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Irving Greenberg: A Jewish Dialectic of Hope

There is a passionate, unique voice in modern Jewish Orthodoxy that deserves the widest of hearings. It belongs to the thinker and leader Rabbi Irving Greenberg. Greenberg addresses the most compelling issues that Judaism faces today with courage and insight. He asks: Can authentic Jewish life be sustained, when the majority of Jews have no contact with those most devoted to Torah and Halakhah? Is there legitimacy to an Orthodox Judaism that for the sake of its “purity” rejects responsibility for the whole Jewish people? Can Judaism maintain a productive encounter with modernity without sacrificing the commitment to a meaningful Jewish distinctiveness? Finally, has the unspeakable horror that is the *Shoah* irreparably damaged the covenant between God and the Jewish people?

Greenberg combines philosophical and theological inquiries with decades of work as a communal leader. He encourages Jews of all persuasions to speak with one another and to recognize their common concern for Judaism’s future. His practical work also includes efforts to strengthen Jewish education and to nurture the next generation of Jewish leaders. Despite the active opposition of many within his own movement, Greenberg continues to provide an impressive model, one especially important in our time, of a committed Orthodox Jew who welcomes dialogue and diversity.

Irving Greenberg was born in New York in 1933 and his writings

display a distinctly American perspective. For some Jews, especially among the Orthodox, the term “American” is not necessarily an appellation of esteem. America is still often regarded as that *trefe medina* (unkosher state), a tempting but dangerous land, that furnishes very shallow soil for authentic Jewish life. Greenberg shows, however, that the hope and openness to the new which that soil engenders provides genuine sustenance. He gratefully acknowledges a number of important influences on his life, among which are: his father – Rabbi Eliyahu Chayim Greenberg, the teachers and students at the Bais Yosef Yeshiva in Boro Park, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, and his wife, Blu Greenberg. These influences creatively resound throughout Greenberg’s mature reflections.

Rabbi Eliyahu Greenberg encouraged in his son a faith in the Jewish people¹ and a belief that Judaism could and should confront the challenges of modernity. At the Bais Yosef Yeshiva Irving Greenberg got a first hand sense of the overwhelming impact of the Holocaust, since many of his fellow students were refugees, and he also learned about the centrality that *musar* (ethics) must have in Jewish life and teaching. The preeminent modern Orthodox rabbi, Joseph Soloveitchik, had a multi-faceted influence, including providing a vibrant model of Orthodoxy and insisting that creative activity in the world is an essential feature of covenantal life. Finally, Blu Greenberg, a prominent feminist Jewish thinker in her own right, helped him to see the positive challenge that feminism presents to Judaism.

Judaism: A Religion of Redemption

Greenberg’s views about the impact of the Holocaust are well known.² However, as pivotal as the Holocaust is in his thought, it is important to appreciate that he begins with an approach to Judaism

and not a theology of the Holocaust. Put in another way, it is an understanding of the nature of Judaism that compels him to confront the *tremendum*³ of the *Shoah*. Greenberg has written that “the central paradigm of Jewish religion is redemption.”⁴ He means by this that at the heart of Judaism stands a vision of the redeemed life and a path for concretely moving toward this goal in history. The Jewish portrait of redemption is sketched by Greenberg through exploring the ramifications of the biblical notion of *tzelem elokim*. As created in the image of God, humans are endowed with “three intrinsic dignities:” infinite value, equality, and uniqueness.⁵ The first means that human life cannot be weighed, measured, or compared in terms of, that is, subordinated to, any other value. In the Kantian parlance, humans are always a goal or end in themselves and never a means to something else. The second term implies that no person or group is privileged over another. In fact, idolatry results when a person or group absolutizes itself or its message. The third idea reinforces the dignity of every human by insisting that each person is irreplaceable and has a special role to play in the redemption of the world.

Redemption is a hope and not a reality for Judaism, for Judaism is a religion that refuses to ignore the brutalities of history. It fully acknowledges that the dignities of *tzelem elokim* are scorned by the violence, oppression, poverty, degradation, and death that pervade human life. As Greenberg expressed it: “The Jewish religion is founded on the divine assurance and human belief that the world will be perfected.”⁶ Judaism engages with and seeks to overcome these realities of history through its notion of covenant. The covenant is that dynamic that God inaugurated in history, that partnership between God and the Jewish people, to achieve the dignities for which all humans were created. Jews are those teachers, models, and

co-workers – having both a divine and human partners – whom God designated to help all persons and even nature achieve redemption.⁷ For Greenberg, the messianic dream of perfection will not be realized by divine fiat, but by “improving this world, one step at a time.”⁸

These understandings of God, humans, and the world are expressed through the Torah and lived-out by the Jewish people through the holy days and the Halakhah. In this view, Torah is that divine teaching that stands as “the constitution of the ongoing relationship of God and the Jewish people.”⁹ The holy days record and present for re-experiencing the orienting events of Jewish history. They bring both past and future into the present. Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot ground the Jewish year with the experiences of liberation, covenant acceptance, and the movement toward redemption. These historical holidays are augmented by the clusters of the Sabbath and the Days of Awe, where the individual’s life is sustained and reinvigorated through the encounter with eternity. A Jewish rhythm or dialectic¹⁰ of sacred and profane, eternity and history, universal and particular is thus maintained within the Jewish calendar. As Greenberg puts it:

The holy days nurture extraordinary dialectical capacities in the individual and community. Trust in God, but help yourself; demand justice, but take it one step at a time; save the world, but start with your own family; bleed for humanity, but be sure to preserve your own group because “all Israel are responsible one for the other.”¹¹

For Greenberg, Passover is the model of the holy days. In harmony with the cardinal role that redemption plays in his presentation of Judaism, he regards the Exodus as “the core event of Jewish history

and religion.”¹² It is paradigm and guarantor of redemption. When Jews relive the Exodus movement from slavery to freedom, they are linked with their specific past and also experience that promised universal future. They experience the perils of the deepest of human oppression, slavery. They are both frustrated and nourished by what is now only a “taste of perfection.”¹³

As a modern Orthodox rabbi, Irving Greenberg is committed to the meaningfulness of the Halakhah. Much as his teacher, Soloveitchik,¹⁴ and another modern Orthodox thinker and student of Soloveitchik, David Hartman,¹⁵ he powerfully portrays the way that Jewish law brings everyday life into contact with God. Halakhah gives fullness and direction – it has been given for the sake of the human¹⁶ – as it endeavors to guide the individual and community from hope to messianic realization. It is “the art of the possible, the divine science of the doable,” which seeks to perfect the human by converting “absolute ends into proximate means.”¹⁷ In this manner, Jewish existence takes up the trials of reality, without illusion or despair. Furthermore, both the covenant and Halakhah allow incremental progress in transformation without a fear that the inevitable compromises and shortfalls will corrupt the attainment of redemption. As we will see, this notion of Halakhah, as well as the other features of Judaism that have just been outlined, are the platform that allow Greenberg’s openness to the unique challenges that Judaism faces in the modern world.

The Challenges of Modernity: Religious Pluralism and Feminism

One of the most distinctive elements in Greenberg’s work is the recognition that the modern period and particularly the present

time offer hitherto unknown opportunities for the growth and development of Judaism. For the vast majority of its history Judaism displayed the ability to be a fortress against oppression and persecution. However, a new era of freedom and power for Jews has begun, which is especially evident in terms of the two current centers of Jewish life, America and Israel. A siege or fortress mentality, where every foreigner was presumed to be hostile and the new was perceived only as a threat, is no longer valid in our contemporary environment of personal, religious, and political freedom.¹⁸ Greenberg is confident that Judaism can thrive in the new situation.

Many Jews do not share Greenberg's assessment. They believe that Judaism requires "the protective tariff of gentile hostility and cultural inferiority."¹⁹ His retort is characteristic of the spirit that pervades all of his writings; "I believe that it is God's will and the eternal goal of the Torah that we learn how to play the religious game as a free and powerful people. We should welcome this stage of our covenantal road."²⁰ He looks forward to a friendly contest between rival faith and secular perspectives. Judaism's affirmation of meaning in terms of Torah and covenantal existence, of family and community stands up to open examination. Further, the encounter with freedom can lead to a Judaism that overcomes past deficiencies and to Jews who emerge with renewed commitment. A powerful sign of his optimism and confidence is that, unlike almost all Orthodox and even Conservative Jewish leaders, Greenberg supports Jewish proselytizing.²¹

To be truly engaged with the new, requires that Judaism assesses and responds to the challenges of modernity. The dialectic of engagement means that Judaism has both a critical task and a positive charge. Greenberg sees the challenges of religious pluralism and of

feminism, or more widely, the changing role and status of women, as serious but also welcome. There is no question that he stands at the forefront of contemporary Jewish thinkers in his insights into these two defining issues of modernity.

Greenberg sees the meeting between Jews and persons of other religious faiths and secular ideologies as an important development for Judaism.²² It has brought Jews to understand and respect other persons, that is, to see them “in the image of God.”²³ It is a reminder that others are co-workers in the common project of redemption. This meeting purifies Judaism of the elements of absoluteness. Jews must recognize that while they have a unique covenant with God, the Bible also describes God’s covenant with all persons – the Noahide Covenant. Further, Judaism does not have a monopoly as a redemptive faith community in relation to God. Other communities are authentic expressions of the God-relationship. Greenberg cites *Isaiah* 19:24–25 that speaks of God’s special relation even to Israel’s greatest enemies during the biblical period, Egypt and Assyria.²⁴

Pluralism does present difficulties, but Greenberg believes that Judaism emerges better after facing them. First, he finds that Judaism’s view of election or chosenness is not jettisoned but clarified through the meeting with others. Some thinkers, and Judith Plaskow is a clear example,²⁵ conclude that the concept of election cannot be maintained when Judaism respects the reality and equality of other faiths. However, Greenberg holds that while election and equality stand in tension, they are also complementary. He writes that “election affirms the uniqueness of each people’s mission – but all are equal.”²⁶ Even more unequivocally, he contends that Judaism has the resources to be more than tolerant. It can affirm the value of others in their particularity, which is the seal of true pluralism. He writes:

Election affirms that the other is different for a good reason; the other is different because he or she is chosen for a special mission...Each group is called – that is chosen. Each can become a leader for *tikkun olam* (redemption of the world); each can share its experiences and become teachers and models for others.²⁷

Second, many religious persons believe that pluralism only arises out of or inevitably entails a weakening of commitment. If this were true, then Judaism would have to regard it as an unadulterated threat. Yet, Greenberg insists that to respect and welcome the other heightens commitment. In learning about others, one sees that redemption is a cooperative effort and one discovers more about the distinctiveness and significance of one's own religious community. He concludes that:

We Jews should have enough inner security in our freedom and, out of consciousness of God's love, allow love to be exercised as universally as God wills. The fullness of the other's divine service enables us to appreciate and learn from them.²⁸

Chapter Five in Greenberg's book, *The Jewish Way*, is titled, "The Role of Women in Orthodox Jewish Life." The prominent place of this discussion highlights the importance that the issue of women and Judaism has for him. While he has learned much from his wife about the problems and needs of Jewish women, his commitment concerning this issue is not derivative. Greenberg sees women's place in Judaism

as a “burning ethical, religious issue.”²⁹ He argues that Judaism must be more open to the experience and participation of women, because this is what Judaism itself demands. It is first a matter of fundamental respect, of *tzelem elokim*, and ultimately of *tikkun olam*.

He is especially critical of the response to groups of Jewish women by Orthodox leaders and communities in America and Israel. In his words:

The process of upgrading women’s condition, started by the Torah and given over to the Torah *she b’al peh* (oral Torah), has been prematurely stopped along the way...(because) of fear of change and yearning for authoritarianism.³⁰

Greenberg insists that there are no good Halakhic reasons for the negative response that Orthodox rabbis have given to the requests of Jewish women to be treated as full covenant partners. He heartily supports the progress already achieved and points to the necessity of this being expanded. He would like to see, for example, increased opportunities for Jewish learning, and also giving full rights to women’s prayer groups, which he designates as “women’s minyanim.” His book on the holidays makes a point of detailing specific customs and practices by women as well as discussing the special celebrations of women’s groups on *Rosh Hodesh* (the beginning of the month).

The treatment of the issue of women and Judaism expresses some of the perennial features of Greenberg’s overall philosophy of Judaism. We have already seen his references to *tzelem elokim* and *tikkun olam*. More subtly, his discussion of the changing role of women, both inside and outside of the Jewish community, reflects

his views about pluralism and the proper critical or dialectical stance toward modernity. He takes up two arguments that have been forwarded by some Jewish men and women who are opposed to new roles for women. Some claim that when women are given new powers and roles in Judaism all differences between “the sexes” will disappear. Following his model of pluralism, Greenberg believes that equality can be achieved between Jewish men and women without overwhelming distinctive differences. Some assert that modernity’s expansion of the roles of women necessarily diminishes the strength of the family. While Greenberg supports this expansion, he is sensitive to the new pressures it puts upon family life. Women must not affirm career to the extent of sacrificing family, but the answer to this tension requires responsible, creative efforts by both women and men. Family is not just a woman’s problem or responsibility.

The Holocaust and the Voluntary Covenant

The Holocaust presents the deepest challenge to Judaism and to Jewish thought in our time, according to Greenberg.³¹ Fundamentally, it threatens Judaism as a religion of redemption. How can the orienting experience of liberation during the Exodus and the messianic promises of *tikkun* in the future withstand the horrific reality of six million murders, where “Death won out”?³² How can the covenant, that partnership between God and the Jewish people in history, continue to be viable when the people were left alone, if not betrayed, to die as innocents? Greenberg’s answer is unequivocal. The standard Jewish notions of redemption and covenant, as well as faith, have been “broken.” The persistent and radical nature of the Holocaust’s challenge to Jewish thought appears in Greenberg’s frequent assertion that: “No statement, theological or otherwise,

should be made that would not be credible in the presence of burning children.”³³

The theme of the “voluntary covenant” is a bold phrase that underscores the idea that the Holocaust has ruptured or broken the contract between God and the Jewish people. Greenberg writes:

After all, if one-third of the people of Israel is broken off from the body of the people and destroyed, how could the covenant of the Jewish people (which undergirds their being), and the Torah of the Jewish people (which shares their life), not be broken as well?³⁴

Still, the dialectic within the notion of voluntary covenant affirms that the relationship has not ended. Greenberg thus rejects the simplicity of two types of response to the Holocaust, one that presents the event as a just punishment for Jewish sin, and a second that concludes that the Holocaust entails the death of God. For him, the relationship between God and the Jewish people has been renewed, at the initiative of the people. The Jewish people, who no longer owe obedience – for they were not in the wrong, voluntarily act out of renewed love and hope.

A major theme that is addressed by Jewish thinkers who seek to fashion a response to the Holocaust concerns the question of “uniqueness.” Is the Holocaust similar to other tragic events of suffering in Jewish history? If the Holocaust is similar, then Judaism possesses the strength now, as in the past, for an adequate response. If, however, it is unprecedented, or unique, then only a transformed Judaism could summon the necessary resources to meet its threat. Many Orthodox thinkers, including the theologian Eliezer Berkovits,³⁵

take up the first position. Irving Greenberg is the most prominent Orthodox thinker – the leading non-Orthodox figures include Richard Rubenstein, Emil Fackenheim, and Elie Wiesel – who takes up the second.³⁶ For him, the Holocaust presents unique challenges to Judaism. It affects all of his thought – redemption, covenant, *tzelem elokim*, pluralism, women, Israel, the holidays – as well as his practical efforts to strengthen the Jewish community.

While the Holocaust is unprecedented, Jewish response to historic catastrophe is not. Greenberg sees past Jewish responses as a guide to what is happening in the present, or, put in another way, he presents a very powerful *midrash*³⁷ or interpretation to illustrate that there is an evolving process within Judaism and that the Holocaust marks another of its phases. He suggests that there have been three stages in the unveiling/development of the notions of redemption and covenant within Judaism. In the biblical period God was regarded as the sole redeemer and the covenant was a contract between unequals. God was the adult, the actor in history, and the Jewish people, his children, remained loyal to the covenant primarily by being obedient. This biblical paradigm ended with the destruction of the two temples. In response to this catastrophe, the Rabbis rethought some of the basic concepts of Judaism. They recognized that God no longer directly intervened in history, which left that stage open to human initiative and responsibility. The covenant form was reconfigured to reflect a more equal partnership. For example, God's word in the written Torah, or the biblical text, was now understood through oral Torah, that is, the interpretative efforts of the Rabbis. In turn, the Holocaust demarcates the end of the rabbinic paradigm and the beginning of a new stage. It demonstrated that God is more hidden/limited than the Rabbis had believed. History and the movement

toward redemption are now given over to human efforts to an even greater extent. Correspondingly, the Jewish people have become the “senior partner” in the covenantal enterprise. In Greenberg’s words: “God now acts primarily, at least on the visible level, through human activity – as is appropriate in a partnership whose human participant is growing up.”³⁸

The Holocaust, with the concomitant diminishing of God’s manifest presence, affects Jewish faith, the calendar, as well as Judaism’s holy sites. A Jewish faith left whole after the Holocaust would be one that ignored the reality of that event. Legitimate Jewish faith in God is possible after the *Shoah*, but it is a transformed one. Greenberg finds that there is now a heightened tension between “faith and doubt, hope and despair, triumph of life and victory of death.”³⁹ At one time he discussed this dialectic of fractured faith in temporal terms. He wrote:

Faith is living life in the presence of the Redeemer, even when the world is unredeemed. After Auschwitz, faith means there are times when faith is overcome... The difference between the skeptic and the believer is frequency of faith, and not certitude of position.⁴⁰

The Holocaust equally ruptures, that is, breaks into, that great repository of Jewish theology and history, the cycle of Jewish holy days. One of the most insightful discussions in *The Jewish Way* is the chapter, “The Shattered Paradigm: *Yom Hashoah*.” It includes an analysis of the challenge and the effects of the Holocaust, but its major focus is the endeavor to commemorate the lives of those who were killed. The review of the theological discussions that led

to the establishment of *Yom Hashoah* (Holocaust Memorial Day) demonstrates that the Jewish people themselves, often despite their leaders, understood the uniqueness of the event. They recognized the imperative that remembering the Holocaust not be collapsed into even the most important traditional mourning day, *Tisha B'Av*. Although the liturgy for *Yom Hashoah* is still in the experimental stage, the emergence of the day is of greatest significance. As he writes:

The day itself is a classic expression...of the thesis of the emergence of a new cycle of Jewish history, one in which the human role in the covenant becomes even more responsible, while God becomes at once more hidden and more present.⁴¹

Additionally, it shows the inadequacy of the distinction pointed to by the labels “holy” and “secular;” it is a secular day, filled with hidden holiness.

The midrash about the unfolding of the Jewish covenant traced the passage of holy sites from the Temple to the synagogue. Greenberg has identified and given tremendous time and effort to what he sees as the succeeding institution, Holocaust Memorial Centers. It may come as a surprise to many that the Holocaust Memorial Center follows in the wake of Temple and synagogue. However, the Holocaust Center symbolizes the third stage of the covenant, demonstrating the impact of that event on Jewish life. Greenberg sees the centre as the result of the Jewish people’s need for “a sacred space to study and explore the profound implications of the *Shoah* in a setting that enables a serious empathetic encounter with it in a total environment.”⁴² Thus, in its seemingly secular

shell the Holocaust Memorial Center again exhibits a hidden sacred dimension, appealing to Jews of every type of commitment. Greenberg also proposes that another institution, the open, “secular” retreat center where Jewish life can be intensively lived and renewed will also be a new, widespread third-era institution. He is frustrated by his inability to create one, thus far.

The Holocaust is more than a challenge to Judaism, and here Greenberg reiterates a perception shared by many philosophers and theologians. He underscores the universal dimensions of the Holocaust’s effects by writing that “at the heart of the world is a crack; reality is fundamentally flawed.”⁴³ In addition to Judaism, Christianity and modernity themselves are no longer whole. In terms of Christianity, Greenberg sees that its history of anti-Judaism, that two centuries of “teaching of contempt,” was a trigger for the Holocaust and now must be confronted and eliminated. Christianity is also fractured, as a second religion of redemption, because it is forced to face the full extent of the world’s lack of redemption, despite its traditional core message of the “good news” of the Christ. In terms of modernity, the Holocaust is a revelatory event. It uncovered deep fissures at the heart of modernity’s seemingly indisputable achievements and successes. Following the Holocaust, we have learned to be deeply suspicious of such modern values as universalism, progress, rationality, individualism and the “rights of man.” Jews and others were not saved by the protective covering of these values, and the post-Holocaust world must respect such correctives as particularity, pluralism, and community.

The response to the Holocaust incumbent on all persons today is to affirm life. In Greenberg’s terminology this is to restore the image of God in every person. For him this means “to reduce evil

and suffering...bringing out to the fullest the individuality, the equality, and the value of every human being.”⁴⁴ Every activity that reaches for these goals is religious in the highest sense. It attests to God’s presence in the only possible way, through realizing God’s image in the other person.⁴⁵ Thus, God’s presence is felt, witnessed, and welcomed in a dialectical rather than a direct manner. This idea of a hidden kernel of the divine within the manifest skin of the secular, or of a necessary dialogue and dialectic between religious and secular is expressed by Greenberg through the notion of “holy secularism.”⁴⁶

Greenberg’s commitment to pluralism, which was detailed above, also arises out of his attention to the Holocaust. If that event caused a split in every person, every community, every religion and every cause, then all human values and activities are affected. If the post-Holocaust experience of rupture and fracture are taken seriously, then wholeness, completeness, and systematic consistency show themselves to be liabilities or errors. In his view, wholeness – lack of questioning, self-critique, openness to different and even opposing visions – is in fact a sign of inauthenticity. Correspondingly, the abilities to recognize the limits of one’s values and allegiances and to appreciate the force of others’ views and commitments, i.e., pluralism, both demonstrates and encourages health.

Despite the length of the preceding examination of the Holocaust, one of the dominant themes in Greenberg’s treatment has not yet been introduced, that is, the modern State of Israel. As with many other Jewish thinkers, the connection between the two topics runs very deep for Greenberg. The creation of the state of Israel is one of the preeminent signs of the Jewish people’s voluntary affirmation of the relationship to God. In his words, “Coming after the incredible

destruction of the Holocaust, the creation of Israel and the rebuilding of Jewish life constitute an unparalleled reacceptance of the covenant.”⁴⁷ From the other side, Israel exhibits a trace of the divine presence; the “rebirth of Israel...is comparable to the biblical Exodus itself.”⁴⁸ Israel is thus part of the dialectic of Jewish life today of catastrophe and renewal, of death and life. For example, Greenberg believes that only the hope engendered by the “miraculous deliverance” of Israel during the Six-Day War allowed Jews to finally face the full horror of the Holocaust.⁴⁹

Israel constitutes a revolution within Judaism, a revolution again confirmed by the calendar. The establishment of the state marked the end of *Galut* Judaism, of centuries of powerlessness. It demonstrated that the Jewish hope for redemption was alive, but that the Jewish people could no longer live just on hope. It began the awe inspiring process of ingathering of the exiles and showed that when the Jewish people take up responsibility for their fate in history, they are accompanied by their divine partner. Greenberg speaks of Israel Independence Day, *Yom Ha'Atzmaut*, as the holiday of “resurrection and redemption.”⁵⁰ It is a day of joy, whose connection to the Holocaust is concretized by appearing seven days after *Yom Hashoah* in the calendar.

Although Israel is a powerful rejoinder to the Holocaust, its relationship cannot just be one of diametrical opposition. The redemption of Israel is certainly a partial, fragmentary one. Greenberg sees Israel as a divine sign and a fulfillment of God's biblical promises. However, God's presence, *Hashgachah*, cannot be identified with any particular event in Israel's history and those who see only Israel's messianic meaning have lost touch with its and our broken reality. Greenberg advances a convincing critique of the messianism of

Gush Emunim, the settlers' movement, and of some *Haredi*, that is ultra-Orthodox, Jewish groups. His rejection of their overt view of God's actions is based on his analysis of the dialectical effects that the Holocaust sows into Jewish history. It is blasphemous to think that God could be directly acting to realize a messianic plan for Israel, because that would imply that God could have intervened to save the six million innocents, and did not! He refers to Elie Wiesel's judgment, in *The Gates of the Forest*, that the time for miraculous intervention is over. In Greenberg's words:

it is too late for an all powerful Messiah to come... Bringing the messiah is dependent on human intelligence, passion, and courage to help overcome the obstacles to perfection...The Kingdom of God can only be created if we bring people together and spread knowledge of God.⁵¹

This bold engagement with contemporary challenges such as the Holocaust, Israel, pluralism, feminism and modernity overall has brought Greenberg to be critical of, and fervently criticized by, many Orthodox leaders. He recognizes, as many other knowledgeable commentators have remarked, that Orthodoxy has moved to the "right" in the past few decades. Ultra-Orthodox rabbis and heads of *Yeshivot* have become increasingly influential and aggressive. Many within Orthodoxy have sought to draw a line between the righteous practitioners of Halakhah and all other varieties and streams of Judaism, which they regard as illegitimate. Further, under the banner of the famous slogan of Rabbi Moses Sofer (1762-1839) that "the new is prohibited by the Torah," Halakhah has been expunged of the flexibility and openness that it had

exhibited in prior ages. In all, a fundamentalism has emerged that fears rational inquiry and self-criticism and that believes that modernity is equivalent to anti-Jewish.

In response to these developments within Judaism, modern Orthodoxy has been on the defensive. Its major rabbinic institution, Yeshiva University, has not sought to counter Jewish fundamentalism, and those modern Orthodox leaders who have refused to accommodate the dominant spirit have been silenced and marginalized. Greenberg is very critical of the response of the movement with which he has always identified. He concludes that modern Orthodoxy has exhibited a “failure of nerve,” in response to Haredi pressure and also to a radicalization within modernity itself.⁵²

As we have seen, Greenberg has tried to guide Judaism in another direction. He believes that:

A renewal of the commitment to respect and realize the *tzelem elokim* of men and women, of observant and non-observant, of Jew and gentiles alike is the key to revitalization of Judaism and Jewry.⁵³

He was at first dismayed by the results of the 1990 National Jewish Population Study that showed that the number of American Jews who saw themselves as Orthodox declined from 14.4 to 7.7 percent in the preceding two decades.⁵⁴ However, his overall response has been to redouble his efforts to provide the vision of a confident and hopeful Orthodoxy. His respect for other, non-Halakhic, varieties of Judaism has led him to listen seriously and to propose creative ways for them to participate in the Jewish tradition in their own terms.⁵⁵ While he admits that, especially in the wake of the Holocaust, “it is

too early to prescribe and say that (halachic) observance is the only kind of Judaism that will survive,” he still finds it “almost impossible – to conceive that the Jews can live without the richness of Torah and halachic observance.”⁵⁶

Jewish Living and Celebration

I would like to conclude this presentation of Greenberg’s philosophy of Judaism by briefly commenting on the two major works that have been the source of this essay. The first is *The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays* of 1988. Jewish thought has often been presented through the genre of an introduction to or extended commentary on the Jewish holidays. In the last century two of the most important presentations are probably those of Franz Rosenzweig, Part Three of his *The Star of Redemption*, and Eliezer Schweid’s *The Cycle of Appointed Times*. Greenberg’s text is a rich tapestry of philosophical or theological reflection woven together with discussions of Jewish history, the origin of the holidays, Halakhic observances and more customary practices, and new innovations. For example, the examination of the holiday of Hanukkah includes a scholarly overview of the history of the Maccabean revolt, and the chapters on *Yom Hashoah* and *Yom Ha’Atzmaut* provide unique detail about the establishment of these days and possible ways for their commemoration. As another example, the chapter on Purim presents a convincing argument that the Scroll of Ester is a paradigm for the way that the Rabbis, and ourselves today, grappled with God’s presence in history. The humor with which Purim is celebrated – and which plays a supporting role in all of Greenberg’s writings – reflects well the tentative, humanistic, even somewhat rebellious way that we can honestly speak of God. Further, he finds:

Ester's and Mordecai's covenantal roles are rooted in the hiddenness of God. The lesson of Purim is that in an age of "eclipse of God," look for divine redemption in the triumph of the good, even if that victory does not meet present notions of purity and perfection...God is the Divine Redeeming Presence encountered in the partial, flawed actions of humans.⁵⁷

Exactly one decade following the first book, Greenberg published *Living in the Image of God* (1998). This is a second experiment in writing which presents his ideas – there are chapters on the nature of Judaism, his life, the role of women, the Jewish family, the situation of modern Orthodoxy, the Holocaust, Israel, and the Jewish future – in a conversational format. In it we see him as a Rabbi and leader dedicating most of his time, over many decades, to addressing very practical dimensions of the contemporary Jewish situation, such as Jewish learning, leadership training, and the unity of the Jewish community. His work as creator and director of *CLAL*, The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, is presented and honestly assessed. The book also provides an absorbing view into the difficulties that Greenberg has faced in the Orthodox world as well as some of the intellectual passions that activate him. At the beginning of the book he reveals his drive not to permit "another delay in getting my thoughts into print," especially when it seems that "many more people had read about my ideas as represented by bitter opponents than had read them directly."⁵⁸ Even some of the questions by his conversational partner, Shalom Freedman, are in subtle tension with Greenberg's critical views concerning ultra-Orthodox Judaism and

the Jewish environment of the state of Israel. Greenberg's discussion of the current peace initiatives in Israel is also revealing. He fully believes in God's promise of the land of Israel, but also anguishes over the rights of Palestine's native Arab inhabitants. This difficulty comes out in his response to a question about "rebuilding the Temple." He notes the paradox that there are "two magnificent Moslem mosques" on "the place where the Third Temple should exist."⁵⁹ He continues: "Maybe when the heavenly restoration occurs, the sanctuary will descend and sit on top of the Dome of the Rock without crushing it... As I said, I leave all of that to God."⁶⁰

There are areas within Greenberg's thought where correctives and alternative visions could well be helpful.⁶¹ In particular, beyond these two books, through a more systematic discussion, but still not a system, he would have the opportunity to develop the implications of his insights, and to place them in the context of other philosophical presentations of Judaism. Still, of overriding importance is that Greenberg demonstrates that the Jewish way can combine commitment and openness, passion with concern for all persons. There are few contemporary Jewish leaders who have addressed in as steadfast a manner, combining both theory and practice, the crucial questions about the future of Jewish life, the role of Judaism in the world, and the challenges of the *Shoah*.

Notes

¹A powerful view of the Holocaust from his father is also cited and appears crucial. Rabbi Greenberg once replied to his son's criticism of the Jewish people with a query whether over the prior decades it was the Jewish people or God who remained faithful. See, Rabbi Irving Greenberg, *Living in the Image of God: Jewish Teachings to Perfect the World* (Northvale [N.J.]: Simon & Schuster, 1998), xx.

²There is an insightful, detailed examination of Greenberg's thought by Steven Katz, "Irving (Yitzchak) Greenberg," in *Interpreters of Judaism in the Late Twentieth Century*, ed. Steven Katz (Washington [D.C.]: B'nai B'rith Books, 1993), 59-89.

³See the penetrating book on the Holocaust, Arthur Cohen, *The Tremendum* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

⁴Rabbi Irving Greenberg, *The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays* (New York: Summit Books, 1988), 18.

⁵Greenberg, *Living in the Image of God*, 31.

⁶Greenberg, *The Jewish Way*, 18.

⁷Greenberg, *Living in the Image of God*, 75-77.

⁸Greenberg, *The Jewish Way*, 19. This view about the possibilities of realizing redemption in history stands in contrast to the understanding of the modern Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas was extremely pessimistic about transforming the human condition in history. See, for example the provocative essay, Emmanuel Levinas, "Loving the Torah More Than God," *Difficult Freedom* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990), 142-45.

⁹Greenberg, *The Jewish Way*, 68.

¹⁰Katz attributes Greenberg's appreciation for dialectical thought to

the influence of the significant American Protestant theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, in “Irving (Yitzchak) Greenberg,” 60.

¹¹Greenberg, *The Jewish Way*, 32.

¹²Ibid., 24.

¹³Ibid., 39.

¹⁴See, Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1983).

¹⁵See, David Hartman, *Joy and Responsibility* (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Posner, 1978).

¹⁶The Israeli philosopher, Yeshayahu Leibowitz expressed a very different view of Halakhah and, by implication, Judaism. He held that the sole purpose of Halakhah is worship of God and that Judaism does not offer happiness or redemption. See, Yeshayahu Leibowitz, *Judaism, Jewish Values and the Jewish State* (Cambridge [Mass.]: Harvard University Press, 1992).

¹⁷Greenberg, *The Jewish Way*, 94.

¹⁸Jacob Neusner also called for Jews to recognize the new situation of freedom, in Jacob Neusner, *Israel in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985).

¹⁹Greenberg, *Living in the Image of God*, 26.

²⁰Ibid., 27.

²¹Ibid., 29.

²²Greenberg’s appreciation for Christianity in particular is discussed by Katz in “Irving (Yitzchak) Greenberg,” 68–69.

²³Greenberg, *Living in the Image of God*, 78.

²⁴Ibid., 80.

²⁵See, Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 97.

²⁶Greenberg, *Living in the Image of God*, 82.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid., 83. Greenberg's experience in this connection is not just theoretical. For example, in the course of his discussion of the heated criticisms that his reflections on the Holocaust have evoked from Orthodox leaders, he refers to the Christian theologians, Alice and Roy Eckardt. This couple, who were "shattered and transformed" by the Holocaust, courageously went on to explore its radical consequences for Christianity. Greenberg was inspired by their determination despite the opposition of many of their co-religionists. See, Ibid., 93.

²⁹Ibid., 100.

³⁰Ibid., 105.

³¹There are two significant essays on the Holocaust by Greenberg. He views his well recognized essay, Irving Greenberg, "Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity and Modernity After the Holocaust," in *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era?*, ed. Eva Fleischner (New York: Ktav, 1977), 7-55, as containing some of his most extensive reflections, while I prefer his later essay, Irving Greenberg, "Religious Values After the Holocaust: A Jewish View," in *Jews and Christians After the Holocaust*, ed. Abraham Peck (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 63-86.

³²Greenberg, *Living in the Image of God*, 55.

³³Greenberg, *The Jewish Way*, 253. However, I am concerned about this statement. No thought is credible in the face of such a scene. Only action would be responsible, if one had the opportunity. Thought has no answer, response, or reply. I think the significance of the Holocaust as a test of all philosophical and theological thought should be expressed in a different manner.

³⁴Greenberg, *Living in the Image of God*, 55.

³⁵Eliezer Berkovits has written that "the problem of faith presented by the holocaust is not unique in the context of the entirety of Jewish experience," in Eliezer Berkovits, *Faith After the Holocaust* (New York: Ktav,

1973), 90.

³⁶See, for example, Richard Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism* (Indianapolis: Macmillian Co., 1966); Emil Fackenheim, *To Mend the World* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982); and Elie Wiesel, *A Jew Today* (New York: Vintage Press, 1978).

³⁷Greenberg acknowledges that no fully adequate or satisfactory response – in thought or in life – to the Holocaust is possible. This insight is expressed through such themes as the broken covenant and the dialectical life of Judaism today. Elie Wiesel and Emil Fackenheim confirm that the Holocaust has shattered the possibility of a systematic response. This is apparent in the value that Wiesel attributes to silence and in Fackenheim's conviction that Jewish *tikkun* and *teshuvah* (return or response) are necessarily fragmentary. See, Elie Wiesel, "Why I Write," in *Confronting the Holocaust: The Impact of Elie Wiesel*, ed. Alvin Rosenfeld and Irving Greenberg (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 200–206; and Emil Fackenheim, "Jewish Existence After the Holocaust," in *The Jewish Thought of Emil Fackenheim*, ed. Michael Morgan (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 190–98.

³⁸Greenberg, *Living in the Image of God*, 38.

³⁹Greenberg, *The Jewish Way*, 323–24.

⁴⁰Greenberg, "Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire," 319. Although writing before the Holocaust, the German Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig also found that the boundary between belief and unbelief was no longer solid and clear. He saw the authentic religious person as both "disbelieving child of the world and believing child of God in one." See, Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 297.

⁴¹Greenberg, *The Jewish Way*, 337.

⁴²Greenberg, *Living in the Image of God*, 231.

⁴³Greenberg, *The Jewish Way*, 322.

⁴⁴Greenberg, *Living in the Image of God*, 37

⁴⁵Emmanuel Levinas has given extensive philosophical expression to the impossibility of a direct relationship to God and to the witnessing of the divine through the love of the neighbor. See, for example, the chapter “The Face,” in Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 85–92.

⁴⁶Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Christian theologian who was jailed and killed for his opposition to Hitler, spoke of a new type of secular/religious expression in Christianity in terms of “religionless” Christianity. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers From Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1972), 280–81, 380.

⁴⁷Greenberg, *The Jewish Way*, 92.

⁴⁸Greenberg, *Living in the Image of God*, 41.

⁴⁹Greenberg, *The Jewish Way*, 334.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 373.

⁵¹Greenberg, *Living in the Image of God*, 310. In a related way, Greenberg’s willingness to sacrifice land for peace has its source in his view of the Halakhic perspective of Judaism. Halakhah teaches that the ultimate goal is reached by proximate means, by taking one step after another. It also indicates that the individual can have confidence in the promise of ultimate redemption, despite necessarily falling short of it because of the realities of life in the world. Greenberg holds dear the divine promise that grants the whole land of Israel to the Jewish people, but can justify compromise to achieve peace and justice in the present time. Also see, 317.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 172. Greenberg recognizes that there is a radical side to modernity that threatens religious communities today. This radicalization includes the overemphasis on individualism and universalism, as well as the unlimited growth of human power.

⁵³Ibid., 113.

⁵⁴Ibid., 151.

⁵⁵In the section, “Toward A Pluralist Shabbat Experience,” he presents a sensitive discussion of experiencing the sacred nature of the Sabbath without necessarily fully observing all the obligations, *The Jewish Way*, 175-81.

⁵⁶Greenberg, *Living in the Image of God*, 60.

⁵⁷Greenberg, *The Jewish Way*, 251.

⁵⁸Greenberg, *Living in the Image of God*, xiv.

⁵⁹Ibid., 258.

⁶⁰Ibid., 260.

⁶¹Katz offers a critique of some of Greenberg’s theological positions, including his views of the relationship between faith and history, Halakhah and the *Shoah*, and the voluntary covenant and God, in Katz, “Irving (Yitzchak) Greenberg,” 78-84.