Studies, where I spent four academic years (5745-5748) in the Education track. My academic choices reflected, on the one hand, my background in Conservative congregational and movement life and, on the other, my post-Halakhic worldview, which led me away from the strictly Halakhic approach according to which the seminary wished to shape the Conservative rabbinate. My convictions later led me to the Reform rabbinate and to my educational leadership roles in its rabbinical seminary, Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR) .

After completing my studies at the Seminary of Judaic Studies, which by this time had already acquired the name “Schechter Institute” and was developing its MA program under the auspices of the Jewish Theological Seminary, I went on to spend several years teaching Jewish Thought and Philosophy of Education at this institution. I served for one year as the head of the institution’s Jewish Studies Teaching track and shaped the approach of this track.

For over 20 years, I was an active and leading member of Mevakshei Derekh, taking an active and substantial part in shaping its policy and course of action. During this period, Mevakshei Derekh served as my spiritual home and provided a platform for informal rabbinical leadership functions. Over the years I served as a member of the congregation’s Presidium, which effectively leads the congregation, and as chairperson of its Prayer

Committee, which is responsible for shaping the liturgical side of the congregation's life. Among other areas of involvement, I took part in the work of the team that developed two volumes of Midrash, poetry, prayer and inquiry that are used during the Days of Awe and other festivals. In recent years I have been a member of *Kol HaNeshama* in Jerusalem and a close friend of *Kamatz*, the Reform congregation in Mevasseret Zion, where I give occasional sermons and lead study sessions.

For several years I was a senior partner in shaping the administrative, Jewish and educational approach of *Tali Bayit VeGan* School in Jerusalem. During this formative stage in the school's development, I made a significant contribution to defining its unique path, determining appropriate modalities for parental involvement, establishing continuation frameworks for the graduates of the school, and stabilizing the school's status and relations with the Jerusalem educational authorities, the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism, and the *Tali* network.

From 2000 through 2009 I headed the Israel Rabbinic Program (IRP) at HUC-JIR. During this period I reshaped the program, which had hitherto been moribund and attracted relatively few participants. I expanded the program and oversaw the education of an entire generation of Reform rabbis who are now serving Israeli society. I can count the majority of the Reform rabbis serving in the institutions and congregations of the Israeli Reform Movement and in other bodies as my students. Many of these rabbis continue to see me as a teacher and mentor and consult with me on spiritual, social and administrative issues. I am proud that we have managed to include in the program many of those responsible for leading the wave of the Israeli version of Jewish renewal. These students came to us not because of our Reform affiliation, but out of a sense that we can provide them with teaching, training, an opportunity for personal growth, and educational and spiritual support.

Among other changes, the reshaping of the IRP included a greater emphasis on Talmudic and Halakhic studies. We introduced guided prayers and intensive study of prayer, as well as courses in spiritual counseling. An Educational program was also developed. In shaping my students' learning in the field of Jewish Thought, my goal was to enable them to develop an infrastructure for a personal theology that could guide them in their future work. The program placed a strong emphasis on the personal spiritual and professional development of the students and on their empowerment as spiritual figures and as mentors for significant circles.

HUC-JIR grew significantly during this period, a process in which I played a key role. I made a decisive contribution to the development of the field of spiritual counseling, and HUC-JIR was among the trailblazers in Israeli society in this field. I also played a major role in developing HUC-JIR program in Pluralistic Jewish Education in collaboration with the Melton Center of the Hebrew University. I was a member of the steering committee of the Israel Religious Action Center, the steering committee of Kehillat Tzedek, and the board of Panim.

During this period, I encouraged and participated in a resurgence of religious literary creativity in circles involved in Reform Judaism in Israel. In some cases, I myself wrote and edited these materials. The products of this process included three innovative festival volumes combining thought and liturgy; spiritual counseling booklets for the sick and for mourners; collections of adapted prayers; theological works; a Passover Haggadah; sermons for the weekly Torah portions, and so forth. The *Barkhu* collection, which I edited together with others after leaving my position as head of the program, is the richest collection in Hebrew relating to the renewal of prayer and the challenges facing this process.

For me, the highpoint of this literary effort was the theological account I offered in my book *A Small Still Voice: Theological Critical Reflections*. This book was published in 2009, just as I reached my decision to retire from my position as head of the IRP and from my involvement in leading and managing HUC-JIR in Jerusalem. In this book I began to offer a systematic presentation of my religious, spiritual and social commitment and to explain the foundations of my faith as well as the open questions with which I continue to grapple.

For many years I have been an active member of the Council of Progressive Rabbis in Israel (MARAM), including a number of periods of office as a member of its board. In this capacity I have been a senior partner in the comprehensive reforms introduced in this body in order to adapt the scope and scale of its activities to changing realities, including the membership of over 70 new rabbis trained during my decade as head of the IRP, and during the subsequent years when I have taught and educated many of the students. I currently serve a chairperson of the Ideological Affairs Committee, a joint body of MARAM and the Israeli Reform Movement, and as MARAM's representative on the joint Reform publications committee, which encourages literary creativity in the movement.

Throughout this period I have considered myself an educator and *shi'ach-tzibbur*, focusing on attempts to bring healing to Israeli society and to strengthen contemporary Jewish existence. I am a firm believer in respecting the different and diverse identities of those who lead the various liberal Jewish movements, as well as the leaders of the secular and Orthodox Jewish streams. Equally, however, I am convinced of the profound need to cooperate, to join efforts, and to acknowledge that in many cases our common interests outweigh our differences. My firm Reform identity is the product of a deep religious and personal conviction regarding the religious approach that is right for me and the way to maximize my contribution to my students. Others will act along parallel lines, adding their own blessing and hope. I do not see this identity as partisan and I do not tend to work under banners. I do believe, however, that movements and denominations are important tools; at their best, they can amplify and empower educational, spiritual, social and political endeavors.

I will not discuss my research work and publications in depth here. The list of publications attached to my formal résumé provides an accurate reflection of my research's focuses, of the interrelations between its different aspects, and of the kinship between this area and my other areas of activity. I will only note that my research centers on various aspects of modern

Jewish thought, and particularly on non-Orthodox perspectives (both religious and secular). As is well known, the study of Modern Jewish thought is currently undergoing an alarming and dangerous decline in Israel, and very few academics are engaged in this field in a serious manner in the Israeli universities. The Schechter Institute constitutes the most important center for this field of research and includes many of the scholars who are active in this area.

My deep interest in the philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig is manifested, first and foremost, in my book *Reason out of Faith: The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig* (2004), and in a long series of articles published in various languages. This interest is equally evident in my role as editor of the Hebrew translation of Rosenzweig's popular work *Understanding the Sick and the Healthy* (*Das Büchlein vom gesunden und kranken Menschenverstand*; 2005, trans: Har'el Kain); my longstanding activity in the International Rosenzweig Society (2004-2012); my role (together with Prof. Yossi Turner) in initiating and organizing the International Conference on the Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig in the summer of 2006, a few weeks after the end of the Second Lebanon War; and my role as editor of the collection *Faith, Truth, and Reason: New Perspectives on Franz Rosenzweig's 'Star of Redemption'*" (2012, with Prof. Turner and Dr. Martin Brassler). Many of the articles included in this collection are based on the lectures at the conference. In recent years my research attention has also focused on Nachman Krochmal, as reflected in a series of articles I have published on his thought; my revised edition of his monumental work *Moreh nevukhei ha-zeman* (2009); and a book I am currently preparing offering a comprehensive examination of his thought and writings. My work relating to Rosenzweig and Krochmal reflects not only my fields of research, but also a profound spiritual and existential interest in two men whose thought is highly relevant – and sometimes painfully so – to the challenges of our own period.

A similar context explains my growing research interest in the thought of Aharon David Gordon, Martin Buber, Hermann Cohen, Mordechai Kaplan, Shmuel Hugo Bergmann, Julius Guttmann, and Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, among others. Just as important, I believe, are my studies on key themes in the thought of recent generations, such as the approach to the myth, coping with the memory of the Holocaust, and understanding the meaning of Jewish existence in a majority Jewish state.

For 20 years I have been active in various ways in promoting interfaith dialogue. My list of publications includes several articles devoted to this field. I taught for many years at the Christian-Jewish Summer University at Humboldt University in Berlin, an intensive week-long informal program held every two years. I have also given lectures at various conferences and participated in dialogue groups. To my regret, I have to date been less involved in such activities in the local Mediterranean context and in the field of Jewish-Islamic dialogue.

In the 2011-12 academic year I served as a research fellow at New York University's Tikvah Center for Law and Jewish Civilization. This wonderful year will produce two books. The first, currently nearing completion, will be devoted to the thought of Nachman Krochmal. The second will examine the longing of schools of non-Orthodox religious thought in Israel

to found a “Halakhah” that can substantiate a way of life in keeping with their spiritual tendencies and the “Aggadah” they have created. I have already completed an extended essay on this theme, published by the Tikvah Center.

I am married to Geuli a poet and a painter. Our sons Amit and Roy and their spouses are our faithful partners as they build their homes and shape their own way in life before God and their fellow humans. So far we have been blessed with one grandchild, Hadas.