

# Unorthodox Orthodox

By WILLIAM B. HELMREICH

*Living in the Image of God: Jewish Teachings to Perfect the World—Conversations with Rabbi Irving Greenberg as conducted by Shalom Freedman.* Jason Aronson, Northvale, New Jersey, 1998. 330 pp.

Rabbi Irving Greenberg defies easy categorization. On the one hand, he is an Orthodox-ordained rabbi who taught at Yeshiva University and who headed a prominent Orthodox congregation in New York for many years. On the other, as the founder and president emeritus of CLAL, The National Center for Learning and Leadership, he has staked out an independent position on many Jewish issues, which has frequently brought him into sharp conflict with the Orthodox establishment.

## BOOK REVIEW

While Greenberg is often criticized, even vilified, by Orthodox leaders, he is the darling of the larger Jewish establishment. Federations and Conservative and Reform temples around the world invite him to address their followers on a regular basis and see him as a visionary and charismatic figure.

Until now, the larger public has known him only by his articles in various newspapers and magazines. In fact, as he himself points out, we have known more about Greenberg from his attackers than from the man himself. Now, however, we have the opportunity to learn what he really thinks.

*Living in the Image of God* is a deeply insightful and original work. It contains hundreds of ideas about how to look at Judaism. It explores, with great clarity and vision, the major issues facing Jews—Israel, the Jew's role in the larger society, prayer, study and the Holocaust. What makes it so compelling is its ability to chart a course that is not limited by adherence to a particular ideology but which evaluates each problem or challenge on its own merits.

Greenberg's background was classic Modern Orthodox. Born in Brooklyn, he attended Etz Chaim Yeshiva and Yeshiva University High School for Boys and was a member of Bnei Akiva. Unlike most Modern Orthodox youths, however, he also studied at the Nevardok Yeshiva, Bais Yosef, where he developed a lifelong sensitivity to the teachings of the *mussar* movement (a movement devoted to the study of Jewish ethics and values established in the 19th century by Rabbi Yisrael Lipkin of Salant). The experience clearly played a major role in shaping the humanistic approach present in so much of his work.

After graduating Brooklyn College, Greenberg pursued graduate

studies at Harvard University, earning a Ph.D. in American history. Besides his rabbinical pulpit, he was the founder and first chairman of the Jewish Studies Department at City College. It was an exciting place then, with Elie Wiesel, Seymour Siegel and Eugene Borowitz all teaching in the same department.

At the core, Greenberg is an activist. CLAL has influenced thousands of Jews in this country, many of them prominent lay leaders, to take their religion more seriously. In this he has also had the involvement and support of his wife, Blu, a noted scholar and religious thinker in her own right. To the extent that there is a move toward the spiritual within the Jewish communal organizational structure, it probably owes a great deal to the seeds planted by Greenberg.

The idea that humans are created in God's image occupies center stage in Greenberg's thinking. As he puts it, "The principles of human infinite value, equality, and uniqueness...are the ethical principles that are meant to govern all human relationships."

In his view, God relinquishes a certain amount of power so that humans can relate to Him with integrity and love. God's covenant with the Jewish people is the method by which this goal can be achieved.

quo. He is, not surprisingly, a strong proponent of women's prayer groups.

Torah places the family at the center of religious life, Greenberg notes. At the same time, he argues (and this will not endear him to the Orthodox), the biblical patriarchs' families were often dysfunctional. "There was jealousy between wives and hatred between brothers, sexual rivalry, and lack of communication. In every generation, there was conflict over succession which, in Jacob's family, even led to an attempt to kill a brother."

By contrast, modern culture allows for greater individualism and equality, leading to more self-expression. The danger is, however, that self-expression can become an end in itself, leading to a downgrading of one's obligations to the community and to other individuals. Here too, the Torah, with its emphasis on communal responsibility, points the way.

When it comes to the Middle East conflict, Greenberg is a moderate. He believes in the historical significance of Judea and Samaria, but feels that without territorial compromise as an expression of sincere intentions, there will never be peace.

He supports the idea of allowing the settlers to stay under a final peace arrangement but is skeptical about the ability of the Arabs to protect those Israelis who will remain.

Greenberg's view of the Holocaust as a central theme in Jewish history is well known. That reality has become institutionalized, he as-

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serts, through its commemoration. In that sense, all of the museums and Holocaust institutes have become vehicles for the expression of Jewish values and beliefs, in the same way that the synagogue emerged as a major institution after the Temple was destroyed. To understand this, one need go no further than the survivors themselves, most of whom rebuilt their lives and families and gave generously to their communities.

Ultimately, this is a book by a Modern Orthodox Jew and it is here

that Greenberg is most insightful. He analyzes how and why Modern Orthodoxy lost its dominant position to the right wing.

He also points out many fallacies. One is that the *ba'al teshuva* movement is a dominant part of the Orthodox community. Greenberg reminds us that, according to the National Jewish Population Study, *ba'alei teshuva* represent perhaps 10% of the Orthodox community or, put another way, less than 1% of American Jewry. Yet a large part of Orthodoxy's financial resources is spent on them.

Greenberg is clearly highly knowledgeable. He is familiar with responsa by Rav Moshe Feinstein and certainly knows how to "learn a *blatt gemara*," as they say in the yeshiva world. Those in that world who call him an *am ha'aretz* (an ignoramus) do so out of fear rather than out of knowledge. Whether one agrees or disagrees with him, his book amply illustrates the depth and breadth of his scholarship.

The problem is that Greenberg's world view is not publicly supported by Modern Orthodox leaders, many of whom fear being attacked by the right-wing Orthodox, to whom Greenberg's brilliance is a threat.

Their reluctance is all the more remarkable when one sees how mainstream Greenberg's positions actually are with respect to adherence to *halacha* (Jewish law). Until they step forward to support him, he will remain a lonely voice crying out in a wilderness bereft of progressive thinking within a Torah framework.

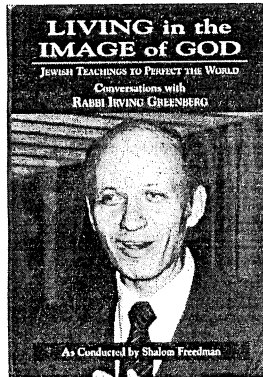
Truth be told, the dirty little secret here is that the Orthodox community has tried very hard to delegitimize Yitz Greenberg, despite the fact that in outlook and practice he is very much a part of that community.

Various Modern Orthodox organizations are afraid to acknowledge his support of their endeavors, and he is, by and large, excluded from their forums.

Since it's obvious he has a lot to say, the reason for his exclusion can only be fear of the impact he might have on his listeners and readers. Were it only because they disagree with him, why will they not let him speak and then refute him?

It is truly a shame, because his contacts with the larger Jewish community make him an ideal person to spread the word about what Modern Orthodoxy has to offer.

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**On April 1, Greenberg assumes what some see as a distinctly political role when he becomes chair of the U.S. Holocaust Council headquartered in Washington, D.C. To the council—he headed the Presidential Commission which was its precursor in the 70s and served on the council until 1993—he now seeks to bring his unique view of the Holocaust as both a Jewish and a universal phenomenon.**

The author is critical of the way Orthodoxy views the role of women in Judaism. He praises the synagogue built by Rabbi Avi Weiss as an example of equal treatment. It is physically split down the middle, enabling men and women to see and hear equally what's going on. Greenberg asserts that things can change, but that the Orthodox leadership is comfortable with the status