For over sixty years, Eugene B. Borowitz has been engaged in the project of understanding modern Jewish existence. This is the task of Jewish theology, and for Borowitz it has been his lifelong task to develop a Jewish theology for the non-Orthodox Jew in the world of late-twentieth-century Jewish life. Borowitz explicitly denies being a philosopher, although his work exhibits an extensive Familiarity with the tradition of Western philosophy, nor is he a sociologist or historian, although his writings abound with sociological observations and historical knowledge of modernity and especially of Judaism in its encounter with modernity. He is a rabbi, a teacher of rabbis, an educator, and a theologian, and for much of his career he has been a spokesperson for Reform Judaism in particular and for what he calls “non-Orthodox” Judaism in general. In over twenty books and hundreds of essays and articles, he has sought to speak to this audience about its primary responsibilities and to frame for it a portrait of self-understanding which would serve to provoke it to revitalization and renewal.

Borowitz’s writing is marked by candor, directness, and accessibility. He avoids jargon, and always has in mind his audience, his readers, and the world in which they live. His style, to my ear, is almost conversational; for Borowitz, writing is less presentation than it is dialogue. This dialogical tone, moreover, is no accident. Probably Borowitz’s deepest intellectual debt is to Martin Buber, and while his thinking exhibits a selective appropriation of Buber’s complex and varied legacy, Borowitz has learned many lessons from Buber, and one concerns the fact that writing, like speaking, is an interpersonal encounter. When he speaks, Borowitz speaks to the reader, and in addition he speaks in a way that is relatively unadorned and accessible.

1 In a response to Elliot Dorff, Borowitz vigorously denies that he is a “Reform ideologue.” His audience, he argues, is much broader: “For over three decades I have addressed myself to and written about that overwhelming mass of modernized Jews who, regardless of labels, exercise the right to make up their own minds about what they will believe and do as Jews.” See “Five Letters to Readers of Renewing the Covenant,” in Eugene B. Borowitz, Judaism after Modernity (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1999), 182–83. See also “Im ba’et, eyma—Since You Object, Let Me Put It This Way,” in Reviewing the Covenant, ed. Peter Ochs (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), 148, and republished in this volume.
No thinker who has written about Jewish life and ideas is any more direct, organized, and uninflated than Borowitz and for good reason. Borowitz is a teacher and an educator. He thinks not only about what he is saying but also, preeminently, about to whom he is saying it and why. By and large, he is speaking to nonprofessionals, nonacademics, lay people, everyday congregants—educated ones, to be sure—and people who have read and who are interested in Jewish life and today’s world. And his purpose in writing or in talking to and for them is largely persuasive. Borowitz has worked out for himself and for them a portrait of what non-Orthodox Jewish life ought to be, and he wants them to understand his portrait, accept it, and then join him in enacting the imperatives, the directives that occur within it. For Borowitz, then, teaching rabbis and Jews is about exploring what Judaism means for those of us who live in contemporary North America, in the Diaspora, and to motivate them to take that understanding seriously, to act on it. Against the background of this conception of his theological goals and his educational purposes, Borowitz tailors his writing and his speech. Much of the time, that writing and that speech will seem clear and unambiguous, although I am not sure that it is always without its nuance and complexity, but all of the time it has the qualities listed above—it is direct and accessible and uncomplicated by jargon or overindulgence.

Borowitz began his career in the years following World War II and the destruction of European Jewry that was part of it. As he came to believe, the Jew in modern, postwar America was engulfed in a world in which moral foundations had been undermined and in which religious conviction was deteriorating. He sought intellectual, moral, and religious security, and the Judaism around him, to which he was committed, seemed to provide none of these. In many essays in his early years, this sense of despair and frustration expresses itself. To him, Judaism needed a real God for Jews to engage with, and it could not rely on science, rationality, and intellectual accomplishments to understand that God or make a case for the Jew’s engagement with the divine. Nor could Jews do without such a real God, if morality and moral ideals and purposes were to have a secure, unconditional foundation and not be subject to changing circumstances or power relations or differences of point of view. And after the Holocaust, the horrific events so vividly exposed after the war ended, how could one go on without such a sense of moral confidence? And hence how could Judaism go on without a vivid and compelling understanding of how a real God provided that confidence?

Borowitz’s years at the Hebrew Union College in the late 1940s involved an ongoing conversation with his two closest friends: Arnold Wolf, who like