

Rabbi talks about God's vulnerability

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RABBI NEIL GILLMAN (left) was the speaker Tuesday evening at a celebration of the 100th anniversary of Beth Israel and 175th anniversary of Bangor Theological Seminary. With Gillman are Norman Minsky, president of Beth Israel; Rabbi Joseph Schonberger; and Dr. Malcolm Warford, president of BTS. (NEWS Photo by Tom Hindman)

A broad spectrum of people gathered at Wellman Commons Tuesday evening to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Congregation Beth Israel and the 175th anniversary of Bangor Theological Seminary.

A distinguished rabbi from the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, Rabbi Neil Gillman, spoke on "How Jews Do Theology," a talk which offered food for thought to those of any religious belief — or even no belief at all.

Gillman suggested it was useful for all to consider the metaphors they use for God. "We create metaphors out of our experience, and we use it to characterize God," he said.

Some of the possible metaphors he mentioned were: sovereignty; one who listens; one who speaks; one who punishes; one who forgives; and one who mitigates sins rather than forgives.

Focusing on the metaphor of sovereignty, Gillman said that in the Bible, "the sovereignty is always intentioned with something else, and that something else is vulnerability."

Gillman offered his own concept of a vulnerable God, describing his visit to a class that used psychodrama to interpret the story of Abraham and Sarah and Isaac.

In the book of Genesis, Sarah and Abraham were blessed with a son, Isaac, despite their advanced age. At one point, Abraham was called to sacrifice his son in a burnt offering. He prepared to do so, only to have an angel of the Lord release him from his promise.

In the class that Gillman visited "as an observer," one person each portrayed Abraham, Sarah, Isaac and God, acting out the conversations which might have taken place surrounding these events. Afterward, those present asked questions of the participants and offered their own opinions.

When Professor Gillman objected the the portrayal of a "macho God,"

the teacher set up another group, with Gillman taking the part of God.

This time, when "Sarah" asked "God" what he was doing to ask Abraham to sacrifice their son, Gillman gave this interpretation to God's feelings:

"You think this is my power asserting itself, but it's not. I've had 20 generations on earth and I have yet to succeed, have yet to find one totally loyal human being. I have failed miserably. I need to be able to tell the generations that once there was a man whose commitment was absolute." With those words, Gillman offered his own metaphor for God.

Gillman went on to talk of finding in the Bible "God who comes back

with endless yearning, endless hopefulness, endless expectations ... to be frustrated."

Gillman suggested that there are many ways to explore one's own metaphors for God, and talked of a teacher who would ask 6-year-olds to draw pictures of God. Gillman has asked his own students to write their metaphors of God, and has even suggested that some go back to their rooms and "dance God."

"There are no stupid pictures of God," he said, "and that's liberating."

More than 100 people attended the lecture and shared kosher refreshments afterward.