In the mid-1940s, as America began to emerge from the Second World War and world Jewry began to grasp the still unfathomable horrors of what later was called the Holocaust, three Hebrew Union College rabbinic students in Cincinnati became lifelong friends and fierce intellectual comrades. These three young men, just twenty-years old when they met, became a chevruta in the deepest sense of the word. At every possible opportunity for more than half a century they debated philosophy and theology, politics, life and love: Rabbi Professor Steven Schwarzschild, Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf, and our beloved Rabbi Distinguished Professor Eugene B. Borowitz. Upon their ordination in 1948, just as the State of Israel was born, each one knew that Judaism, especially liberal theology, must be rethought. What did it mean to lead and think and pray knowing what they now knew—that their predecessors did not—about humanity and modernity?

Prof. Schwarzschild died suddenly in 1989. With Dr. Borowitz he had an ongoing chevruta on the possibilities and limitations of Neo-Kantian philosophy. Dr. Borowitz often told me that anything he said or wrote about philosophy, even after Schwarzschild’s death, continued to be part of Dr. Borowitz’s endless debate with him.
When Rabbi Wolf died in December 2008, Dr. Borowitz—as generations of those of us blessed and challenged to be his students called him—although he spent two decades getting me to call him Gene—made his way alone in a storm to Rabbi Wolf’s funeral in Chicago to give one of the most painful eulogies of his life. He became what Gene would call his “spiritual brother” and “private prophet.”

Dr. Borowitz began the eulogy for Rabbi Wolf with a story of being with him at a funeral of a close friend . . . “After the interment,” said Dr. Borowitz, “as we were standing there at [the] grave, Rabbi Wolf, or Arnold as he was known to his colleagues, tearfully threw his arms around me and said, “I want you to do my funeral . . . I can’t do yours . . . I can’t do another one like this at all. . . .” Gene protested, of course, as he said at Arnold’s funeral, “but you know what it meant to try to protest to Arnold. So I am here today to fulfill another command from my brother.”

To fulfill commandments, that sense of loving and absolute duty, was precisely how Dr. Borowitz understood relationships with others and with God. Whether Dr. Borowitz quoted Martin Buber or Emmanuel Levinas, psalms or prophets, he insisted that we respond to others not just out of ethical impulse but out of a God-grounded sense of commanded-ness.

With Dr. Borowitz, like hundreds and thousands of his students, I studied Buber and Levinas, psalms and ethics, Leo Baeck and Joseph B. Soloveitchik. . . . And he and I, like many of us here, had a very precious chevruta. For me it took a startling turn the day he insisted that I argue with him more. He insisted that I must correct him when I thought he was wrong—it was a daunting request but one which changed everything.

For many years he would even buy for me subscriptions to the New York Review of Books—at first anonymously—as well as other Jewish academic periodicals. This was a sign not just of his usual generosity, but he also seemed to want to ensure that I was up-to-date on the latest thinking, and perhaps even more so to ensure that he might have someone of the next generation with whom he could talk and often marvel at or criticize whatever the newest exciting book or idea was at the moment.

Many years ago when he was moving from the home he and Estelle had lived in for more than forty years and where they raised their precious family, he wanted to give me much of his library. . . . What an awesome library and what an enormous responsibility. A
few years later when I told him his books were making aliyaḥ, he gave me his blessing—stressing what a great mitzvah it is to live in the Land of Israel and that if he couldn’t be there at least his books could. And when we—the College-Institute and the Reform Movement in Israel—worked to have *Renewing the Covenant: A Theology for the Postmodern Jew* translated into Hebrew, he and I spoke many times at great length asking together the questions: Which sections would be relevant for Israeli society? Would it be properly understood? And, of course, a deeper question: What did it mean to him to be translated? Upon the publication of the volume, titled in Hebrew: *Hidusha shel HaBrit*, a couple years ago, he said to me with a smile: “See, I am making aliyaḥ...” And when I came back to the U.S. to work at the College in Cincinnati, Gene was insistent, even though his health was declining, that we find every opportunity to teach and be together.5

From near and from afar Gene so inspired me that—with his encouragement and constant support—I devoted much of the last twenty years to the study of his thought, his writings, and his life’s work. In 2005 I was asked to write the entry on Dr. Borowitz and his theology for the new *Encyclopedia Judaica*6—something Prof. David Ellenson insisted upon—and soon thereafter wrote my Ph.D. dissertation on the development of Dr. Borowitz’s theology. In more recent years, I have published articles in academic and nonacademic journals about the importance of Dr. Borowitz’s thought for the autonomous Jewish self in our time.7 I not only loved him, I loved his ideas.

So—*l’havdil* לְהוָדִיל—in a very different but related sense, I stand here today to fulfill the command of our rabbi and teacher, who was in many ways my intellectual and spiritual “father.” I want to suggest how we—his inheritors—might continue to teach, celebrate, and renew his theology of covenant, his love of God, and the meaning of his life.

Dr. Borowitz brought so much Torah and God into our world with such profound power and depth that it cannot but continue to live far beyond the limited lives of those he touched. Among Dr. Borowitz’s enormous contributions are the 19 books he wrote, along with more than 350 articles and book reviews, in a stunning range of fields including Jewish education, Jewish ethics, Jewish philosophy, halachah, Jewish-Christian theological response, Talmudic language and theology, and rabbinic training.8
His work, according to some scholars, has been so influential that it is impossible to imagine liberal theology, much less Reform Judaism, without his influence.9 Scholars have called Borowitz: (1) “The premier liberal Jewish theologian at work today,”10 (2) The “dean” of contemporary American Jewish thinkers,11 (3) “Pastor to Jews in a postmodern world;”12 and (4) And most of all, according to Arnold Wolf,13 Borowitz [was] “the great teacher of our generation, the thinker who best exemplified our strength and who best probes our weaknesses” and characterized Borowitz as a “bridge theologian, spanning modernism and postmodernism.”14

In fact, the central role he would play in setting the agenda for liberal Judaism was clear quite early on, when he published one of his first but truly seminal articles in 1961 in Commentary magazine. Long before, he knew he had to create a more open and pluralistic periodical, and that’s how Sh’ma: A Journal of Jewish Responsibility came into being in 1970—which he edited and published for twenty-three years. It is in this 1961 article that he first coined the term “Covenant Theology” in order to refer to a Jewish theology that transcended traditional notions of law or universal monotheistic ethics. He explained that this new theology in the making—“Covenant Theology”15—was a [postmodern] response to the real God encountered in history.16 He tried to explain that early intuition a few years later in the following way: “What Judaism needs is not a theology, but theological concern, not theological uniformity but theological informed-ness . . . a sharp focus on the religious component of Jewishness.”17

As part of his efforts to go beyond the work of Buber and Rosenzweig, Borowitz knew that he needed to be even more clear about what a truly commanding existentialist theology might mean. “I knew with gradually increasing clarity,” he wrote, “that the truth of Judaism inhered in its particularity and not merely in its universalism. Therefore, what our community now required was a theology of non-Orthodox Jewish duty, particular as well as universal.”18

“Instead of becoming another confirmed mid-century agnostic,” wrote Gene, frustrated with the secularization of his generation, “I became convinced that only belief could now found, even mandate, our strong sense of personal and human values.”19 His life’s work was—as he wrote often, but emphatically to me in 2005—primarily about “bringing the living God back to the religiosity of thinking Jews.”20 Everything else was about working out the
possibilities and implications of that presence of God in our lives and in the world.

In his crowning 1991 theological work, *Renewing the Covenant: A Theology for the Postmodern Jew*, there are two sections that I believe have had the greatest impact on much of what would and will follow: The first is a culminating section entitled “The Five Premises of Jewish Duty,” which outlines how he understands a simultaneous Covenant between the Autonomous Jewish Self; a commanding God; and the Jewish People, past, present, and future. But the section that challenged his students the most was entitled “Knowing What God Wants of Us.” This section and the whole book is filled with a spiritual clarity that God is still present and commanding and that a thoroughgoing understanding of postmodernity, and God’s presence, would cause us to see the complexities of leading serious liberal Jewish lives as the best possible way of ensuring that we would become more ethical, more Godly, and less like the worst of humanity.

I find this Ultimate to be of such superlative quality as to lift me far above myself in aspiration and, often, in consequent action. I am surprised, grateful, honored, commissioned by this intimacy with the Other that I and our people call, let me say it, God.21

So today we must ask, in his language: What does Dr. Borowitz’s theology still demand of us (even if he can no longer directly engage with us, make funny faces, mark up our papers with green ink, or send us long e-mails explaining why we might be wrong)? There are three primary areas that encompass who he was, what he was about, and what he still demands of us:

1. **More theological concern.** More piety—which he believed can and should be arrived at through study and prayer, both of which should more deeply ground our commitment.”

2. **More ethics.** Ours must be a very particular ethical commitment along with the universal, grounded not only by ethical sensibilities but by a commanding, present God, who should even mandate our strong sense of personal and human values.22

3. **More love.** He was a man of enormous love—love for his family, love for his students, love of ideas, love of Torah, love of Talmud, love of Prayer, and love of God. First and foremost he strived to be a student of Buber and always seek out
a deeper sense of what he would call “a touch of the sacred” in all his relationships, a sense of the Buberian “Thou” when engaging every human being.

He was very conscious of the unfinished tasks of his theology. And he had an unquenchable thirst for knowledge: he constantly wanted to think even more deeply about some idea or aspect of God, write one more book, one more article, create one more new course, and complete just one more project.

While he devoted his life to restoring God to a significant place in American Jewish religious life, he focused primarily on personal religious experience and the ethics and practices of this world:

Our kind of religiosity was based on what, if one opens oneself up to God, one can feel or sense about God and the Covenant. But that method fails us when we seek to speak of life after death. We who are alive in the here and now, can hardly deal directly of what life might be there and then. Our standard way of thinking religiously does not directly deal with such an issue. But, the certainties of classic Jewish tradition will not let us go. If God is eternal, and we are created in God’s image, should there not be a touch of eternity in us?23

“Of course,” Gene continued in the eulogy at Rabbi Wolf’s funeral, “we can let our fantasies roam: Arnold in heaven . . . looking for Franz Rosenzweig, who he hopes will explain to him what a couple of generations of scholars have not been able to figure out in his thought.”

And now I must echo your words back to you, dear teacher. There was surely something about Dr. Borowitz “which went deeper into reality than an ordinary lifetime does. His exceptional life, one so much richer than most of us know, one so open to God and God’s service, that it intimates the possibility of eternity in all of us.”24

Indeed our hearts might be heavy and broken with sorrow but we are also overflowing with gratitude for having known such a great man, his brilliance and his love.

My precious rabbi and teacher: You were forced to let go of this world and so we must bid you farewell. We return you now to the great and commanding God who gave you to us. Because you really did believe not only in the Messiah but in the world to come, I remind all of us of that faith as we prepare to lay you to rest.
What does your theology mean for you now? Yes, you too now will be reunited with those you loved, with your beloved soul mate Estelle, who you missed so constantly; and yes, you will be able to seek out your precious friends including your chevrutas Arnie Wolf, Steven Schwarzschild, and Emil Fackenheim; and yes, you too will get to push Buber and Rosenzweig toward the ideas you wanted them to articulate better. And there you’ll be able to rejoin the Talmudic debates of Rabbi Yochanan and Reish Lakeish as well.25

All of them are awaiting your arrival, ready to study and debate with you anew, to hear your new questions and demands. . . . They will all be there to welcome you—with arms wide open—into the Great and Heavenly Study Hall of the next world, the beit midrash shel malah, where loving Torah, loving God, and loving others eternally surely must be easier . . . more clear and more pure.

May you find there great peace and comfort. May you know a nearness to God that you craved so deeply—and often left you so lonely—here in this imperfect Earthly House of Study beit midrash shel ma’atah . . . May you finally be at ease and be satisfied—knowing fully all the triumphs of your life’s work and how deeply you have inspired in all of us, the possibilities of eternity.26

Blessed are You, Adonai, Sovereign of the Universe who has given a share of Your Divine wisdom and Your glory especially to this soul,

HaRav Yechiel Baruch ben Binyamin u’Malkah who knew and proclaimed constantly Your Divine reality and Your eternal truths.

Go in peace, our precious rabbi and teacher. . . .

Notes

1. Dr. Borowitz often reminded the senior class that he was the last in his class to be hired in a rabbinic position, lest a panicking student lose sight of the longer trajectory of one’s life.


4. In personal correspondence, whenever he sensed that he might have failed me or someone else he cared about, in addition to trying to rectify any oversight directly with the other person he often added “I hope God will also understand. . . .”


6. In response to sharing with Borowitz a question from the new Encyclopedia Judaica editor why I’d left out of the EJ piece the significance of Abraham Joshua Heschel in Borowitz’s thought, and why I hadn’t included the “fact” of Heschel’s enormous impact on Borowitz, so much so that Borowitz considered following Heschel to JTS, Borowitz quickly responded that I was correct and the editor was not. “. . . If [the editor] raises any questions . . . I not only didn’t have the connection Heschel, I didn’t have any romantic notions as R or D did about JTS . . . It is something of a nuisance to have other people’s pieties worked out on you. I am grateful to you for your caring, Gene.” Private correspondence, April 19, 2005.


8. For the most inclusive collection of Borowitz’s work see Studies in the Meaning of Judaism (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2002).

9. See collection of essays in Jewish Spiritual Journeys, ed. Lawrence A. Hoffman and Arnold J. Wolf (West Orange, NJ: Behrman House, 1997). Hoffman writes that Borowitz “created the field of modern Jewish theology.” In a review of Renewing the Covenant, Alan Mittleman writes: “Borowitz has long helped to redefine the terrain of Jewish theology in America.” See Alan L. Mittleman,

17. Ibid., 53.
18. Borowitz, “A Life of Jewish Learning,” in *Studies in the Meaning of Judaism*, 395. Borowitz also widened his understanding of theology to include a larger claim that in general, Jewish theology is Judaism’s “meta-halakhah, the belief which impels and guides our duties,” those of liberal as well as non-liberal Jews. Ibid., 388.
20. Private correspondence, April 19, 2005.
21. Eugene Borowitz, *Renewing the Covenant: A Theology for the Postmodern Jew* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 266. “This restricted cultural vision has also led to a massive inability to assert the authority of ideals, the reality of persons, or, for that matter, the nature of any complex reality like love or goodness. Knowing them not to be illusory, I have become skeptical of skepticism and remain confident that this One I confront is real.”
24. Borowitz, Eulogy for Arnold Jacob Wolf, December 26, 2008. “And so even if we cannot know what awaits us we can trust that these wonderful memories of Arnold will abide with us and give us the
strength to face our own end, and that, in the meantime, our incomparable rabbi, Arnold, our Arnold, will find a way to be with us, and we, one day, with him.”

25. For a symposium celebrating his 85th Birthday on February 17, 2009, Dr. Borowitz asked me and two other young scholars who had written about his thought to respond in part to the following text from the Babylonian Talmud Tractate M’tzia 84a: “Resh Lakish died, and R. Johanan was plunged into deep grief. Said the Rabbis, ‘Who shall go to ease his mind? Let R. Eleazar b. Pedath go, whose disquisitions are very subtle.’ So he went and sat before him; and on every dictum uttered by R. Johanan he observed: ‘There is a Baraita which Supports you.’ ‘Are you as the son of Lakisha?’ But he complained: ‘When I stated a law, the son of Lakisha used to raise twenty-four objections, to which I gave twenty-four answers, which consequently led to a fuller comprehension of the law; whilst you say, “A Baraita has been taught which supports you:” do I not know myself that my dicta are right?’ Thus he went on rending his garments and weeping, ‘Where are you, O son of Lakisha, where are you, O son of Lakisha;’ and he cried thus until his mind was turned.”