

“The 60s”

Dear Sir:

I have just read R. Dr. Irving Greenberg's "Yeshiva in the 60s" and, much as forensic altercation runs counter to my grain and instincts, I am constrained, almost in sheer self-defense, to respond. I shall not comment in depth upon the wide range of issues relating to Dr. Greenberg's "spiritual odyssey" and his current haven. I shall focus, instead, upon factual errors, some trivial, others significant, which permeate the piece, with particular attention to the numerous inaccuracies and gross misrepresentations concerning myself.

Dr. Greenberg identifies me as part of a clique of "newcomers" who sought to "improve the yeshiva, not just the College." I, indeed, had this aim in mind. However, I was by no means a "newcomer," having been affiliated with Yeshiva University since 1949 — first, as a *talmid*, later, as an assistant to the Rav, and, from 1961, as head of the resuscitated *kollel*, and, finally, from 1963, as a *maggid shi'ur*. Secondly, I was not brought to the college to teach English literature specifically (as I had done at SCW); and, most important, the improvement I sought was hardly in the direction and by many of the means enumerated. I never acted to have all the *shi'urim* switched from Yiddish to English; the notion that "relevance" should be a prime condition in the selection of a *masekhta*, I regarded, then as now, as antithetical to the ideal of Torah *li-shmah*; and the implication that I joined in advocating "less *pilpul*, more *bekiyut*" is pure fantasy. So is the assertion that meetings to thrash out such an agenda "were held mostly in the apartments of the Liebman and the Lichtensteins at 17 Fort

George Hill” — and this, not only because neither family resided at that address, or because, while we were genuinely friendly with the Liebmans, our social relations with the Greenbergs were relatively marginal, but inasmuch as our involvement in the process under consideration was far from what has been suggestively implied. We certainly were involved in serious discussion, but were hardly privy to the semi-revolutionary ferment conjured up by Dr. Greenberg’s recollections.

With respect to the conclaves organized by David Hartman in the Laurentians, they were indeed often heady and stimulating, but not as focused upon the *Shoah* as implied; and the notion that Emil Fackenheim needed to be “ignited” on the subject by Dr. Greenberg’s “burning interest” is simply preposterous. Most egregious, however, is the account of the *gerut* cited. *Ma’aseh she-hayah kakh hayah*. The Conservative member of the *beit din*, far from being a *shomer mitzvot*, waverer, by his own account, between atheism, agnosticism, and faith, and certainly did not maintain a halakhic commitment. When some of the Orthodox rabbis among us realized what was transpiring, we consulted briefly and decided to have three of us engage the *ger* in an impromptu discussion of *halakhah*, in the hope of eliciting a *kabbalat ol mitzvot*, which in the opinion of those *rishonim* who held that only this phase required a *beit din*, could salvage the process. I recall the incident vividly, including being drawn into the dancing, with great ambivalence, in order not to embarrass the *ger*. I also recall that, as I realized in which direction the wind was blowing, the event — and not a presumed “drift to the right” — drove me into disaffection for the whole enterprise. (Incidentally, the protagonist subsequently underwent a fully Orthodox conversion in Israel.)

My sharpest revulsion, however, is reserved for Dr. Greenberg’s account regarding the contretemps over his interview and my response to it. I shall not challenge his claim that my “tolerances for exploration” are too constricted, as they do, indeed, fall far short of his. I readily concede a major concern with “preserving Judaism” and admit to the conviction that if we are to strive, as we should, for “affirming it and its sovereignty in modern culture,” we must be certain that what is being affirmed is what has, in its integrity, been authentically preserved. What riles me is the account of “the furor,” and, particularly, the remarks concerning the Rav. Dr. Greenberg habitually asserts that the Rav — or, for that matter, small fry fish like myself — fundamentally agreed with many of his cherished views regarding modernity et al but lacked the courage to assert

them, to walk through the doors the Rav had himself opened. This ploy is doubly effective. At one fell swoop, it abducts a giant from a rival camp to one's own; secondly, it enables one to bask in the contemplated glory of his own integrity and strength, while attributing a "failure of nerve" to others. It is, however, unabashedly, a blatant example of what Steven Schwarzschild called "imperialism of the soul." The thought that refusal to ride the crest of the *zeitgeist* may be wholly principled rather than a reflection of temerity often refuses to penetrate.

In this case, there is also icing on the cake: a self-image which includes not only being a "profile in courage" but suffering the status of a persecuted *nirdaf* as well. Dr. Greenberg depicts a scenario which includes a political cabal in opposition to him, which proceeded to enlist me to "refute" him. This is, to the best of my recollection, patently erroneous. I wrote in response to provocative statements and not under pressure. As to the contention that I had largely agreed with his positions but had only regretted the tone of the interview, this is an unkind and ungrateful cut. In the desire to be generous, I suggested that perhaps the interview did not quite reflect Dr. Greenberg's truly more traditional views, which had somehow become skewed in a wide-ranging but imprecise discourse. At the time, Dr. Greenberg, in turn, assented that there was some truth to this conjecture. Now, however, he informs us that this concession was made "disingenuously" — confirming, that from the ideological standpoint of his opponents, the original criticism was indeed warranted. I suggest that anyone who has the patience and the interest read the original exchange and judge the tone and the substance of my remarks for himself.

One could comment upon the article further. I, for one, find the total omission of any reference to Israel in a survey of the 60s, startling. I also take issue with the implication that, as regards the *Shoah*, "Orthodoxy did not have all the answers," but supposed that it did, while Dr. Greenberg did indeed. The Rav's Orthodoxy preached that, with respect to such issues, a Jew needed to strive to sustain his covenantal commitment in the face of the questions, rather than pretend to have answers. These salient points are not to my present purpose, however. Much water has passed under the bridge since those heady 60s. Dr. Greenberg has gone on to carve out a prominent career in the field of Jewish public service, even as he has adopted and advanced views regarding such crucial issues as the covenant and Christianity which the traditional Torah world has categorically rejected. The mutual disaffection which has regrettably

ensued may, in the eyes of some, render much of this discussion irrelevant. Nevertheless, even as a matter of historical interest, it is important to keep the record straight.

Respectfully,
Aharon Lichtenstein
Jerusalem, Israel

Response to "The 60s"

Dear Sir:

Rav Aharon Lichtenstein's critical reaction to my account of "Yeshiva in the 60s" warrants a response because it illuminates what happened at Yeshiva in the interim. His tone expresses his feelings that I sought to attack or embarrass him and to co-opt him to my religious-educational positions. I did not want to do that. Then and now, I consider him a leader and an avatar of Modern Orthodoxy at its best — although I differ with certain of his policy judgments, which, I think, have resulted in Modern Orthodoxy losing some ground. There also were and are substantial ideological differences between us. Still, I always felt that this was a matter of *elu ve-elu*. Certainly, I acknowledge that he was no member of any clique of "newcomers," let alone "semi-revolutionaries." Nor did I intend to claim that we were close social friends. I actually wrote: "...we (husbands and wives) got together for 'salons' to develop our thoughts on modern Orthodox issues" (no semi-revolutions there). To the extent that I failed to distinguish clearly to the reader between what were my views of improving the Yeshiva and his differing views, I apologize. Obviously, he was offended by my unintended lumping of the two of us together, but I did not want to "homogenize" our views. Personally, I am committed to and uphold these differences.

I believe that a primary reason that Yeshiva College had a spiritually exciting and intellectually stimulating atmosphere in the 60s was that the members of the Yeshiva community did have a variety of opinions and they freely spoke, argued, and debated them. There were outstanding and respectful debates between the right, left, and center of Modern Orthodoxy, and the atmosphere was one of *kin'at sofrim tarbeh hokhmah*. The students benefited the most from the interchange, but the outside

community also was stimulated.

Nothing has so enervated the capacity of Yeshiva during the past two decades to instruct and nurture the general Jewish and Modern Orthodox communities as the shutting down of this *mahloket le-shem shamayim*. I believe that spiritual stagnation and deadening of inquiry is the result of denying or delegitimizing differences rather than clarifying and growing from them. In this atmosphere, even R. Lamm had to struggle to uphold his views in the Yeshiva. This delegitimation is truly the violation the *Gemara* describes as the cause of the plague that decimated Rabbi Akiva's students, *mipnei she-lo nahagu kavod zeh la-zeh*.

In my recent *Commentator* article, I described how in the atmosphere of the 60s a number of us — including Rav Aharon — joined and learned with Conservative and Reform rabbis over a number of years, to our mutual benefit. Although we differed substantially in our views and our tactics, we even celebrated a *Klal Yisrael gerut* together. R. Aharon's recent reaction reveals that he was much more uncomfortable and ambivalent then (more than I realized then) and that he was more distanced from that group. I missed this because I was personally transformed by my encounter with the group, as were so many of the other participants. I continue to believe that there is nothing to be ashamed of in that collective behavior in that time of greater *ahdut* in *Klal Yisrael* — even if the moment passed. Therefore, in my recent *Commentator* article, I did not think to veil the fact that once some of us from Yeshiva and other Orthodox institutions experimented or worked with non-Orthodox rabbis or tried to engage in *tikkun olam*.

Just as I was shaped by that *Klal Yisrael* encounter in the 1960s and on, so was I transformed by confrontation with the Holocaust, from then until now. The *Gemara* states that Jeremiah and Daniel refused to repeat the words of Moshe Rabbeynu, *ha-kel, ha-gadol, ha-gibbor ve-ha-nora*, with meaning unchanged, because after the *Hurban* repeating the same old words and meaning would be a "lie." *Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu amiti hu, ve-lo kizvu bo*. Not until the *Anshei Keneset ha-Gedolah* reinterpreted these words by reinterpreting the scope and nature of *Hashem's* intervention in the world did they restore *Hashem's* crown and make these words central to our central prayer, the *Amidah*. The desire to praise and speak truthfully to *Hashem* in the light of the new and greater *Hurban* of our time is the nub of my attempt at a theology after the *Shoah*. R. Aharon disagrees with my theological interpretations. Unfortunately, at Yeshiva, because of the more right-wing influence of the past two decades, my views are

dealt with by exclusion and suppression rather than by reasoned debate — to the detriment, I believe, of both sides. But here is not the place to expound my views on the Holocaust and *halakhah* further.

This brings me to the current interchange between us. Summarizing our exchange in the 1966 *Commentator*, I wrote that I was disappointed that R. Aharon ignored my argument for Orthodoxy's self-criticism and self-questioning as well as my calls for its need to be more forthcoming to *Klal Yisrael's* views in its response to the *Shoah* and Israel reborn. I regretted that he was silent in the face of my delegitimation and dismissed as "a nice nineteenth century notion" the argument that intellectual/spiritual space — even for errors — was needed for exploration of the challenges of modernity. I should add that I never believed that R. Aharon was recruited or joined in any cabal when he differed with me in 1966. I do not believe there was any cabal in the 1960s and truly regret using the phrase "The opposition found the only other person at Yeshiva who had the credibility to 'refute' my views." I meant to say that R. Aharon's article served the purposes of those who opposed my views because he was credible as being both fully modern and Orthodox.

In his recent response, R. Aharon argues that low tolerances for religious exploration preserve Orthodoxy. I believe that when the limits are too tight, in the resultant climate of opinion, fresh new thinkers in Modern Orthodoxy are constrained and are not free to articulate approaches that effectively deal with new issues, such as in theology or historical-critical studies or feminism, because they risk being delegitimized. When a variety of responses are not developed and Orthodoxy appears not to be listening or incapable of responding, we lose credibility and we lose people.

R. Aharon has every right to remain true to his own principles, but he has not yet drawn the lessons of these two decades. The failure to defend the philosophical need to explore the full range of issues and approaches has had a chilling effect on religious seeking and honest conversation about problems in the community. This has encouraged a turn toward following authority and learning without asking questions. One outcome is a generation of *lomdim* and *talmidim* who master halakhic details but are not trained to grasp religious principles. Often, they are hobbled in wrestling with the large and serious religious questions of our time. Unlike *Hashem*, they are often uncomfortable or unwilling to live in the midst of *Benei Yisrael*, even *betokh tumatam*. Unable to deal fully with spiritual challenges, the community has moved toward protecting

its religious judgments by valorizing conformity and censorship. It has grown more insular. The balance of *bein adam la-makom* and *bein adam la-haveiro* has been lost — yet people fear to speak out. As a result, Modern Orthodoxy has lost out in the open society; people slip into secularism or assimilation on the left or shift towards haredism on the right. Rav Aharon does not want these outcomes, but I think that he might have put them in check by defending the need for a wider range of religious thinking and debate.

This brings me to my personal experience of delegitimation. R. Aharon describes the account of my encounter with the Rav during the 1960s controversy as a “ploy... [designed to] abduct a giant” to my side. The point of that story was not about me but what it showed about the Rav and his feelings about the atmosphere growing at Yeshiva being generated by some of his *talmidim*. The Rav was unhappy with the trend toward what Heschel called pan-halachism, learning and observance not suffused with *ruah* and ethics. Whatever the Rav’s differences with my views, he refused to denounce them in public because he respected them and did not want them to be delegitimated.

R. Aharon feels that I presented myself tendentiously as a “profile in courage” and “as suffering the status of a persecuted *nirdaf*.” I never felt that way about my place at Yeshiva in the 60s. I related that the original interview was published without my advance knowledge in order to impart the ambiguity of the incident, although I take full responsibility for these words now, I actually stumbled into that controversy, and, far from acting nobly, reacted with confusion and uncertainty. As I wrote “I disingenuously tried to soften and minimize the implications of my words.” Since that time, with my work on the *Shoah* and pluralism, the situation has become more polarized. I will only say that as I came to grasp more firmly the enormity of the *Shoah* and the amazing blessing and challenge of freedom, I have managed to continue to explore without yielding or giving in to my fears of exclusion.

In general, the approach of exclusion is a mistake. Given the lessons of Jewish history in which breakthroughs (such as Hasidism, Maimonidean approaches, *Mussar* and Zionism, etc.) were hounded by delegitimation, plus the experience of modern culture, which has shown that deeper and more powerful ideas emerge out of a freer exchange, Modern Orthodoxy should not have gone this route.

Since anger and caricature are not R. Aharon’s usual style, obviously

my words must have hurt him. I regret this. I also regret having to enter into this exchange because, to my mind, Rav Aharon remains one of our best leaders. However, on his watch at Yeshiva, the cause of *Torah u-Madda* went into exile in its own home. The Jewish people, which needs Torah teachings that speak credibly inside Jewry's real life situation, is the poorer for it. Now, along with many others, I have real hopes for a renaissance of Modern Orthodoxy at Yeshiva. Rav Aharon, as a leader in Modern Orthodoxy and as *talmid muvhak* and continuer of the Rav's teachings, should take the lead in undoing the recent constriction of *weltanschauung* and in turning with outstretched hand and spirit to all of *Klal Yisrael*.

Sincerely,
Irving Greenberg
Riverdale, New York

POSTSCRIPT: Rav Aharon writes that my reference to igniting Emil Fackenheim was "simply preposterous." Again, the true point of this reference was that open, respectful spiritual interaction between Orthodox and non-Orthodox was constructive for both. For Fackenheim, encounter with the *Shoah* was seminal; for me, it was the Reform theologians' emphasis on covenant that brought me to focus fruitfully on this central aspect of halakhic thinking.

But since I must defend the record: until 1965, Emil Fackenheim was a leading religious existentialist thinker who believed that religion was unaffected by history or historical events. After two years in the Canadian group, he was transformed in his thinking. In his first book on Holocaust theology, he wrote of the "incalculable inspiration" he received from the group.

In his opening major work in Holocaust theology, entitled *God's Presence in History*, he acknowledged this sea change and articulated his new view that Judaism was shaped by epoch making events. The paper that I read in the group's first year was entitled "God's Acts in History;" it deals with the *Shoah* and reborn Israel as orienting events shaping our religious understanding, much as the Exodus and the *Hurban* did in earlier eras of Jewish tradition. In the preface to *God's Presence*, Fackenheim wrote: "...I owe a fundamental debt to Irving Greenberg's concept of 'orienting experience:' his stubbornly historical thinking has liberated me from some false philosophical abstractions" (ibid. p. v).