

Remembering Jacob Neusner

10 October 2016

Jack's family telephoned Saturday to say that he had left us. Decades ago, I had read his lucid account of שבת, including his remark of how sweet a nap is on that day. All who love Jack are grateful that Suzanne and his children enabled the repose of death to unfold at home.

But the name "Jacob Neusner" and the noun "repose" are not natural partners. Early in his tenure at Bard College, I met one of his friends in Manhattan, so we could assess the process of settling in. Both of us were delighted by the ease of the transition. Describing Jack's attitude, we were put in mind of the strategy of another legend in his own time: "float like a butterfly, sting like a bee." His intellectual footwork was no less dazzling than Muhammad Ali's, and even happy, Jack remained a busy bee, sting ready for any bout.

He transformed his discipline. He made Rabbinic literature the focus of academic inquiry by means of critical translation and historical analysis, rather than the preserve of pious antiquarianism. His vigor and precision – as well as his taste for what he proudly called "punch-in-the-nose prose" – drew controversy.

Jack was already a great scholar when I came to know him, first by reading his scholarship. One day a letter arrived for me at my department in Sheffield, England from Brown University. Two realizations came to me at once on opening the envelope: the material was sent by Jacob Neusner, and it included a review of my most recent book. As I later remarked to Jack, I began wondering as I drew out a letter and the review

what other lines of work I might pursue if he were as tough a reviewer as some people said he was.

Contrary to this repute, I found an elegant appreciation of how the New Testament and Jesus are better understood with reference to Aramaic traditions of Judaism. At the time embroiled in controversies on his own turf, Jack had found a way to step outside a narrow construction of his expertise and offer encouragement. We corresponded and eventually met; Jack and Suzanne made Odile and me welcome when we moved to the United States. By the time I took up a position at Bard College, interests expressed in our correspondence had influenced our research. Each of us sought to analyze, not simply texts, but the religious activities – ethical, ritual, and philosophical – that lay behind them. The collaboration was intense, enjoyable, challenging – and included many colleagues at Bard and beyond, because we understood that questions such as ours need to be posed across religious traditions as well as within them.

He was a tireless champion. He championed his ideas, his projects, his colleagues, his discipline, his Judaism, and became a one-man publicity machine for his children. Years ago, he might reasonably have decided to fold his hands and warm himself with the admiration that rightly came his way. He did not.

Instead, he pressed into the last phase of his revolutionary work. Distaste for confessional theology and its dogmas never left Jack. But he saw a role for theology in a different key – as how people articulate the ethics, rituals, and meanings that animate their lives. Varied and rich, Jack compared theology in this existential sense to music, finding in one the play of the mind's eye, and in the other the play of the mind's ear.

Towards the end of his life, he became vociferous in his insistence that play of this kind never ends.

On evening Jack and I spoke at a presentation of the Institute of Advanced Theology at Bard. Someone asked, "Why don't Jews believe in the afterlife?" Jack's counter question did not delay: "You've never been to a synagogue?" The questioner insisted on enrollment in a local congregation. "So," said Jack, "what are you doing when the liturgy praises God who 'makes alive the dead'? It is right in the liturgy." Floating like a butterfly, he stung like a bee.

"All Israel, for them there is a portion in the world to come" (Sanhedrin 10:1). Jack loved that mishnah, and the complex interpretations it provoked. He knew something of that portion in this life, enjoys it now, and remains a blessing to us.

Bruce Chilton