RESPONSE

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Reports from New Projects in the Community

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Change and the Orthodox Community

by Irving Greenberg

Irving Greenberg is rabbi of the Riverdale Jewish Center in New York City and an associate professor of history at Yeshiva University. In this interview, he explores the complex process involved in a religious community's adapting to a new and compelling consciousness of society. The changing role of ritual and the fate of existing communal forms are examined in terms of the progress Jewish life has to make in the future. Rabbi Greenberg, in addition, shows the risks and the costs inherent in change.

Q. *Rabbi Greenberg, in viewing the makeup of the Jewish community today, do you feel American Judaism is a pluralistic tradition with several different streams, or do you view it as something of a monolithic structure?*

RABBI GREENBERG: Well, I think it is a de facto pluralistic one. The American Jewish community is a satelite of the mainstream of American culture, and my guess is that, as time goes on, it will be distributed more and more over the full range of the spectrum which is found there. Because of this range, I think there cannot be a monolithic community any more, except perhaps in the sense that it is heavily middle class, and tends to lack certain phenomena associated with having other classes in the population mix. But in terms of its movements, or ideologically, I don't think that the community is monolithic.

None of the groups has integrated this fact of pluralism into their central concerns — especially the Orthodox, who have not yet developed any ideological schema for a positive notion of pluralism, or good institutional arrangements for a de facto pluralistic community. The official ideology on all levels still denies the serious reality of pluralism. It has not even tried to work out a pragmatic ideology of cooperation. Nevertheless, I think that de facto pluralism exists.

Q. *Do you think there are any notions of exclusiveness or legitimacy in Jewish traditional thought which are impeding this process of contact between different movements?*

RABBI GREENBERG: In the Orthodox community, and, I would say within the entire Jewish community, there is still an unresolved understanding of the relationship of particularism and universalism in Judaism. This applies to relationships within the Jewish community as well as with the rest of American society and world religions. Does the legitimary of Judaism involve universal claims of truth? Beyond the apologetics level of "the righteous of all nations have a portion in the world to come" and beyond conventional liberalism, the answer has not been articulated or fully confronted. The same problem exists in relationships between Orthodoxy and the other movements within the Jewish community itself.

In the case of the Orthodox, the feeling is that there would be an admission of the validity of the changes or breaches— or whatever word you want to use— of Tradition, by admitting the legitimacy of Reform and Conservative. This is one kind of problem. I think it is an intellectual problem in the sense of a willingness to see the Orthodox theology in a different framework. It is partly a lack of comprehension simply of just how a pluralistic situation works: i.e. whether or not I agree in principle, recognizing the reality of the other's ongoing life. For example, the Christian ecumenism toward Jews essentially is not yet on the level of recognizing full legitimacy, but sees the ongoing reality of Judaism which Christians must therefore live with, accept and be positive toward. This is in itself a constructive development, although it falls short of what I think is needed.

The problem of particularist-validating and universal relationships is most powerfully reflected in the Jewish general society relationships. In terms of real concern, sensitivity, personal involvement and alliances, I think it is true that the Jewish survivalists and the Jewishly committed are still heavily tribal. That is to say, they tend to be Jewishly committed in concert with *less* concern for the outside world. Those concerned for the outside world tend to become so by becoming less Jewish; they may think that they have to give one up to do the other well, and this, in fact, is what happens. I think a person can be very Jewish in essence when he fights for civil rights. But in most cases he feels that part of the task of fighting for civil rights is to give up some of his Jewish quality, to be free, to be fully a man. There is a shortage of people who are seriously trying to aid society out of a deep Jewish feeling.

Q. *Do you think that if the traditional Jewish community were to engage in this type of social action it would somehow destroy its traditional fabric? Is there a possibility of both involvement in society and maintaining the traditional framework?*

RABBI GREENBERG: This is the whole point at issue. The logic of your question is obviously the logic of those who are Jewishly committed and socially uninvolved. And it is the logic behind the fact that those who are

socially involved are less Jewish. If this is inescapably the case, then we face a fairly dismal prospect. At best, it means losing a good fraction of the Jewish community, because obviously it is socially involved and will become more so. I would prefer to explore an alternate possibility.

My feeling is that traditional Jewish commitment has become confused with many components of traditional society, a society which is now dying. Insofar as the two are intermixed, religion gets dragged down with the latter. This is what we see happening. But I don't think this link with traditional society is intrinsic to religion. This is the struggle that has been going on in Jewish life for the last hundred and fifty years: How, if at all, can we dissociate Jewish religion from the previous cultural and social setting, and relive it again in this environment? We need a kind of translation of the fundamental calls of Judaism into a new setting.

The life style of the traditional community was more authoritarian, monolithic, ascetic, and particularistic. In the old setting, all of these things had certain possitive functions. In the new setting they tend to be destroyed. Everything else goes with them. In a sense, it is possible to be integrated in a double culture, and remain traditional, only if the *religiously* traditional is no longer bound to the *culturally* traditional. It would have to become itself in a new setting.

Q. *Is that something to be wished for or to be repelled?*

RABBI GREENBERG: I would say something to be wished for. Fundamentally the call to the Jew has been to do his thing, in each culture, wherever he is, and not in a culture that existed two hundred years ago. The same fundamental confusion is present with those, on the one hand, who think one can only be a traditional Jew by recreating the older culture or by at least keeping the new culture out of the Jewish area; and with those, on the other hand, who seem to feel that they can be faithful to contemporary culture only by giving up Jewish culture.

What has not been explored seriously is the possibility that, in fact, it is really not necessary to accept this polarity. It is perhaps destructive of both cultures to do so.

Let me give a concrete example of what I mean by life-style change, and then a comment on this question of what's negative in giving up the Jewish. Take the question of *kashrut,* dietary laws. Obviously, most Jews have concluded that in order to be faithful to modern culture they must give it up, either because it was difficult, unavailable, divisive socially, or in some way restrictive of the opportunities to truly work in society. If the only serious conception of *Kashrut* is essentially separatist, which is the role it played in a previous culture, then it must crumble for most Jews. But perhaps *Kashrut* also represents a certain reverence for life, or an awareness of the

divine in the human, which could translate itself into a certain kind of social-ethical relationship. If so, the separatism aspect of *Kashrut* can be overcome by the new framework, where the Jew who keeps *Kashrut* lives in an integrated society: I think *Kashrut* should be kept more by people who eat with Gentiles than by those who eat with Jews. It's at that moment when we are sharing a meal that the Jew can feel at one with the Gentile and yet be reminded of his distinctiveness.

To operate in this new way would take not only a psychological change of attitude toward *Kashrut,* but a willingness to look for the *halakhic* ways of being able to eat with a Gentile, without violating *Kashrut.* That's the kind of change that is needed to make possible the carrying on of a significant traditional framework in an integrated society.

Q. *So you see one function of ritual as that of maintaining identity while involved in open society.*

RABBI GREENBERG: This is not its only function, but it is important. The tragedy has been, again, the mistaken pre-supposition of the necessity of choice: Those who have given up their specific identity to be in society have frequently done an injustice to the Judaic moral claims as well as to society itself. Some Jewish radicals and Jewish libertarians have tended to be insensitive to Jewish legitimate moral claims— of Israel's right to exist, for example. They're so concerned with saving mankind that they're willing to let Israel or others die in order that this shall be done. So you have a paradoxical price that is paid for this insensitivity on both sides.

Q. *If we could pass now to the area of personal relations, what position would you like to secure in the Orthodox community? How would you go about developing an ethic of the interpersonal which would be responsive to change in a social context?*

RABBI GREENBERG: Well, I guess you have to first decide what is your theory of humanity and your theory of social and sexual relations. Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, a nineteenth century figure who has a lot to offer, states that the Torah came to make a *mensch.* That is his capsule summary of Torah. Now, if we take that seriously -- that the Torah is come to make a human being truly human -- then presumably the theology of human relations will strive to maximize the capacity of the Jew to become human.

To put it in traditional terms, only in the discovery of the image of God in the other person do I truly discover myself. "The image of God" means, among other things, the uniqueness of the person, the fullest humanity of the other person. If this is the goal then one can begin to develop an ethic. One would recognize that the separation of boys and girls in a previous culture was designed to maintain a certain integrity of relationship which is now possible only in the mixing of the two. This is one way in

which one begins to confront these questions.

Q. *So you would say somehow that the primary value remains the same, although its application might differ in a different circumstance?*

RABBI GREENBERG: Yes. I will admit, in all honesty, that a) my awareness of this drive to humanize is conditioned by the culture I have grown up in; and that b) I think modern culture has really widened our conceptions of what man is capable of. In this sense, I would have to argue that this new development was, at best, latent in Judaism. We often try to convince ourselves that if we only show that Judaism had certain values first, this proves it's wonderful. Such proofs are useless; my response to them tends to be: What have you done for me lately?

A more fruitful notion, I believe, is implicit in Torah as the word of God. The word has latent within it many possibilities which might not have come out but for the cultural situation, or the historical experience of the people. In many cases, when modern culture may well be ahead of us, the question is only whether I can now develop in that direction with Judaism. And when I do, I may end up leading again. Or at least, I can make a contribution to my time by joining in its work.

In this same spirit, I would say I'm not claiming that everything I'm saying was always normative. Rather there are elements in the tradition which now come to the fore, and which, now crystallized, can draw upon a rich tradition and therefore be enriched even as they function in the contemporary reality. Maybe we can even contribute a particular nuance to current policy.

For example, I think contemporary culture, in its thrust for the fuller humanness of man, creates cultures which sometimes dissolve the very thing they seek to enhance. Technology and mass society make possible affluence, which is fundamental to dignity, yet which can become extremely oppressive, humanly speaking. Here is where Jewish culture may make a contribution by creating a framework within which men can become human in their affluence rather than being oppressed by it. It may very well be that by coming into this society late, Judaism can make a better contribution to the contemporary struggle to humanize life.

Q. *What happens, then, to the halakhic process? Is the process a response to cultural change you have outlined for us--is that the restoration of the original process? What happens to religious change?*

RABBI GREENBERG: I believe that this is what the *halakhic* process has always been, really: the Jewish methodology of mastering life, by reconciling the conflicting claims of which all life consists-- individual and society, in-group and out-group, justice and law and order. There is a legiti-

mate, constant dialectic of these claims. The *halakha* was a method and instrument of impregnating every aspect of life with value and attitude. However, I think that in recent centuries it has stopped being that. It has become both more abstract and more rigid. In part, then, I think we must restore it to its pristine 'beauty.' Of course this may be my own ideological projection based on contemporary values, but I honestly feel it is a restoration.

Even a limited kind of *halakhic* adjustment-response to modern life would be a big help; we can live in the tension, providing we are not in two totally different worlds. *Halakha* is incapable of adjustment just now because it is in the hands of its current practitioners, who are largely incapable. Every system has potentials, methods, and devices which are not used until somebody comes along who wants to use them. When the ideology becomes "we want to use this, we want to adapt," there will be new options. The *halakha* is not a preservation system, but a system that seeks to master new situations. When the commitment to the new situation is made, I think the ideology will then fall in, perhaps by going back to the minority viewpoints, perhaps by drawing upon neglected sources. In Jewish history there were major permutations that took place when exactly such a possibility emerged.

Here I am trying to walk a narrow line between those who insist that permutations are impossible and those who insist that such permutations accent the shattering of the old framework. There are those who feel that rabbinical Judaism is a total shattering of biblical framework. I don't think that's a fair statement. I think it is picking up certain options within the biblical and developing them extensively, while moving away from other options that were present there. I think the same thing can be done again, including restoration of certain options from the biblical which have not been used for some time now.

Q. *Do you think that it's worthwhile trying to influence the practitioners of this theory-making now, or do you think it's more important, perhaps, to direct one's efforts elsewhere?*

RABBI GREENBERG: My current instincts are to move in the second direction, to create a laity, a community, and those institutions that are needed. If this is done, the practitioners of the theory will catch up eventually. This second approach is a costly process and an inefficient one--of course ideally I'd like to be dialectical and work on both fronts. There is, in fact, a bit of action on both fronts, but I think the main thrust now is in the creation of the laity and the channels new enough to develop a community that is trying to be Jewish in contemporary reality.

Q. *Well, to follow it up for a moment, right now there is a Jewish youth*

culture which is growing in the community. Do you think that the Jewish community as it is constituted today is "good" enough to absorb these people without the necessity of their having to change it? In other words, should youth create new institutions or reform existing ones?

RABBI GREENBERG: The Jewish community is overorganized to cope with old issues and underorganized to face new situations. When it comes to youth culture, it's terribly underorganized; as it is when it comes to providing a vehicle for serious Jewish participation in American society. I think we need a whole raft of new movements, institutions, and aggregates of power to begin to carry out what needs to be done. One can only greet with excitement and joy a magazine like RESPONSE or the new Jewish collegiate movements. (At the risk of sounding like I'm plugging my own, Yavneh is the most significant because it's more student led.) Student leadership means it is a response and not obedience to a form simply imposed by the adult community in the hope of "meeting the challenge."

Unfortunately, the college community has very few Jewish leaders who are organizationally or administratively free to respond to the youth culture. Rabbis or a lay collegiate leadership will have to represent Jewish tradition more dynamically in its presence. And there are very few institutions that enable students to get together to study, explore, and develop the Jewish experience. In an article in JUDAISM (Summer 1968), I proposed a "think tank" for this purpose. There's a vast shortage of ideological and philosophical material. There's a significant shortage of social action headquarters available to aid the expression of student social concerns. We simply must have more channels.

Q. *Regarding the generation which is leaving college now and getting into the adult community in the next few years, do you think that the structure of the adult Jewish community, with its synagogues and centers and so on, will fulfill their needs?*

RABBI GREENBERG: I am afraid that when they get back to the community, they will be every bit as complacent as the present community is. In this sense, I'm afraid the institutions *will* be adequate. I think that what we are therefore looking for, really, is major shifts within the institutions, or new institutions. Here again, unfortunately, none of us has come up yet with the new institutions. Havurat Shalom, a group in Cambridge (RESPONSE, Fall, 1968), is trying to set up a community, and it is an example of one kind of new institution, but obviously a limited kind.

I have often thought that a movement (like the Opus Dei movement of Catholicism) where the people attempt to live in secular life, carrying out the values of the tradition, would be a very important kind of development, not necessarily restricted geographically. It could draw people who have a

common feeling from the entire city, on the adult level, and would be an important new kind of framework.

Q. *Do you see synagogues as capable of being changed?*

RABBI GREENBERG: Truthfully, I'm skeptical Now that I'm a rabbi and working at it (and I have a community that seems to want to try it), I've become more skeptical than I was before I started. There are such built-in inertial forces—such as fund raising concerns, the absence of a selected group agreed on fundamentals and committed to action. It seems easier and perhaps more fruitful to create new aggregates.

AN APPEAL

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