10. Irving (Yitz) Greenberg, "The Third Great Cycle of Jewish History"

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Rabbi Dr. Irving (Yitz) Greenberg (1933–) served as President of the Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation and The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership (CLAL).

In retrospect, we can see that in all of Jewish history, there have been two grand fusions of basic condition, theological message, institutional performance and leadership group. Despite continuing shifts in local situations, institutions, practices and self-understanding, these four elements were so coherent that one may characterize the overall era as a unity. In each case, it took a fundamental change in condition to motivate the kind of transformation which led to a new synthesis. Yet the resolution was seen as a continuation of the previous pattern and the new Jewish equilibrium that emerged was perceived as a station on the way to the final goal. These two historical syntheses correspond to the Biblical and the Rabbinic eras. Each era oriented the Jewish way in the light of a major event. In the Biblical Age, the event was one of great redemption, the Exodus; in the Rabbinic Age, it was an event of great tragedy, the Destruction of the Temple. Remarkably enough, in this age the emergence of a new synthesis is taking place before our very eyes. The third era is beginning under the sign of a great event of destruction, the Holocaust, and a great event of redemption, the rebirth of the State of Israel.

Elsewhere I have suggested that "no statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of burning children." This suggests that we are entering a period of silence in theology—a silence that corresponds to profound hiddenness. The fundamental religious act is the reaffirmation of faith, redemption and meaningfulness through acts of love and life giving. Indeed, creating life is only possible out of enormous faith in ultimate redemption and a willingness to risk the worst suffering to keep the covenantal chain going. In an age when one is ashamed or embarrassed to talk about God in the presence of burning children, the creation of an image of God—viz., a human being of infinite value, equality and

uniqueness—is an act that speaks even louder than words. This image points beyond itself to transcendance. The human vessel imprinted with the image of God testifies by its very existence to the source of that image. Perhaps this testimony is the only statement about God we can make.

COMMENTARY BY JOSHUA FEIGELSON

In a dispatch from the 1977 General Assembly of Jewish Federations for the *New York Jewish Week*, columnist Bernard Postal noted something rather remarkable. Former Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir, just three years out of office, was in attendance for the first time in nearly thirty years. On Friday evening, Postal reported, "Seven hundred people eager to hear Meir stood jammed together like a rush-hour subway crowd for over an hour outside a part of the hotel ballroom, waiting more or less patiently and good-naturedly to be admitted." But, Postal continued, "the larger segment of the ballroom was filled with some 1,800 people listening to Rabbi Irving Greenberg lead an Oneg Shabbat on the Holocaust."[1] Such was the influence of Yitz Greenberg: he could outdraw even Golda Meir.

Beginning in the late 1960s, and continuing for the next half-century, Greenberg was one of the most influential interpreters, teachers, and institution-builders in American Jewish life. As a young professor of history at Yeshiva University, and later at CUNY, Greenberg traveled the country to deliver lectures on the challenges, opportunity, and meaning of contemporary Jewish experience. By 1974 he had founded the National Jewish Conference Center, later renamed CLAL (National Jewish Center for Leadership and Learning), to serve as a think-tank, convener, and laboratory for his many ideas. Through NJCC, Greenberg convened scores of retreats for young adult Jewish lay leaders, in an effort to deepen their Jewish educations. He published hundreds of articles in Jewish and general newspapers and magazines, ranging from the *New York Times* to the *Jewish Press* to *Redbook*. He built new institutions, created new forms of engagement, and theorized new ways of understanding and enacting Jewish life.

A 1959 PhD graduate in history from Harvard who had been reared and yeshiva-educated in Orthodox Borough Park, Brooklyn, Greenberg could speak with equal facility about a passage of Talmud or Bible, contemporary philosophy, the latest scientific discoveries, and popular culture. A half-century later,

1 Bernard Postal, "Postalcard from Dallas," *The New York Jewish Week*, November 20, 1977.

when people would ask me about my doctoral dissertation and I would tell them I was writing about Yitz Greenberg, the nearly uniform response from those of a certain age was: "I can vividly remember the first time I heard him speak."

Central to Greenberg's teaching were several key elements, all of which appear in "The Third Great Cycle of Jewish History." These include: the idea of Judaism as a "midrash on history"; human beings created in the image of God as a *clal gadol*, or orienting principle, of Judaism; the notion that the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel represent shattering events in Jewish history that demanded new paradigms and institutions; the concept of "voluntary covenant"; and the notion of "holy secularity." I will briefly discuss each of these concepts.

In many ways, the first four paragraphs of "The Third Great Cycle" encapsulate the essence of Greenberg's ideas. "Judaism is a midrash on history," he begins. For Greenberg, Judaism is distinguished by its focus on this world and on a belief that it can be perfected: "Judaism affirms that this incredible perfection will be attained in this world, in actual human history." That, in turn, means the stakes are high: either the claims made by the tradition are reflected in the realities of life on Earth, or they are not. And if they are not, then God is not credible. The endpoint of this perfection is that "every human will attain his or her fullest expression as a creature created in the image of God."

The teaching that "human beings are created *be-tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God" has become an aphorism in contemporary Jewish life. And while many have espoused the idea, Greenberg would seem to claim the lion's share of the credit for popularizing it. Beginning in the late 1960s, Greenberg began articulating a basic religious framework built on the notion articulated in Genesis 1:26: if human beings are created in God's image, then they bear three fundamental dignities, all of which are mentioned in the first paragraph of "The Third Great Cycle": 1) like God, each human is unique; 2) because we are all images of God, humans are fundamentally equal; and 3) just as God is infinite, each human is infinitely valuable. As such, the destination of human history is that these dignities will be upheld: "there will be no oppression or exploitation; there will be adequate resources to take care of every single life appropriately. The physical, emotional and relational aspects of the individual's life will be perfected."

This claim sets up the architecture of history that Greenberg then outlines. Judaism endured crises of credibility previously, most particularly with the destruction of the Second Temple. That event was so cataclysmic that, in

Greenberg's narrative, it demanded a new approach to Jewish life. As a result, the Biblical Era came to an end, and the Rabbinic Era began. The Rabbinic Era lasted nearly 2,000 years, according to Greenberg. And while the European Enlightenment and Jewish emancipation represented a first step toward a third era, it was ultimately the twentieth-century events of the Holocaust and the formation of Israel that ushered it in.

It is essential to emphasize that, for Greenberg, it is not one or the other that is important: the Holocaust and Israel *together* constitute the shattering event. "The Holocaust and the rebirth of Israel are profoundly linked yet dialectically opposed to each other," he writes. "Does the Holocaust disprove the classic Jewish teaching of redemption? Does Israel validate it? ... How should we understand the covenant after such a devastating and isolating experience? Can the Jewish condition be the same after sovereignty is regained?" Greenberg understands a need for these questions to be asked simultaneously. In many respects this distinguishes him from Holocaust theologians like Emil Fackenheim and Richard Rubenstein, on the one hand, or Israeli theologian-philosophers like David Hartman or Yeshayahu Leibowitz on the other, who tend to treat one event much more than the other. Greenberg's formulation of the Holocaust and Israel as deeply intertwined—not from a causal point of view, but from a theological one—is unique.

As a result of both the Holocaust and the establishment of Israel, Greenberg taught that the relationship of humans and God is fundamentally changed. The divine was not manifest only in things traditionally considered sacred, like rituals and services. Rather, in the modern world, even those things we might think of as secular were moments to encounter God. Greenberg termed this notion "Holy Secularity." Advances in medicine, agriculture, economics, and human rights are all manifestations of God's presence in the world. For Greenberg, this represents a radical move: after the Holocaust, God should not be understood as absent, but more hidden. "The divine is more present than ever, in street and factory, media and stage," he writes, "but the catch is that one must look and be open to the encounter." (In this, Greenberg echoes thinkers like Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer.)

Concomitantly, God needs to be understood as continuing on a path begun with the transition from the Biblical to the Rabbinic Era: making ever-greater room for humans to take responsibility. Where the Rabbinic Era replaced prophecy with the notion that God "is not in heaven" (Babylonian Talmud Bava Metzia 59a), in the Third Era humans must take even greater responsibility for the world: "If God did not stop the murder and the torture, then what was the

statement made by the infinitely suffering Divine Presence in Auschwitz? It was a cry for action, a call to humans to stop the Holocaust, a call to the people Israel to rise to a new, unprecedented level of covenantal responsibility."

From here flowed an idea that proved controversial in Greenberg's native Orthodox circles: if God had fundamentally broken the covenant through the Holocaust, then any Jew who decided to live a Jewish life, or even to have Jewish children, expressed a voluntary commitment to uphold the covenant. And since it no longer came from a place of requirement or imposition, acting on the covenant voluntarily thus reflected a higher degree of agency and maturity on the part of the Jewish people. Greenberg elaborated this idea more fully in the companion essay published with "The Third Great Cycle" entitled "Voluntary Covenant."

Taken together, these elements established an approach to Jewish life that claimed unusual purchase on a generation of Jewish leadership that was college-educated, professionally successful, and thirsty for an approach to Jewish living that was academically credible, historically attuned, and felt traditional and authentic. With a dialectical approach that allowed him to stake out competing positions—on tradition and innovation, power and powerlessness, the holy and the secular—Greenberg provided his listeners and readers with a combination they devoured.

On the basis of this approach, Greenberg would establish many of the projects and institutions he discussed in the essay: Jewish education programs through Federations and Jewish foundations; pluralist retreat centers; projects in media; synagogue renewal programs; the Association for Jewish Studies. Most singularly, perhaps, Greenberg, working with Elie Wiesel, led a movement to create Holocaust memorials in cities across the country. And as a result of one of his 1970s retreats, he eventually led the development of the President's Commission on the Holocaust, which created the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, which Greenberg chaired from 2000–2002.