Introduction

Our mutual friend Kalman P. Bland (1942–2017) was professor emeritus of religious studies at Duke University, violinist, sculptor, photographer, conversationalist extraordinaire, and embodiment of the Platonic ideal of thoughtfulness. He passed away unexpectedly while on a working vacation in England that he had taken with his longtime companion, Annabel J. Wharton. In keeping with scholarly practice, we have agreed that the best way to mourn Kalman and to commemorate his memory was to ask some of his colleagues and friends to contribute a piece of original scholarship in his honor. We have encouraged everyone to write on one of the topics that were dear to Kalman, who cultivated a diverse set of diverse interests. These included medieval Jewish philosophy, animal studies, religious studies, and the intersection of Jews and Muslims.

Born and raised in Chicago, Kalman eventually received his BA in philosophy from Columbia University, his PhD in medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophy from Brandeis University, and his rabbinic ordination from the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City. His Doktorvater was Alexander Altmann. In the acknowledgments to The Epistle on the Possibility of Conjunction with the Active Intellect by Ibn Rushd with the Commentary by Moses Narboni, a revision of his dissertation, Kalman wrote “To my teacher – Professor Alexander Altmann – I am indebted in a way that mere words cannot describe. The use of his personal copies of the Munich manuscripts and the Bodleian 119 is but a token of what I have gained from his example as a scholar and human being and what I have learned from his study of medieval Jewish and Islamic intellectual history.” Kalman's lifelong dedication to his teacher is corroborated in his editing, together with Jehuda Reinharz and Daniel Swetschinski, Mystics, Philosophers, and Politicians: Essays in Jewish Intellectual History in Honor of Alexander Altmann (1982). But beyond that gift and other publications where Altmann's mentorship is palpably on display, the greatest reverence consisted of the fact that, in emulation of his teacher, the student became in his own right a consummate scholar and human being.

Kalman began his lengthy teaching career at Indiana University before relocating to Durham, North Carolina, to take up a position at Duke, where he

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1 Kalman P. Bland, The Epistle on the Possibility of Conjunction with the Active Intellect by Ibn Rushd with the Commentary of Moses Narboni: A Critical Edition and Annotated Translation (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1982), xiii.
served on the faculty for thirty-eight years. He was an award-winning undergraduate teacher and an important member of the graduate program. His pedagogy, like his scholarship, was shaped by the willingness to push boundaries, buttressed by a distaste for tribalism and a loathing for intellectual dishonesty or laziness, especially when used to legitimate unsavory truth claims. As he would often tell us, over one of our cherished dinners whether in New York or at the annual meetings of the American Academy of Religion or the Association for Jewish Studies, since so much of what motivates how we study and interpret the premodern sources derives from our present-day reality and political persuasion, we can either interrogate the past’s inconvenient facts or paper over them. Fortunately, he always did the former. This often made him a transgressor, a badge he wore with honor. As he wrote in the introduction to *The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmations and Denials of the Visual*, “Ideas and theories, like all human artifacts, connote their makers. Because human activity is overdetermined, ideas and theories are overdetermined…. Political campaigns, wishful thinking, and controversies in the history of science warn us of immense gaps between the validity of a proposition and its public acceptance.” Kalman was comfortable living in and from that chasm between the articulation of thoughts and their public reception.

In addition to his academic activities, Kalman was committed to social justice, both at home and abroad. He worked to help those less fortunate to read and write, giving them the skills to reclaim their lives, in his own community. He was also deeply dedicated – on both a scholarly and a personal level – to peaceful coexistence between Jews and Arabs in Israel and Palestine. This may be witnessed in his support for such charities as Jewish-Arab Education in Israel, the American Near East Refugee Aid, and Médicines Sans Frontières. A passage from Edward W. Said, one he often invoked, sums up Kalman’s thinking:

The real question, then, is whether in the end we want to work for civilizations that are separate or whether we should be taking the more integrative, but perhaps more difficult path, which is to try to see them as making one vast whole whose exact contours are impossible for one person to grasp but whose certain existence we can intuit and feel.  

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This quotation symbolizes the cosmopolitan nature of Kalman’s thought and presence. In this respect, he was as devoted to Israeli-Arab coexistence in the present as he was to mapping out Jewish-Muslim interconnections in the past. His cartography, however, was not of the “golden age” variety. He saw the injustice in the co-option of various aspects of the past and the various ways they could be, and often are, contorted in the present for a host of neoliberal narratives.

Kalman was the author of dozens of articles and book chapters as well as two monographs that have already been referenced. The first was the critical edition and annotated translation of *The Epistle on the Possibility of Conjunction with the Active Intellect by Ibn Rushd with the Commentary by Moses Narboni* (1982). The work, a revision of his doctoral thesis, demonstrates the philological and historical training that Kalman received at the hands of Professor Altmann. As Kalman advanced in his career, he became more and more engaged by contemporary theoretical questions, but he never abandoned this earlier method. This is demonstrated clearly in his book on the visual and iconic elements of medieval Jewish sources as well as in his later studies on animal fables in medieval philosophy. Altmann taught his students that flights of speculation are welcome but they have to be rooted in the text. The ideas one elicits from a particular text may intersect broadly with many other texts, but that interface always has to be grounded in a proper exposition of the particular text one is investigating. Consequently, as Altmann also imparted to his students, the exacting study of medieval sources should not be viewed as an arcane enterprise of consequence only to a handful of scholars but rather as an intellectual pursuit that is relevant to the contemporary seekers of knowledge. Addressing this issue in the preface to *The Epistle on the Possibility of Conjunction*, Kalman wrote:

The study of medieval philosophy is rewarding, but notoriously difficult. Its unfamiliar terminology and abstruse arguments baffle and frustrate readers who search it for spiritual truth or intellectual enlightenment. Critics, alienated by its religious or outdated scientific notions, condemn it as being a futile exercise amounting to nothing more than vacuous dialectics. Medieval philosophy has been remanded to the exclusive care of philologians and historians of antiquarian thought.... Ironically, our profound estrangement from medieval philosophy opens the most promising and direct access to its elusive rewards. By acknowledging the discontinuities in culture, temperament, and historical experience that separate us from *The Possibility of Conjunction* by Ibn Rushd and the
Commentary of Narboni, we attune ourselves to the ethical significance of their accomplishment.4

A book written centuries ago is closed but the text remains open and subject to endless exposition, a process of elucidation driven, first and foremost, by the criterion of ethical relevancy. As intellectual historians, we exegetically confront philosophical, mystical, commentarial, or poetic sources with the goal of becoming better human beings. Allegiance to this hermeneutical axiom was bolstered by Kalman's intimate familiarity with rabbinic modes of interpretation. In conversations, he would often invoke a talmudic dictum to clarify a point, thereby capturing the depth of the ancient wisdom and exemplifying the principle that there is no original meaning to the text but only a meaning that is subject to constant modification in accord with the ever-changing conditions of the moment. He was particularly fond of the rabbinic practice of offering analogies and parables to elucidate a more abstract concept. As he wrote in the foreword to Barbara Galli's *On Wings of Moonlight: Elliot R. Wolfson’s Poetry in the Path of Rosenzweig and Celan*, “Seldom did the ancient rabbis permit a single parable to suffice. The rabbis recognized that everything displays multiple likenesses, that similes are inexhaustible, that similes therefore imitate and approach infinity.”5 Kalman’s mind was acutely acclimated to this mode of thinking.

Kalman’s second, and much more adventurous and mature book was *The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmations and Denials of the Visual* (2001). It is, as he freely and playfully admits in the book’s introduction, a work that is all about art but without any pictures or illustrations. The work dismantles the simplistic and long-held idea that the Jews are an artless people. Drawing upon a wide array of sources from medieval Jewish philosophy, mysticism, poetry, biblical commentaries, travelogues, and works of law, Kalman sets out to demonstrate that the aniconism commonly associated with Judaism is a modern assumption – and not the result of the second commandment and the injunction against graven images – that denies to Jewish culture a visual dimension. The conclusion of years of painstaking research is stated boldly and unequivocally in the last sentence of *The Artless Jew*: “At no time and in no corner of medieval Jewish society were Jewish eyes otiose or the visual arts taboo.”6 In this book, as the author writes in the introduction, he has combined

his “professional training and love for medieval Jewish thought” with his “amateur’s delight in the musical and visual arts.” Furthermore, the reader is told that the book satisfied Kalman’s “desire for the pleasures of ‘critical theory’” and confirmed his faith “in the advantages of taking a social approach to the history of ideas.”

For Kalman, intellectual history and philosophical analysis were a means to an end: we probe the past to learn about human beings in order to improve ourselves and particularly to enhance our sense of moral responsibility for others. The following words that Kalman applied to Hans Jonas could easily be transferred to him: “To resuscitate philosophy means denying literal-mindedness, sophistry, credulity, and gullibility any more victims. To resuscitate philosophy is to cultivate a vigorous distrust of language and reacquire robust immunities against the wiles of politicians and merchants.”

Consider the impassioned conclusion in his essay on “Cain, Abel, and Brutism,” interpreting the remark in Maimonides’s *The Guide of the Perplexed* (2.36) that all people are either like domestic animals or beasts of prey:

Maimonides nevertheless reminded us that animals, like all of nature, are morally neither praiseworthy nor blameworthy. Humans impose human values on animals. The lesson has yet to penetrate our consciousness, centuries after Maimonides taught it so forcefully. He therefore offers the hope that once humans fully acknowledge the truth of his haunting statement, once we understand that we truly are either domestic animals or beasts of prey, once we renounce the supremacist principles and hyperbolic rhetoric of Brutism, things might slightly improve for all us animals.

With typical candor and a healthy dose of skepticism, Kalman conjectured that if we heed the words of Maimonides, *things might slightly improve for all us animals*; there is no promise of utopia or of a messianic transformation of human nature here, only the petition for some enhancement of our current situation.

Kalman’s life was more than just his work, although a careful reader of his work would discern the ways in which the work points to that which

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7 Ibid., 4–5.
exceeds the work. Above all else, he was a lover of the arts, music, painting, poetry, and the wordless beauty of nature. In Aristotelian terms, he mastered both practical and theoretical reason. He lived a life of social-political activism, but he was also enamored of contemplative solitude. Often he would cite the words of W. H. Auden, “For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives/In the valley of its making ... A way of happening, a mouth.” Kalman embodied the way of happening where nothing happens, the quietude of acting without a specific purpose to act, exemplified in the Taoist idea of wu-wei, or in the Heideggerian Gelassenheit as the will that wills with a willfulness outside the distinction between activity and passivity, the will of nonwilling that is not simply the renunciation of the will but an action that does not pertain at all to the will. There is no appeal to a deus ex machina to justify human suffering or to provide a teleological rationale for our behavior. Indeed, Kalman’s interest in science was driven by an acute sense that nature itself and not some transcendent or supernatural deity is the ultimate mystery, “a plenum beset with contradiction.” Art and scholarship, for Kalman, provide pathways to encounter persons in all of their complexities and vulnerabilities, and thus he was a humanist par excellence. Above all, Kalman was a dear friend whose advice, wit, insights, and thoughtfulness will be sorely missed. May his memory continue to be a blessing for many generations to come.

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11 Galli, On Wings of Moonlight, xvi.