

**Opening our Hearts and Minds Even to People Who Challenge our Beliefs
and Assumptions about Life**

By Rabbi Amy S Wallk

המקום שבו אנו צודקים ~ The Place Where We Are Right

by Yehuda Amichai

From the place where we are right
Flowers will never grow
In the spring.

מִן הַמָּקוֹם שֶׁבוֹ אָנוּ צוֹדֵקִים
לֹא יִצְמָחוּ לְעוֹלָם
פְּרָחִים בְּאֲבִיב

The place where we are right
Is hard and trampled
Like a yard.

הַמָּקוֹם שֶׁבוֹ אָנוּ צוֹדֵקִים
הוּא רָמוּס וְקִשָּׁה
כְּמוֹ חֲצָר

But doubts and loves
Dig up the world
Like a mole, a plow.

אֲבָל סִפְקוֹת וְאַהֲבוֹת עוֹשִׂים
אֶת הָעוֹלָם לְתַחוּם
כְּמוֹ חֲפְרָפֶרֶת, כְּמוֹ חֲרִישׁ

And a whisper will be heard in the
place
Where once stood the house
Which was destroyed.

וְלַחֲשֵׁה תִשְׁמַע בַּמָּקוֹם
שֶׁבוֹ הָיָה הַבַּיִת
אֲשֶׁר נִחְרַב

Introduction

Last June, while I was in Israel, my daughter, Nina, called and told me about the death of her friend's grandfather. Nina was in Tel Aviv for the summer on a Young Judea program for college students. As was her friend, Becca, whom she has known from Camp Ramah since they were nine years old. Becca's grandfather had made Aliyah as an older man and was being buried in Jerusalem. Nina was planning to go to the funeral and I took pride in my daughter's loyalty to her friend and thought how timely they were together this summer and in Israel. I also thought how much Nina would learn by seeing a funeral in Israel.

I asked, innocently, about Becca's grandfather and Nina told me who he was. Upon hearing her response, I nearly dropped the phone and suddenly realized that this was no ordinary grandfather and it would be no ordinary funeral.

One of the greats of the generation had died: David Weiss Halivni, may his memory be a blessing.

David Weiss Halivni was a renowned Talmud scholar. And I spent my life staying away from his teaching. It was time for me to turn - and think about who this man was and where I allowed my own opinions stand in the way of learning and seeing. I told Nina about Becca's grandfather's autobiography, which had left a mark on me many years ago when it was first published, and it was time for me to reread and do some turning of my own.

Background

Professor Halivni was the lone survivor of the Holocaust in his Eastern European Jewish family. He was born David Weiss in Kobylestka Poliana, now in Ukraine. He later adopted the Hebrew surname Halivini, which, like Weiss, means white. He adopted the Hebrew name because the German name Weiss also belonged to an SS officer who he he had encountered in the camps.

Although his passport rendered his birthday as December 21, 1928 — his family says his birthday was September 27, 1927. The date was changed so he could qualify for immigration to the US under a special program for orphans.

When he was 4, his father and mother separated and he went with his mother to live with his Hasidic grandfather, Shaye Weiss, an esteemed Talmud scholar, in the town of Sighet, then in Romania. There he was, at times, a fellow classmate in *cheder* (religious school) of Elie Wiesel and of my late teacher Eliezer Slomovic.

Professor Halivni's grandfather realized that his grandson was a child prodigy, with a phenomenal memory capable of recalling whole pages of text, and had him begin studying Talmud at age five. By the time he was ten he had stopped attending school to study full time on his own, and by fifteen he was ordained a rabbi.

In March 1944, the Germans marched into Sighet and deported its Jewish residents to Auschwitz, where David's mother, sister and grandfather were killed. His father was also killed by the Germans, leaving him at sixteen as his family's sole survivor. After a week at Auschwitz, he was transferred to forced labor camps at Gross-Rosen, Wolfsberg and finally Mauthausen, where he worked in an underground munitions plant.

In his memoir *The Book and the Sword*, which I highly recommend, Professor Halivni described how he once saw a German guard eating a sandwich wrapped

in a page torn from the Shulchan Aruch, a critically vital Jewish code of law, and daringly asked the guard to give him the wrapping. The guard consented, and the page became an object of study for several months for him and his fellow inmates.

After the Allies' defeat of the Germans, Halivni returned to Sighet to find that the Jewish community there had been wiped out. From Sighet, Halivni went to Budapest, where he spent his days studying with a rabbi. In his memoir he recalls that the only thing that kept him going after the war was learning.

In 1947 he immigrated to the US and found his way to the Jewish Theological Seminary of America where he would teach Talmud until 1983.

Halivni's character (written by a student of his by Rabbi Charles Sheer, Jewish Chaplain at Columbia University for 34 years)

When I think about him as a person, the first image that comes to mind is a large black-and-white photo of him as a child in the shtetl of Sighet, then part of Romania. He hung this portrait in his office, and I observed it during each shiur (lesson). He looks about 9 or 10 years old, wearing simple clothes and a shtetl cap. His warm, kindly eyes stare out at the observer. With this photo, David Weiss Halivni had preserved in his study the world of his innocent childhood which, in a few years, would be destroyed by the Nazis. Not long after the picture was taken, young David was deported to Auschwitz, his family and community destroyed. And yet, he emerged seemingly unscathed and whole.

After he died, I connected with a colleague who knew him well. Each of us reflected on his learning but our conversation quickly shifted to our remembrance of him as a person, and especially his exceptional humility. We recounted his modesty, warmth and approachability. These virtues could already be seen in the eyes of that sweet young child in the photo.

On Shabbos afternoon, Rabbi Weiss Halivni and I both attended the same mincha service. Before the evening service he liked to take a shpatsir (stroll) on Riverside Drive. He invited me to join him, and for many years, this became a cherished moment for me to be with my revered teacher. During one of these walks he startled me by declaring that he feared he hadn't successfully taught his method to us. "I know the class understands my interpretation once I present it," he said. "But I'm not sure I know how to teach you — to teach the class — how to recognize the seams on the page."

He was right. It wasn't easy for us to master his method. But during that walk I was touched that he sought to unburden himself to me. After all, I was still his

student. I can't recall any other teacher in yeshiva or graduate school who demonstrated such humility, honesty and caring.

I once dared to ask him how fellow concentration camp prisoners had emerged from their encampment. I deliberately asked about others. I really wanted to know about him. He said that he sensed there were two reactions. During the Holocaust, some survivors lost their faith — and the was understandable. He never was critical of Jews — especially survivors — who could not believe. Others, he said, deepened their faith, even in the face of horrific loss. He insisted that it was humanity that was on trial during the Holocaust, not God. Rabbi Weiss Halivni had provided an answer to what I asked, without openly acknowledging it. I never heard him express doubt in his faith or God, nor did I observe in him a diminished observance of Jewish law.

Halivni and Children (written by his editor Elisheva Urbas)

Alongside his extraordinary scholarship, Professor Halivni brought a sweetness and gentleness to his interactions with everyone he met that encouraged your growth, your opportunity to be as thoughtful, as knowledgeable, as attentive to your rabbinic or literary text as it was in you to be.

He was particularly joyful around young children. When the Book and the Sword was published, I was pregnant with my second child. In those years, I used to go on Shabbat afternoon and Tuesday nights to a Gemara shiur taught by our friend, his son, Baruch. Our eldest would come with me, as a nursing infant and then as a young toddler, sitting up on the floor near our feet while we learned. In his occasional guest appearances Professor Halivni regularly commented with satisfaction that even before she could speak she was imbibing the sounds of Torah. In the book, he tells an anecdote about being shamed as a little boy for playing instead of learning: "I put the ball down and never picked it up again." When my second child was born a few months after publication of the book, he and Mrs. Weiss gave the new big sister a special gift, a ball, one printed all over with the letters of the alphabet.

Halivni's scholarship

My teacher, Rabbi Gordon Tucker, describes how Professor Halivni changed the face of Talmudic scholarship fundamentally and forever. Professor Halivni had a photographic memory which allowed him to roam the world of the Talmud. In his classes, he focused on the page the students were studying, emphasizing that the text had developed over time. Professor Halivni tried to identify the

“seams” of a sugya (a particular section of study). Most sugyas are not easy to understand — let alone identify — as they contain many rabbinic voices from many centuries and often range in discussion away from what seems, at first glance, beyond the topic at hand. Professor Halivni wanted his students to critically examine the text and identify the seams, which often led to a new understanding of the sugya.

Professor Halivni’s work was pioneering in his working to burrow deeply into the history of *how* the Talmud — thousands of pages of commentaries and debates by sages seeking to clarify and expand upon statutes outlined in the Bible — came to be compiled from the third to the seventh century in Babylonia.

Ultimately he tried to restore the pristine state of the Talmud by pointing out incorrect editorial assumptions that were made by later sages. In other words, Professor Halivni tried to iron out the inconsistencies and gaps and restore logical coherence by, among other methods, returning to the sources or tracing how a particular concept developed over time. He went about this work much like a First Amendment lawyer scrutinizing the Federalist Papers to see what was intended in the articles of the US Constitution, or examining earlier precedents.

While this method - often called the historical-critical method - may seem natural or reasonable for those of us who come from modern academic institutions, that approach is antithetical to the world from which Halivni came.

Unsurprisingly therefore, Agudath Israel, an ultra Orthodox Israeli political party, called Professor Halivni’s work an abomination. They accused him of daring “to enter the domain of the holy and express the *poisonous and destructive thought* that the transmitters of the Talmud changed the text not even knowing that they did so.”

Many in the Orthodox world were afraid of the critical eye that Professor Halivni cast on the Talmud. And so it is not surprising that Professor Halivni was at home at JTS as opposed to Yeshiva University or a more traditionally-minded institution. For quick reference and if you have read *The Chosen* - think Reuven’s father as opposed to Danny’s.

Alas, Professor Halivni was a respected and appreciated scholar, rabbi, and teacher who had found comfort in Morningside Heights teaching future rabbis of the Conservative movement until... Until he was not at home at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

Professor Halivni left JTS in 1983 — after a long and distinguished career. He left because of the Seminary's decision to ordain women as rabbis.

Leaving JTS

The chancellor of JTS in the early 1980s, Gerson Cohen, was committed to finding a way to ordain women. It was time. The Reform movement had been ordaining women since 1972. And there was much pressure for the Conservative movement to ordain women as well. In many ways, the decision was sociological one not halachic. So too, it could be said that it was an admissions decision — not a halachic decision.

The decision to ordain women as rabbis was made by the faculty of the Seminary. To be clear: The decision was made by the faculty of *all* the departments, ranging from Talmud to Bible to literature to history. For Professor Halivni the process and the decision-makers were wrong. Wrong in their conclusion but more importantly: wrong in their process.

Professor Halivni wrote the following letter of resignation in 1983 —

“To the members of the Faculty Assembly:

My position concerning women's ordination is by now, I take it, well known to all of you assembled here. I am against it. It is a violation of halakhah which to me is sufficient grounds to reject it.

I am cognizant of the enormous pressure exerted upon us from different quarters to ordain women. But a religious Jew, when faced with a confrontation between sociology and religion, must choose religion. This is the meaning of kabbalat ol mitzvot, of accepting the yoke of the mitzvot, even if it is uncomfortable, even if it is being attacked and ridiculed, and even if you have doubts about its ethical correctness...

...

That is not to say that there were no changes in halakhah, that halakhah remained monolithic throughout the ages. Changes did take place, but they were not done consciously. The scholars who legalized them did not perceive themselves as innovators. The changes were integrated into community life long before they sought — and received legal sanction. They originally came about imperceptibly, unnoticed, the result of a gradual evolutionary process. By the time they demanded legal justification, they were ripe, overgrown, as it were. So much so, that in many an instance, whoever opposed the changes was considered a breaker of tradition, adopting a “holier than thou” attitude.

...

It is my personal tragedy that the people I davven with, I cannot talk to, and the people I talk to, I cannot davven with. However, when the chips are down, I will always side with the people I davven with; for I can live without talking. I cannot live without davvening.”

Conclusion —

So why have I chosen to tell you about Professor Halivni as we enter the High Holy Day Season? Because his story — and my story — are really related back to the poem by Yehuda Amichai at the top of this writing.

Back in 1983 when Professor Halivni left JTS — I personalized it. I told myself that Professor Halivni left JTS because I had applied and was preparing to study there. If I am honest with myself, I dismissed Professor Halivni entirely and never once considered his perspective, his life-story, or the simple fact that he was entitled to his opinion. Though I had classmates and friends who studied with Professor Halivni, I never once even tried. What could he possibly teach me and why would I, a woman, want to study with him? And the truth is - it would have been possible because when Professor Halivni left JTS, he became a professor of religion at Columbia University just a few blocks away from where I was studying.

Sadly, I assumed Professor Halivni to be an adversary and as a result I didn't make room for the possibility that he could still have important Torah to teach me. What a shame!

The story gets a little worse. Just a matter of a few hours before Nina called me to tell me about Becca's grandfather dying, I had read that Professor Halivni died in Jerusalem. My first instinct was to remember that Professor Halivni left JTS because he was opposed to my ordination. I didn't focus on the death of a great Torah scholar. Rather, I made it about me and I focused on the fact that this scholar did not think women should be ordained as rabbis. It was only later that day when I spoke with Nina and she told me that Becca's grandfather died — and that his name was David Weiss Halivni — that I truly felt sad. I stopped thinking about Professor Halivni's views on the ordination of women and I started thinking about Professor Halivni as Becca's zeyde. And so something changed in my heart. I saw Professor Halivni in a very different way. I thought about the fact that he was a father, a zeyde, a husband, a survivor, a scholar and so much more.

I am embarrassed by this story but I share it with you because I know I am not alone. I am certain that some of you have had similar experiences: when you have closed your heart and your head to someone who disagrees with you, personalizing an intellectual disagreement, and not asking yourself what else someone may have to teach you.

This is the season of turning - turning toward one another and not away from. Turning toward previous poor behaviors and finding space for humility, understanding, and potentially even: renewal. This is the season to soften the ground, in which maybe seeds will find soil whereby flowers and even fruit can arise.

As I began, so I will conclude - with the poetry of Yehuda Amichai.

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