

Professor David Weiss Halivni Z"l (1927-2022) by Barry Scott Wimpfheimer, CC' 95; GSAS '05

This morning I woke up to the news that my Columbia doctoral adviser Professor David Weiss Halivni had passed away in Jerusalem. His loss is devastating, but we've been losing him for a few years already. I've visited him twice in the last few years and left saddened by the realization that this intellectual giant, world renowned for his memory, could no longer remember me. During my most recent visit, this past November, Halivni was in good physical health and could speak with some difficulty. He had a volume of the Vilna Shas (the standard print edition of the Talmud) in front of him, but it was closed, and he apologetically told me that he hadn't been making progress on his Talmudic commentary *Meqorot Umesorot*—a multi-volume work that he began in the 1960's and covers 75% of the vast Talmud. This was the first time that he didn't proudly tell me that his most recent Talmudic analysis required a complete rethinking of everything he'd said before about the Talmud. I left the meeting thinking that it was likely the last time I'd see him in person.

David Weiss Halivni was an immensely impactful intellectual, theologian, and pastoral counselor and none of those descriptions measure up to his identity as an Auschwitz survivor. Like his Sighet neighbor and childhood acquaintance Elie Wiesel, he will forever be identified as a survivor who was also an intellectual, theologian and counselor. And he didn't mind it. He lost every close relative in the Holocaust, and personally suffered the indignities of Auschwitz as an orphaned teenager. The experience lived with him in perpetuity. I remember his apologetic mumble about the impact of starvation when we attended an event with a catered buffet, and he took three times as much food on his plates than he could ever finish. Though his *Meqorot Umesorot* was unquestionably his magnum opus, he was proud of his published work as a theologian and, in recent years, of the post-Holocaust theology that he produced in dialogue with Peter Ochs. It thrilled him when his Holocaust memoir, *The Book and the Sword*, was published in Italian.

Halivni was an old-world person who grew up without indoor plumbing, telephones and automobiles. His childhood education was limited to the traditional Jewish canon, and he made the jump from Bible to Mishnah and Talmud at a very young age. In a traditional world that valued Talmudic study above all else and panned for child prodigies, Halivni (then Weiss) was acknowledged an *Ilui* (prodigy) at a young age. Wiesel often recalled the ways that established Sighet townspeople would defer to Halivni and offer him favors and rides.

The Talmud has been a Jewish intellectual playground for the last millennium. This layered work composed of several generations of conversation among rabbis, simultaneously serves as a comprehensive revision of earlier Jewish knowledge and sets in its place a robust polyvocal and multi-generic dialogue that ranges across all possible Jewish topics of interest and came to constitute the discursive space inhabited by a millennium of legal scholars struggling to distill applicable principles and guidance. Religious insiders have been known to spend a lifetime of days and nights exclusively studying the Talmud and its reception materials (codes, commentary and responsa); it is an act at once intellectual and ritual. Halivni combined the diligence of a religious scholar—the commitment to study this material day and night for a lifetime—with a critical sensibility that motivated him to step outside the traditional discourse and discover new insights about how and when the Talmud came to be composed. Textual criticism involves both lower criticism (attention to variants and philology) and higher criticism (attention to redaction and the chronology of composition). Halivni's encyclopedic

command of the entire Talmud and its commentarial corpus allowed him to do a unique form of textual criticism that will never be repeated.

As an adolescent, Halivni passed a *nodl farher*-- a talmudic pin test. The pin test was a legendary way of demonstrating a young person's Talmudic prowess—or at least their memory. The test asks that one identify the word that occupies a location of the pin on a randomly selected page of Talmud. There are 2711 double sided pages of Talmud. In my lifetime I've known people of prodigious memory. I've met people with photographic recall of Talmudic pages. They could reproduce a few words or lines from memory when given a citation. Compared to what Halivni could do, this is but a parlor trick.

Halivni not only had the Talmudic text memorized, he had instant recall of the deeper logical debates that surround every such Talmudic text. What's more, he had the unique ability to reprocess all of it in a seeming instant. When I studied with him in graduate school, I had the Bar Ilan Responsa CD burned onto my hard drive, and I could perform sophisticated word searches of the Talmud. Students would sometimes ask the type of question that a word search could generate. Halivni would answer faster than the computer and with an accuracy rate that was near 100%. More significantly, though, students would sometimes ask questions of second order analysis—e.g. how common is it for a sixth generation Babylonian amora to disagree with the midrashic reading of a fourth generation amora? These questions, which would require much more work to get out of a computer, would be answered by Halivni with the same speed.

The ability to reprocess the entire Talmud led Halivni to constantly challenge his own prior work in order to produce a stronger theory of talmudic composition. Each introduction to *Meqorot Umesorot* uses the examples of that volume to reconsider fundamental questions of dating and the techniques through which the Talmud was constituted. Halivni's critical mind meant that every new in-depth analysis could force him to reconsider all the examples he had already processed in earlier volumes. The commentary footnotes bear ample evidence of this revision.

By the time I began to study with Professor Halivni, he was already a living legend on multiple levels. It took me some time to get used to his habit of citing the page numbers of *Meqorot Umesorot* as if they were the Talmud itself. *Meqorot Umesorot* is a critical commentary on the Babylonian Talmud. Halivni claimed that it is the first critical commentary on the Talmud. (I'm not sure that's fair to the *Hagahot Dinar* now published as *Hiddushe HaRitzad*). *Meqorot Umesorot* is a monumental achievement, covering a significant majority of Talmudic tractates. Halivni's method is selective—unlike his younger colleague and rival Shamma Friedman (also my teacher יבדל לחיים) whose commentarial method accounts for every word of every passage, Halivni homes in on the aspects of a Talmudic passage that catch his critical eye. Often, these are the moments in the passage that possess logical hiccups (that he called "maculations") or lend themselves to historical inquiry. And they definitively respond to late nineteenth and early twentieth century rabbinic scholarly predecessors who weren't necessarily critics but were, like Halivni, engaged in an attempt to establish the proper meaning of the text in an historically responsible way. Halivni studied Talmud all day and into the night. The Talmud was always open and so was the word processor. In graduate school I was Halivni's technical support, a role that I suspect other students had played in the years before me. He never quite learned how to deal with attachments, but he proudly typed his own commentary into the computer.

Three years ago, I visited Halivni in his home after he had had a stroke. I was saddened to encounter him in a diminished capacity. He didn't remember me and had trouble speaking. It wasn't

clear to me that he remembered his family members. Much of the meeting was a one-way dialogue; I was speaking, and he would sometimes nod or smile in recognition. After a few minutes I told him about my book *The Talmud: A Biography* and I offered to share a textual insight I had produced while studying the Talmudic section about the tort of fire damage. To my delight, Halivni perked up and the million-dollar smile reappeared. My teacher was back in front of me. He stuttered and stammered but managed to communicate the page citation for the Talmud's discussion. As I began to discuss the topic, Halivni's eyes lit up and I could see not only comprehension but deep immersion. I could tell that he had things to say but was unable to communicate. I left with sadness and the realization that Halivni's Talmud memory was deeper than other things in his mind—like muscle memory or *mame-loshn*. I also realized the depths to which his soul was existentially connected with the Talmud—as if the Talmud lived in his body. Last November, I tried to share textual insights to see if I could bring my teacher back. There was no reaction—no smile or glimmer of the eyes—and I knew that I had already lost him.