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Relationship, Power, and Holy Secularity:
Rabbi Yitz Greenberg and American Jewish Life, 1966-1983

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ABSTRACT

How did American Jews in the 1960s and 70s experience and develop their relationship to tradition? How did their relationships with parents and grandparents, and with narratives, histories, and cultural memories conveyed or obscured or forgotten by those forebears, inform and shape their identities and actions? How did discourses about contemporary events such as the Holocaust, the state of Israel, and the Vietnam War inflect their individual and collective sense of self? We are beginning to ask these questions as we begin to write the history of these years. Investigating them sheds light on our understanding of American Jewry and American religion.

This dissertation explores these questions through an examination of the thought, teaching, and work of Rabbi Irving (Yitz) Greenberg (b. 1933), and his influence on American Jewish life, between 1966-1983. I examine in detail four major historical moments, including: Greenberg’s 1966 debate with Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein at Yeshiva University over the focus of contemporary Jewish orthodoxy; the movements for ecumenical Jewish-Christian dialogue, and interdenominational Jewish dialogue, of the late 1960s; the anti-Vietnam War movement at Yeshiva University; and the development of media portrayals of the Holocaust and American Jews in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Throughout the historical account, I explore the development of key concepts in Greenberg’s thought that would achieve influence through his extensive teaching and writing, including: his understanding of humans created b’z’lem elohim (in God’s image); his conceptualization of halakhha, Jewish law, as a model for an ethic of the exercise of governmental power, and as itself a discourse and process subject to political action; his understanding of modernity as a call to a theology of “holy secularity;” and his post-Holocaust notion of a voluntary covenant between the Jewish people and God. All of these concepts took root in Greenberg’s conceptualization of history.
and the relationship of the present with the past, which I demonstrate is central to understanding his influence and the reception of his ideas, and thus sheds light on essential questions animating American Jewish life in these years.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It seems I’m always the last one to know what others have known about me all along. I distinctly remember the father of my childhood rabbi telling me at age 18, “You know, you’d make an excellent rabbi.” I dismissed the idea out of hand—I would have to learn too much, I wasn’t cut out for it, I was planning to be an orchestra conductor. Yet within six years I would enter rabbinic school. And years after that, a college friend would tell me, “Josh, we all knew you were going to become a rabbi. You were the only one who couldn’t see it.”

The same seems to be true with this dissertation and the larger process of a doctorate in religious studies. For years, friends and colleagues told me, “You should really try for a PhD,” and I dismissed them out of hand—I would have to learn too much, I wasn’t cut out for it, I was planning to be a college campus rabbi. But, nine years after starting work as rabbi at Northwestern Hillel, here I am. So my gratitude goes to all those who saw this work in me and encouraged me to pursue it, especially at those moments when I looked least likely to make it to full term. In particular, my thanks go to Northwestern faculty friends and colleagues Laurie Zoloth, Cristina Traina, Barry Wimpfheimer, Bill Haarlow, Sophie Haroutunian-Gordon, Claire Sufrin, Gary Saul Morson, and Sandy Goldberg, as well as scholars Yehudah Mirsky, Alan Brill, Scott Aaron, and Barry Chazan. Additional special thanks go to the former dean of the Graduate School at Northwestern, Andrew Wachtel, without whom this project would not have happened.

The first four years of my study as a graduate student were undertaken while I was working full-time at Northwestern Hillel, the last three as an employee of Hillel International and the iCenter. I am grateful to my students over these years, who have enabled me to teach and who have been my teachers. In particular, Joshua Logan Wall and Lilly Skolnik served as able research assistants at early stages. I am also grateful to the boards and staffs of these organizations for their encouragement,
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As I discuss in the introduction, writing about a living figure, particularly one who has been so important in one’s own life, is a double-edged sword. I could not have asked for a more willing, open, and enthusiastic subject than Rabbi Dr. Irving Yitz Greenberg. From the outset, Yitz has encouraged me in this project, making himself available for interviews whenever I requested them, responding quickly to emails and my prodding for information, and generally welcoming the opportunity to have his life and work be put under a critical lens. He has confirmed what I have known about him for nearly fifteen years, that he is a truly remarkable human being. It has been an honor and delight to have him as both a living teacher in my life and the object of my academic work.

Much of the archival research for the dissertation was carried out at the Judaica Division of the Harvard University Library, as well as the archives of CLAL. My thanks go to the staff at both institutions.

I have been blessed to be a member of several communities of friends and colleagues whose intellectual, emotional, and spiritual support have been indispensible in the process of pursuing this doctorate. The Wexner Graduate Fellowship community has been a source of inspiration, challenge, and comfort for many years, and my appreciation of it has only deepened in this process. Special thanks to Zev Eleff, who plied me with source material and was a sounding board, Shai Held, who generously read early drafts of several chapters and provided helpful comments, and Sue Fendrick,
who provided crucial editing guidance. Likewise, the graduate students of the Northwestern department of Religious Studies have been thought partners in seminars, through qualifying exams, and in workshops and colloquia. My thanks go to members of the North American Religions Workshop, who gave important feedback in developing chapter 5, and whose insights and discussions have informed many other sections of the work. I am also grateful to Darren Kleinberg for his scholarly companionship and late-night Facebook symposia in the emerging field of ‘Yitz Studies.’ And I express my gratitude to members of the two faith communities I have been a part of on this journey, the Northwestern Hillel Orthodox Minyan and Kol Sasson Congregation, who have nourished my mind and soul, and served as sounding boards for my thinking and writing along the way.

Robert Orsi served as my dissertation adviser and a key theoretical influence. The demanding rigor of Bob’s thought, the grace of his writing, and the compassion of his scholarly spirit have affected nearly every page of this work. To the extent that this dissertation contributes to scholarship of religious studies, American religion, and American Judaism, Bob deserves a sizable share of the credit. Any shortcomings are entirely my own.

I spend a good deal of chapter 6 dwelling on the coextensive nature of our relationships with the past and those we have with our parents. I have been blessed with a mother and father who provided me with early examples of life in an academic community that combined scholarship with family, religion, and community participation. They have encouraged me at every stage of this journey, and I can only hope that the satisfaction they derive at seeing me complete it can begin to pay forward the enormous debt I owe them. I dedicate this dissertation to them.

As a parent, I have begun to experience the questions of conveying tradition and raising children who will make their own home in relation to it (and me). My sons, Jonah, Micah, and Toby,
have been the objects of my attention, affection, and—whether or not they knew it—my religious and scholarly reflection. What I am sure they know is that they have endured nights and Sundays and vacations when Abba was off at a coffee shop or the library to work on his dissertation. They have sacrificed in ways large and small, and just as I am grateful for them, I am also grateful to them.

The person who has most sustained and encouraged me throughout has been my wife Natalie Blitt, without whom none of this would be possible. Natalie has been my partner, confidant, reader, patient listener, and cheerleader. She has believed in me during moments of doubt and crisis, and has sacrificed a great deal to enable me to complete this work. I am grateful for all these manifestations of her love and commitment.

Finally, I express my thanks to the Creator to whom I direct my heart and attention daily, whose presence I experience in my study and teaching and writing, and whose works and nature I have come to know through my relationship with Yitz Greenberg.
No one can refuse the light of the historian; 
but we believe that it is not sufficient for everything.

~ Emanuel Levinas, *Quatres Lectures Talmudiques*

When the Holy Blessed One desired to give the Torah to Israel, the Divine said to them, ‘Accept my Torah.’ They responded, ‘Yes.’ The Divine said to them, ‘Give me a guarantor that you will uphold it.’ They said, ‘Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will be guarantors.’ The Divine said, ‘The ancestors themselves require guarantors.’ They said, ‘Our children will be our guarantors.’ Immediately the Holy Blessed One accepted them and gave the Torah to Israel.

~ Midrash Tanhuma Vayigash 2

By taking up its task, each generation joins the past and carries on, until the day that the hopes of all will be fulfilled. If one generation rejects the covenant or fails to pass it on to the next generation, then the effort of all the preceding and future generations is lost as well. Each generation knows that it is not operating in a vacuum; what precedes it makes its work possible, just as its successors will make or break its own mission. Thus, the covenant is binding not just because it is juridical—that is, commanded—but because others continually accept its goal and become bound to its process.

DEDICATION

To my parents,
Sheila B. Feigelson, PhD and
Louis M. Feigelson

Tell it to your children,
and let your children tell it to their children,
and their children to the next generation.

Joel 1:3

with love and gratitude
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Irving (Yitz) Greenberg and American Jewish Life

I. Camp Barney Medintz and American Jews, 1973

On the weekend of August 24-26, 1973, eighteen married couples attended a retreat at Camp Barney Medintz, 80 miles northeast of Atlanta. Most were in their 30s and had young children. All were part of the Atlanta Jewish Federation’s Young Leadership Division, which sponsored the retreat. While they spanned a range of Jewish backgrounds, most had grown up in Conservative and Reform synagogues in the 1950s. Nearly all had attended college. They went to synagogue on the High Holidays, sent their children to public schools, and donated money to the Federation. They attended different synagogues and were not, by and large, products of advanced Jewish education, but all understood their Jewishness as a significant part of their ethno-religious identity.

What happened that weekend was transformative. After spending 48 hours studying, praying, eating, and socializing together, “Most of us have decided to make at least a beginning effort at meaningful observance of Shabbat,” one participant wrote. “At least two couples of us have made the decision to observe kashrut,” Jewish dietary laws. Many of the couples decided to send their children to Jewish day schools. They also committed to “making a massive effort to heal the breach” in the community as a result of the recent decision by the local Jewish Community Center to open on Saturday. In the ensuing decades, the participants would go on to become some of the major leaders in the Atlanta Jewish community—its Jewish federation, synagogues, communal organizations, camps, and day schools. Their children would also become active leaders, as rabbis, Jewish communal professionals, and volunteers, and would raise millions of dollars for Jewish organizations and Israel-related causes. One couple moved to Israel, while others traveled there
more frequently than before. The couples maintained relationships with each other through their communal work and subsequent study events.¹

In the history of Atlanta Jewry, the retreat at Camp Barney Medintz was a watershed moment, heralding a shift in the contours of Jewish life within the families involved, and in the Atlanta Jewish community more broadly. The moves these families made—embracing traditional customs like Shabbat and keeping kosher, sending children to Jewish day school, engaging in study of traditional Jewish texts—reflected a broader shift in American Jewish life during the 1970s on the part of many individuals and families, toward rediscovering and recovering rituals and traditions willfully or unwittingly forgotten, or simply unknown to them. They also reflected other national trends: the rise in Jewish day schools, and the particular subset of non-Orthodox day schools; the ascent of Jewish Federations, rather than synagogues, as loci of communal power and influence; the increasing engagement of Jews in political activity, particularly on behalf of Israel. The fact that the retreat included both husbands and wives also signaled a shift, toward inclusion of women in Jewish communal leadership, and toward greater involvement of men in Jewish family life.²

The 1973 retreat led to more retreats, one of which, the following year, included Stuart and Fran Eizenstat. Stuart was an Atlanta attorney friendly with Governor Jimmy Carter, and upon Carter’s election as President, he became chief of domestic policy in the White House. Writing in

¹ Jack Balser, "Letter to Irving Greenberg, August 30," 1973, Papers of Rabbi Irving Greenberg, Harvard University Library, 55: 23. See also the posted biography of Rabbi Adam Frank of Congregation Moreshet Yisrael in Jerusalem, which begins, "Rabbi Adam Frank was born and raised in a Zionist, non-observant household in Atlanta, GA. Profoundly, his parents gave Adam and his brothers (Joshua, Aaron and Isaac) biblical names, and a weekend with Rabbi Yitz Greenberg inspired his parents to send their children to Jewish day school. While he was in second grade [N.B. 1974 – ed.], Adam’s parents decided to keep a kosher home and Friday night Shabbat dinners became the norm.” Frank’s parents, Larry and Lois Frank, attended the 1973 retreat, as evidenced by an attendance list included in Greenberg’s papers. "Couples Weekend Sabbath, August 24-26, 1973," August 23, Papers of Rabbi Irving Greenberg, Harvard University Library, 55: 23. "Spiritual Leadership - Moreshet Yisrael," http://www.moreshetyisrael.com/spiritual-leadership.html, December 25, 2013, .

² For helpful accounts of these developments, see: Jonathan D. Sarna, American Judaism: A History (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004); Shaul Magid, American Post-Judaism: Identity and Renewal in a Postethnic Society, Religion in North America (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013); as well as Gal Beckerman, When They Come for Us, We’ll Be Gone (New York: Mariner Books, 2010).
2001, Stuart Eizenstat recalled that, during the retreat, he and his wife “learned about the revolutionary implications of America's emerging open society, and was made to consider how being a Jew in freedom would require of all American Jews a deeper Jewishness and a higher level of living and learning. For my family, this awareness led to a decision to send our children to day school.” The retreat, he wrote, helped them “understand that Judaism is a serious, ethical way of life that could sustain us and be a source of pride even when we were fully integrated into American life.”

In a 1977 interview, Fran remembered “it was a weekend that left, I think, some scars on us in the sense that there were 10 hours of lectures on the Holocaust.” The main presenter at the gathering “had just returned from spending a year at Yad Vashem reading original documents of survivors and his lectures were thought provoking and, in a way, very difficult to listen to, and I think they left us with an indelible mark on our psyche.” She said this weekend, and the lecturer’s influence in particular, shaped their sense of responsibility: “Stuart and I both think fairly similarly on this… that it’s our generation’s responsibility not to be silent… we saw once in a century an attempt to physically annihilate the Jewish people.” As Stuart Eizenstat put it, “The Holocaust, something most of us had barely thought about, became central to our lives, our understanding of Judaism and of Jewish ethics.”

In 1978, Eizenstat would advise Carter to create the President’s Commission on the Holocaust, which would ultimately lead to the creation of the National Holocaust Memorial and Museum in Washington, DC. Eizenstat acknowledged that the relationship with the main educator at the 1974 retreat “influenced [the museum’s] combination of emotion and understanding of public

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5 "In Praise of a Visionary Leader".
exhibition and nationwide education. This balance is the power and distinction of the museum, and it is due in large measure” to what began that weekend four years earlier.6

The story of the Barney Medintz retreat group and its effect on the Atlanta community is not unique. During the 1970s and 80s, scores of similar retreats, involving thousands of young Jewish leaders, occurred in dozens of communities across the United States, frequently under the auspices of Jewish federations. Cities included: Baltimore, Birmingham, Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, Columbus, Dallas, Denver, Des Moines, Honolulu, Kansas City, Los Angeles, Memphis, Milwaukee, Nashville, New Orleans, New York, Omaha, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Rochester, San Francisco, St. Louis, Tulsa, and metro areas in Florida, New Jersey, and California. Over the course of a decade or more, groups like the Atlanta group would meet for retreats and ongoing study seminars, often yielding catalytic effects on their local communities.7 The groups helped activate a new sense of energy and vitality in the participants that inspired them to a deeper level of commitment to both Jewish ritual practice and Jewish communal involvement, and ultimately to new communal and familial configurations, new priorities, and new institutions.

II. Greenberg's Influence: Shaping a Generation of Power

What united all of these retreats was the man at the center of them, Rabbi Irving (Yitz) Greenberg. Since the mid-1960s, Greenberg had been traveling the country to speak at synagogues,

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6 Ibid. A 1997 interview with Eizenstat reaffirmed this: “He also was influenced profoundly by the teachings of Rabbi Irving Greenberg. Eizenstat recalled attending a federation-sponsored retreat for young couples in the mid ‘70s, at which Greenberg, now president of CLAL, the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, spoke for hours about the renewal of Jewish life out of the Holocaust. It was an experience Eizenstat describes as ‘searing’ and an ‘early sensitizing event.’” “Mix of Judaism, Politics Guides Eizenstat in Shaping U.S. Policy,” Jewish Telegraphic Agency, June 11, 1997. For a thorough account of Greenberg’s involvement in the formation and operation of the President’s Commission, see Edward Tabor Linenthal, Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America’s Holocaust Museum (New York: Viking, 1995) ch. 1.

7 The list of cities here is drawn from files of retreats and study seminars Greenberg and CLAL conducted during the 1970s, found in: Papers of Rabbi Irving Greenberg, Harvard University Library, Cambridge, MA, Boxes 19-21.
Jewish federation dinners, college campuses, and interfaith gatherings. At that time, he was a professor of history at Yeshiva University, and, beginning in 1966, the rabbi of the Riverdale Jewish Center, an Orthodox synagogue in New York. By 1972, Greenberg had left his pulpit and YU to found the Jewish Studies department at City University of New York. Throughout this period, he maintained a busy schedule of speaking engagements and conferences around the country, and in the early 1970s began to organize retreats like the one held at Camp Barney Medintz. His speaking and retreat work ultimately displaced both his pulpit and academic positions, and by the end of the decade he was the founder and full-time director of the National Jewish Conference Center (later renamed the National Jewish Resource Center – CLAL), funded largely by contributions from participants in his retreats and study groups, as well as through contracts with Jewish federations to organize Jewish education initiatives in their communities and at the annual General Assembly of North American Jewish Federations.8

Greenberg was an electrifying presence. “I feel that I have just had one of the most gratifying and meaningful experiences of my life,” wrote one retreat participant from Los Angeles in 1972. “I know that the effects of it will reverberate and probably will extend out and touch many other things that I think, experience and do.”9 Another, writing after the 1973 Atlanta weekend, said, “I should like to have your vocabulary and accuracy of phrasing at my command so that I might articulate my gratitude for the change in my life wrought by your presence.”10 Greenberg’s talk at the

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8 In 1985, philanthropist Leslie Wexner and Rabbi Herbert Friedman established the Wexner Heritage Program, largely modeled on CLAL’s retreats and seminars, and incorporating Greenberg himself as one of the central faculty members. Greenberg has continued to teach at Wexner Heritage institutes continuously since then. According to the Wexner Foundation, 1,800 leaders from 33 communities—often attending with their spouses—have participated in the two-year Wexner Heritage program, on top of a similar number (totals not available) who participated in NJCC/CLAL retreats in the 1970s and early 1980s. See http://wexnerfoundation.org/about-us/history-mission.


1974 annual meeting of the Pittsburgh Jewish Federation led one attendee to write, “Your talk… last Thursday was dynamic and provocative. People are still talking about it and will be talking about it for a long time to come.”\(^{11}\)

What made Greenberg so compelling to so many was not only his personality or passionate teaching style. As participant Jack Balser put it in his letter after the 1973 Georgia retreat, Greenberg helped him and the other participants find “a new depth of understanding both of ourselves and of our religion.” Greenberg offered the young Jewish leaders of Atlanta, and around the country, a sense of discovering, or rediscovering, a Judaism that was both emotionally compelling and intellectually sophisticated. He taught them to appreciate traditional rituals like Shabbat prayer and fellowship, keeping kosher, and observing Jewish holidays, which they had previously either not experienced, or viewed as stale.

Greenberg was not unique as an actor in this movement of revival and renewal in the 1970s. These were the same years guitar-strumming Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach opened the House of Love and Prayer in Berkeley, CA and fused traditional Jewish liturgy with the rhythms and harmonies of contemporary folk singing; when the militant Rabbi Meir Kahane preached to Jewish college students to discover their roots, and ultimately take up arms in both asserting and defending themselves; when the Lubavitch movement began establishing Chabad Houses on college campuses; and when, inspired by the Whole Earth Catalog, members of the do-it-yourself Havurah movement published the First Jewish Catalog, which eventually ran second only to the Bible on the list of best-selling titles of the Jewish Publication Society. Alongside these examples, Greenberg is yet another case of a rabbi doing the work of Jewish renewal.\(^{12}\)

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\(^{11}\) Aaron Levinson, "Letter to Irving Greenberg, January 9, 1974," ibid.

What distinguished Greenberg among these examples were three main things, each of which will become a major theme in this study: First, while he did lecture on college campuses, Greenberg increasingly came to focus his work on post-college age people like the ones who went to the Barney Medintz retreat: parents with young children who were not so much seeking an identity to express, as a way of living a Jewish family life in relationship with their own parents and children. Second, and related to this point, is that, unique among these examples, Greenberg worked with, rather than outside, Jewish institutions, particularly Jewish federations. While he did create his own power base (CLAL) outside of any institution, Greenberg did not aim to be a counter-cultural figure seeking to ignore, subvert, or dramatically change existing power structures. Rather, he sought to infuse them with greater purpose, religious depth and significance.

Third, while Greenberg shared the emphasis on holidays and traditional practices of other actors in the 1970s, he also developed a unique discourse of Jewish history and relationship with the past that undergirded his thought, writing, and teaching. In particular, Greenberg emphasized the significance of recent history, beginning with modern European emancipation, but especially the Holocaust and the establishment of the state of Israel, for Jewish life. It is worthwhile to linger on this for a moment, because Greenberg is perhaps best known in theological literature as a post-Holocaust theologian, included in standard introductions to the subject, alongside other positions. Haredi Orthodox thinkers generally understood the Holocaust as the latest, most painful example of divine punishment for Jewish sins—in this case, the sins of an assimilating, modernizing Jewish community in Europe. At the opposite end of the spectrum one finds the theology of Richard Rubenstein, who argued that the Holocaust represented the death of God and any basis for a supernatural theological paradigm. Reform philosopher Emil Fackenheim, whose work and relationship with Greenberg we will examine more closely in chapter 4, understood the Holocaust as
generating a new commandment, not to grant Hitler a posthumous victory. Modern Orthodox thinker Eliezer Berkovits held that the Holocaust should be understood within the classical framework of *hester panim*, the hiding of God’s face, an inscrutable and painful moment. Greenberg’s partner, Elie Wiesel, would see in the Holocaust a call to witness to and on behalf of humanity.13

As we will see in chapter 4 and again in chapter 6, Greenberg’s Holocaust theology eschewed the divine punishment formulation of the Haredi position, which he saw as both desecrating the memory of the victims and inadequate for explaining the scale and scope of the killing and destruction. He likewise resisted the God-is-dead position of Rubenstein, as he saw in the establishment of Israel a divine presence to counter the absence of the Shoah. And unlike Berkovits, Wiesel, Fackenheim, and most other theologians, Greenberg was an historian by training, and he constructed his theology in historical terms, with reference to specific historical events.

It is this point in particular—Greenberg’s historical orientation—that made him second only to Wiesel in influence outside the Orthodox world among Holocaust theologians (and one could argue that while Wiesel has achieved far greater fame, his influence is hard to articulate). Greenberg’s ability and willingness to speak in theological terms about events that had happened within the lifetime of his generation struck a deeply resonant chord for many. Writing in 1982, a Chicago couple observed that Greenberg “encourages pride and love for our religion,” based on “intelligent, in-depth understanding of an event in our history which too few Jews, both lay and professional leadership, are willing or able to come to grips with.” Greenberg, they said, was willing to risk

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13 There are many general introductions to Jewish Holocaust theology. Two useful general readers are Steven T. Katz, Shlomo Biderman, and Gershon Greenberg, eds., *Wrestling with God: Jewish Theological Responses During and after the Holocaust* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) and Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *Holocaust Theology: A Reader* (New York: NYU Press, 2002).
controversy, and that made him admirable in their eyes.\textsuperscript{14} Greenberg presented himself as a contrast to other rabbis and institutions across the denominational spectrum who, in his telling, were too timid to take on the questions of the meaning of recent Jewish history and articulate a compelling philosophy for Jews in the present. Where others were viewed as failing to deal adequately with the questions of God’s absence during the Holocaust, or God’s presence in the formation of the state of Israel, or the challenge of modern Western conceptions of subjectivity to traditional Jewish life and halakha (Jewish law), Greenberg was viewed by his many followers as engaging these issues and giving them a way to relate to Jewish collective memory and the divine.

III. The Historical Context: Yitz Greenberg and American Jewish Life Since 1945

Before going further, it is important to locate Greenberg historically. Born in 1933, Greenberg was a second-generation New York Jew, and in key respects he reflected the dimensions of modern Orthodox second-generation experience identified by social historian Deborah Dash Moore in her landmark study of this demographic group: he grew up not on the Lower East Side, but in Brooklyn’s Borough Park; he attended the modern Orthodox Etz Hayim yeshiva and the Yeshiva University High School of Brooklyn, rather than public school; and, surrounded by other Jews, attended Brooklyn College en route to a Harvard PhD.\textsuperscript{15}

At the same time, because he was born after the period of mass Jewish immigration that lasted from 1880-1924, and came of age during and after the Second World War, Greenberg must also be understood in the context of postwar American Jewish life, beyond the scope of Moore’s


book. The postwar period is identified by historian Jonathan Sarna as one of “Renewal” in his history of American Jewry, a reference both to restoring the upward socio-economic mobility that Jews lost along with Americans in general during the years of the Great Depression, and to the work of renewing Jewish life on a global scale in the years following the Holocaust. Sarna identifies the process of renewal as taking place in two major movements, both of which are significant in understanding Greenberg. The first, from the end of the war until the mid-1960s, was a phase marked by economic growth, upward social mobility, moving to third areas of settlement (the suburbs), and further entering the American mainstream both culturally and religiously. The third-generation grandchildren of Jewish immigrants found themselves more accepted than they had been before the war: at not only New York or east coast universities, but in the rapidly expanding network of colleges and universities across the country, as both students and faculty; in professions further up the socioeconomic scale from the sheet metal, textile, or construction businesses that typified the second generation, and into those of medicine, law, and business; in film and television representations like *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1959) and *Exodus* (1960); and in their inclusion alongside Protestants and Catholics as one of the three major religions in American public life, as in the title of Will Herberg’s influential work, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (1955).

Taking up a general trend toward institutional religious behavior, postwar American Jews built hundreds of new synagogues across the country, and drove the rate of American Jewish families affiliated with a synagogue—overwhelmingly of the Reform and Conservative movements; Orthodox Jewish practice was left behind by most American Jews—to an all-time high of 60 percent. Their rabbis, who included both European refugees and a new generation of native-born Americans, wrote articles on theology, published general circulation books about Jewish teachings,
and, in 1961, gave the invocation—in Hebrew—at the inauguration of President John F. Kennedy. The Jewish renewal of this period was one of restoring Jewish strength after the Shoah, achieving greater acceptance in American culture, and assimilating into mainstream American life.¹⁶

Greenberg reflected many of these patterns in his own life. After earning his doctorate in history at Harvard in 1959, he initially entertained thoughts of becoming a professor at a secular university before being hired by YU (more on this in chapter 2). He spoke and wrote alongside Protestant and Catholic scholars at conferences and in journals,¹⁷ and he represented the Jews alongside leading Christian clergy in testifying to Congress about the Vietnam War (see chapter 3). Beginning in 1966, he served as rabbi of the Riverdale Jewish Center in the north Bronx, which, while not technically suburban, was one of the formerly rarified communities to which Jews moved from more densely-populated urban areas.

In what Sarna identifies as the second movement of renewal, beginning mid-1960s, some of these trends were challenged or reversed. Large suburban synagogues became perceived by many as devoid of spiritual substance. Feminism led many Jews to reconsider the roles and identities of men and women in family life, community leadership, and religious teaching. Orthodoxy began to grow, both in Ultra-Orthodox enclaves like Lakewood, New Jersey and Kiryas Joel, New York, founded by rabbis who survived the Holocaust, and among Reform and Conservative Jews reclaiming traditional practices. In the wake of the general countercultural movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Jews from across the denominational spectrum became more interested in reclaiming


rituals, texts, and traditions that had been forgotten or obscured, and communal organizations—not only synagogues—developed a new focus on Jewish education. And while Jews had been champions of public schools in the first part of the century, from 1968–1998 the number of students in Jewish day schools doubled, to over 184,000, a combination owing both to renewed interest in tradition and Jewish participation in white flight from urban public schools. Sarna sums up the period by observing, “In the years following 1967, the American Jewish communal agenda as a whole shifted inward,” from general American concerns like civil and human rights to particular concerns like global anti-Semitism, Jewish education, and traditional Jewish practice.

Greenberg reflected and influenced these developments as well. With his wife Blu, Greenberg was an early and lifelong supporter of Jewish feminism. As we have already noted, he targeted much of his teaching at the Jews who had grown up in those large suburban Reform and Conservative synagogues, encouraging them to rediscover and reclaim traditional practices. He was a father of the turn away from public schools, both in founding the SAR Academy in Riverdale in 1968, and in his public writing of the imperative for day school education. At the same time as he projected Judaism outward to an American civic culture that increasingly embraced Jews and

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18 As yet there is scant literature examining the racial dimensions of the Jewish move away from public schools. Marc Dollinger examines Jews’ relationship with liberalism in the late 1960s in Marc Dollinger, *Quest for Inclusion: Jews and Liberalism in Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) and is currently conducting new research on the question of Jews, white flight, and day schools.

19 Dollinger argues that this inward turn was part of a larger trend in American liberalism, which affected Jews alongside other communities. “Once the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 realized African-Americans’ civil rights goal of legal equality, American liberalism turned inward, encouraging Jews as well as other ethnic groups to focus their social reform efforts on their own communities.” Ibid., 10. The coincidence of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war also played a significant role in both focusing Jewish attention on the question of Israel’s survival, and, after Israel’s victory, in inspiring Jewish pride.

20 Along with feminist scholar Martha Ackelsberg, Greenberg participated in the opening keynote presentation, “Liberation from Sex Roles in Judaism: Past Expectations, Future Implications” at the 1974 National Conference on Jewish Women and Men held in New York. During the session, Greenberg emphasized the need to reconsider gender roles through a reading of Genesis 1 that emphasized that both men and women were created in God’s image. He also called for women to receive rabbinic ordination—this at a time when the Reform movement had just ordained its first woman rabbi two years earlier, and the Conservative movement was still ten years away from ordaining its first woman. See "Report on National Conference of Jewish Women and Men," (North American Jewish Students NETWORK, 1974).
expressions of Jewishness, Greenberg was encouraging and buttressing the inward turn of American Jewish life.

Two areas in particular stood out in the intersection of American Jews and American public life in the 1960s-80s, both of which Greenberg contributed to. The first was the Holocaust. While the arrival of 300,000 Jewish refugees from Germany and eastern Europe after World War II had significant effects on the internal workings of American Jewry, the capture and trial of Adolph Eichmann in 1960-61, along with Hannah Arendt’s controversial account of the trial in 1963 and the best-selling publication of Arthur Morse’s *While Six Million Died* in 1968, led American Jews to a new, more public discussion of the Holocaust. This reached its apex with two events in 1978: the airing of the NBC docudrama ‘Holocaust,’ which was viewed by over 100 million Americans; and the creation of the President’s Commission on the Holocaust. In the same years, dozens of local Holocaust memorials and museums were established across the country, and Holocaust education became a mandated part of the curriculum in many states. During the second half of the twentieth century, the Holocaust became the dominant lens through which America and its Jews related to each other.

Greenberg was a pivotal figure in teaching and guiding a generation of communal volunteers and Jewish professionals for whom the Holocaust was an event to be understood, dealt with, and acted upon politically. His exchanges with Jewish and Christian theologians and scholars, at conferences, panels, and in scholarly journals, made him a central figure in the developing discourse of post-Holocaust thought and theology. Emerging from their first encounters at the interdenominational retreats of rabbis and Jewish scholars he helped convene in the mid-1960s (see chapter 3), Greenberg and Elie Wiesel formed a partnership to advance study of, reflection on, and commemoration of the Holocaust. In 1975 they founded Zachor: The Holocaust Resource Center
as an arm of the NJCC, which became a main address for scholars, communal leaders, survivors and their children, who sought greater study and memorialization of the Holocaust. When President Carter created the President’s Commission on the Holocaust in 1978, Wiesel became its chairman, and Greenberg its director. That commission grew into the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council, which eventually built the national Holocaust Museum and Memorial in Washington, and literally cemented Greenberg’s influence in shaping how the Holocaust entered American collective memory.

The second major area of development to note in these years was American Jews’ relationship with Israel, which had “remained largely peripheral to American Judaism in the 1950s.”21 The 1967 Six Day War led many Jews to see both the vulnerability of Israel to military defeat or annihilation, and the perceived miraculous nature of its military victory, and in the wake of the war, support for Israel became an essential part of American Jewish communal life. In 1967, American Jews doubled their financial support of Israel, to $430 million, over the previous year, and ushered in a new era of Jews contributing to Israel through United Jewish Appeal and purchasing State of Israel bonds. By the mid-1970s, Jewish political power on behalf of Israel was reflected in a rising number of Jewish representatives in Congress, as well as an increasingly effective lobbying organization, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. Jewish activists notched a number of successes on behalf of global Jewry beginning with the 1974 Jackson-Vanick Amendment, which penalized the Soviet Union for its restrictive emigration policy for Soviet Jews, and continuing with billions of dollars in American economic and military aid to Israel over the ensuing decades.

As Sarna notes, Israel moved to the center of American Jewish communal life “in tandem with the rise of Holocaust awareness,”22 and Greenberg was a pivotal figure in conceptually linking the two. His public writings and teaching about Israel painted the country as the redemptive divine

21 Sarna, American Judaism: A History, 335.
22 Ibid., 335-336.
response to the Holocaust: Where the Holocaust was a reflection of ultimate Jewish powerlessness and ultimate divine absence in the world, the establishment of Israel signified a miraculous reassertion of Jewish power, and God’s paradoxically radical presence. This theological helix, of Holocaust-divine absence-Jewish powerlessness on the one hand, and Israel-divine presence-Jewish power on the other, shaped the way many in the growing establishments of Jewish communal federations and political advocacy organizations understood the religious significance of their work, and helped fuel their expansion.\(^{23}\)

I should emphasize here that I do not view Greenberg’s importance as primarily rooted in his ideas. While he did make several important intellectual contributions to American Jewish life, in the end Greenberg is less significant as an original thinker, and much more as a teacher and purveyor of ideas to a broad American Jewish public. As Greenberg himself would admit, others were more sophisticated rabbis, philosophers, theologians, social scientists, and historians (all roles he played at various points). He was both aided and hindered by his rhetorical skills, which included a gift for clear, powerful language and an ability to frame complex issues in terms of basic propositions and values. Yet this asset was simultaneously a liability, as Greenberg could be imprecise with his words. We will witness this dynamic most powerfully in chapter 2, in Greenberg’s debate with Aharon Lichtenstein, but it is a significant dynamic throughout his career. As Jewish philosopher Steven Katz writes, in Greenberg’s work “such elemental terms as ‘revelation,’ ‘messianic,’ ‘messianism,’ ‘history,’ ‘redemption,’ ‘real,’ ‘secular,’ ‘religious,’ are all used in a multiplicity of ways, aimed at a spectrum of differently informed listeners, and all are employed

\(^{23}\) See, for instance, Irving Greenberg, "The Growth of an American Jewish Political Culture: The Case for Aipac," in *Perspectives*, ch. (New York: CLAL, 1988), which grounded the work of the major Israel lobbying organization in the theological language developed in the early 1980s for Jewish federations, and which I have heard anecdotally is still cited as highly significant by AIPAC leadership.
(perhaps in part intentionally) without any précising [sic] definitions being offered.” Katz, a major proponent of Greenberg’s work, concludes that, “his work suffers from a certain lack of logical rigor.”

Nevertheless, Greenberg was able to communicate ideas, in writing and in person, in ways that connected with American Jews thirsty for a teacher and a teaching that was both “religious” enough to feel authentic, and academic enough to feel intellectually credible. In this he was served by his credentials, as orthodox rabbi and Harvard PhD; his wide reading, in everything from critical Talmud and Bible studies—in Hebrew and English—to Christian theology, to academic writing in the social sciences, to popular literature and film; his relentless energy and a family structure that supported his frequent travel and teaching; and his cultivation of relationships with people who would go on to positions of power and influence. We will see all of these dimensions at play throughout the chapters that follow.

III. Goals and Outline of The Dissertation

This dissertation is an intellectual biography that combines historical narrative and theoretical reflection to contribute to two scholarly areas of research. The first is the study of American Jewish life in the twentieth century. In chapters 2-5, I excavate several key moments in Greenberg’s work during roughly the first half of his career, from 1966-1983, and situate them historically in a broader context. My goal in doing so is two-fold. First, as we have seen, Yitz Greenberg is one of the most influential Jewish teachers and communal leaders of the late twentieth century. As we begin to write the history of these years, Greenberg will be part of the account, and the episodes recounted here are an initial contribution to that effort. Second, Greenberg is important

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because he identified, responded to, and helped influence a number of the major issues and themes in American Jewish life in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, spanning wide sectors of the American Jewish community and the broader American public. In the chapters that follow, I try to situate the historical account within an analytical lens framed by these developments.

It is also important to explain the choice of the years that mark the time horizon of this study. As we will see in the next chapter, 1966 was a year in which Greenberg burst onto the scene of the Orthodox community at YU, and in many ways marked his first major public controversy. The year 1982-83 saw the publication of Greenberg’s essay “Voluntary Covenant,” which I take up in the last two chapters, and which in many respects is one of his most enduring intellectual contributions to American Judaism. Greenberg was active before, and particularly after, these years, but the major outlines of his ideas and teaching were developed and promulgated during the decades studied here.

The second area to which this work contributes is the field of Religious Studies. Specifically, studying Greenberg and his career can add what I believe is a new inflection to the ongoing discussion among scholars of religion about secularism, how we label and talk about the holy, and how we understand religion and collective memory. While much of that discussion has been rooted in an interrogation of theories that emerged out of a Protestant milieu, Greenberg opens up discussion from what I see as a unique Jewish perspective, particularly because he partially roots his ideas about subjectivity, secularism, and the holy in an ethical-legal discourse of halakha, and not exclusively a discourse of theology. Greenberg thus problematized the categories of holy and secular, historicism and cultural memory from what I believe is a unique vantage point. Where scholars of religion have in recent years developed a discourse built on recovering a sense of embodiment, Greenberg naturally located his approach to the holy and the secular in such a
discourse, because halakha, as an ethical-legal discourse, is already deeply animated by a sense of embodiment. Greenberg thus offers both an historical antecedent to current scholarly discussions in religious studies, and can potentially serve as a subject in those discussions.

This introduction serves as chapter 1 of the dissertation, outlining the major themes to be explored and introducing the main theoretical frames of analysis. I then move on to chronicle four periods and major events in Greenberg’s career in the 1960s and 70s, each of which offers both new historical and scholarly material drawn from archival research, and sheds light on the larger issues introduced here.

The second chapter takes up Greenberg’s most controversial moment in his tenure at Yeshiva University, his public exchange of letters with Aharon Lichtenstein in the pages of the Commentator student newspaper in the spring of 1966. Where this episode has been chronicled, it has generally remained on the level of narrating a perceived “rightward,” or more insular, shift at YU beginning with the letter exchange and continuing for the next decade. What none of the existing accounts do is seek to theorize the Greenberg-Lichtenstein debate in terms of two broader embedded questions: What were the competing definitions of terms like “Orthodox,” “halakha,” and “tradition,” and what was at stake between them? In this chapter I take up those questions, and offer a new—and what I hope is more usable—theory for understanding not only the Greenberg-Lichtenstein debate, but the varieties of American Jewish Orthodoxy more broadly, based in particular on how Jews relate to the past and Greenberg’s unique way of theorizing that relationship.

In chapter 3, I examine Greenberg’s involvement in the anti-war movement of the late 1960s, first within the context of Greenberg’s relationship with the Orthodox community and YU, and then through his testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in May 1970. Here we
see Greenberg offer a significant articulation of his ethic of power as rooted in the Biblical notion of humans as tzelem elohim, the image of God (Genesis 1:26), and the discourse of halakha. The dialogue between Greenberg and the senators enables us to see some initial dimensions of his inversion of conventional understandings of secularity, as he reflects on the role of public figures as moral leaders, and on the political dimensions of religious communities.

Chapter 4 explores Greenberg’s involvement in inter-denominational and interfaith dialogue. In 1965, Greenberg was one of the organizers of what would become a series of annual retreats in Quebec, attended by rabbis and scholars from across the denominational spectrum. This gathering was the first of its kind, and had significant effects on the participants, many of whom went on to be influential Jewish thinkers in the coming decades. Greenberg likewise participated in the ecumenical interfaith dialogue movement with both Catholics and Protestants that arose in the wake of the Second Vatican Council. This chapter takes up his work in both these areas, particularly as it marked a key point of tension with the powerful leader of the Orthodox community in and around YU, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, accentuating the fissures that began to emerge between the two in the 1966 YU debate. We also encounter here Greenberg’s initial formulation of the idea of “holy secularity,” which built upon the inversion of holy and secular explored in the previous chapter, but was particularly formulated in terms of the Jewish experience of the Holocaust and Israel.

In chapter 5, I examine Greenberg’s involvement with two mass media projects: the 1978 NBC miniseries ‘Holocaust,’ and the 1980 film production of ‘The Jazz Singer,’ starring Neil Diamond. Throughout his career, Greenberg understood the power of television and film to develop collective memory. Coming as they did during key years in the development of the perception of American Jews within American culture, these two projects had significant potential to shape the way Americans imagined American Jews, and the way American Jews imagined
themselves. ‘Holocaust’ had enormous influence in bringing a sustained narrative about Jews in the Holocaust into 100 million American living rooms. The miniseries aroused a fevered controversy between Elie Wiesel and screenwriter Gerald Green that played out in the New York Times in the weeks following the broadcast, and Greenberg was central to that debate. In this part of the chapter, we see how Greenberg negotiated the challenge of representing the unrepresentable. In the second half of the chapter, I bring to light two memos from Greenberg to the producer of “The Jazz Singer,” which illuminate how Greenberg conceived of the issues involved in presenting a portrait of America and American Jews. In particular, we will see how Greenberg’s concern about generational conflict reflected and also seemed to underlie his understanding of how human beings relate to the past and tradition.

The final chapter does not present an historical narrative like the preceding chapters, but theoretically and theologically reflects on the major themes presented in them, including: the notion of humans as images of God, and the significance of that idea for a Jewishly inflected negotiation of modern Western subjectivity and society; the ways in which mass media intersects with individual and collective images of subjectivity; the potential of halakha as a discursive frame for problematizing received understandings of a binary of secular and holy. I take up my analysis of these areas from an experiential orientation that understands these questions as rooted in the reality of relationships—between individuals who share a physical world, and between those who are separated by either space or time. With the help of theorists including Paul Ricouer, Daniel Gross, Lionel Trilling, and Robert Orsi, in this chapter I note the largely coextensive nature of the relationships people have with their parents and grandparents, and the relationships they have with the past. I suggest how Greenberg’s ideas about these relationships can contribute to not only our understanding of American Jewish life, but the field of Religious Studies.
IV. Greenberg, Yerushalmi, and Me: Toward a New Vocabulary of Relationship in Jewish Historiography

My own story is, inevitably, intertwined with the people, ideas, and history in this study. My family enacted many key elements of the stories explored here. My father’s parents, and my mother’s grandparents, were Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe. My parents attended public schools and went to local universities, and eventually earned advanced degrees. In the suburban setting of a 1950s housing development in Ann Arbor, Michigan, they maintained a traditional home—keeping kosher in the house, saying Kiddush on Friday night, driving to a Conservative synagogue on Shabbat, reciting the Passover Haggadah in Hebrew, but with little advanced Jewish education (there was no set of the Talmud, in English, Hebrew, or Aramaic, in our home growing up, for instance, though there was a set of the Encyclopedia Judaica). They partook of, rather than resisted, key elements of American life (public schools, college football games, and participation in the Boy Scouts, to name a few), but also maintained a clear ethno-religious identity as committed Jews. In 1974, after the Yom Kippur War, they spent a year living in Israel with my brothers (I wasn’t born yet). My oldest brother took on Orthodox customs as a teenager—walking to synagogue, becoming stricter in his kashrut observance, studying in yeshiva after high school—and our middle brother and I followed suit, both as a convenient, holier-than-thou way to enact a teenage rebellion, and eventually because we found a community of meaning within Orthodoxy.

By the time I decided to enter rabbinic school in 2000, I found myself in what felt like a seam. On one side was an Orthodox community whose thick attachment to Jewish text and custom was both a source of deep attraction, and at the same time seemed to inhibit it from responding to some of my deeply-held moral impulses, in particular related to gender equality. On the other was a non-Orthodox community that embraced many of my moral views, but which presented itself as
culturally thin in comparison with the Orthodox world, lacking the rigor of study and living that made Orthodoxy so compelling.

It was around this time that I first met Yitz Greenberg. A cousin was working on a project he was involved with, and arranged for me to visit him at his office in Manhattan. That first meeting gave way to participation in a monthly fellowship group he taught, a summer job cataloguing his library, and co-teaching with him during my final year of rabbinic school. My wife, Natalie Blitt, aided Blu Greenberg, Yitz’s wife, after the death of their son J.J. in 2002. When our eldest son was born a few months later, Natalie and I asked Yitz to recite the blessing at his circumcision in which Jonah received his name. So it almost goes without saying that both Greenberg’s teaching, and my relationship with him, has had a profound influence on my understanding of and approach to Judaism and Jewish life.

It likewise goes without saying that gaining critical distance on a figure who has been so central in one’s own life is no simple task, and I readily admit that this has been one of the central struggles in writing this dissertation. This comes on top of the already formidable challenge of writing about someone who is still alive. (I should note that, while I was in touch with Greenberg in the research and writing of this study, I did not share any of it until after its defense.)
And yet these challenges, of writing about the living, and writing about those with whom we have relationships, presume one of the value assumptions that I seek to interrogate and problematize, namely the role of death, distancing, rupture, absence, in relating to the past through history. Does someone or something have to be outside a dynamic relationship in order for us to study it? This is the assumption of objectivity; it presumes a deadening of subjectivity. A dominant approach to history, one in which we are schooled as children and that we continue to inhabit in modern Western adulthood, presumes a distancing, an absenting, in the name of objectivity, which has its roots in death. Death “is implied in the very act of doing history,” observes Ricouer. “Death is then mingled with representation in its role as historiographical operation. Death marks, so to
speak, the absent in history.” Post-colonialist theorists such as Dipesh Chakrabarty and Michel-Rolph Trouillot, as well as intellectual historian David Gross, have likewise helped problematize the ways in which death and absence undergird fundamental assumptions of modern Western subjectivity—how we relate to others in the present and the past, alive and dead, of this world and of other worlds. Robert Orsi has taken up these questions in suggesting a perspective of “abundant history,” and a more capacious vocabulary of presence than has generally been the norm in Western historiography.

Within Jewish Studies, this conversation is still largely framed in the binary of memory and history developed by Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi in *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (1982), which posited a dramatic rupture in the fabric of Jewish life in order to create a Jewish historiography that could align with the modern turn away from divine presence as reality. This rupture gave rise to Jewish history on one side, modern and academic, and Jewish memory on the other, traditional and religious. Given the predominance of academic experience in modern Jewish life, “the key system by which Jews relate to their past has changed to ‘history’—in many ways the

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27 “To the degree that this historiography is indeed ‘modern’ and demands to be taken seriously, it must at least functionally repudiate premises that were basic to all Jewish conceptions of history in the past. In effect, it must stand in sharp opposition to its own subject matter, not on this or that detail, but concerning the vital core: the belief that divine providence is not only an ultimate but an active causal factor in Jewish history, and the related belief in the uniqueness of Jewish history itself.” Yosef Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), 89.
corollary or sometimes the antithesis of memory.”

28 Scholars of Jewish Studies are beginning to take up the work of thinkers like Ricouer, Talal Asad, and Orsi, towards a new way of theorizing, thinking and talking about how we conceive of ourselves and our relationships with beings from beyond the physical and temporal present, but this conversation is in its infancy.

As the reader will see in the chapters that follow, Greenberg himself was keenly aware of, indeed deeply animated by, the binary of history and memory. Yet, as I outline in the next chapter, Greenberg aimed to escape the either/or choice of absence or presence, history or memory, the past or the present. As we will see throughout the dissertation, Greenberg was relentlessly dialectical in his thought and teaching, insisting on an orientation that was both-and: noting both God’s absence (in modernity in general, and in the Holocaust in particular) and God’s presence (in the “holy secularity” of modernity in general, and the holy secularity of the state of Israel in particular), the study of history as the objective study of the past (e.g. in academic study of the Bible) while simultaneously engaging it as collective memory that lives, through tradition, in the present (e.g. in yeshiva study of the Bible). Rabbi Yitz Greenberg and Dr. Irving Greenberg thus bore the contradictory impulses of these dialectics in the same mind and body, as a boundary-crossing rabbi-historian, articulating and living in a dynamic relationship with the Jewish past and present, the Jewish people and its covenantal partner.

28 Drawing on many of the theorists mentioned above, Yehuda Kurtzer follows this observation with a proposal for “a system of thought and a reading strategy for our texts and our past, in order to articulate a Jewishness that stands in radical relationship to the past without attempting to inhabit it.” Yehuda Kurtzer, Shuva: The Future of the Jewish Past (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2012), 2-3.
“Some publics are defined by their tension with a larger public. Their participants are marked off from persons or citizens in general. Discussion within such a public is understood to contravene the rules obtaining in the world at large, being structured by alternative dispositions or protocols, making different assumptions about what can be said or what goes without saying. This kind of public is, in effect, a counterpublic: it maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status.”

On April 28, 1966, the Yeshiva University (YU) Commentator, the campus’s student newspaper, published a long article under the headline, “Dr. Greenberg Discusses Orthodoxy, YU, Viet Nam, & Sex.” Written by freshman student Harold (Hillel) Goldberg, the interview with Irving (Yitz) Greenberg spanned 4,000 words spread over four broadsheet pages, during the course of which the YU history professor posed serious challenges to prevailing sensibilities at YU about Jewish theology, Biblical criticism, the idea of Jews as the Chosen People, Jewish pluralism, and the application of *halakha*, Jewish law, to contemporary political and social issues, including Vietnam, the war on poverty, consumerism, and sex. The interview provoked an intense reaction, most notably a lengthy open letter to Greenberg in the same paper a month later by Aharon Lichtenstein, a prominent contemporary of and fellow rabbi-professor at YU with Greenberg. As one observer

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2 Harold Goldberg, "Dr. Greenberg Discusses Orthodoxy, Y.U., Viet Nam & Sex," *The Commentator*, April 28, 1966. A complete transcription of Greenberg’s interview, his subsequent letter to the editor, and Lichtenstein’s response, are included in the appendices.

* The Commentator interview and subsequent articles uniformly transliterate this Hebrew word as *halacha* or *Halacha*. Contemporary scholarly practice is to transliterate it as *halakha*. When quoting from the Commentator, I will use the newspaper's spelling. When discussing the concept outside of quotation marks, I will use current conventional spelling.
put it, “Never before at Yeshiva had a modern Orthodox figure put forward so radical a critique of mainstream Orthodoxy.”

The controversy arose less because Greenberg challenged YU’s ideals, than that he brought to the surface the tensions within them. Founded in New York in 1896, the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (RIETS) was folded into the newly-formed Yeshiva College in 1928, which became Yeshiva University in 1946. YU espoused an ethic of Torah u-Madda, Torah and secular knowledge, the motto emblazoned on its official seal, and reflected in its requirement that alongside their studies in secular subjects, undergraduates must enroll in Talmud and other Jewish studies courses taught by Seminary faculty. For some, the idea of Torah u-Madda reflected a positive vision of engagement and assimilation into—rather than resistance to—what was perceived as mainstream American culture shared by non-orthodox Jews. As Deborah Dash Moore notes, from its beginnings in the 1920s, YU had aimed for a unique kind of achievement among Jews after the first generation of immigration: a plausible vision of Jews who attained success in secular careers and lived thickly traditional lives at home. They could succeed as professionals—physicians, lawyers, accountants, businessmen, educators—while sending their children to Jewish day schools, and refraining from working or driving to synagogue on the Sabbath.

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Yet the nature and dimensions of the synthesis implied in the slogan *Torah u-Madda* were up for debate—a debate Greenberg brought into public view. In the eyes of Samuel Belkin, president of YU from 1943-1975, *Torah u-Madda* meant something like accommodation, in which Torah was largely limited to the private and intra-communal realms of home and synagogue, and secular knowledge—particularly science—was preserved as the domain of life beyond these spheres. “We prefer to look upon science and religion as separate domains which need not be in serious conflict, and therefore, need no reconciliation,” Belkin wrote in 1956. “If we seek the blending of science and religion and the integration of secular knowledge with sacred wisdom, then it is not in the subject matter of these fields but rather within the personality of the individual that we hope to achieve synthesis.” Like many others in Modern Orthodoxy, Belkin saw ‘synthesis’ as a personal project, not an institutional one. The individual could struggle with how to live a traditional life while also working in secular society, but Jewish law and theology needed no particular updating on an official basis for the modern setting—either in the form of increased stringency in observance and resistance to the general culture (as Ultra-Orthodox, or Haredi, Jewish leaders maintained) or through greater accommodation to the same (as Reform or Conservative leaders argued). Under Belkin’s influence, public discussion of *halakha* at YU assumed that Jewish tradition could adequately give individual Jews the resources they needed to live meaningful lives, and that to the extent that modernity provoked crises of faith, these were internal individual struggles, not public institutional ones.

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graduates who were competing for suburban congregants with Conservative rabbis, and in the growth of its academic vision, particularly the opening of the Albert Einstein School of Medicine in 1956. The 1950s saw YU embrace a much bolder vision of the place of Orthodox Jews in American public life than had existed prior to the Second World War.

In noting the parameters of acceptable or expected public discourse at YU, it is good to pause here and call attention to a formulation of contemporary social theorist Michael Warner, which will be helpful in theorizing the 1966 Greenberg-Lichtenstein debate. In his essay “Public and Private,” a quotation from which introduces this chapter, as well as his essay “Publics and Counterpublics,” Warner notes the way in which mass media and the formation of large institutions (such as the nation-state, but also, for our purposes, the modern university) not only generate a unique modern notion of “the public,” but also enable the formation of counterpublics: discursive social imaginaries “structured by different dispositions or protocols from those that obtain elsewhere in the culture, making different assumptions about what can be said or what goes without saying.” As I will discuss further in this chapter, from its inception in the nineteenth century, Orthodoxy had self-defined as this kind of counterpublic, against the prevailing norms of a secularizing Western culture. Yet YU, in particular in its postwar manifestation as an ambitious university with a growing public profile, marked a moment when Orthodoxy attempted to harness the forces of modern Western liberalism—in particular, capital, a university, an active print media culture—and in so doing, become not just a counterpublic, but a new kind of powerful public itself vis-à-vis the Orthodox Jews it served. In becoming a public of its own, YU thus gave rise to counterpublics within its ranks. As we will see, Greenberg was in essence giving voice to a counterpublic within the newly-constituted public of YU, particularly in both mode (the newspaper) and substance (sex).

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7 Ibid., 119.  
8 In many respects, this approach reflects the church-sect framework espoused by Ernst Troeltsch and deployed by sociologist Charles Liebman in his 1965 essay on Orthodoxy in the American Jewish Yearbook: “In contrast to Conservative and Reform Judaism, much of Orthodoxy’s energy has been addressed to finding solutions within a halakhic framework for individual problems arising in contemporary life. Orthodoxy has been the least church-like of all Jewish religious groups. In part this stems from the absence (until recently) of any self-consciousness. Only recently has Orthodoxy begun to define itself as a particular movement in the United States and been brought into contact with the...
Greenberg’s critique drew energy from the fact that he was so forceful and colorful in projecting an embodied *Torah u-Madda* on an individual level—and not only on the corporate or institutional level that Belkin espoused. In this, he evoked similar general elements of the late 1960s counterculture (counterpublics) that brought previously-taboo discussion and enactment of sexuality into the public sphere. But as Warner demonstrates, such public, mediated discussions of sexuality are not only about sex—they can ultimately lead to powerful contests about the contours of the public imaginary itself, and this was precisely the effect of Greenberg’s challenge in 1966.

YU historian Jeffrey Gurock writes that the central question seemed to be, “Can, and in what ways should, Yeshiva people enter as a moral force into secular world crises? To what degree were Orthodox Jews obliged to make the causes of the great society their own?”9 To translate this into Warner’s terms, the question was, how would the Orthodoxy of YU function as a counterpublic vis-à-vis mainstream American culture (hence keeping its claim to Orthodoxy) while also seeing itself as part of other significant publics—including American universities and the student counterculture of the late 1960s? In the history of YU and Modern Orthodoxy, the Greenberg-Lichtenstein exchange is still understood as a signal event, a moment when Modern Orthodoxy defined itself—with Greenberg’s vision rejected.10 To Greenberg and his sympathizers, it marked a broader society by the accelerated acculturation of its adherents and its own institutional growth.” To paraphrase Liebman, Haredi Orthodoxy presents as a sect-like (subaltern) counterpublic; as a church, Modern Orthodoxy presents as a public within the larger public, and thus engages with the public issues of the day. He notes: “Since 1960 much of this has changed. In 1964, speaking to a Young Israel meeting in New York, Rabbi Aaron Soloveitchik, one of the leading Talmudic authorities in Jewish life, delivered a major address on civil rights from a halakhic perspective. In that same year a joint conference of the Industrial Union Department, AFL-CIO, and the Social Action Committee of the RCA [Rabbinical Council of America] heard a series of papers by young Orthodox rabbis on religion and labor. Such developments were a portent of serious stirrings within Orthodoxy.” Charles S. Liebman, "Orthodoxy in American Jewish Life,” in *American Jewish Year Book*, ch. (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1965), 21-97, 44.

9 Gurock, *The Men and Women of Yeshiva: Higher Education, Orthodoxy, and American Judaism*, ch. 11. Two specific sites of these debates, the student protest and interfaith dialogue movements, are the subject of later chapters.

10 The exchange has been the subject of an academic paper by David Singer, and a substantial treatment in Gurock’s history of YU. Additionally, in 2005 the *Commentator* invited Yeshiva College alumni and former professors to contribute essays about their memories of the institution as it celebrated its 75th anniversary. Greenberg’s essay, “Yeshiva in the 60s,” prompted a letter to the editor from Goldberg and another letter from Lichtenstein. Greenberg replied to both
key moment in the gradual “move to the right” at YU and in its associated communities that occurred over the 1960s and 70s. To others, it was an important affirmation that YU would see itself primarily as a yeshiva, and would resist efforts to move Orthodoxy “to the left.” For both, it marked a moment when the dimensions of YU Orthodoxy, as both a public and counterpublic, were contested and defined.

Beyond Warner’s helpful formulation, my aim in this chapter is to offer some additional possibilities for theorizing the 1966 debate and the social-religious-ideological shifts in and around YU since. I do so because I find much of the prevailing discourse insufficient. To begin with, the language of left and right, borrowed from political discourse, flattens the narrative and obscures other ways of understanding it. For instance: Greenberg and the students who rallied around him clearly partook of the spirit of leftist student movements and aligned themselves with liberal causes like civil rights and opposition to the Vietnam war. Yet Lichtenstein also spoke out in support of civil rights and against the war, and he even justified protesting the war when others questioned whether it constituted a wasting of valuable time that could otherwise be spent studying Torah. Who was “left” and who was “right” in this case?

“Open” and “closed” is another type of binary. This is a slightly more interesting heuristic, in that the questions of categorization on which it is based—What is one open to? To what is one closed? Or, related: Who or what is in, and who or what is out?—are persistent. By the mid-1960s, Greenberg was emphatically on the side of Jewish pluralism, and was growing into a theological approach of religious pluralism that would lead him to a career as one of the leading Jewish figures in Jewish-Christian dialogue over the next three decades (this is the subject of chapter 3). The
questions of who was an Orthodox Jew, or what constituted Orthodoxy, had lost much of their purchase for him. His goal in the 1966 interview could be seen as challenging YU undergraduates and faculty to rethink precisely the questions, Who is in, and who is out? (Or, to use Warner’s terminology, Who is part of this public? And what publics are we part of?) While he never aligned with the Conservative movement, which by that point had become an institution with its own identity separate from YU and Modern Orthodoxy, Greenberg was growing less and less concerned with the Orthodox label. Lichtenstein, by contrast, was much more concerned with who was “in.”

And yet the language of in and out, or open and closed, only goes so far, begging the question: On what basis was someone or something defined as in our out of Orthodoxy? To put it another way: What enabled Lichtenstein—who was himself highly conversant in “secular” learning—to remain inside the world of YU and the communal norms of Orthodoxy, while Greenberg ultimately wound up outside them? “In and out” may be interesting, but as an analytical frame, the terms raise more questions than they answer.

If we look beyond the discourse of left and right, open and closed, in and out, I suggest we can find some deeper roots undergirding the debate between Greenberg and Lichtenstein. While the two shared a great deal, including acknowledgment of the value of science, democracy, and much of modernity, they revealed a profound disagreement in how they related to the past, how they understood the implications of historicism, and how both of these informed their ideas about halakha in the present. Exploring this disagreement, and its implications for understanding Orthodox Judaism, will be the focus of this chapter.

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11 Greenberg recounts that in the early 1980s he traveled to Israel to form an alliance between himself and several prominent Modern Orthodox rabbis, all of whom had come under attack in the Haredi press. These included David Hartman, Adin Steinsaltz, Shlomo Riskin, and Aharon Lichtenstein. As Greenberg tells it, Lichtenstein first ruled out any possibility of an association with Hartman, who was already “over the line.” As for Greenberg, Lichtenstein said: “You, I don’t know where you are, I suspect maybe you’re there already, but I don’t know.” Irving Greenberg, Interview with Irving Greenberg, 2010, Joshua Feigelson.
Yitz Greenberg

Irving (Yitz) Greenberg was at the center of the cultural and religious debates at YU in the mid-1960s. Born in Borough Park, Brooklyn in 1933, Greenberg was the youngest of the four children of Sonia and Eliyahu Henry Greenberg, Polish immigrants who arrived in America in the 1920s, at the very end of the period of mass Jewish immigration from 1881-1924. His father, Eliyahu Greenberg, was the product of yeshiva education, and had received rabbinic ordination from Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik (1853-1918). In telling the story of his father, Yitz Greenberg recounts his passion for studying Talmud, saying he was “a talmid chacham [Talmud scholar] of awesome proportions.” Yet, according to Greenberg, Eliyahu’s failure to master English prevented him from achieving the kind of material and social success that the younger Greenberg imagined for him. Rather than becoming the “upstairs rabbi” at the newly-constructed, ornate Beth El Synagogue in Borough Park, Eliyahu was consigned to leading the hevra shas, the Talmud study group in the basement, and earning a living as a shochet (ritual slaughtterer).

12 Gurock, The Men and Women of Yeshiva: Higher Education, Orthodoxy, and American Judaism. Gurock notes Greenberg’s centrality to the broader social movement at Yeshiva: “In all these causes and through these expressions, Yeshiva social activists were clearly acting out the sentiments cogently articulated by a very popular history professor, Rabbi Irving Greenberg” (220). Gurock recounts the Greenberg-Lichtenstein exchange on 220-225. It also bears mention here that YU was not the only, nor even necessarily the most active, site of this discussion. Beginning in the late 1950s, Orthodox day school graduates began to attend Ivy League universities in greater numbers as these institutions eased quotas on Jewish admission. In 1961, Orthodox students at Columbia University formed the first chapter of Yavneh, which in the following years grew to be a nationwide network of Orthodox students on 40 campuses. While initially focused on pragmatic concerns like kosher food and Saturday exams, the organization quickly developed an intellectual focus, publishing a journal and sponsoring conferences and talks. From its ranks emerged many early scholars in the nascent field of Jewish studies. Greenberg was central to the life of Yavneh, serving as its national advisory board chair until 1967 (when he was succeeded by Aharon Lichtenstein). See Benny Kraut, The Greening of American Orthodox Judaism: Yavneh in the Nineteen Sixties (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2011).

13 Chaim Soloveitchik was known as Reb Chaim Brisker due to his leadership of the yeshiva in Brest, Belarus (Brisk in Yiddish). He was the grandfather of Joseph Soloveitchik, the leading intellectual and religious figure at YU from the 1960s until his death in 1993.


15 Moore elaborates on the upstairs/downstairs class distinctions alluded to by Greenberg: “Second generation Jews built their synagogue center as the antithesis of the immigrant chevra,” the “immigrant type of synagogue.” These were small groups that attempted to adhere closely to ritual performance as it had been done in the places of origin of their
In important respects, Greenberg straddled the worlds of the more insular and more outward-looking subcommunities of Orthodox Brooklyn in the 1930s and 40s. He attended the Modern Orthodox Etz Hayim yeshiva for grade school where, unlike at the Haredi Yeshiva Torah VoDaath, many students were not strictly Orthodox in their home practice. Yet Greenberg reports that “there was more learning and piety in our home than in… the typical Orthodox home.” His father was also an ardent Zionist, and Greenberg regularly witnessed his father arguing against his European Orthodox rabbinic compatriots who saw Zionism as sinful. Like many of his friends in Brooklyn, Yitz joined the Hashomer Hadati religious-Zionist youth movement as a teen. These influences would be highly significant in shaping Greenberg’s philosophical and political Zionism, as well as his personal sojourns in Israel in the 1960s and 70s.16

Greenberg attended the Modern Orthodox Yeshiva University High School of Brooklyn, and had planned to enroll at Yeshiva College. But the summer before he was due to matriculate, his father was approached by the head of a small yeshiva near the Greenbergs’ home called Bais Yosef, which had been founded by refugees who had come from a yeshiva of the same name in France.

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16 Greenberg, Living in the Image of God: Jewish Teachings to Perfect the World, 1; Interview with Irving Greenberg, 2010. It may be useful here to recall here the way that Chaim Potok presents the argument over Zionism between the Saunders and Malter families in The Chosen (which will be discussed more in chapter 6). In the novel, after the 1947 United Nations resolution for partition of Palestine between a Jewish and Arab state, Reuven Malter celebrates with his father, an ardent Zionist, while Reb Saunders forbids his son Danny from any relationship with Reuven for months. Gurock notes that religious Zionism became a defining feature of the Jews at YU, with “one out of every four or five students” members of a Zionist club or society. Gurock, The Men and Women of Yeshiva: Higher Education, Orthodoxy, and American Judaism, 119.
The yeshiva was opening a program for American young men, and the rabbi asked Greenberg’s father if he knew of any boys who might be a good fit. Eliyahu Greenberg vouched to his son for the Talmudic seriousness of the yeshiva, and the two went for a visit one evening.

What distinguished Bais Yosef was that it was a Musar yeshiva, meaning it followed the teachings and practices of Israel Salanter and focusing on spiritual and moral transformation, and not only on intellectual mastery of passages of Talmud and halakha. Within the Musar world, however, Novaredok was unique: Whereas other Musar yeshivas conceived of self-improvement as still primarily intellectual, “In Novaredok Musar, character development required a vigorous program of action.” Thus, in Novaredok, “study of musar included nighttime sessions of primal screaming, and uncontrolled outbursts of tears, whines, and fist-pounding. And they seemed to actively pursue schemes by which to make themselves the objects of mockery and disgust. Students would enter a crowded grocery, push to the front, and begin reciting the afternoon Amidah [daily prayer] at the top of their lungs; or wear filthy clothes on the Sabbath, which they had intentionally splattered with mud on Friday afternoon; or present words of Torah to their peers which were blatantly false, contradictory, or inane.”

Bais Yosef did not go to this extreme, but it clearly maintained a focus on spiritual and moral development that distinguished it from the intellectual focus Greenberg was familiar with from his upbringing. So as Eliyahu and Yitz Greenberg studied Talmud together in the main hall, the room

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17 David E. Fishman, "Musar and Modernity: The Case of Novaredok," *Modern Judaism* 8, no. 1 (1988), 43-44. For additional background on the Musar movement, see: Hillel Goldberg, *Israel Salanter, Text, Structure, Idea: The Ethics and Theology of an Early Psychologist of the Unconscious* (New York: Ktav, 1982) and *Between Berlin and Slobodka: Jewish Transition Figures from Eastern Europe* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1989). It is important to note that the Hillel Goldberg who wrote these works as a scholar of Musar, is the same as Harold (Hillel) Goldberg who wrote the interview with Greenberg that appeared in the YU *Commentator* in 1966 (the main subject of chapter 2). In fact, it was Greenberg who introduced Goldberg to the study of Salanter and Musar, as Goldberg wrote about in a 1970 anthology he self-published: “There is a very special place in Brooklyn… a single-room musar yeshiva named Bet Yosef. I learned of it from Rabbi Irving Greenberg, who first taught me about the Musar Movement. In Bet Yosef, the intensity of prayer and feeling is, in its own quiet way, so great that after a while you feel as if the room is on fire.” *Musar Anthology*, 1st ed. (Hyde Park, Mass.: Harwich Lithograph, 1972), 4.
suddenly became silent. After a few moments, the students began chanting, louder and louder, until the noise reached a crescendo “like a storm.” This practice, called *behispaylus*, was a signature element of the Novaradok community, and stood in stark contrast to anything Greenberg had experienced at school. He described it as the first time he had ever witnessed “religious ecstasy,” and immediately decided to scrap his plans to go to YU, and instead attend Bais Yosef by day and Brooklyn College by night.

It is important to pause here and note the way Greenberg recounts his relationship with his parents. Greenberg speaks glowingly of them, and never publicly criticizes them. In particular, he remembers his father as the greatest thing an Orthodox man can be: a *talmid chacham*, learned in traditional Jewish scholarship. In other stories, Greenberg remembers his father’s early embrace of religious Zionism as putting him, in Greenberg’s estimation, on the right side of history. He recalls his father’s willingness to confront those he felt were wrong, on Zionism and on matters of Jewish law. He viewed his father as a model, and reveres his father’s memory in all his later reminiscences.

Greenberg’s reverence for his father is a pivotal part of understanding why, despite his outspokenness and promotion of views he knew would be viewed as radical in the Orthodox community, Greenberg viewed himself as an Orthodox Jew all his life. “All revolutionaries are partricides, one way or another,” observes Yuri Slezkine. The move to challenge the authority of tradition pushes against not only the ideas and conventions of the past, but the conveyors of

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18 *B’hipta’alut* in Hebrew: Excitement. Greenberg maintained that the American boys did not receive the full experience of the European Novaredokers. Nevertheless, he actively participated in *behispaylus*, and in the self-critical activities of the yeshiva, and ascribed to the experience his openness to critique. Irving Greenberg, Interview with Irving Greenberg, 2012, Joshua Feigelson.

19 Greenberg recalls, “Bais Yosef gave me a dynamic and very different, more moving religious experience than I would have received at Yeshiva University. Compared to YU, the religious educational experience was much less filtered by modernity, and my college experience (at Brooklyn College) was much less filtered by Orthodoxy.” Greenberg says that this lack of synthesis trained him to use a dialectical philosophical approach, “rather than to reach resolved positions.” *The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays* (New York: Touchstone, 1988), 3.

tradition and the symbols of the past. Slezkine makes a strong case for the centrality of a
generational break as a defining trope in modernism, beginning with Kant, and in Slezkine’s analysis
finding strong expression in figures as varied as Marx, Freud, and Joyce. Greenberg imagines many
of his contemporaries were making precisely these kinds of breaks—leaving behind what they
viewed as a tradition, and the quaint parents who embodied it. They were becoming free of the past
as they became free of their parents. Orthodoxy was defined by opposition to this trend: holding on
to tradition was bound up with revering, rather than rebelling against, parents. To question tradition
was to question one’s parents. Thus the issues surrounding tradition and change in Orthodoxy were
not simply ones of Jewish law, theology, or ideology, but were woven through with a strong
psychological reality. Greenberg’s view of his parents—about which we only have his testimony to
rely on—thus becomes an important horizon within which to understand his challenge to
Orthodoxy.  

Midway through his college career, Greenberg’s rebbe at Bais Yosef, Yehuda Leib Nekritz,
needed to change their study schedule, shifting Greenberg’s Jewish studies to the evening and
enabling him to take courses in the daytime. Greenberg recalled this moment as a pivotal event of
serendipity, which brought him into contact for the first time with “real courses” that engaged
critical scholarship and provoked a crisis of identity: “I didn’t have answers to science, religion. I
didn’t have answers to philosophy, and—fortunately or unfortunately—I couldn’t escape those
questions, which a lot of my friends were doing.”

For the first time, Greenberg seriously
encountered the notion that human beings could be living in a world not created by the God of

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21 This is not to suggest that Conservative or Reform Jews hated their parents. Rather, the significance here is to
understand that the culture within Orthodoxy—both in its Haredi varieties, and at YU—was built on a pillar of revering
parents and the tradition they represented, and was bound up with other ways in which Orthodoxy defined itself as
resisting modernizing trends. More will be said about this later in this chapter, as well as in chapter 4 (on the student
protest movements of the 1960s) and in chapter 6.

Genesis, that science could offer more compelling explanations of the workings of the world than religion, that the claims that had ordered his world until now might in fact be phony. As he would repeat often, he experienced this as a moment of “shattering.”

It is important to linger on this word for a moment, because it comes up again and again in Greenberg’s writing and teaching—whether he is talking about Jews confronting modernity (this chapter), the effect of the Holocaust on the divine covenant (chapter 3), the effects of images of napalmed children on Americans’ psyches (chapter 4), or the shattered relationships between parents and children as portrayed on screen (chapter 5). On one level, the “shattering” Greenberg talks about here is a loss of innocence, the discovery that the world is more complex than it seems. Yet his insistence on the term suggests that it evokes something more for him: an intense blow to an individual’s or collective’s self-understanding, a moment of incapacitating incoherence, out of which a sense of identity and meaning must be recomposed. Something core to Greenberg was lost at this moment, opening up an opportunity for change—potentially destructive, potentially constructive.

In his telling, Greenberg’s relationship with both Nekritz at Bais Yosef and with Jesse Clarkson, a professor of Russian history at Brooklyn College, were significant in enabling the shattering process to result in growth. Clarkson had been a Marxist, but by the time Greenberg studied with him in the early 1950s, he had become an anti-Communist, his disenchantment with Stalinism inflecting his scholarship. “Clarkson sensitized me to the insight that it is not sufficient that ideas be credible or of logical construction; they have to enable people to cope with reality,” Greenberg recalled. For Greenberg, Clarkson’s relationship to Communism was an important lesson in the dangers of idealism and the importance of grounding theory in the material lives of people: “I have striven to articulate and teach ideas that help us build a better world, but, following Clarkson’s warning, I have sought to develop and apply these ideas in ways that upgrade the real world.
Clarkson showed how ideas—even good ones—can shield people from reality and serve as justification for cruelty and systematic evil.”

Clarkson’s most influential work was his 800-page *A History of Russia*, published by Random House in 1961. In the preface, Clarkson offered a statement of his approach to history, one that will prove resonant with our discussion later in this chapter: “History is here viewed as a continuum, in which any given ‘present moment’ is but the algebraic sum of the cumulative past, immediately itself becoming part of the past and contributing to condition the new present throughout all future time. *Historically viewed, the distinctions between past, present, and future are shifting and fundamentally meaningless* [emphasis added]. However present-minded one may be, there is much truth in the saying that there is nothing new under the sun.”23 It also bears mention that in 1966, the same year as the Greenberg-Lichtenstein debate, Columbia University Press reprinted a 1941 essay collection co-edited by Clarkson, entitled *War as a Social Institution*. There, Clarkson and co-editor Thomas C. Cochran framed the collection with a reflection on the responsibilities of the historian by contrasting with a focus on “contemporaneity of research” in the 1939-40 American Historical Society conference papers, with the pre-World War I era AHS conferences: “Unconscious of any obligation to offer the nation guidance in its immediate social problems, the historian could dwell in his ivory tower, dismissing events of the preceding half century as scarcely suitable for analysis by the techniques of his profession.”24 Clarkson’s sense of both the responsibility of scholars to the public, and the usefulness of history for understanding the present, would be reflected in Greenberg’s work.


Clarkson’s example helped confirm for Greenberg that he wanted to study history. He applied to Harvard, and entered in 1953. Six years later, at age 26, he had completed a 400-page dissertation on Theodore Roosevelt and the American labor movement, married Blu Genauer, and been recruited to the faculty of Yeshiva University. Greenberg joined the ranks of other young, American-born academics who came from strong yeshiva educations (including ordination in most cases) and who had earned doctorates at top American universities. Yeshiva College dean Isaac Bacon was on a mission to improve the college and raise its standards, and these young faculty—including Greenberg, Lichtenstein (English), Charles Liebman (sociology), and Moshe Tendler (biology)—were central to the effort. Young and energetic, Greenberg was an enormously popular instructor. “Greenberg swept us up in the excitement of intellectual history, providing a broad perspective for understanding the Jewish experience,” one former student recalled. Another wrote: “I remember being powerfully stimulated by not only Rabbi Greenberg’s lectures… but by the exchanges between the instructor and several knowledgeable students who regularly challenged Rabbi Greenberg’s assumptions… I have tried to emulate the stance of teacher as ‘agent provocateur’ in my own career, due in no small measure to experiencing the give-and-take in a true Torah u-Madda context.” By 1966, Greenberg’s stature was sufficient that the Yeshiva College student yearbook, the Masmid, was dedicated to him:

Dr. Greenberg’s significance lies in that he is the personification of the aim of Yeshiva University. Never reluctant to draw parallels and show differences between the heritage of


classical Judaism and modern Western culture, Dr. Greenberg's ultimate goal for himself, his students, and the institution is “synthesis” in its highest form.28

All of this set the stage for the Greenberg’s interview and the reaction it provoked.

28 Norman Meskin and Gerald Weisfogel, *Masmid 1966* (New York: Masmid Club of Yeshiva College, 1966). It is worth noting the varying honorifics with which Greenberg is referenced. “Doctor” was the title virtually all of the secular studies faculty went by, whereas Judaic studies faculty were called “Rav,” or rabbi. This prevailed even when the instructors were rabbis with PhDs, including Rabbi Dr. Samuel Belkin, president of the university, who was uniformly referred to as Dr. Belkin. The emphasis placed on title provides a window into competing sensibilities about what kind of training and status demanded what kind of respect. On the one hand, “Doctor” connoted a western, academic pedigree that put YU faculty on the same footing as professors at any other university. On the other, “Rav,” particularly beginning in the 1960s, connoted a sense of authenticity and authority vis-à-vis the Jewish textual and legal tradition. (As he left YU and modern Orthodoxy for the broader arenas of communal Jewish life, Greenberg gradually became referred to as Rabbi Greenberg—neither Rav nor Doctor, reflecting the kind of authority he commanded: he had little to no stature among more yeshiva-oriented Orthodoxy, yet his work was clearly rooted in Jewish, rather than academic, concerns.) This point merits further study and documentation, particularly in comparison with parallel figures at other American seminaries (the Jewish Theological Seminary, Hebrew Union College).
The Greenberg-Lichtenstein Exchange of 1966

Though Greenberg was a professor of history, Harold Goldberg’s questions—at least those that were printed in the final version of the interview—were not about history. 29 “What do you believe is the essential element of Jewish theology?” was Goldberg’s first question. He asked eight more over the course of the printed interview, including: “What are some of the major contemporary problems to which we could apply halachic principles and laws, but don’t?” “How can Orthodoxy—halachic Judaism—become relevant in America?” and “Is Yeshiva University meeting its responsibility of educating an intelligent American Jewish laity?” These were not questions for a narrowly-focused historian. If they were questions about history, they powerfully intersected with Jewish law, theology, and contemporary politics. They were questions for a person viewed as having something important to say, reinforced by an introductory editor’s note that called the interview “a crucial article for all to consider.”

Greenberg did not disappoint. His answers were lengthy, substantive, and forceful.

“Orthodoxy refuses to come out of the East European ghetto psychologically,” he said. Orthodox Jews needed to recognize that democratic America was not only a refuge from persecution, but invited and demanded not just economic self-sufficiency or looking after parochial interests, but civic participation and activism on the issues of the day. Drawing on their tradition, Orthodox Jews could offer a prophetic voice against injustice, specifically in the civil rights and anti-war movements.

29 Though the editors referred to the article as an interview, both Greenberg and Goldberg agree that it did not reflect the record of a single conversation. Rather, Goldberg approached Greenberg early in the school year, interested in Greenberg’s thinking on issues of history, politics, and Jewish law. The two had many conversations over the course of the year, and at a certain point agreed to work on a written project together. Goldberg drafted the work as an interview, and Greenberg reviewed the drafts. What is not clear is at what point Goldberg decided to publish the interview, and whether Greenberg had given his permission. Goldberg claims Greenberg approved the final version before publication, while Greenberg has maintained he never knew Goldberg planned to publish it. See “Letters,” The Commentator, May 17, 2005.
“Only Jews are bound to observe halacha,” he said. “But in the spirit of a democratic society, we can suggest that others accept our attitudes and follow our actions.”

Greenberg called on Orthodoxy to “acknowledge a debt to Bible critics,” and to engage Biblical criticism in a more sophisticated way than mere rejection. He saw value in the critical move to situate the Bible within its historical context, saying that it would enable contemporary Jews to better understand “our own revelation.” But he critiqued mainstream Bible criticism because it “denies G-d [sic] and sees only the temporal qualities of the ancient Jew.” Instead, he suggested, “we need Jewish scholars who assume that man can relate to G-d… We should be committed by faith to the Torah as Divine revelation, but what we mean by ‘Divine revelation’ may be less external or mechanical than many Jews now think.”

These statements were provocative enough in the setting of 1960s Orthodoxy. Even among the most liberal figures in the Modern Orthodox community—i.e. Emanuel Rackman, Walter Wurzburger, or Eliezer Berkovits, all of whom were within the mainstream of Modern Orthodox thought at the time—such pronouncements were radical. Biblical criticism was identified with the Reform movement, and to engage in such methods chafed against the discursive limits of even the most liberal Orthodox thinkers, and to invite attacks of being a Reform Jew. As Charles Liebman put it in 1965, though some modern Orthodox thinkers might privately be persuaded by the approach of Franz Rosenzweig to divine authorship of the Torah, wherein the Torah was a human artifact of divine revelation, “questions of actual dogma have not yet been broached among Orthodox leaders. When they are, as seems likely,” he predicted, “there will be explosive consequences.”

30 Liebman, "Orthodoxy in American Jewish Life", 44.
But what proved most controversial, and occupied the bulk of the interview, was Greenberg’s statement that Orthodox rabbis should make “a thorough re-examination of the Shulchan Orach [sic],” the Code of Jewish Law from 1568 that served as the legal basis of contemporary Orthodox life. “The purpose of halachah is to transform the mundane into the holy by the utilization of the halachah which applies to any given experience,” he argued. “But today, there are some experiences which halachah doesn’t cover adequately, and we are unwilling to apply many halachot that deal with contemporary problems. The Poskim [legal decisors] aren’t meeting their responsibility in updating and fully applying our law codes. This inaction represents a denial of one of the basic tenets of Judaism: that our tradition may be applied to any situation. In short, the halachah has broken down.”

Among the areas Greenberg called on Orthodox rabbis to treat through the lens of Jewish law were the war in Vietnam and governmental social welfare policy. Jews should bring their heritage of critical legal thinking to bear on the complicated question of military intervention in Southeast Asia. Ho Chi Minh should be evaluated in terms of halakhic categories, and Orthodox Jews should lead the movement to “wage peace.” Likewise, regarding social welfare legislation, Greenberg argued, “the central moral principle of the Torah is the belief that man is created in the image of G-d, and this implies that any act or policy which humiliates or ‘shrinks’ a person is an act

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31 Greenberg here seems to be referring to halakha more as a process than as a corpus of legal rulings. For Greenberg, halakha is the process of applying Biblical values to the world one inhabits, using the precedents of the past as an authoritative frame for decision-making. He never wrote a systematic statement of his philosophy of halakha, and cannot be said to be a leading halakhic theorist or jurist. For his fullest treatment on the subject, see Irving Greenberg, "Jewish Tradition and Contemporary Problems," in Relationships between Jewish Tradition and Contemporary Social Issues, ch. (New York: Wurzweiler School of Social Work, Yeshiva University, 1968), 1-19.

32 Greenberg’s comments here echoed others he made at the time in other venues about Vietnam in particular. These are examined more fully in chapter 4, and I do not want to go into detail examining them here, as Greenberg’s comments about sex, not Vietnam, became the focal point of public discussion. Suffice it to say that Greenberg’s idea—which was not unusual, if not yet mainstream, for YU at the time—involving using traditional Jewish legal categories such as defensive war, pre-emptive war, required war, and legal concepts derived from Biblical injunctions about laying siege to an enemy, treatment of captives, and protection of food supplies, to evaluate the live public policy questions about the war in Vietnam.
of desecration of the Divine image. Belittling man drives the Divine presence out of the world. Thus, Jews are required to eliminate those conditions—physical or psychological—that humiliate people... Jews must stand for an increased war on poverty.”

After addressing all these topics, Goldberg asked Greenberg, “What is one main experience which halachah doesn’t adequately cover?” Without missing a beat (at least in Goldberg’s presentation), Greenberg replied: “Sex.” It is important to read the entirety of Greenberg’s answer, because this proved to be the key passage that aroused the most controversy:

_Tanach_ [the Bible] doesn’t look upon sex as an evil; the prohibition of _negia_ [touching someone of the opposite sex] is based upon a technical _halachab_—that a girl is in a state of _nidah_ [ritual impurity as a result of menstruation] until she performs _t’vilah_ [immersion] in the _mikvah_ [ritual bath]. The fact that unmarried girls are not permitted to go to the _mikvah_ reflects the reaction of the _Poskim_ in the Middle Ages to the looseness of morals of many, who, having gone to the _mikvah_, felt free to do anything. If the tradition felt that sex itself were wrong, we should not have associated sex with the holy _mitzvah_ [commandment] of _mikvah_. Instead, we would view celibacy as a higher state of holiness, as it is viewed in the Catholic tradition.

Today the _Poskim_ should recognize that there is nothing wrong with sex per se, and should promulgate a new value system and corresponding new _halachot_ about sex. The basis of the new value system should be the concept that experiencing a woman as a _zelem Elokim_ [image of God] is a _mitzvah_ just as much as praying in _Shul_. The _Poskim_ should teach people that the depth of one’s sexual relationship should reflect the depth of his encounter. Sex has come to be considered as a secular activity only because _Poskim_ have abdicated their responsibility in examining its true meaning.
Sex is a religious activity and we abuse it by ignoring it. No value system is free of its practical problems and this new value system might lead to an increased tendency by some to violate *halachab*. But still, this new approach to sex, even with its problems, would be much better than our present suppression of such a deep and meaningful activity. Indeed, I believe that more people would end up observing for they would see relevance and rationale in the new *halachic* categories.

The article “burst like a bombshell.” Greenberg had clearly succeeded in provoking a great deal of conversation, and he found himself under attack. While his points about Biblical criticism and non-Orthodox denominations challenged central communal and institutional norms at YU, his comments about sex—particularly the intimation that sex outside of marriage should be one of the updates to Jewish law—provoked condemnation from other professors and rabbis at the university. Two weeks later, on May 12, Greenberg wrote a two-page letter in the *Commentator*, which ran under the headline, “Greenberg Clarifies and Defends His Views,” in which he attacked his critics for assuming that he operated with bad intentions. Notably, in the letter to the editor, Greenberg loaded his prose with Hebrew, Aramaic, and Yiddish phrases drawn from a range of Biblical, Talmudic, medieval, and contemporary sources—far more than he had done in the initial interview. This was plainly designed to establish, or re-establish, Greenberg’s bona fides as, if not a halakhic authority, at least one with significant enough yeshiva learning to be taken seriously. His call for change in the interview had, it seems, been perceived as insufficiently rooted in halakhic discourse, and overly rooted in language from thought beyond Orthodoxy. Nevertheless, Greenberg did not


significantly change his position. With regard to the key charge that he had advocated sex outside of marriage, he wrote, “It may sound naive, but it seems to me that at Yeshiva University one has a right to assume that discussion of sex assumes a marital state.” With that caveat, he repeated his call for a richer communal and halakhic discourse on sexuality within marriage, just as he defended his other statements.

By invoking the language of assumption—“at YU one has a right to assume that discussion of sex assumes a marital state”—Greenberg signaled that, in this particular area as opposed to any other in the interview—including Biblical criticism—he had transgressed a fundamental limit of the public discourse at YU. To return to Warner, a public or counterpublic is ordered through the different assumptions each makes “about what can be said or what goes without saying.” Greenberg clearly had crossed a boundary about what was assumed, otherwise he wouldn’t have had to “defend and clarify his views.” And he had particularly crossed the discursive boundary of sex, bringing into public discussion—in the newspaper—an area of Jewish law usually thought of as private or intimate. And he did so against the backdrop of a mid-1960s American media culture that was itself beginning to become much more open in its public discussion of sexuality. Thus Greenberg challenged YU as a public, by writing about the verboten topic of pre-marital sex; and he challenged YU Orthodoxy as a counterpublic, by suggesting that it align with the emerging discourse of a larger public, against which it had defined itself. If he didn’t walk back his comment and situate sexuality within marriage, he risked being cast out of the YU public, and losing his status as the leader of a counterpublic within YU.

The result was an explosion, ultimately manifested in a 4,900-word open letter from Aharon Lichtenstein in the June 2 issue of the paper, which would be the last edition before the summer

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Lichtenstein was uniquely positioned to write his letter, since, like Greenberg, he had completed a doctorate at Harvard, in English literature. Though both were born in 1933, Lichtenstein had attended YU as both an undergraduate and rabbinical student, while Greenberg was never a student at the university. Thus Lichtenstein carried a certain weight at YU that Greenberg, despite his popularity, did not—and Lichtenstein’s marriage to Soloveitchik’s daughter only served to enhance his status. Greenberg and Lichtenstein were not members of different socioeconomic classes materially. But just as YU bore the tensions of competing subcultures (e.g. yeshiva and university), those subcultures reflected competing social economies. In one social economy, that of the mid-1960s large university, Greenberg, as the outspoken professor of history, carried more weight; in the yeshiva economy, Lichtenstein was higher-class: the erudite Talmudic scholar married to the Rosh Yeshiva’s daughter. These dynamics of class are important to bear in mind in understanding the differences in both substance and tone between the two.

Though they had crossed paths in Boston and Cambridge, the two became friends only at YU, and Lichtenstein’s letter refers to his personal affection for Greenberg. On substance, Lichtenstein confessed to sharing Greenberg’s aims of applying halakha to new areas and to cultivating students with a serious religious consciousness, as well as Greenberg’s embrace of secular study within a religious framework. Yet he differed with Greenberg on three key points. First, he did not view Jewish settlement in America with the same enthusiasm as Greenberg. “I do not think that we should immerse ourselves in American society to the extent you seem to advocate,” he wrote. “Our primary goal must be the more selfish—yes, selfish—one of surviving as a viable tradition; and I simply cannot buy your thesis that this can be better done by much greater involvement in American political life.”

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Second, Lichtenstein was deeply unsettled by Greenberg’s forceful, even brusque, language of rejection of the past. Lichtenstein defended the Poskim, the legal decisors, whom Greenberg berated. “Were they so obtuse” he asked Greenberg, “as to overlook the fact that even when conception is impossible, onah, periodic marital relations, is obligatory mid’oraita [from the Torah]? Lichtenstein proceeded down a lengthy list of laws about the conjugal rights and responsibilities of wives and husbands, underscoring his point that the legal luminaries Greenberg castigated for failing to articulate a positive sex ethic in fact did just that. He reiterated throughout his letter his objection to “the strident tone of much of the critique of contemporary Orthodoxy and some of its Halachic leaders.”

Third, Lichtenstein took issue with Greenberg’s discussion of these issues in public. “There is a basic distinction between discussion and publication,” he wrote. “Horace’s dictum about waiting nine years between writing and publication may be too severe. But the underlying principle is sound. We would do better to do more tentative groping orally before rushing into print.” Lichtenstein argued for exploring ideas in “fluid forms of inquiry and discourse (although even then with caution) before encasing our gropings in the hard cast of print.” Lichtenstein here reflected Warner’s observation about the effect of print media on generating a public: the problem wasn’t simply that Greenberg was transgressing boundaries of thought and therefore violating the norms of the culture; it was that he was doing so in print, and particularly in the campus newspaper, a political medium. Greenberg wasn’t engaging in a simple thought experiment; by exploring these issues in the paper,

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37 “A public can only act in the temporality of the circulation that gives it existence. The more punctual and abbreviated the circulation, and the more discourse indexes the punctuality of its own circulation, the closer a public stands to politics. At longer rhythms or more continuous flows, action becomes harder to imagine.” Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics” 96. Warner goes on to distinguish between newspapers, which are printed frequently (biweekly in the case of The Commentator), and academic journals, which appear at larger intervals. The latter are, ipso facto, further from political impact than the former. It is noteworthy that Greenberg attracted so much more attention for this interview in the paper than he did for his academic writings.
he was engaging in politics. (As we will see in the next chapter, Greenberg would not disagree—he saw *halakha* as a political process; Lichtenstein saw it more as a formal, philosophical one.)

Beyond these disagreements, Lichtenstein took Greenberg to task strongly for being sloppy with his language, for failing to show sufficient care with his words. Regarding the specific issue of the passage about sex, Lichtenstein observed, “Anyone reading the original article, which is much vaguer than the comment and with almost no hint of the thrust of the latter, would naturally have assumed that the hue and cry about new *halachot* had to involve significant departures in the only area in which departures could make a real difference—the premarital.” Greenberg, Lichtenstein suggested, was being at best careless, and at worst mendacious.

More broadly, he averred that “basic problems should be discussed. A Torah-*Halachic Weltanschauung* vis-a-vis contemporary problems does need to be formulated and expressed.” In any yeshiva, students must integrate the world as they encounter it into a total Jewish worldview. And at Yeshiva University, with its motto of *Torah u-Madda*, it was especially important. Yet precisely because of YU’s vision of integrating the sacred and the secular (which Lichtenstein added was undertaken “with varying degrees of enthusiasm” among the faculty), professors at YU incur a collective debt to [the students] and to ourselves to help them grasp the relation—be it one of complement, irreconcilable conflict, or fruitful tensions—between *Torah* and a given aspect of *Madda*. To place the full burden of integrating two worlds upon the individual student is neither fair to him nor in the best general interest of *Halachic* Judaism. Thus, Lichtenstein argued, a professor like Greenberg—much less one as popular and influential as Greenberg was at the time—who engages in public discussion of sensitive issues, “assumes a double obligation: of inquiry and expression. He is morally bound both to come as close as possible to the truth and to be as accurate as possible in communicating that truth… And of course the more
serious the problem, the greater the responsibility to be precise—or, if need be, to remain silent.”

The souls of students were in their hands, Lichtenstein argued (“we are dealing with human lives and their spiritual destinies”), and thus Greenberg should have been more careful, measured, and deliberate in his choice of words. With his radical rhetoric, Lichtenstein suggested, Greenberg risked shattering the carefully constructed and maintained modern-Orthodox identities of YU’s students. And with his concession that an updated halakha might invite people to transgress it, Greenberg showed that he did not view transgression of the law as a red line. “Where the reality of error is genuinely regarded as a disaster,” Lichtenstein concluded, “its possibility will be neither lightly regarded nor easily dismissed.” In Lichtenstein’s view, Greenberg either did not see the possibility of disaster, or he did not care. In a comparison of their responsibilities as Modern Orthodox educators with one of the most powerful symbols of modernity at the time, Lichtenstein asked rhetorically, “How much margin of error is allowed on the Gemini flights?” By implication, Greenberg, with his forceful rhetoric and perceived push against the tradition, was bringing about a catastrophe.

Tradition, the Past, and the Present: Interpreting the Greenberg-Lichtenstein Debate

How can we understand this debate? Returning to Slezkine’s observation about revolutionaries, we can say that Lichtenstein saw in Greenberg flashes of revolutionary rhetoric, and detected undertones of a patricidal impulse. By publicly critiquing halakhaic authorities; by accusing

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38 Moshe Halbertal and Tova Hartman Halbertal’s study of the yeshiva is illuminating here: “On the one hand, the ultimate goal in the training of the Yeshiva student is to educate an inquisitive mind, on the other hand, however, there are questions that may not be voiced. Questions aimed at the meaning of the practice as a whole, inquiries concerning theological and religious beliefs, historical contextualization and moral critique which might undermine claims for authority, are not part of the legitimate ongoing conversation… Limitations are not peculiar to the Yeshiva. Most other educational institutions set clear boundaries of investigation. But a Yeshiva education creates a particular inner tension, which lies in the attempt to develop an inquisitive searching Talmudist while framing and channeling this search into well-defined boundaries…The challenge of the Yeshiva is to direct the intense cultivated intellectual libido towards the internal goals of the system, in particular at times when powerful competing ideologies tend to capture the minds of the minds of the young. The questions that are prohibited are not announced as such, and the boundaries not to be crossed are not clearly marked. After all, declaring a boundary is a way of tempting one to cross it.” Moshe Halbertal and Tova Hartman Halbertal, “The Yeshiva,” in Philosophers on Education, ed. A. O. Rorty, ch. (New York: Routledge, 1998), 467.
Orthodox Jews of continuing to live in a ghetto; by adopting the language and tone viewed as strident and therefore too modern, Greenberg seemed to be taking on Orthodoxy in a particularly threatening way. In mounting such a strong and public critique, which was amplified and took on added seriousness by its appearance in the YU newspaper, Greenberg had pushed harder than many others, including Aharon Lichtenstein, could bear. He was calling the authority of tradition, and the generation of bearded, European-born, Yiddish-speaking rabbis in the rabbinic seminary who represented tradition, into question. By his own admission, he was trying to bring about a shattering moment—a moment when not just the individuals of YU, but the collective, would have to renegotiate its relationship with tradition. And he was doing so against the backdrop of multiple generations in which Orthodoxy itself had come to be defined in terms of its resistance to the general modern trend to shed the past, the traditions of the past, and the people who clung to them. Exploring these dimensions, particularly the way Orthodox Jewry understood and reacted to the modern project of historicism as a primary vehicle for relating to the past, will be the subject of the rest of this chapter.

Historical thinking is a sine qua non of modern culture in the West. By historical thinking I mean the notion that the story of human experience, from past to present to future, is (1) composed of discrete events, each with its own context, and (2) each event is explainable by an appeal to empirical, verifiable fact. Since the late nineteenth century, if not earlier, an historical worldview has become synonymous with modern Western notions of academic objectivity and seriousness. Yet the hegemony of historicism has not quieted important countercurrents, particularly from theological thinkers. As historian David Myers documents, history and theology in nineteenth-

century Germany “were locked in a tight, if uncomfortable, embrace.” Because historical thinking was such a powerful and persuasive approach, theologians acknowledged and employed it. At the same time, since historicism seemed to upend a foundational understanding of divinity, namely the notion of a divine creator involved in natural and historical events, it posed a fundamental challenge to theologians. Thus “theologians were perforce obliged to attack the frailty and hubris of historical method with particular urgency.”

Theologians, who were not quite at home but also not quite guests in the emerging modern academy, wrote and spoke in a language that was at once historical and academic, and at the same time suffused with notions—like the existence of God—that ran counter to the academic mainstream.

Judaism’s modern theological expressions were, to varying degrees, built on these scaffolds of historicism. Nineteenth-century Reform Judaism embraced academic notions of history to demonstrate that the past was past, and that therefore the modern era, which was so radically unlike anything that had come before it, necessitated a response that made a similar break. Conservative Judaism began its life as Positive-Historical Judaism, embracing *Wissenschaft* and its imperative of placing Jewish texts in historical and social context.

Both the Reform Hebrew Union College and the Conservative Jewish Theological Seminary adopted key elements of western academe: awarding not only rabbinic ordination, but advanced degrees like master or doctor of Hebrew letters to new rabbis; referring to rabbi-instructors as “professor” or “doctor;” and requiring entrants to their rabbinical schools to hold a bachelors degree.

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40 Myers, *Resisting History: Historicism and Its Discontents in German-Jewish Thought*, 8.

41 This historical approach did not, in and of itself, lead to a break with what would emerge as Modern Orthodoxy; in fact, during the 1920s, an attempt was made to merge the Conservative Jewish Theological Seminary and Revel’s nascent Yeshiva College.

42 “The graduates of the Talmudical Academy were able to study the Talmud and its commentaries on an advanced level, and they continued their talmudic studies in the advanced classes of the Yeshiva. Since the Seminary, on the other hand, accepted students only after they had already graduated from high school and college, these students generally were not intensively prepared for talmudic study.” Rakeffet-Rothkoff, *Bernard Revel: Builder of American Jewish Orthodoxy*, 110.
embraced the historicizing of the Bible through Biblical criticism, while the Conservative movement applied a similar approach of historical contextualization to Talmudic study, and ultimately to the Biblical text. By the 1960s, the mainstream of both institutions, the rabbis they produced, and the laity they served, took historicism as a given, and dealt with the challenges of historicism in ways similar to the German-Jewish theologians about whom Myers writes: with varying degrees of embrace, tension, apologetic, and attempted synthesis.

Like other nineteenth and twentieth century Western religious fundamentalisms, Jewish Orthodoxy was defined by its resistance to these trends. Yet this impulse was itself built on the awareness that something was new, that it marked a break with the past, and that therefore the link of past and present was precarious. Intellectual historian Yehudah Mirsky offers a helpful definition: “‘Orthodoxing’ takes place when the tradition has become aware of its own contingency and fragility, of the ways in which it is dependent on historical circumstances, and how a change in those circumstances may sweep that tradition away.”43 Haredism, or Ultra-Orthodoxy, became the chief exponent of this impulse, embodying the *cris de coner* of the nineteenth century central European Rabbi Moses Sofer, *Hadash asur min baTorah*, ‘Innovation is prohibited by the Torah.’ Historicism was to be resisted in all its guises: theological, educational, institutional.44

This applied to both components of the definition we outlined above. The first move of contextualization could prove radically destabilizing: The Torah, the Bible, the Talmud—every holy Jewish text was no longer the timeless word of God, but rather was a particular document

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44 “The very project of a *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, born in Germany around 1820, is not confined to the emergence of a scientific methodology but implies a radical critique of the theological sense adhering to the Jewish memory and amounts to adopting a historicist ideology that underscores the historicity of all things. The vertical relation between the living eternity of the divine plan and the temporal vicissitudes of the chosen people, which was the very principle of the biblical and Talmudic meaning of history, cedes its place to a horizontal relation of causal connections and validations by history of all the strong convictions of the tradition. More than others, pious Jews resent the ‘burden of history.’” Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 400.
composed in a particular time and place by particular people. Implicit in this move of contextualization was an additional Western notion of progress that suggested that not only was the past now discontinuous with the present, but that it was also outmoded, only suited to the primitive time and place whence it came. Thus, in positing the continuity of past and present and the continued veneration, rather than negation, of the past, Haredi Orthodoxy would insist that the Bible in particular, but more broadly all texts regarded by the community as sacred, could not be historicized. The second move, exclusively appealing to empirically verifiable fact in explaining history, would excise God from the conversation. Sacred documents would now be not only historically contingent, but explainable in purely human terms. “God, it seems, must be expelled from history by the modern historian, just as He is expelled from nature by the modern scientist,” observes Emil Fackenheim.\textsuperscript{45} This move, as much as the first, would have to be resisted by Haredim.

But the people of YU after World War II—its rabbis, professors, students, alumni, and the laypeople in the communities they served—were not Haredim. They wore contemporary clothing, spoke English without an accent, studied science, aspired to a greater degree of integration in mainstream society, and wanted their children to get a college education. In both their own lives, and in the life of their university, they would navigate between the magnetic fields of competing poles: seeking the imprimatur of academe on the one hand, and maintaining recognition as sufficiently Orthodox by their Haredi co-religionists on the other. The very name Yeshiva University, and YU’s motto \textit{Torah u-Madda}, indicated both ambition and inherent tension. Yet what has been insufficiently recognized in writing about YU is the degree to which historical thinking became the locus of this tension. Unlike science or philosophy, historicism as it was understood could not easily be subsumed into the notion of \textit{Torah u-Maddah}. Science could be engaged as a series

of technical questions about how the world operated, bracketing theological questions about God’s involvement in it, and, from an Orthodox perspective, applying existing halakhic categories to scientific phenomena (e.g. applying the laws of Shabbat to modern technology). Philosophy was a dominant form of Modern Orthodox discourse, epitomized in Soloveitchik, but also including many other significant figures. History, however, was more problematic: On the one hand, to completely reject historical consciousness would deny one of the basic elements of academic identity, and thus jeopardize the claim to be both modern and a university (which, at this point, are coextensive terms). On the other hand, to embrace historicism, with its inherent relativization of the past and its exclusion of divine providence, would jeopardize the community’s self-perception as continuously linked with their forebears, the basis of the claim to Orthodox identity. This was the dilemma for the people in and around YU.

All involved in the project of YU rejected the Haredi approach. They understood that the modern era had brought about a new historical epoch, that Jewish life would have to deal with its changes, and that they had to find ways to reconcile or reduce conflict between the claims of modernity and what they saw as the claims of traditional Judaism. This was, and has remained, the project of much of the literature emanating from YU and its rabbis. “It should be admitted that the committed Jew who lives in a democratic society and the scientific world sometimes experiences a sense of conflict,” wrote Rabbi Dr. Sol Roth in a characteristic study. “The sense of conflict, however, can be avoided.” Roth, a philosopher and prominent New York pulpit rabbi who taught at YU, went on to argue that there is no inherent conflict between modern science and traditional Jewish ideas about God and revelation, since science cannot disprove the existence of a deity. “Since

46 In his 1965 essay, Liebman observed, “In general, the natural sciences have attracted more Orthodox Jewish graduate students than the social sciences or humanities. This may be because they offer preparation for more lucrative and prestigious professions today, or because they raise fewer critical problems for Orthodox Jews. It is not difficult to dichotomize religious belief and scientific work, whereas the very assumptions of the social sciences are often thought to run counter to traditional Orthodox views.” Liebman, "Orthodoxy in American Jewish Life", 57.
God, by definition, is not available to observation or experimentation—either directly or indirectly—He belongs outside the domain of scientific concerns.” Having reduced the sense of conflict between modern and traditional claims, Roth goes on to advocate for Orthodox involvement in American (secular) democratic life. The secular world doesn’t pose a real danger or challenge, and thus Orthodox Jews can maintain their beliefs and commitments in their homes and synagogues, their hearts and minds.

Applied to the challenge of historicism for tradition-bound Jews, Roth’s argument, echoed in other leading Modern Orthodox figures, addresses the second dimension of our working definition of historicism, the need for empirically verifiable explanations. To apply his logic: Since God cannot be empirically proven not to exist, the demand for empiricism is not really a challenge. Belief in God is not dependent on empiricism, and therefore empirical explanations or refutations of Biblical accounts of the Creation, the Exodus, and other events are ultimately not relevant. God continues to exist, and the Bible continues to be true and authoritative, despite the fact that empirical evidence fails to support, or even directly challenges, those assertions.

Greenberg would challenge this view as dodging the full shattering force of modernity. By bracketing the questions of empiricism and historicism on the basis that they were a separate discourse from theology, Roth and others were employing a convenient strategy. But this was not the focus of his argument. What really bothered Greenberg was that formulations like Roth’s failed to address the first part of the definition of historicism, the demand for contextualization. His comments on Biblical criticism in the interview are illustrative:

We should acknowledge a debt to Bible critics. They have shown that the Torah is not toneless, but has elements in common with the temporal experience of the ancient Near

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East. This does not undermine our faith because the Jewish idea of a holy life is the proper utilization of the temporal. However, contemporary scholarship denies G-d and sees only the temporal qualities of the ancient Jew. We need Jewish scholars who assume that man can relate to G-d. This type of Jewish scholarship would illuminate our understanding of the ancient Jew, it would enable us to understand the exact point of meeting between the Divine and the temporal. We would be able to see how the ancient Jew utilized the temporal in a Divine manner.

Greenberg’s argument here is a critically important conceptual move. Implicitly, Greenberg argued that he could minimally accept the arguments of thinkers like Roth on the question of empiricism. The demand for empiricism, whether in science or history, did not automatically lead to the death of God. But where Greenberg diverged from his Orthodox and academic colleagues was in how he understood contextualization. Where mainstream historicism and most other YU thinkers saw historical context in reductivist terms that automatically led to empirical claims (e.g. the Torah was written by human beings in a particular time and place, and therefore not by God), Greenberg saw God precisely in the fact of contextualization: The Torah was written in a particular time and place, and therefore teaches us about the relationship of the people of that time and place with God. From here, Greenberg can draw a straight line between past and present:

Orthodox Jews inherit the notion that Judaism entirely transcends the temporal, that Judaism should be independent of local culture. We’ve come to think that a relationship with the Divine means separation from current or everyday life.

But on the contrary, our acceptance of the Mosaic covenant and of Jewish law is tantamount to the belief that G-d intervenes in the temporal, and that we can experience infinite values in a concrete worldly experience. Thus, Jewish history is a history of human responses to the
Divine approach—to Torah, Prophetic and Talmudic values, and mitzvot. Some of these human responses have led Jews to experience their Zelem Elokim and some have not. The central issue in Judaism today is this: What are the concrete experiences that can lead us to an experience with G-d?

Greenberg thus offered a radically different notion of historicism than was generally articulated in either academic or theological circles. Where most Orthodox thinkers reacted to the contextualizing and anti-theistic claims of historicism by essentially rejecting the premises, Greenberg reconceptualized them by means of a dialectic: The past and the present are fundamentally different, separated in particular by the rupture of modernity; at the same time, the past and the present are fundamentally alike, as human beings are still human and still relate to God. The implication is that one need not be afraid of historicizing the past, but that one must also be deeply involved in writing the history of the present—sensing a divine imperative to be involved in the collective political and social issues of the day, embracing the idea that halakha must be consciously influenced by, and an influence on, the secular world. By moving in these opposite directions—toward a transcendent historicism, and simultaneously toward an immanent habitation of the present—Greenberg pulled apart the fabric of Orthodoxy that many of his contemporaries had woven for themselves.

Elaborating on the dominant conception against which Greenberg pushed, Mirsky observes, “Much of halakha’s meaningfulness, its resonance as a way of life, resides in its transhistoricity, in its lifting us above the messy, petty and regularly depressing realities of this world. At the same time much of its authority over us, its ability to command our obedience, depends on its ahistoricity, on its being issued from God, who stands above the normal run of historical processes.”48 Halakha here is not merely Jewish law, but an entire discourse that undergirds contemporary Orthodoxy. As

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48 Mirsky, "Modernizing Orthodoxies: The Case of Feminism."
Mirsky suggests, much of its power comes from the notion that the religious practice in which one engages in the present is an authentic expression of the Torah given to Moses at Mount Sinai. Both parts of historicism, the contextualization of the past and the exiling of God from history, have been generally perceived by self-described secular and religious people alike as fundamentally at odds with an Orthodox approach to halakha. This was true in Modern Orthodoxy as much as in Haredi Orthodoxy. The force of Greenberg’s challenge in 1966 lay in his willingness to directly address and redefine historicism, with implications for both the past and the present.

That call went largely unheeded at YU. Lichtenstein, who was among those at YU most equipped to respond favorably to Greenberg’s ideas, rejected them on two basic grounds, both of which reflect Mirsky’s observation. First, unlike Greenberg, Lichtenstein subscribed to Soloveitchik’s more Platonic, formalistic approach to halakha. Where Greenberg saw halakha as an ongoing conversation in history between God and the Jewish people, Lichtenstein, like his father-in-law, posited the existence of an ideal, ahistorical Halakha. Greenberg’s idea that halakha takes into account the unique circumstances of an historical moment, rather than exists outside of history, ran contrary to Soloveitchik’s espoused philosophy in an essential way. Greenberg’s forceful call for a conscious halakhic embrace of the present, without Soloveitchik’s concession that the halakha as applied in the present was a poor reflection of the ideal, timeless halakha, created a serious gap between their worldviews. Second, Lichtenstein saw the role of YU faculty, and YU rabbis more broadly, in more conservative terms than Greenberg: “Given all the pressures for latitudinarianism,

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49 See especially Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Halakhic Man (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1983): “The foundation and the pillar of halakhic thought is not the practical ruling but the determination of the theoretical Halakhah” (24). Similarly: “The foundation and the pillar of halakhic thought is not the practical ruling but the determination of the theoretical Halakhah” (99).
we cannot afford to relax our efforts to maintain the integrity of Torah and Halacha,” he wrote.\textsuperscript{50}

This position, too, can trace its roots to Mirsky’s observation about the resistance to historical thinking implicit in much of Orthodoxy: It was not contemporary history that generated the demand for an \textit{halakhic} response to American social problems, as Greenberg suggested. Rather, if and when Jews should become involved in American political life could only be determined by the objective categories of \textit{halakha}. That is, the ahistorical, essential \textit{halakha}—whose main concern is with Jewish life, not American life—should drive decision-making, not the call of history.

Other Orthodox thinkers, already less inclined than Lichtenstein to be open to Greenberg’s challenge, saw Greenberg as the flag-bearer for a false Orthodoxy. In December 1966, six months after his exchange of letters with Lichtenstein, Greenberg was involved in another exchange of letters, this time in the magazine \textit{The Jewish Observer}, published by the Agudath Israel of America, the main synagogue organ of Haredi Orthodoxy. Under the title “Modern Orthodoxy or Orthodox Modernism?” Greenberg responded to a strong critique by Rabbi Shelomo Danziger, who accused Greenberg of dangerous and misguided thinking. “We do not want men of Dr. Greenberg’s stature to become alienated from the mainstream of Orthodox tradition,” Danziger wrote. “We want him \textit{with us, not against us}. Yet, many of us are alarmed by his radical proposals, which, if unchecked, would incline toward non-Orthodox concepts and practices.”\textsuperscript{51} Greenberg defended himself, making similar arguments to those in the YU \textit{Commentator} interview and letter to the editor. But his views found little reception in the Haredi community.

While Greenberg would go on calling himself Orthodox for the next half-century (and continues to do so to this day), none but the most liberal Orthodox Jews would count him as one of their own. This highlights an important reality that needs to be underscored about Greenberg’s

\textsuperscript{50} Lichtenstein, "Rav Lichtenstein Writes Letter to Dr. Greenberg".

\textsuperscript{51} Shelomo Danziger, "'Orthodox Modernism'--an Exchange," \textit{The Jewish Observer}, December 1966.
nature as both a liminal figure to some, and a marginal figure to others. To non-Orthodox rabbis and laypeople, as to the Christians he worked with, Greenberg represented an Orthodoxy that was available and open to them, that would engage them with a willingness to learn. This made him a liminal figure, a boundary-crossover operating between communities—something we will see more in the coming chapters. Yet to the Orthodox community he claimed as home, Greenberg came to be seen not as liminal, but marginal—a marker of a limit he had already transgressed. That marginality began in earnest in the spring of 1966, as Greenberg began his journey out of the mainstream of Orthodox life—and the Orthodoxy of YU further coalesced in reaction to him. These developments were about more than simply “moving to the left” or “moving to the right,” as they are most often described. As we have shown, they were, at root, a contest about the meaning of modernity and Orthodoxy, and particularly about whether and how modern historical consciousness could inform an American Orthodox identity.
CHAPTER 3

Into the Public Sphere: Halakha as an Ethic of Power

As we saw in the previous chapter, in the mid- to late 1960s, Yitz Greenberg was at the center of a cultural debate at YU about how to be an American Orthodox Jew, and how to be an American Orthodox Jewish community. At the heart of that debate were competing understandings of halakha, which were rooted in diverging views of the dangers and possibilities of experiencing a relationship with the divine in historical terms. On the one hand, halakha was understood as philosophical, idealized, and formal, in the view of Joseph Soloveitchik and the majority of the population at YU. For Yitz Greenberg, halakha was historical, material, and dynamic. In the previous chapter we saw how these competing conceptions played out in a public discussion of an issue generally understood as private: sex. Yet, as the bulk of Greenberg’s original interview suggested, the mid- to late 1960s were years of debate and contestation about the meaning of halakha for public issues as well, most significantly the war in Vietnam.

In this chapter, we will explore how Greenberg evolved from a cautious, if critical, position on the war in 1966, to become an outspoken critic and anti-war demonstrator by 1969, and ultimately an articulate representative of anti-war clergy to the Senate Foreign Relations committee in 1970, and how the articulation of his notion of halakha evolved in tandem. In particular, we will examine how Greenberg understood halakha to involve, and also to itself suggest, an ethics of exercising political and military power, rooted in the Biblical notion of human beings created in God’s image. We will see how Greenberg applied this ethic to power structures in institutions and communities both religious and secular, and used it to blur the distinction between them.
Greenberg at the Synagogue Council of America Conference on Vietnam (1966)

Greenberg’s first public statements on Vietnam came in February 1966 at a conference under the auspices of the interdenominational Synagogue Council of America, held at Columbia University. During the early 1960s, Orthodox participation in the SCA became increasingly fraught, with Haredi rabbis castigating Belkin, Soloveitchik and their Modern Orthodox followers over their cooperation, through the SCA, with non-Orthodox rabbis on matters of social policy, arguing that even acknowledging Reform and Conservative rabbis was granting their views legitimacy. The YU-oriented rabbis disagreed, as they saw cooperation with their non-Orthodox colleagues as an important activity in representing a unified Jewish community to the non-Jewish world. In 1961, the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations debated whether to continue in the SCA, and decided overwhelmingly (74-16) to do so. But the dissension would fester and grow over the decade, and Greenberg’s remarks need to be understood against this backdrop.\(^{52}\)

While Reform rabbis, who historically had been instrumental in founding the SCA, continued to be outspoken defenders of liberal positions on civil rights and against the Vietnam War,\(^{53}\) interdenominational and interfaith cooperation became much more attenuated within YU...

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\(^{52}\) Jonathan J. Golden, "From Cooperation to Confrontation: The Rise and Fall of the Synagogue Council of America" (Doctoral Dissertation, Brandeis University, 2008), chapter 5. While the Orthodox community around YU (as expressed through the OU and the Rabbinical Council of America) continued to participate officially in the SCA over the ensuing decades, the fissures between the constituent denominations expanded, particularly in the early 1980s after the Reform movement officially recognized children of Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers as Jewish (at odds with the 2,000-year old position of the other denominations) and the Conservative movement began ordaining women as rabbis. Greenberg was an important voice in the public discussion of maintaining interdenominational cooperation, and Golden discusses his role. The SCA finally dissolved, with a whimper, in 1994, the year following Soloveitchik’s death.

\(^{53}\) Rabbi David Polish recalls: “During the Vietnam War many [Reform] rabbis actively opposed the American government’s prosecution of the war, counseled young men who were opposed to the draft, and in one case, six rabbis were prosecuted for trespassing on federal property in their opposition to the war. The apparent discrepancy between this posture and support for Israel was pointed out by President Lyndon Johnson, who cited a strong anti-Vietnam statement by a leading Reform rabbi when a Zionist delegation came to him in behalf of Israel. In another instance, Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin denounced Reform rabbis for jeopardizing Israel’s position by their active opposition to the Vietnam War. David Polish, "The Changing and the Constant in the Reform Rabbinate," in The American Rabbinate: A Century of Continuity and Change, 1883-1983, ed. Jacob Rader Marcus and Abraham J. Peck, ch. (American Jewish Archives, 1985), 224.
Orthodoxy as the Orthodox community generally became more politically conservative (more on this in chapter 4). These shifts reflected the dissolution of “a liberal political consensus, one that once united much of the Jewish community and pointed to particular policy positions.”\textsuperscript{54} As we will see in this chapter, Vietnam in particular would prove a source of deep division.

The 1966 SCA conference was intended to explore “the conflict in Vietnam, and the overall relevance of religion to the search for world peace.” A month earlier the council had issued a policy statement calling on the Johnson administration to resist pressure to escalate military involvement. Greenberg was one of a number of speakers representing the various denominations as well as relevant scholarly disciplines.\textsuperscript{55}

At the time of the conference, the majority of Americans still supported the administration policy of escalation. Criticism of the administration was still confined to a growing, but minority, group on the political left, mostly on university campuses such as the University of Michigan and the University of California at Berkeley. The tenor of the SCA conference and its statement put it clearly on the liberal side. Among the presenters, prominent Reform congregational rabbi Arthur Lelyveld of Cleveland was the staunchest in calling for America to “desist” from its activity in what was clearly a civil war. Lelyveld had been a conscientious objector during World War II, and achieved notoriety for his work in the Civil Rights movement, including suffering a concussion at the hands of segregationists while registering voters in Mississippi during Freedom Summer in 1964.\textsuperscript{56} “The majority of the population of South Vietnam support the [Communist] National Liberation Front,” he claimed, and thus the United States had no business sending troops there. Seymour Siegel, a young rabbi-professor of Jewish thought at the Conservative movement’s Jewish Theological

\textsuperscript{54} Golden, "From Cooperation to Confrontation: The Rise and Fall of the Synagogue Council of America", 116.


Seminary, presented a more moderate position, calling for the United States to hold the conflict “within controllable bounds” while “actively and sacrificially seeking means to terminate the conflict.” The Jewish Telegraphic Agency reported that the outcome of the conference was a consensus that cessation of conflict and “an intensive peace effort” should be American policy.

Though the SCA included the Orthodox Rabbinical Council of America as one of its constituent members, and despite the participation of other Orthodox rabbis besides Greenberg, the Orthodox community as a whole still followed the conservative attitude of the general public. The Orthodox participants in the conference were thus outliers in their own community. Reflecting this, the more conservative Rabbinical Alliance of America (perhaps better known in Orthodox circles by its Hebrew name, Iggud HaRabbonim) issued its own statement in the form of a letter to President Johnson conveying its support of the administration’s policy. “The Rabbinical Alliance deplores the rash of critical statements being issued against the Government in the name of religion and morality,” they wrote. “These declarations are detrimental to the security of these blessed United States, and are inimical to the best interest of our beloved country.”

The gap between the academic and intellectual community, which was overwhelmingly against the war, and his own Orthodox community, which was for it, seemed to create some pressure for Greenberg, as he was both a university academic and an Orthodox rabbi. “It is my impression… that the bulk of the Orthodox Jewish community backs President Johnson’s policy,”

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57 Siegel had also actively participated in the Civil Rights movement, but by 1972 had come to reconsider liberalism: he announced in the New York Times that he would be voting to re-elect President Nixon, and ultimately became known as “the rabbi of the neo-conservatives,” forging close ties with the movement’s major thinkers, like Irving Kristol, Michael Novak, and Norman Podhoretz.” Ari L. Goldman, “Rabbi Seymour Siegel, 61, Leader in Conservative Judaism, Is Dead,” ibid., February 25, 1988.


59 The Iggud HaRabbonim should not be confused with the Agudath HaRabbonim, which represented the Haredi rabbinate. Whereas the Iggud would partner with the RCA on certain matters, the Agudah would not.

60 “Peace Policy Explored by Three Wings.”
he observed in his remarks at the conference. “I fear that this support may well reflect its relative lack of cultural and political sophistication or its tendency to render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s, rather than an analysis of the situation—but this does not change the fact of its attitude.” Greenberg thus distanced himself from Orthodoxy, saying that he could not claim to speak as its representative, “but rather as one who speaks from within the framework of the classic Jewish position.” While his debate with Lichtenstein in the Commentator two months later would garner greater attention, this preamble to Greenberg’s remarks on Vietnam reflected an early acknowledgment of his position within the community and at YU—a position at odds with the prevailing attitude.

Nevertheless, Greenberg was no pacifist. “Judaism seeks peace but does not exclude the possibility of war,” he said. “War is a possible or even necessary instrument of policy under certain circumstances.” How was one to tell whether a given war was necessary? “Judaism seeks utopian goals—such as peace—but its method is Halacha. It is the essence of Halacha that it seeks to realize broad absolutes—even divine ones—only in the concrete specificity of human situations.” Notably, Greenberg here spoke in the language of halakha. In this particular formulation, he did not diverge from Soloveitchik, who likewise taught that halakha was an attempt to enact timeless ideals in specific, real-world situations. In the particular setting of an inter-denominational rabbinic conference, Greenberg’s embrace of halakha as an operative category reflected the reality that he had

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62 In this respect, the 1966 SCA conference was the first of more instances to come in which Greenberg had to preface his remarks with the caveat that he was not a spokesman for Orthodoxy. See the discussion in chapter 4 about Greenberg’s involvement in the May 1967 interfaith conference in Boston, from which the Orthodox community formally pulled out, but which Greenberg attended as a private individual. See Edward B. Fiske, “Orthodox Jews Defy Boycott,” The New York Times, May 8, 1967.
more in common with Soloveitchik and Orthodoxy than he diverged from them, at least in comparison with avowedly non-halakhic ideologies like that of the Reform movement.

Greenberg entitled his talk “Judaism and the Dilemmas of War—An Essay in Halachic Methodology.” The body of his remarks were devoted to a review of Maimonides’s legal distinction between “war as a possible response,” or milhemet reshut, and “war as an appropriate or necessary response,” milhemet mitzvah or milhemet hova. Whereas in later years Greenberg’s writings on power would largely draw on Biblical references, which would be more accessible to Christians and non-Orthodox Jews, in this talk he referred to Rabbinic and later Jewish legal sources, including Tosafot, the 12th century Talmudic commentary, and the midrash Genesis Rabba, that would have been generally familiar to educated Orthodox Jews and some non-Orthodox rabbis, but foreign to non-Orthodox laity and many of their rabbinic and scholarly leaders. In this setting, an inter-denominational conference, the likely effect was to establish Greenberg as a genuine voice of Orthodoxy, making a claim to authenticity—“the classic Jewish position,” as he put it—particularly in the eyes of the non-Orthodox rabbis who were present.

Greenberg began to articulate his policy recommendation by first claiming the political realm as terrain for clergy. The “search for the relevance of god’s [sic] word,” he said, “bespeaks a new vitality and earnestness in those who witness to God’s address to man.” Here Greenberg was speaking to his own Orthodox community, which not only supported Johnson’s policy, but seemed culturally averse to its rabbis engaging in political activity. Just the previous week, Greenberg had debated Abraham Hecht, president of the Rabbinic Alliance, at a meeting of the men’s club of Shaaray Tefilla synagogue in Far Rockaway, New York, on the question, “Should Orthodox leaders speak out on controversial issues?” moderated by the synagogue’s Rabbi Emanuel Rackman.
Greenberg argued yes, and that “we need trained people to do it.” Hecht disagreed, saying “there are laws that govern all and eventually they will have to be obeyed so there is no need for discussions.”

Nevertheless, in arguing for clergy to speak out at the SCA conference, Greenberg cautioned they “should eschew sweeping moralisms.” Clergy should make “informed judgments” about political issues, not offer impulsive reactions. “Because the liberal protest on civil rights was correct, it does not automatically follow that it is right—or has the whole truth—in Vietnam,” he said. It could be that Ho Chi Minh’s brand of Communism was just cause for American military intervention. “In some of its aggressive forms, Communism is not just another political or social order, but a basic denial of human dignity which seeks to cut men off from the ground of their spiritual source,” he said. “The crucial judgment,” which Greenberg argued was modeled by Jewish law, “is whether the National Liberation Front or Ho Chi Minh is such a form.” If North Vietnam were found, upon close inspection, to be this kind of dignity-denying political entity, then according to Greenberg, the war would be justified. If it were found to be something less, then the war would be unjustified, and clergy should lead the opposition. But here, in February 1966, Greenberg expressed genuine doubt about the answer, and intoned that “religious groups should bend all their efforts to a full airing of these issues. Clergy concerned about Vietnam should be less coy in demanding this review and, at the same time, should be less fellow traveling with secular liberals, and should present at their meetings, in all their force, both opposing political viewpoints.”

It is important to note here that Greenberg’s tone toward clergy who were reliably politically liberal, echoes Lichtenstein’s tone toward Greenberg in their subsequent debate. Just as Lichtenstein

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63 Clipping (source not clear), Papers of Rabbi Irving Greenberg, Harvard University Library, 56:23. Hecht had a long career as rabbi of Congregation Shaare Zion in Midwood, Brooklyn, a very large Sephardic synagogue. He was an intimate of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, and known for his strict approach to Jewish law and resistance to liberalization. In 1995 he was suspended by his synagogue for six months following the murder of Yitzhak Rabin, whom he had publicly labeled as being eligible for assassination according to Jewish law for “betraying Jews to non-Jews.” “Rabbi Abraham B. Hecht, Sephardic and Chabad Leader, Dies at 90,” The Jewish Week, January 6, 2013.
would accuse Greenberg of being too broad in his condemnation of halakhic authorities, Greenberg here accused liberal clergy of being too broad in their condemnation of political authorities. For both Greenberg here, and Lichtenstein later, “Be careful with your words,” is a sentiment deployed in favor of maintaining the status-quo. At the same time, Greenberg also demanded a dialectical approach to debating the issues, particularly in calling for airing opposing viewpoints “in all their force.” Here Greenberg reflects Soloveitchik’s own embrace of dialectic. And thus Greenberg also challenged those to his right. “Even if the war is found to be justified,” he said, “we must be open to the elements of evil in such a necessary judgment and seek to minimize them.” Greenberg reminded his audience that, in the real world, they could not demand moral purity. At the same time, all could agree that minimizing civilian casualties was the right course. Here he offered not only concern for the poor—“After all, the agony of Vietnamese peasantry calls to us”—but an understated evocation of what would become one of his signature phrases about the Holocaust: “Who more than Jews should be shattered by the sight of burnt children?”

In this picture of Greenberg in 1966, we see a rabbi-professor not yet 33 years old, working simultaneously to be careful and forceful, thoughtful and critical, a representative of Orthodoxy

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64 Greenberg’s best-known formulation of this line came in his 1977 essay, “Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire,” where he wrote: “No statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of the burning children” of the Holocaust. Irving Greenberg, "Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity and Modernity after the Holocaust," in *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era?*, ed. Eva Fleischer, ch. (Hoboken: KTAV, 1977), 7-55, 441-46, 23. Greenberg frequently invoked the image of suffering and dying children, both because of the moral weight such images carried, and also because he was deeply moved by them. In a personal essay reflecting on his life at age 70, Greenberg recounted an episode from his year as a Fulbright scholar in Israel in 1961-62, when he was caring for his infant son Moshe. After leaving the baby to cry for 30 minutes so that he could read, Greenberg finally went to him to find that his skin had become irritated from a soiled diaper. “Suddenly a memory clicked,” he wrote, “a scene I had read countless times but had failed to grasp: families packed in cattle cars, without water or food, unable to move—let alone change a diaper—put on railway journeys for days and days that delivered them to death camps. Had I before now grasped that extra dimension of discomfort, the pain and then the agony of babies whose skin had become raw from not being change? Had I properly weighed their cries? Or the feelings of their mothers and fathers unable to respond? Even as I reached for the Desitin ointment, the anger switch flicked off. I felt a sudden flood of pity for the child on the table. In this generation, in memory of all the others, he deserved instant loving care, gentle cleansing, and tender dressing. Feeling ashamed of my obsession with reading, I lifted Moshe up to hold him close.” "On the Road to a New Encounter between Judaism and Christianity: A Personal Journey,” in *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth*, ch. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 24-25.
critiquing both his own community and communities beyond. We see him adopting—not yet challenging—the *halakhic* formalism of Soloveitchik and applying it to a pressing political challenge. *Halakha* was a model, Greenberg argued, because it “refused to abandon the secular by setting forth absolute claims or policy statements which are so above the operating standards of the world that responsible and irresponsible statesmen alike can ignore them as out of the realm of plausibility.” By doing so, “Halacha was able to change society—not denounce it.” Greenberg did not see himself as a revolutionary. He believed in the possibility of positive change without a major political or social rupture.

The Antiwar Movement Reaches YU (1969)

Over the next three years, however, the situation changed. The United States continued its troop buildup, and by 1967 a half-million American troops were in Vietnam. As the war escalated, the antiwar movement gained strength, drawing much of its energy from university faculty, and their students who were subject to the military draft. At YU, students and professors began to deal with the question, Will YU be like other universities, and if so, how? As noted above, the Orthodox community generally supported Johnson, and later Nixon. At YU, the lack of major protests were undoubtedly related to the requirement that YU students be dually-enrolled in seminary courses, which meant that every male undergraduate at YU qualified for a draft exemption. When over 6,000 faculty who signed a multi-page ad in the New York Times in March 1967 under the banner of the Inter-University Committee for Debate on Foreign Policy calling for an immediate cease-fire

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66 “It was an open secret at the school that, during this most unpopular of American wars, a number of YC [Yeshiva College] students enrolled uptown primarily to receive the rarely questioned religious ministry deferment from military service. Their actions were not so very different from those of Jews and Gentiles at most colleges, who had to find more ingenious means of outwitting the Selective Service System.” Gurock, *The Men and Women of Yeshiva: Higher Education, Orthodoxy, and American Judaism*, 214.
and withdrawal, 30 YU professors signed.\textsuperscript{67} But none taught in the rabbinical school and only a handful taught in Yeshiva College. Greenberg was not among the signatories.\textsuperscript{68}

The Tet Offensive of early 1968 shocked many Americans who had previously been assured that the North Vietnamese were incapable of winning the war. By 1969, the student protest movement made substantive inroads at YU, as antiwar students, with Greenberg’s active encouragement, succeeded in getting the university to participate in a nationwide teaching 

\textsuperscript{67} "Educators Appeal to the American People... Help Stop the War in Vietnam," \textit{The New York Times}, March 12, 1967.

\textsuperscript{68} Greenberg acknowledged the fluidity of his views during this period. At the 1966 SCA conference, he was not yet convinced that the U.S. should disengage. But within 18 months he would say, “The tragedy in Vietnam, in my judgment, is the failure of the Administration to recognize that the fallible judgments on which it based its original decision to intervene—fear of Chinese Communist expansion, belief that the South Vietnamese government was viable and had some popular support—have proven to be mistaken by the further course of history. Were the American people and the government tuned in to the notion of ‘walking the narrow ridge’ and the need to review policy facts and make new moral judgments constantly, perhaps it would be easier to de-escalate and ultimately eliminate this tragic involvement.” Greenberg, “Jewish Tradition and Contemporary Problems”, 13.
moratorium on October 15. While only secular studies courses, held in the afternoon, were cancelled, even during morning religious courses “the atmosphere of Moratorium Day was evident.” Enacting Soloveitchik’s vision of Torah u-Maddah, many of the rabbis used their classes that morning to discuss “the halachic overtones of American involvement in the war.” A generational divide appeared, as “a great majority” of students seemed to want disengagement, while among the faculty—at least those who spoke in the morning—there were more supporters of continued American involvement, particularly on the basis of commitment to Israel: Like South Vietnam, Israel was an American ally, and if the Vietnamese could be abandoned by the United States, then Israel could be as well. Greenberg was evidently unpersuaded by such arguments, as he was the concluding speaker at a better-attended rally in the afternoon—that is, during hours when secular studies courses normally occurred—organized by the Yeshiva College Student Council, at which faculty were clearly against the war. Greenberg called on “American Jews to actively voice opinion against any further needless sacrifice of lives.”

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69 “Student activists were influenced in no small measure by the persuasive Greenberg.” Gurock, *The Men and Women of Yeshiva: Higher Education, Orthodoxy, and American Judaism*, 226.

70 Joe Belitsky and Mark Spanglet, "Vietnam War Involvement Blasted During Y.C. Moratorium Proceedings," *The Commentator*, October 30, 1969. The article noted that the consensus among the rabbis was that “if one is drafted, he has an obligation to fight.”

71 Here one hears resonances of Lichtenstein’s remark to Greenberg in 1966: “Our primary goal must be the more selfish—yes, selfish—one of surviving as a viable tradition; and I simply cannot buy your thesis that this can be better done by much greater involvement in American political life.” Aharon Lichtenstein, "Rav Lichtenstein Writes Letter to Dr. Greenberg," ibid., June 2, 1966. The *Commentator* also noted that the morning session concluded with a speech by Rabbi Steven Riskin, whose position reflected similar sentiments to Greenberg’s, at least his positions from 1966: “He referred to the ‘spirit of G-d’ present in every human being and its implications on the loss of human life. Rabbi Riskin cited scripture to show that peace must be diligently sought before one reverts to war. The primary concern must be with the value and preservation of human life. He pointed out that although self-defense is a legitimate goal in any war, it has not been satisfactorily established that our nation’s defense is now at stake. It is also a disputable point whether or not one nation should fight for the defense of another.” Joe Belitsky and Mark Spanglet, "Vietnam War Involvement Blasted During Y.C. Moratorium Proceedings," ibid., October 30, 1969.

72 The *Commentator* reported that Lichtenstein was the speaker at an evening session attended by 300 students. “In Rabbi Lichtenstein’s opinion, the Moratorium was to be a time of national teshuva (repentance) in which Americans could call upon their government to reevaluate its position in line with moral dictates. While not advocating immediate withdrawal from Vietnam, he insisted that United States efforts must be directed toward peace rather than toward intensification of the war.”
It is difficult to pinpoint what led Greenberg to change his position from 1966 to 1969, though it would seem he was like many others at the time whose thinking evolved as the war escalated.\(^73\) As we will explore in the next chapter, Greenberg was an increasingly active participant in interfaith and interdenominational dialogues during these years, and these encounters led to developments in his theology and thinking about *halakha*. It is certainly plausible that his more frequent contacts with non-Orthodox and non-Jewish—and generally liberal—interlocutors had an influence on him. It could also be that Greenberg’s Vietnam activism coincided with his increasing activism on behalf of other causes beyond the parochial concerns of the Jewish, and particularly the Orthodox, community. Greenberg was an activist in the early 1960s—not in the Civil Rights movement, but in the nascent movement to assist the emigration of dissident Soviet Jews. As early as 1961, during his Jerusalem sabbatical, Greenberg became involved with Yaakov Birnbaum, an English activist who, with Greenberg’s aid, moved to Washington Heights in 1963 to establish an activist base in and around YU. Over the next decade, Greenberg would be a prominent public activist rabbi on behalf of the Soviet Jewry movement, joining in rallies, demonstrations, and protests. Thus we can surmise that Greenberg’s evolution from cautious critic to outspoken protestor from the mid- to late-1960s tracked with the evolution of his identity beyond the Orthodox community.\(^74\)

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\(^73\) Gurock cites Greenberg’s comments about Vietnam in the 1966 *Commentator* interview (chapter 2) to support his claim that Greenberg was “among the first Yeshiva professors to speak out publicly against the Johnson-Nixon policies” (226). But as I have noted above, in 1966 Greenberg was not yet a vocal critic, but called for close study, and then, if justified, political action. And in the *Commentator* interview, Greenberg dwelled only on the need for study in order to justify the war, and to insist, if justified, on minimizing civilian casualties. He did not articulate an anti-war position. Thus Gurock misreads Greenberg in 1966. Nevertheless, by 1969, Greenberg had clearly come to a full-throated anti-war position. I have not succeeded in finding documentation of how his shift in view occurred, but it strikes me as most likely that Greenberg followed American public opinion: As the war wore on, as more young Americans were drafted, and particularly, as noted here, as the extent of American military activity became more widely understood, he, like many Americans, came to a new anti-war position.

\(^74\) For an account of Greenberg’s involvement in the Soviet Jewry movement in the 1960s and 70s, see Beckerman, *When They Come for Us, We’ll Be Gone.*
Whatever the motivations, Greenberg embraced the role of antiwar activist rabbi-professor. In November 1969, a month after the Moratorium Day rally, Greenberg accompanied a group of 35 YU students as they traveled to Washington, DC for a major antiwar rally that drew a quarter-million marchers to the national mall. There they joined Jewish students from other universities, representing a wide array of Jewish backgrounds, who organized at the Jewish Movement Center, staffed by the National Jewish Organizing Project, a confederation of Jewish activist groups. As Joseph Telushkin, a YU undergraduate and participant in the group, wrote, for the YU students, their encounter with the general protest movement, and with the other Jewish protesters, was formative. Since the rally was scheduled for Saturday, the students had to make accommodations for Shabbat, including finding kosher food and a Torah scroll for services. When they marched to the White House on Saturday morning, they carried no placards and accepted no pamphlets, as there was no eruv in Washington at the time that would enable carrying on Shabbat according to halakha. They had to explain why. As they did, and as they sang Hebrew songs of peace, they drew admiring comments from the others in attendance. “It’s great to have you here,” one girl said, “to know you people care too.”

And the effect not only touched the Orthodox protesters; it also reached the non-Orthodox Jews marching that weekend. As one of them wrote, the event “showed them that there is a very real alternative to the kind of Judaism they had known from their parents.” In place of what they viewed as their parents’ bland, suburbanized Judaism that emphasized the empty performance of ritual, the Orthodox students showed them that a ritually-thick, embodied Jewish practice could be a force that expressed their deepest moral and political commitments.

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For Greenberg, this was an enactment of the kind of halakhic engagement in American life he had espoused in the *Commentator* interview and in his writing and teaching throughout the decade. Here were Orthodox Jews living out a public commitment to halakha, and showing both non-Orthodox Jews and Americans at large that halakha could be a moral force on the street, a model for American political and ethical life. The religious was not confined to the private sphere, but brought its voice into the public square. Greenberg and the student protesters thus embodied, in a very literal sense, the overlapping domains of secular and religious, public and private.

Reflecting on the events in his *Commentator* column, Telushkin remarked on Greenberg’s influence. Describing it as “the most beautiful Shabbat I can remember,” Telushkin observed that “I, at least temporarily, synthesized the values most significant to me.” Telushkin found that the participation of YU students alongside their non-Orthodox Jewish counterparts to be tremendously significant.

As Irving Greenberg (who spent the weekend with us, and gave it ruchniyut, a pervasive spirituality it would otherwise have lacked) suggested, these people are telling us something. Right now Orthodoxy is not an option to them, for they view Orthodox Jews as being generally morally insensitive people, caught up in private concerns that are irrelevant to the students’ world. Their deepest concerns, they feel, are ignored by us. But when Orthodox Jews tangibly show them that they share their moral concerns, that suffering touches them equally, then they’ll regard Orthodoxy as a possible approach to life, something that can at least be considered without involving one in moral compromise. And then, if we can show a superior family life, a finer communal life, a greater ability to satisfy the existential problems of modern man (that is, that laws between man and God have practical ramifications) they might be willing to adopt it as a way of life.
The general attitude among Orthodox Jews, Telushkin observed, was to reject non-Orthodox Jews. Yet Telushkin found after the march experience that this attitude was wrong. The protesters he had encountered were “often more advanced than we are in their concepts of tzelem elokim.” The non-Orthodox protesters were “performing religious acts in a non-religious context, to a large extent because they feel that the religious context excludes the possibility of moral concern.” The YU students, and Orthodoxy in general, thus had an opportunity to show non-Orthodox Jews that halakha could, in fact, respond to the things that mattered to them.\footnote{Telushkin, “Kosher Dialogue".}

In the next chapter, we will explore how Greenberg’s involvement in formal and informal dialogues with non-Orthodox Jews and Christian clergy helped shape key elements of his teaching. It is important to note here, however, how the self-image of the YU students participating in the anti-war rally was inflected by their encounter with people beyond their own community—something Greenberg likely highlighted in his Shabbat talks with the students. In the context of relationship, the YU students were forced to explain themselves, to generate a narrative, in a way they had not previously done. They had to articulate why they observed the halakha that prohibited carrying objects in the public domain on Shabbat, or the halakha that required them to eat only kosher food. And in the same breath, they had to explain why, as Jews who experienced their lives as bound by halakha, they were in Washington, protesting the war. In the act of encounter, the students articulated and experienced a discourse of halakha that was not only legally restrictive, but morally expansive—precisely the kind of halakha Greenberg had articulated in his original Commentator interview.

Yet like Telushkin, Greenberg was on the outspoken fringe of the YU community at this point—an energetic voice of conscience, but one that ultimately made little impact within the YU
community itself, a result of a number of factors. The comparison of Israel to South Vietnam was a compelling one for many in the YU community. The official Haredi leadership continued to support Nixon, and the culture at YU increasingly seemed inclined to follow the lead of the ultra-Orthodox rabbinate on matters of social policy. But where Greenberg’s views failed to capture the imagination of many in the Orthodox community, they would ultimately take root beyond the community of Orthodox Jews, as the non-Orthodox students of the late 1960s became the adult leaders of synagogues, Jewish federations, and Jewish philanthropies in the 1970s and 80s. The encounter between the YU students and the non-Orthodox students at the 1969 rally would provide a template for Greenberg in the years to come: representing his activist brand of Orthodoxy to non-Orthodox Jews who were thirsty for an approach to Jewish life that allowed them to live in a thick relationship with Jewish tradition and participate whole-heartedly in public life.

Speaking *Halakha* to Power: Greenberg’s testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (1970)

Six months after the antiwar rally, Greenberg was back in Washington, this time to testify to the Senate Foreign Relations committee, at a hearing on May 7, 1970, entitled “Moral and Military Aspects of the War in Southeast Asia.” By this time, Sen. J. William Fulbright, the committee chair, was the leading critic of American war policy. In 1966, and again beginning in 1969, Fulbright’s

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78 This “rightward drift” has been the subject of much discussion in recent years, and it is not my intention to offer a full analysis of the phenomenon here, as much as to tell one story within the larger narrative of the changes in the modern Orthodox community in the late 1960s and early 70s. Chapter 4 also reflects on this shift. See also Samuel C. Heilman, *Sliding to the Right: The Contest for the Future of American Jewish Orthodoxy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006) as well as Gurock, *The Men and Women of Yeshiva: Higher Education, Orthodoxy, and American Judaism* ch. 11, and *Orthodox Jews in America*.

79 See chapter 1.

committee held regular hearings at which opponents of the war, ranging from businessmen to returning soldiers, voiced their critique of the continuing military campaign. At the May 7 hearing, Fulbright’s committee invited three clergymen to speak: one Protestant, one Catholic, one Jew. The Christian representatives had distinguished resumes: John C. Bennett, the Protestant, had been president of Union Theological Seminary in New York since 1964, and was a leading figure in the antiwar movement; Bishop John J. Dougherty, the vice chair for international affairs of the U.S. Catholic Conference, had recently stepped down as president of Seton Hall University. By contrast, the Jews were represented not by a gray-haired institutional leader, but by 36-year old Irving Greenberg.

That Greenberg was the Jewish representative at the hearing was both surprising and unsurprising. One might have expected a figure like Abraham Joshua Heschel, the white-maned philosopher-theologian of the Jewish Theological Seminary, to speak, as he was a leading voice in the antiwar movement, on par with Bennett and Martin Luther King. Heschel was recuperating from a heart attack during the early months of 1970, and was likely unavailable to testify. Whatever the reason, it was Greenberg who spoke before the Fulbright committee. By 1970, Greenberg had already begun working beyond the Orthodox community, traveling the country to speak at synagogues, Jewish education conferences, and interfaith gatherings, and receiving regular press coverage in both Jewish and general circulation papers. He was developing a reputation among both his liberal Orthodox constituency and, increasingly, among non-Orthodox Jews as “a brilliant young professor,” “who has been making a name for himself with proposals for a fresh new look” at

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81 Bennett and Heschel were both among the founders of Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam (CALCAV) in 1965 and were regular signatories on public statements against the war.

82 Susannah Heschel, E-Mail Correspondence with Joshua Feigelson, April 10 to.

Jewish life.” For him to be cast alongside Christian clergy-scholars at a Senate hearing was thus not wholly unexpected, but nevertheless unusual.

By the time of Greenberg’s appearance before the committee, Johnson had been forced not to seek re-election under pressure from antiwar supporters of Eugene McCarthy and Robert F. Kennedy, and Richard Nixon had been elected President. The 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago, as well as numerous protests, laid bare the deep divisions in the country. The student protest movement had succeeded in changing public opinion, and the country was now closely divided between supporters and opponents of continued military action. In the days immediately preceding the May 7 hearing, Nixon announced a new strategy of bombing Cambodia, which had provided safe haven for Viet Cong forces. And on May 4, National Guard troops shot and killed student demonstrators at Kent State University.

Greenberg’s statement, and the subsequent question-and-answer session with members of the committee, articulated many of the key themes of Greenberg’s teaching, which we will see in the remainder of this chapter. First among these themes was the idea of human beings created in God's image to support a notion of inherent human dignity—particularly on behalf of Vietnamese civilians—and the related power of media to shape the way people honored or diminished the image of God in the world. Additionally, Greenberg offered a significant early articulation of what he would later come to call “holy secularity,” inverting accepted understandings of the categories of holy and secular by telling government officials that they had a duty to see themselves as moral exemplars. And he rooted this argument in an ethic of power and agency developed out of his understanding of halakha, along the lines we have explored until now: that halakha provided a blueprint for how citizens in a liberal democracy could and should understand political power. We

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84 "Orthodox Refusing to Leave Ghetto, Says Yeshiva Prof.,” National Jewish Post and Opinion, June 10, 1966.
will explore each of these dimensions in turn, and then step back to analyze the broader ways in which this moment reflected some important inversions in received understandings of religion and secularism in both American Jewish Orthodoxy and American public life.

The last of the three clergy to speak, Greenberg began his remarks by reflecting on the role of mass media in creating the cultural climate. The amplification and reverberation of the images of the war through broadcast media were creating a “moral disaster,” Greenberg said. The Vietnamese became dehumanized in the eyes of Americans, Vietnamese soldiers and civilians were not seen as images of God, and therefore God’s presence in the world was diminished. Massive aerial bombardments, the use of napalm, and the continued futility of the war effort—all of these combined to desensitize American soldiers and civilians alike to “the human qualities of the enemy,” and the innocent civilians being killed in such great numbers. “Every image of prisoners pushed out of a helicopter, or children napalmed, becomes a hideous moral example,” he said.  

In a society dominated by images broadcast on television, projected on film, and printed in newspapers, political leaders were powerful agents in generating a national moral sensibility. “Public life is the primary moral example in the United States today,” he said. The messages conveyed through media “are perceived by everyone and learned environmentally, which means they are more

85 Greenberg’s focus on the image of “children napalmed” built on his remark about “burnt children” at the 1966 SCA conference, and drew a rhetorical line between Auschwitz and Vietnam. Children played a particularly powerful rhetorical role in Greenberg’s speeches and writings on the Holocaust. Perhaps most famously, in his 1974 speech at the first interfaith conference on the Holocaust, held at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York, Greenberg uttered the powerful line: “No statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of burning children.” See Greenberg, "Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity and Modernity after the Holocaust" See also the reflection by Israel Shenker in the New York Times the week following the conference, in which Shenker observed that Greenberg’s speech was “so moving that many wept,” and in which he quotes Greenberg: “After Auschwitz, we have to speak of ‘moment faiths,’ moments when redeemer and redemption are present, interspersed with times when the flames and smoke of the burning children blot out faith—though it flickers again.” Israel Shenker, "In Search of God at Auschwitz," The New York Times, June 9, 1974. Greenberg had not yet deeply incorporated the Holocaust into his public writings and teaching at the time of his 1970 testimony, and would only begin to do so following a sabbatical year in Israel in 1972-73.
likely picked up, internalized, and influence the actions and standards of everyone.” In light of the enormous power of media, it was not only clergy, but even more so government officials, who would shape American cultural values. “All the sermons and classes in America reach a fraction of the people reached by one action of the U.S. Army or one speech of the President,” he said. Greenberg would press this point throughout his testimony, complicating the neat separation between political leaders and voices of conscience. Political leaders were moral pedagogues, and by the same token moral and religious leaders were also political figures. While their respective primary areas of expertise would remain distinct, Greenberg suggested a significant blurring of boundaries: clergy (including, he argued to his own community, Orthodox rabbis) had a duty to act politically, and political figures had a duty to act morally.86

Building on this, Greenberg told the Senators that the country’s leaders, like all human beings, needed to recognize their wrongs and admit their errors. By way of explaining his own evolution, Greenberg argued that in the early to mid 1960s, there were good reasons to believe that intervention in Vietnam was not only strategically correct, but morally right. “There was a phase,” he said, “in which we saw communist China, then in its commune period which seemed to deny the elemental dignity of man,” and North Vietnam as its satellite. Evoking his own ambivalence about

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86 Greenberg had already begun to articulate his view about the political responsibilities of clergy, of course. In the 1966 Commentator interview, Greenberg acknowledged limitations, but in the same breath even arrogated to religious figures responsibility for specific operational details of military actions: “There is great resistance among all clergymen to getting involved in operational details of a war situation, yet it may be here that the greatest saving of human lives can be achieved. For a simple order to win a war frequently leads to unlimited excess. Once informed, we must descend to the political marketplace and demand those specific policies of our government which best preserves the dignity and life of the Vietnamese.” Goldberg, “Dr. Greenberg Discusses Orthodoxy, Y.U., Viet Nam & Sex”. In the late 1980s, Greenberg published an essay on a Jewish approach to the exercise of power, particularly against the backdrop of the first Palestinian Intifada and accusations that Israel was using excessive force, in which he continued to massage the boundaries of political and religious leadership: “Since real policy rarely meets the absolute standard of the ideal, those who exercise power are in constant tension with the prophets who denounce their moral failures. The contrast is not always in favor of the prophets. If those in power are responsible people, they must renounce prophetic stances. Prophets can rely on spiritual power and make absolute demands for righteousness. Governments have obligations to protect people. On the other hand, when governments ignore prophets, they usually end up abusing the people they are supposed to protect.” Greenberg, "The Ethics of Jewish Power".
the war four years earlier, he observed, “In this phase the fear of another Munich and the conviction
that we dare not sell out or be indifferent lest World War II repeat itself colored the judgment of
many.” But when those assumptions were revealed to be false, Americans should have heeded the
example of the Biblical King David, who “could recognize and confess his errors and in most
powerful contrition turn from his ways and redress injustice.” The Johnson and Nixon
administrations had done precisely the opposite, continually escalating the conflict on the
assumption that one more battle, one more bombardment, would bring capitulation. The inability to
admit error out of a misguided sense of pride was the ultimate failure of moral leadership and a
perversion of the ethics of power that underlay both Judaism and Christianity. Connecting the
theme of leadership with the concept of the image of God, Greenberg said the “inability to accept
the tragic, the ironic, the possibility of mistake and failure, is to be less than fully human. Perhaps
this is our national problem.”

It should be emphasized that none of these critiques was original. Liberal clergy had been
voicing them for years. But the significance of Greenberg’s testimony lies not so much in the
originality of his comments, as in the fact that he was offering them from a Jewish perspective, one
which he understood and presented as rooted in a traditional, rather than radically new,
understanding of Judaism, and particularly an halakhic understanding rather than Heschel’s prophetic

87 Further on in the hearing, Senator Jacob Javits likewise opened his remarks by thanking Greenberg for this
observation: “Rabbi, I am very impressed by the fact that you reminded us all in the early days of this intervention,
before we really plumbed the depths of what it was all about, it might have been justified even morally on the ground
that we were trying to save a small people from the elimination of their nation.” It also bears mentioning that Martin
Luther King made a very similar reflection on his turn against the war in his April 1967 ‘Beyond Vietnam’ speech at
Riverside Church.

88 Martin Luther King Jr., for instance, had voiced similar concerns about the corrosive power of images, and particularly
the urgency generated by images of children burned by napalm, as early as February 1967. Greenberg echoed not only
this theme, but also King’s concerns that the war constituted a misuse of funds that would better be directed at
problems within the United States, and that the war was being perpetuated out of the arrogance of American leadership.
See Martin Luther King, “The Casualties of the War in Vietnam,” in Digital Archive (Los Angeles: The King Center,
1967)
one. As in the antiwar rally and march the previous November, Greenberg’s Senate testimony provided an occasion for him to show, to himself, to YU, and to the world, that the Jewish legal tradition could be applied to the most pressing political problems in the present, that halakha was up to the task of modernity. Where Orthodox rabbis had testified before government officials in the past, these testimonies were about and for the sake of intra-communal issues, particularly the effects of government regulation on the kosher food industry. With his testimony to the Foreign Relations Committee, Greenberg was fulfilling the aim he had publicly set in his 1966 Commentator interview: applying halakha to current American problems for the sake of America, not only for the sake of the Jewish community.

And yet, as much as he conceived of himself as simply applying the halakhic tradition to the present, there was nothing simple about that. In translating traditional Jewish legal ideas into moral and political positions in present-day America, Greenberg was inherently engaging in a radically new activity, enacting a discourse of halakha that took note of modern conceptions of subjectivity and agency, the political architecture of democracy, the phenomenon of mass media, and the destructive potential of modern military technology. It is important to elaborate for a moment on these dimensions before proceeding to Greenberg’s testimony itself. As Greenberg had begun to teach and write in the years leading up to his Senate appearance, if each individual is created in God’s image, then s/he is infinitely valuable, unique, and equal to every other human being. If God is understood to be free, creative, and powerful, then the image of God is likewise meant to be free, creative, and powerful. The image of God thus aligned well with modern Western conceptions of

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89 For instance, Soloveitchik testified at least twice (1961 and 1964) to the Agriculture Department’s advisory committee about the humaneness of methods of ritual slaughter. See Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Community, Covenant, and Commitment: Selected Letters and Communications, ed. Nathaniel Helfgot (Toras HoRav Foundation, 2005). But I have not been able to find another example of an Orthodox rabbi testifying to Congress before Greenberg in 1970.
individual autonomy, agency, and freedom. And as Greenberg observed frequently in the late 1960s, including during his Senate testimony, in the context of modern mass communication, the image of God can be represented and shaped, enhanced or diminished, through portrayals in art, television, and film. And in a nuclear age, a single individual could potentially destroy every image of God—but could also develop technologies to enhance life and alleviate suffering. All of these dimensions informed the idea of halakha as an ethic of power that Greenberg brought to the Foreign Relations Committee.

It is important to spell out as clearly as I can what I mean when I say that Greenberg saw halakha as an ethic of power, because Greenberg himself is not entirely clear on the matter (a problematic aspect of Greenberg’s thinking that Aharon Lichtenstein had picked up on in 1966). Greenberg used the term in two ways: “the Halacha” described accepted, conventional Jewish law; but, halakha, when not denoted as a proper noun, was also a process whereby the idealistic vision of the Biblical prophets—and the contemporary voices that echoed the prophetic call—could be made real in the world. It was primarily in this latter usage that Greenberg understood it as an ethic of power, applicable both to individual ethics about matters like interpersonal relations and business affairs, and to collective questions like the status of women in Jewish law or government social welfare policy. And in this sense, significantly, it was a human system, subject to the dynamics of all human power systems: on one end, the potential to do good, or as Greenberg would put it, to

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90 The 1966 Commentator interview was one of the earliest moments when Greenberg mentioned the Image of God in public writing. As elaborated further in the next chapter, Greenberg’s 1967 address at the Religious Education Association opened with the assertion that “the universalization of culture” was an “expansion of human consciousness” that results in “an encounter and the recognition of the ‘image of God’ found in all men.” Irving Greenberg, “The Cultural Revolution and Religious Unity,” Religious Education 62, no. 2 (1967), 98. Likewise, Greenberg’s talk at YU’s Wurzweiler School of Social Work in the same year also began by evoking the Image of God concept, but there he also cited what would become one of his most frequently-taught expositions, using the Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5 to argue that the status of Image of God renders all human beings unique and infinitely valuable. In later years he would add “equal” to this list.

91 Again, see ibid.
increase the recognition of the image of God in the world through serving humanity and enhancing the equality and uniqueness of each image of God; and on the other, to become an instrument for reifying existing power structures, and thereby diminishing the capacities of the image of God through systems of inequality, tyranny, and death.

To navigate between these poles was the fundamental challenge of humanity, the challenge to which halakha responded, particularly through an unceasing dialectic between ideal and real. Greenberg explained this, among other places, in a 1967 lecture at YU’s Wurzweiler School of Social Work:

The basic thesis of the Halachah is very simple: norms, whatever their intrinsic worth, cannot be realized in real life in one step, if they can be realized at all. Then the crucial question of the moral state of society becomes: how to move, step by step, toward the overcoming of an evil without thereby collaborating with the system, that is, in the process selling out to the system. The classic tension of being either in the underground or the establishment—with nothing in between—has been the besetting problem of reformers and of revolutionaries throughout history. Judaism felt that the only resolution of this tension is to try a two level approach: the prophetic holding up of the generality and the constant renewal of exposure to that total demand—whether it be ‘freedom now’ or ‘social justice immediately’—must be combined with the Halachah [to achieve] the proximate and partial realization of the good possible at this moment. There is a crucial, ongoing role for the rabbi or the individual in deciding what is the next step to be taken. By taking only this step, one does become a de facto collaborator with the existing system. But without this ‘collaboration’ nothing would be achieved.92

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92 "Jewish Tradition and Contemporary Problems", 11.
Greenberg saw *halakha* as a way to negotiate between lofty ideals and pragmatic realities. In this, he echoed Soloveitchik. Yet where Soloveitchik understood real-world application to be a concession to reality by a perfect, ideal *halakha*, Greenberg saw *halakha*’s this-worldliness as a virtue, not a concession. To the Senators in May 1970, Greenberg put it this way: “What we need in our time is not the dismantling of power but greater and greater precision, calibration, and proper direction in its use.” Power itself was neither good nor bad—it was a feature of being created in God’s image.

**History, *Halakha*, and Politics: Reconsidering Religious and Secular**

The modern shift to see individual human beings as endowed with human rights to the powers of thought and expression has been conventionally understood to have emerged out of a challenge to the authority of religious institutions. As theorists of secularism have observed, in Western Europe as in America, that project was generally inflected by a blend of Protestant theology and free-market capitalism that aimed to circumscribe religion and limit it to the private sphere. As I suggested in the previous chapter, Orthodox Judaism self-defined this way: In all its forms, from Haredism to the Modern Orthodoxy of 1960s YU, Orthodox Jews maintained a notion of separate spheres between the public-secular and the private-religious. In the dominant formulation at YU at the time, the two did not need to be in serious conflict, but could be pleasantly harmonized, as *halakha* could be applied to modern medicine, and the values of traditional Jewish thought could be brought into dialogue with modern philosophy (see Samuel Belkin’s comments in chapter 2).

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Soloveitchik had begun to articulate a more totalizing possibility, in which halakha became the discursive lens through which “Halakhic Man” encountered the world in all its parts.\textsuperscript{94} Greenberg understood Soloveitchik to mean that halakha could inform all areas of life—even those which were generally presumed to be secular, and even the most challenging parts of those areas. He used this conceptual opening to press against the veneer of compatibility between religious and secular, Torah and Madda, espoused at YU, pushing Orthodoxy to consider how modern developments—particularly individual autonomy for all human beings—could, and in his view must, lead to a renegotiation of Jewish tradition.

Critically, Greenberg emphasized that that negotiation must in take place not only in areas that were private, or in private conversations, but in public issues and through public media. In so doing, he challenged not only the prevailing ethos at YU, but the basic assumption of the theory of secularism that religion was confined to the private realm, Beyond this, he also demonstrated that halakhic Judaism, a legal framework that governed embodied practice, had a place in the American public square. Anti-war marchers who wouldn’t carry placards because it was Shabbat, rabbis who wore kippot on their heads when they testified to Congress—these were tangible expressions of not only a new dimension of American Orthodox Jewish life, but an emerging open ness to embodied religious expression in public life. They also contributed to an atmosphere in which non-Orthodox Jews became more interested in recovering traditional practices, texts, and language, as the their own conceptions of what was appropriate in public, and what was valuable in private, shifted. (See Chapter 1)

Religious and secular, public and private, were undergoing Greenberg’s hoped-for re-consideration. The spheres were overlapping, and did not work in isolation from each other. Rather

\textsuperscript{94} Soloveitchik, Halakhic Man.
they each contributed to a larger discursive frame in which individual images of God made decisions—a frame that was amplified into a cultural imaginary through mass media. Morality was thus a common project of religious and political leadership, and each informed the other. This argument was most dramatically played out in the following exchange:

Senator [Claiborne] Pell [RI]: I do think we have to be more eloquent. Otherwise we will be yawned at or booed off the stage by the young people in their search. The churches, the moral leaders, have the responsibility here. You have the moral responsibility to make the people upon whom you depend for bread and butter take effect in the general community.

Dr. Bennett: But a lot of ministers lost their livelihoods.

Senator Pell: A lot of men are losing their lives.

Senator Case: It is not for Mr. Bennett, but for the young priest or rabbi out in the grounds it is.

Dr. Greenberg: But each act provokes other acts. When I read in the paper of the Senator who risks his future in reelection to cast a certain vote, next time I say it to affect my leadership or the board of trustees. I can say if the Senator can do it, how can I look myself in the mirror as a rabbi and not do it.

It is worth parsing this statement of Greenberg’s closely, because it contains within it all the elements of his testimony in general. In the scenario he draws, the fact that Greenberg reads of a senator acting with courage in the newspaper—that is, mass media—gives the act an added weight and reality that prompts Greenberg to want to act likewise. Just as the senator confronted those on whom he depends for his livelihood—his constituency—with a courageous act, the rabbi can now confront his source of subsistence—his community—with his own need to act courageously.
Greenberg defines that courage as the rabbi, or the senator, being able to recognize the image of God in himself as he looks in the mirror.

For Greenberg, these gaps—between what the rabbi or senator wants to do, and what he actually has the courage to do—were mirrored in the gaps between historical reality and human aspirations for history. “There is such a great gap between what ought to be and what actually is,” he observed. This fact implied lessons for leaders: “Therefore any moral leader, whether he is temporal or spiritual, must continually be in conflict with both sides of the argument because we cannot get them both together for awhile.” Importantly, the leader served to keep the conflict between the two sides of the dialectic from erupting into violence. Holding this nexus point, where the push and pull of forces of change and forces of stability met, formed the essence of not only policy-making, but halakha. If the religious was political, and the political was religious, then halakha itself was a dynamic, political process—not a strictly formal, idealized process as Soloveitchik construed it.

Greenberg’s 1966 Commentator interview thus takes on new significance, as he saw himself as not simply making formal legal arguments, but engaging in a political process of halakhic development. Lichtenstein’s objections about tone and language, and Greenberg’s argument that rhetoric needs to leave room ‘to be wide of the mark,’ reflect this gap in their understandings of what halakha was and how it worked.

95 In this view of leadership, Greenberg was drawing on the understanding of Theodore Roosevelt he had developed years earlier while writing his doctoral dissertation. There, Greenberg credited Roosevelt with serving as a mediating force between labor and capital, consistently eschewing violent forms of labor protest while working to advance the material well-being and freedom—that is, the image of God—of workers. See Irving Greenberg, Theodore Roosevelt and Labor: 1900-1918, ed. Frank Freidel and Ernest May, Harvard Dissertations in American History and Political Science (New York: Garland, 1988).

96 In fact, it was Greenberg’s wife, Blu, who put the notion most succinctly, in one of the most widely-circulated aphorisms in contemporary Jewish life: “Where there’s a rabbinic will, there’s a halakhic way.” See Blu Greenberg, On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1981), 44.

97 Greenberg articulated this understanding in numerous ways during the late 1960s. In a 1968 interview in the Jewish student activist magazine Response, he defined halakha in socio-political terms: “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
For Greenberg, this ethic of power—whether applied to matters within the Jewish community, or to broad political and social problems affecting society at large—was linked to his understanding of living in history. As Greenberg put it to Fulbright during their final exchange, “There are two choices in history. Either you let the historical forces dominate you as our Presidents, three of them, have allowed momentum forces to dominate them instead of exercising control. Or you have the choice of human will and leadership exercising a creative momentum of taking charge of destiny.” Greenberg feared that the failure of leaders “to take charge and pull out and admit our error raises the real possibility that the momentum of history will get us out the other way—through the breakdown of legitimacy of our institutions. I think that would be a disaster of global proportions, not only to Vietnam but to the world.”

Greenberg could apply this diagnosis to American political leadership, as well as to his own Orthodox community. Leaders, like all human beings, could be anchored down by the weight of the past, by their fear of appearing to break with it. In Vietnam, that resulted in further and further escalation by American military and political leadership: to de-escalate would mean that past policy had been mistaken, and would thus constitute a rupture with and rejection of past leadership. In Orthodoxy, it meant a greater and greater resistance to new legal formulations and practices, as moving in such directions would seem like breaking with tradition and the rabbis, parents, and

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98 In evoking the language of “taking charge of destiny,” Greenberg seemed to be nodding to what he viewed as Soloveitchik’s essay *Kol Dodi Dofek*, which he had approvingly cited in his 1966 *Commentator* interview (see Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Kol Dodi Dofek*, trans. David Z. Gordon (New York: Yeshiva University, 2006.)). One of the central arguments of that essay was Soloveitchik’s differentiation of two types of covenant: a covenant of fate, and a covenant of destiny. The former was passive, and marked a shared identity on the basis of birth or other external forces; the latter was active, and could only be entered into volitionally. Greenberg’s remarks here make a very similar point using similar terminology. This is noteworthy because, as we have seen, by this time Greenberg was already well on his way out of YU and the orbit of Soloveitchik. Nevertheless, in 1970 as throughout his career, Greenberg taught Soloveitchik’s philosophy in overwhelmingly sympathetic terms.
ancestors who conveyed it. But Greenberg argued that in both cases the unwillingness of leaders to exercise agency and responsibility in the present would result in institutions, whether the American government, the Orthodox rabbinic establishment, or, as he also observed in his testimony, the Catholic church, losing credibility in the eyes of their constituents. As he put it in his final remarks to the committee, halakha could learn from politics as much as it could teach:

   Society is made up of rationality, history, pride, moralism, all of these things coming together. What we need now is some leadership that can pull all these trends together and really formulate this point. If I had to formulate it, I would say: there is a worldwide challenge to authority and to force—but it is not a challenge to the principle of authority. It is asking that authority justify itself, that power justify itself by serving. Authority can no longer maintain itself by simply being there or by using its power because it has it. Once you understand the challenge is to serve, this explains how devout Catholics can ask their leadership to re-think its role, or how devout Jews can challenge their leadership to reinterpret their law to serve mankind.”

Greenberg saw religious institutions confronting the same problem as political institutions: how to exercise authority in a modern world in which individuals were themselves bearers of authority. The challenge required a fundamental reconsideration of previously-held assumptions about what it meant to be a person and a community. As we have shown in this chapter, those assumptions were not limited to questions of the scope of Jewish law and tradition, but partook of and implicated broader questions about the contours of religious and secular spheres in American life.
CHAPTER 4

Confrontation and Fellowship: Interdenominational and Interfaith Dialogue

Among the key issues Aharon Lichtenstein identified in his debate with Greenberg was the extent to which American Jews, and particularly American Orthodox Jews, should see themselves as at home in the United States. “I do not think that we should immerse ourselves in American society to the extent you seem to advocate,” he wrote in his open letter to Greenberg. “Our primary goal must be the more selfish—yes, selfish—one of surviving as a viable tradition; and I simply cannot buy your thesis that this can be better done by much greater involvement in American political life.” For Lichtenstein, America did not represent home—or, at least, not home in its truest sense. It was, rather, a temporary home, a way station on the road to an eventual return to Zion as part of redemption (a return that Lichtenstein himself would enact in the coming years by permanently moving to Israel). In Lichtenstein’s view, as for many other Orthodox leaders, the task at hand was how to maintain distinctiveness, particularly in the face of what seemed to be powerful forces aligned against that task. And for American Orthodox Jews, the project of maintaining distinctiveness was defined not only in terms of maintaining a general Jewish identity, but a specific set of practices and discourses—“tradition”—against secular culture at large, and other Jewish movements that more readily embraced America.

In the previous chapter, we saw one significant site of these competing conceptions of the American Orthodox Jewish project: the Vietnam War. In this chapter, we will examine another: the permissibility and wisdom of Orthodox rabbis participating in both the Jewish-Christian dialogue movement, which involved Catholic and Protestant religious leaders as well as Conservative and
Reform rabbis; and a nascent intra-Jewish movement that aimed to involve rabbis and scholars from the various denominations.

Greenberg was an active participant in both of these dialogue movements, again serving as both a liminal to some, and a marginal figure to others, the Orthodox rabbi-professor who defied the emerging consensus within the YU community in favor of what he would view as a more authentic, and what his detractors would view as an impure, version of Jewish tradition. His participation in both these dialogues represented a further step outside the Orthodox community. At the same time, these dialogues influenced the development of the major themes Greenberg invoked in his antiwar activism and his broader religious philosophy, including the concept of human beings created *b’zelem elohim*, in the image of God, and the power of mass media to reflect, reify, and develop how individuals and collectivities understood subjectivity.

An additional area that developed at this time was Greenberg’s notion of God’s action in history, and its implications for experiencing and relating to God in the present. As we saw in chapter 2, Greenberg’s dynamic understanding of the relationship between past and present situated him on the fringe, or even outside, an Orthodox intellectual community that was either overtly anti-historical, or highly philosophical—and generally ahistorical—in its understanding of the human-divine relationship. Beginning in the latter 1960s, Greenberg found greater reception for his views among non-Orthodox rabbis and scholars, especially those he met in the inter-denominational dialogues chronicled in this chapter, and particularly Reform philosopher Emil Fackenheim.

Through these encounters, Greenberg continued his move beyond Orthodoxy, and into areas that Orthodoxy would come to define as off-limits: dialogue with both non-Jews and non-Orthodox Jews about foundational questions of how humans related to the divine, and work with
individuals and communities who did not view themselves, and were not viewed by Orthodoxy, as genuinely religious—but who Greenberg argued were in fact deeply so.

Greenberg, Soloveitchik, and Interfaith Dialogue

In the more than 60 boxes of his files Yitz Greenberg donated to the Harvard University Library, there is a folder labeled ‘Correspondence with Joseph Soloveitchik.’ It contains a single letter, handwritten in red ink, dated 3 Tishrei 5726 (September 29, 1965). By evidence of the letter, Greenberg had written Soloveitchik in the weeks before Rosh Hashanah (1-2 Tishrei) to apologize for something. After a formal opening (“Please accept my greetings and felicitations on the occasion of the New Year”), Soloveitchik assured Greenberg, “there is absolutely no need of apologies or explanations.” He went on:

You are certainly entitled to your opinion as much as I am to mine. I have never demanded conformity or compliance even from my children. I believe in freedom of opinion and freedom of action. When you consulted me about your participation (?) all I said, which I addressed not to you but to myself, was in the form of a hesitant (?) advice. In fact, I spoke in the first person, namely if I were invited I would not accept. I did not instruct nor did I try to convince you. Since you have made up your mind in accordance with your own view, all I can say to you is aleh v’hatzleach, Go and may God be with you! ¹

Greenberg did not preserve a copy of his original letter to Soloveitchik, so we do not know precisely what “participation” he referred to. But Greenberg evidently had participated in something that Soloveitchik himself would not, and Greenberg felt the need to apologize. Given the circumstantial

evidence, it is logical to conclude that the conversation was about Greenberg’s participation in the Jewish-Christian dialogue movement.²

The previous year, Soloveitchik published one of his most important articles, “Confrontation,” in which he set the parameters by which he believed Orthodox Jews could participate in interfaith dialogue. In practical terms, Soloveitchik called for faith communities to work on issues of shared concern, but, crucially, to avoid discussion about matters of theology or doctrine. “The confrontation should occur not at a theological, but at a mundane human level,” he wrote. “There, all of us speak the universal language of modern man.”³ Soloveitchik rooted his position in a reflection on the second chapter of Genesis, noting that human beings live a dialectical existence of both abject loneliness on the one hand and participation in relationships and community on the other: “Our feelings of sympathy and love for our confronter are rooted in the surface personality and they do not reach into the inner recesses of our depth personality which never leaves its ontological seclusion and never becomes involved in a communal existence.”⁴ This situation, he suggested, applies to all human beings, and implies that, on a basic level, no two human beings can ever truly communicate. Language, Soloveitchik argued, can help us cooperate and give us moments of companionship, but in the final analysis, “The gap of uniqueness is too wide to be bridged. Indeed, it is not a gap, it is an abyss.”⁵

On top of this, Soloveitchik contended, Jews face “a double confrontation. We think of ourselves as human beings, sharing the destiny of Adam in his general encounter with nature, and as

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² Greenberg affirmed this speculation in email correspondence with me: “I honestly don't remember getting the letter from him. It was almost certainly about participating in interfaith dialogue.” Irving Greenberg, E-Mail Correspondence, July 8, 2013 to Joshua Feigelson.
⁴ Ibid. 16.
⁵ Ibid. 15.
members of a covenantal community which has preserved its identity under most unfavorable conditions, confronted by another faith community.”6 Abraham, Soloveitchik reminded his readers, had described himself as “a stranger and sojourner” among the children of Het—simultaneously of and apart from the surrounding society. For Soloveitchik, this meant that Jews had an obligation to engage with the general world, including and even particularly those from other faith communities as compared with opponents of religion. But such engagement must be undertaken in the spirit of Jacob’s encounter with Esau: “Our approach to and relationship with the outside world has always been of an ambivalent character, intrinsically antithetic, bordering at times on the paradoxical... We cooperate with the members of other faith communities in all fields of constructive human endeavor, but, simultaneously with our integration into the general social framework, we engage in a movement of recoil and retrace our steps.”7

Soloveitchik’s position informed a policy adopted by the Orthodox Rabbinical Council of America at its convention in February 1964, which called for interfaith cooperation on pragmatic grounds, but insisted that no dialogue take place amidst even “the mere hint that a revision of basic historic attitudes” would result.8 The RCA further spelled out its position in a 1966 statement authored by Soloveitchik, enumerating possible areas for cooperation “in the public world of humanitarian and cultural endeavors...on such topics as War and Peace, Poverty, Freedom, … Moral Values, …Secularism, Technology…, Civil Rights, etc.” But the statement reiterated the RCA’s objection to dialogue on matters of theology, doctrine, and law.9

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6 Ibid. 17.
7 Ibid. 26.
This position put the RCA between the Reform and Conservative movements to its left, which were both formally active in interfaith dialogue, and the Haredi community on its right, which eschewed any formal dialogue with other religious communities. It reflected a basic ambivalence of many of its members—starting with Soloveitchik himself—about the extent to which they shared a culture, a home, with non-Jews. Soloveitchik’s comments about language are very significant, and reflect an emerging cultural identity among the community centered around YU. In essence: ‘While it may look like we can genuinely understand and be understood by other people and communities, in fact human beings must endure a lonely existence.’ The gap between two individuals, much less two communities, is, in Soloveitchik’s words, “an abyss.” This analysis could be understood as both descriptive and prescriptive, and both tones come through in Soloveitchik’s writing. As a descriptor, such loneliness and fundamental inability to community is tragic, and humans strive to overcome it. Human beings yearn for community, a basic dimension of life Soloveitchik read as recognized by God in Genesis 2:18: “It is not good for man to be alone.” Yet Soloveitchik was also prescribing: his community should not attempt to overcome the existential loneliness, but should bear it, and even maintain it. To think that we can ever really know another on anything but a superficial level is a lie. On a communal level, this meant that faith communities should not delude themselves into thinking they could share a language about the most intimate aspects of their relationships with each other.

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10 The Haredi approach was most clearly articulated by Aron Kotler, the head of the Lakewood Yeshiva and Soloveitchik’s chief rival for the mantle of intellectual leadership in the larger Orthodox community. Beginning in the early 1950s, Kotler castigated Orthodox rabbis—including Soloveitchik—who participated in interdenominational activities with Reform and Conservative rabbis, whom he described as “enemies of Torah.” By working with them, Kotler said, Orthodox rabbis were giving them legitimacy, aiding and abetting the spread of “the venom of these philosophies.” Amos Bunim, A Fire in His Soul (New York: Feldheim Publishers, 1989), Quoted in Golden, "From Cooperation to Confrontation: The Rise and Fall of the Synagogue Council of America".
and the divine, but rather should limit themselves to working together on projects that did not require such intimacy.  

In laying out this position, Soloveitchik and the RCA were explicitly rejecting the calls of others, most notably the Catholic Church. In October 1965, between Soloveitchik’s essay and the second RCA statement, the Second Vatican Council issued *Nostra Aetate,* which revised centuries of church teaching about Jews. The statement included a paragraph against “all hatreds, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism directed against the Jews at any time or from any source,” which was widely understood to reflect an acknowledgement of the role of anti-Semitic church dogma in laying ground for the Holocaust. It also included a call for “further mutual understanding and appreciation. This can be achieved, especially, by way of biblical and theological enquiry and through friendly discussions.” It was particularly the call for “theological enquiry” that Soloveitchik responded to, even as the statement was being drafted. For Soloveitchik, the private language of a faith community’s relationship with God was not something to be discussed outside the religious sphere of the community. Not only this, but in light of how they understood the church’s history of

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11 This dialectic between loneliness and community is a basic element of Soloveitchik’s theology, most notably expressed in his essay, Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "The Lonely Man of Faith," *Tradition* 7, no. 2 (1965), in which he elaborates on the two accounts of the creation of human beings in Genesis (ch. 1 and ch. 2). Adam I is born into community, created both male and female. Adam II, by contrast, is created singularly, and thus God creates Eve from Adam’s rib to provide companionship. Where Adam I communes with another human and is set in a human civilization over against nature, Adam II communes with nature and yearns for community and civilization. It should also be noted here that the mid-1960s marked a shift in Soloveitchik’s philosophical emphasis. From this time onwards, he puts much greater focus on sacrifice and bowing before the demands of the halakha than emphasizing creative agency in applying the halakha to the present. For more on this, see Lawrence Kaplan, "From Cooperation to Conflict: Rabbi Professor Emanuel Rackman, Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik, and the Evolution of American Modern Orthodoxy," *Modern Judaism* 30, no. 1 (2010) and David Hartman and Charlie Buckholtz, *The God Who Hates Lies: Confronting and Rethinking Jewish Tradition* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2011), 155.


13 See Irving Spiegel, "Rabbi Says Faiths Are Not Related," *The New York Times,* August 16, 1964, which noted: “Rabbi Soloveitchik’s objections to any pressure for changes in Christian doctrines dealing with Jews was an indirect reference to the actions of certain Jewish groups that have been outspoken on the possible statement on Roman Catholic-Jewish relationship that might be adopted at the Ecumenical Council in Rome.”
persecution of Jews, Soloveitchik and many others viewed such calls from the church with suspicion.

For Yitz Greenberg, however, interfaith dialogue was both a strategic imperative and, increasingly, a transformative personal experience. At first, Greenberg entered interfaith dialogue activities out of self-interest: he wanted to prevent a second Holocaust. In 1961, Greenberg, along with his wife Blu and their infant son Moshe, spent the year in Israel as a Fulbright visiting lecturer at Tel Aviv University. The family lived in Jerusalem, arriving during the last week of the Eichmann trial. Over the course of the year, Greenberg became increasingly absorbed with study of the Holocaust, describing it as an overwhelming, shattering experience. “There were mornings when I would put on my tefillin and then sit there, overwhelmed by horrifying sights and disturbing sounds from Shoah sources that flashed through my mind, unable to recite the words of the siddur [prayerbook].” At the same time, the existence of a modern and secure state of Israel, “teeming with life,” along with the presence of his infant son, created a counterpoint to the images of death in his reading.  

Ultimately, the two poles of Shoah/death and Israel/life, would come to form an essential dialectic in Greenberg’s teaching. But upon their return from Israel in 1962, Blu and Yitz decided to join the Jewish-Christian dialogue movement less out of theological conviction than a combination of political urgency and righteous indignation.  

14 “I swept down on the dialogue like an avenging angel, demanding that Christians cease spreading evil and demeaning images of my faith,”


Greenberg recalled. “Blu and I frequently smote Christian dialogue partners with the rod of our Holocaust anger.”\textsuperscript{16} Soloveitchik, too, had expressed anger toward Christianity for its culpability in the Holocaust. “We certainly have not been authorized by our history, sanctified by the martyrdom of millions, to even hint to another faith community that we are mentally ready to revise historical attitudes, to trade favors pertaining to fundamental matters of faith, and to reconcile ‘some’ differences.”\textsuperscript{17}

Yet where Soloveitchik’s resentment of the Christian community combined with his more purist sensibility about the limits of a common language among believers to yield a sharply limited approach to dialogue, Greenberg saw a more encompassing dialogue—precisely about problematic language—to be essential: “the alternative to repentance and excision of hateful stereotypes” on the part of Christians “was culpability in past and future genocidal assaults.”\textsuperscript{18} As in his debate with Lichtenstein, here Greenberg evinced a less formal, more dynamic view than Soloveitchik. For Soloveitchik, the imperative to avoid theological questions and to remain firm in ideological commitments flowed from a philosophical understanding of the human condition as essentially fixed. The paradox of being simultaneously in community and alone was hard-wired into God’s design for humanity, and therefore, much as one might want to overcome the barriers, they must be maintained, otherwise one was casting off a fundamental element of the tradition. For Greenberg, however, the events of the recent past and present could not be ignored. History, and recent memory, informed his move to break through the barriers Soloveitchik maintained. As in his debate with Lichtenstein, Greenberg understood the call of history to trump formal philosophical considerations, and to demand participation in interfaith dialogue for the sake of Jewish survival.

\textsuperscript{16} Greenberg, "On the Road to a New Encounter between Judaism and Christianity: A Personal Journey", 8.
\textsuperscript{17} Soloveitchik, "Confrontation" 25.
\textsuperscript{18} Greenberg, "On the Road to a New Encounter between Judaism and Christianity: A Personal Journey", 8.
Yet by the mid-1960s, Greenberg participated in Jewish-Christian dialogue out of more than impulses of self-preservation. For the first time, he had encountered Christians who, he felt, genuinely listened to his views and expressed no interest in converting Jews. “They were eager to connect to the Jewish roots of Christianity, and they drank in our words about Judaism with a purity and intensity that Jewish students would find hard to match.” But it was not only the Christians who were affected. Greenberg himself began to consider Judaism within the context of its relationship with Christianity—precisely the kind of move Soloveitchik feared might occur. In December of 1964 he delivered a lecture on the topic, “The New Encounter with Christianity—Challenge and Response” at a synagogue dinner outside Philadelphia. Two months later he gave a similar lecture in Manhattan at the West Side Institutional Synagogue. Greenberg had moved from seeing the dialogue as a mechanism for Jewish self-preservation to understanding that Judaism itself could grow and develop from encounters between Christians and Jews.

19 Ibid. 8. Greenberg mentions Sister Rose Thering, Edward Flannery, and Father John Pawlikowski among these early Christian dialogue partners.

20 On this score, Greenberg confirmed the fears of Soloveitchik and others. The problem, as they described it, was not simply that public perception might confuse social policy discussion with theological colloquy, but also that the experience of dialogue would introduce foreign concepts into the vocabulary and philosophy of Orthodoxy. “There can be no doubt that one’s theological thinking can be stimulated and refined by acquaintance with the works of theologians of a different faith,” wrote Walter Wurzburger in debating Eugene Borowitz at the February 1967 SCA conference. “But the example of recent theological writing also indicates that it is extremely difficult to guard against the intrusion of categories which are foreign to Jewish thought.” Wurzburger did not give examples of what these foreign categories might be, thus the significance of his remark lies more, perhaps, in his perception that Jewish thought was a domain that needed to be kept pure from infiltration by outside forces. Wurzburger worried that some Jewish thinkers wound up overreacting and presenting Judaism as “an inverted form of Christianity.” He concluded that, because of the tightrope that must be walked, “extreme caution has to be taken to maneuver a safe middle course between the two extremes and only properly qualified specialists [emphasis in original] should devote themselves to the study in depth of non-Jewish theologies.” Walter S. Wurzburger, “Justification and Limitations of Interfaith Dialogue,” in Judaism and the Interfaith Movement, ch. (New York: Synagogue Council of America, 1967). In Wurzburger’s words, we can hear a distinct echo of Aharon Lichtenstein’s position in his debate with Greenberg in 1966: “Where the reality of error is genuinely regarded as a disaster, its possibility will be neither lightly regarded nor easily dismissed. How much margin of error is allowed on the Gemini flights?” Greenberg clearly disagreed, seeing the Jewish-Christian encounter as an opportunity to deepen self-awareness while also serving practical ends. (It is not clear whether Greenberg would have qualified as a specialist in Wurzburger’s view. He admitted he was not a trained theologian or philosopher.)


This shift was reflected in Greenberg’s writings. In his 1967 essay “The Cultural Revolution and Religious Unity,” Greenberg for the first time articulated what would become a cornerstone of his teaching in the years to come. After observing that mass communication had transformed the experience of culture in contemporary society, Greenberg wrote:

This universalization of culture is not a mere product of technological forces. It is an expansion of human consciousness. In Biblical terms, it constitutes an encounter and recognition of the ‘image of God’ found in all men. This encounter leads to the demand that the image of God be freed and restored where it has been enslaved or defaced. The appropriation and internalization of the sacredness and reality of the other forces a new theological and human encounter with him.\(^{23}\)

While we have encountered Greenberg invoking the concept of tzelem elohim multiples times already, this essay marked his first printed elaboration of it, and from this point forward the idea of humans as images of God would become foundational for Greenberg in a way unlike any other Jewish figure. He would include it in nearly all of his written work from 1967 onward, and would, in a singular way, make it a well-known concept in Jewish thought and education.

The fact that Greenberg’s articulation of man as the image of God first appeared in this 1967 essay, as Greenberg was increasingly and controversially involved in interfaith dialogue, suggests that the idea took root in his mind, at least in part, in the course of his encounters with his Christian interlocutors. This claim is supported by the fact that the essay was originally delivered as a lecture to the Religious Education Association conference in November 1966, and printed in the association’s journal the following year. The REA was an organization of generally liberal Protestant ministers, theologians, and professors. Greenberg was thus talking to a largely Christian audience.

\(^{23}\) Greenberg, "The Cultural Revolution and Religious Unity"
His choice to invoke the image of God, where he had not done so before, thus reflected evolution in his own thinking, evolution, it seems, that was furthered by his participation in Jewish-Christian dialogue.24

The image of God concept would serve a number of purposes in Greenberg's emerging teaching. It gave theological significance to print, television, and film, all of which presented images of human beings and therefore played a significant role in shaping the way people saw themselves and each other, that is, how they saw the image of God in the world.25 It likewise led to an ethic of power in which the goal of individuals and society should be to increase the capacity of people to live as images of God and to recognize others as such (see chapter 3). What Greenberg does not mention, but is a crucial point, is that he applied the image of God category to all human beings, and not just Jews. This was not a minor thing. In one of the Talmudic passages he taught most frequently, the ancient rabbis outlined what they would say to witnesses before testifying against the accused in a capital case: “This is why Adam was created as an individual being: To teach that anyone who destroys a life, it is as though he has destroyed an entire world, and anyone who saves a single life, it is as though he has saved the entire world.”26 Significantly, in many traditional printings of the Talmud, the phrase reads, “Anyone who destroys a life (of Israel)” and “anyone who saves a life (of Israel).” The implication of the later reading is that Jewish lives are inherently more valuable.

24 It is worth noting that Nostra Aetate also included image of God language as the basis for denouncing racial and religious discrimination: “We cannot truly call on God, the Father of all, if we refuse to treat in a brotherly way any man, created as he is in the image of God.” It is also important to mention that Greenberg had stated the image of God concept as a fundamental teaching in his spring 1966 interview in the Commentator: “The central moral principle of the Torah is the belief that man is created in the image of G-d, and this implies that any act or policy which humiliates or ‘shrinks’ a person is an act of desecration of the Divine image.” Goldberg, "Dr. Greenberg Discusses Orthodoxy, Y.U., Viet Nam & Sex". The REA speech and essay were the first time he published the image of God concept in an peer-reviewed setting. In a November 1967 lecture at YU’s Wurzweiler School of Social Work, Greenberg, "Jewish Tradition and Contemporary Problems". Greenberg would use the Image of God concept to develop his philosophy of halakha. This is discussed in chapter 3.

25 This is explored in greater depth in the next chapter, on Greenberg’s involvement in mass media projects in the late 1970s.

26 "Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5," my translation.
than those of non-Jews, that non-Jews are not true images of God. This issue, of course, touches on much larger questions, particularly about Jewish attitudes toward their self-image as Chosen People, which was a locus classicus of debate in modern American Jewish thought. What is significant for our purposes is that Greenberg, as an Orthodox rabbi, not only passively embraced, but actively taught, the equality of all human beings as images of God, and that he developed this central principle through his dialogue with non-Jews (Christians).

**Another Step Beyond Orthodoxy**

Greenberg’s embrace of interfaith dialogue on not just pragmatic, but theological grounds, established his next significant step beyond an Orthodox community that was heading in a different direction. This became apparent when Greenberg attended a major conference between Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Jews on May 7-8, 1967 in Boston, funded by the Ford Foundation and co-sponsored by the National Council of Churches, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, and the Synagogue Council of America (SCA). While the Haredi community had avoided contact with the SCA in order to avoid legitimizing the non-Orthodox branches, Soloveitchik and the RCA, as well as the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America (OU), its sister synagogue organization, had been members of the SCA for decades.

The theme of the conference was “The Role of Religious Conscience” as applied to five areas: “war and peace, race, state aid to religious education, the authority of law, and society’s economic obligation to its citizens.” The framing of the conference as avoiding theological issues was designed to assuage Soloveitchik’s concerns. But three months before the conference, the New

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York Times ran a front-page story under the headline, “Dialogue Among Three Faiths Entering New Phase.” As the Times described it, the conference would move the dialogue “beyond discussions simply of social issues to include mutual consideration of problems with religious dimensions.” This was a far more ambiguous portrayal of what would take place. The Times account continued: “Movement to the next stage—discussion of such purely theological subjects as the nature of God—has not been considered by these national organizations because of opposition from Orthodox Jewish leaders in the Synagogue Council, who fear that such talks could lead to a watering-down of the faith.” It was not clear from the article whether the conference would indeed move to the theological plane, or whether it would remain in the non-theological realm that Soloveitchik approved. Readers could easily interpret the Times account as suggesting the former.28

The next day, SCA executive vice president Henry Siegman sought to clarify the matter in the Boston Globe. “The purpose of the conference is not to explore theology,” he said, “but to apply our respective religious traditions to these areas. This means that we will discuss them all within a religious context but the thrust will not be theological.”29 But the damage had already been done. After the Times article appeared, Soloveitchik came under pressure from the Haredi community, since it appeared that he was wading into precisely the waters he had marked as off-limits for dialogue.30 By late April, he withdrew his support, and the RCA and OU pulled out of the conference. In its account of the Orthodox withdrawal, the Times noted that both organizations “participated actively in the year-long planning of the conference.” Explaining the organizations’ withdrawal, RCA president Pesach Levovitz “declared that ‘one of the most important factors

28 Edward B. Fiske, "Dialogue among Three Faiths Entering New Phase," *The New York Times*, February 20, 1967. See also Greenberg, "On the Road to a New Encounter between Judaism and Christianity: A Personal Journey" p. 14: “[Soloveitchik] conceded that the program honored his restrictions, but claimed that the Times gave the misleading impression that the dialogue was open-ended and unlimited—and such a conversation was unacceptable.”


30 "Two Orthodox Groups to Abstain from Interfaith Parley in Boston," April 24, 1967.
influencing’ his organization’s action was the fear that ‘an erroneous impression might be created, especially within the Jewish community, that we Jews were somehow part of the ecumenical movement for Christian unity.’” The RCA, Levovitz said, did not want anyone to be confused. Along similar lines, the OU’s statement said that “interreligious dialogues or colloquiums, whether or not intended to involve interchanges on theology or doctrine, contribute to and are identified in the public mind with the ecumenical movement.” Given how the conference had been publicly portrayed, the modern Orthodox organizations concluded that they could not afford the risk of being misunderstood and seeming to violate Soloveitchik’s position, even if the truth was otherwise.

It is worth noting that, as in the case of the *Commentator* interview in 1966, here too all concerned shared the sense that the images and impressions created by media portrayals carried significance. Soloveitchik, Levovitz, and Greenberg, as well as their non-Orthodox and Christian counterparts, understood that not only their participation in the dialogue, but the image of that participation, would contribute to a sense of reality on the part of a faceless, unnamed, but real cultural imaginary ‘out there.’ People would think that Orthodox rabbis were talking with Catholic priests about how they related to God—not because anyone said that was what they were talking about, but because they didn’t say it wasn’t. As Lichtenstein had objected to Greenberg, in discussing sensitive matters, those in positions to generate public images and understandings bore an increased burden to be precise in their linguistic formulations. For Soloveitchik, as for Lichtenstein, the imprecision—or perhaps the intentional vagueness—of language, engendered suspicion. Greenberg, by contrast, didn’t share Soloveitchik’s view on the problems of discussing theology, nor was he as concerned about surgeon-like precision with his words. For Greenberg, the potential of media to shape public narratives was too powerful to be overly concerned with perfect accuracy in language. In his view, the public image of Orthodox Jews and Christians talking together was both
pragmatically valuable (it could contribute to lessening historic tension between the communities) and intrinsically desirable (both communities could learn and develop in their relationship with the divine by talking with one another).

The spring of 1967 thus proved a second watershed in Greenberg’s relationship with the Orthodox community. As he was to later recall, Soloveitchik “crumbled” under pressure from the Haredi community, presaging the gradual “rightward drift” of the modern Orthodox community, including YU, the RCA, and the OU. Greenberg, along with fellow YU professor Michael Wyschogrod, attended the Boston conference despite the objections of the RCA and OU, and, with a tone of lament, claimed to represent only themselves, not their movement. “I feel the pullout of the Rabbinical Council of America was a serious mistake,” Wyschogrod told the Times. “Orthodoxy in this country is more secure than some people give it credit for, and it has the ability to influence the religious climate. Withdrawal is not in conformity with the duty of the Torah community to speak both to non-Orthodox Jews and to men of goodwill everywhere.” For Greenberg, it was not

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31 Greenberg, "On the Road to a New Encounter between Judaism and Christianity: A Personal Journey", 16. See also the excellent discussion of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein’s reaction to Soloveitchik and Vatican II in David Ellenson, “A Jewish Legal Authority Addresses Jewish-Christian Dialogue: Two Responsa of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein,” in After Emancipation: Jewish Religious Responses to Modernity, ch. (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2004), 394-409. For Greenberg, Soloveitchik’s basic reasoning in “Confrontation,” and the policy position to which it gave rise, “contradicted one of Soloveitchik’s fundamental teachings: that halakhah regulates all of life because all areas of life are intrinsically religious.” Greenberg, "On the Road to a New Encounter between Judaism and Christianity: A Personal Journey" 13. Ironically, it was the Reform community that supported Greenberg’s argument. At a February 1967 SCA conference on “Judaism and the Interfaith Movement,” Reform philosopher Eugene Borowitz said Soloveitchik’s position gave rise to “a strange discontinuity” between social welfare and theology. “In the former case Jews are eager to speak and work together with Christians. In the latter they fall silent and withdraw. Is that a reasonable condition to put upon such a relationship? Can people really expect men to work intimately with them in areas of vital human concern and yet refuse to speak to them, politely to be sure, when they inquire about one’s values or commitments?” Borowitz further argued that this dichotomy was all the more “schizophrenic” when the inter-communal activities took place under religious auspices (rather than the non-rabbinic or synagogue organs of the Jewish community, such as the Anti-Defamation League or the American Jewish Committee). “How then can one close off in advance inquiries about what faith grounds Jewish concerns in an area of social action or what beliefs guide them in taking a given stand on a certain issue?” Eugene Borowitz, "On Theological Dialogue with Christians," in Judaism and the Interfaith Movement, ch. (New York: Synagogue Council of America, 1967).

32 Fiske, "Orthodox Jews Defy Boycott"
only this sensibility, but also his own personal spiritual fulfillment that impelled him to continue
with the dialogue in spite of Soloveitchik’s position. “By then,” he reflected, “I was drawing strong
spiritual sustenance from my Christian dialogue partners,” particularly Roy Eckardt, a Methodist
minister and professor of religion at Lehigh University, and his wife Alice, who publicly called for
demythologizing the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus out of a sense of Christianity’s moral
responsibility for the Holocaust. Greenberg saw the Eckardts, and other Christians involved in the
dialogue, as taking major theological risks. Therefore, he reflected, “I was not inclined to disappoint
Christian friends in order to uphold a mistaken, unjustifiable Orthodox about-face.”

Finding God in History: Intra-Jewish Dialogue in the 1960s

Alongside Greenberg’s involvement in interfaith dialogue, he was also at the center of a
nascent group of intellectuals meeting to discuss not only pragmatic cooperation between Jewish
denominations (as the SCA had done for decades), but fundamental questions of theology and
philosophy. Beginning in the summer of 1965 and continuing until 1970, this interdenominational
group of rabbis and scholars held a weeklong retreat in the Laurentian Mountains in Quebec, hosted
by David Hartman, a pulpit rabbi in Montreal and former student and instructor of Jewish
philosophy at YU. In 1965, a Montreal philanthropist offered to contribute money for Hartman to
convene leading thinkers to study with. Eventually the gathering became formalized as the I. Meier
Segals Centre for the Study and Advancement of Judaism.

33 Greenberg, "On the Road to a New Encounter between Judaism and Christianity: A Personal Journey", 15. Roy
Eckardt, and Roy and Alice Eckardt together, wrote several books on reassessing Christianity after the Holocaust,
including: A. Roy Eckardt, Your People, My People: The Meeting of Jews and Christians (New York: Quadrangle Press/The
New York Times Book Company, 1974); Alice Eckardt and Roy Eckardt, Encounter with Israel: A Challenge to Conscience
(New York: Association Press, 1970); Long Night’s Journey into Day: Life and Faith after the Holocaust (Detroit: Wayne State
University Press, 1982).

34 Though this dissertation is not the place for it, the history of these gatherings is worthy of a full-fledged historical
study. As far as I know, they were the first interdenominational gathering of their kind, establishing a pattern that has
The format of the retreats reflected the rabbi-doctor resume of many of the 40 or so participants, combining the presentation of academic papers with a large dose of informal conversation. Reporting on the gatherings, New York Times religion columnist Edward Fiske described the participants as “an ecumenical ‘underground’” made up of “younger rabbis and theologians from all three branches” of American Judaism, Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox, and focusing on themes including secular culture, law, the perceived need for greater “spontaneity and vitality” in organized prayer services across the denominations, and the basic need for interdenominational discussion itself. “The essential dynamic of this new ecumenism,” Fiske concluded, “is an across-the-board anti-fundamentalism. Reform thinkers are protesting what they regard as doctrinaire liberalism and secularism in their camp. Their Orthodox counterparts reject what they consider to be their own denomination’s equally doctrinaire isolationism and legalism.”

been maintained by the Wexner Fellowship and the Shalom Hartman Institute, among others. Many of the thinkers at these meetings would go on to prominent places in American Jewish thought and education in the ensuing decades. The Canadian meetings had roots in an earlier set of retreats among mostly Reform rabbis and scholars at the Olin-Sang Institute in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin. These retreats built the nucleus of a new generation of Reform leadership who sought to reclaim traditional practices and, in particular, developed a language of covenant theology, which would ultimately have an effect on Greenberg and others in the Canadian group. For examples of the writing stimulated by the Wisconsin meetings, see Arnold Jacob Wolf, ed. Rediscovering Judaism: Reflections on a New Theology (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1965). Also see Eugene [writing under pseudonym Ben Hamon] Borowitz, "The Reform Rabbis Debate Theology: A Report on the 1963 Meeting of the C.C.A.R.," Judaism 12, no. 4 (1963), and Edward B. Fiske, "Jewish Theologians Are Reviving an Interest in Traditional Customs and Teachings," The New York Times, November 23, 1969.

Greenberg claimed that Hartman called him in the spring of 1965 saying, “What would you do if you had this money?” According to Greenberg, he and Hartman began drafting a list of invitees. Hartman was more widely read in non-Orthodox thought, and had followed the writings of thinkers like Eugene Borowitz (Reform), Arthur Hertzberg (Conservative), and Emil Fackenheim (Reform). “He was also more social,” Greenberg said. Greenberg, Interview with Irving Greenberg, 2010. Hartman added that he simply “had the chutzpah” to speak with “the best people” in each of the movements. Among the specific individuals Hartman named as attendees over the 5 years of annual gatherings were: Eliezer Berkovits, Moshe Greenberg, Aharon Lichtenstein, Yochanan Muffs, Jacob Neusner, Zalman Schachter, Stephen Schwarzchild, Shubert Spiro, Elie Wiesel, Arnold Jacob Wolf, and Walter Wurzberger. David Hartman, Interview with David Hartman, 2010, Joshua Feigelson. Greenberg also recalled friendships formed through the gatherings with Eliezer Berkovits, Jakob Petuchowski, Dudley Weinberg, Seymour Siegel, Samuel Dresner, and Herschel Matt. See Greenberg, "On the Road to a New Encounter between Judaism and Christianity: A Personal Journey", 11.

35 Edward B. Fiske, "Religion: Rethinking by Jews; New Challenge Emphasizing Emotion; Double Attack; Praying Together," The New York Times, May 21, 1967. This column appeared three weeks after Fiske wrote a column analyzing the RCA and OU withdrawal from the Boston interfaith conference. In that column, Fiske observed, “Judaism in this country is divided into three religious groups. The Orthodox are fundamentalists who insist on strict interpretation of
On the most basic level, the gatherings provided fellowship, which the young Jewish
literature scholar Robert Alter observed was “something hard to come by anywhere in the ordinary
academic world or, for that matter, in the world of organized Jewish life.” For Greenberg, Hartman,
and many others, this was certainly the case. Greenberg had entered YU in 1959 living a bifurcated
existence, feeling unable to be understood by most of those around him. By the mid-1960s, his
views on interfaith dialogue, halakha, social action, Vietnam, and the Holocaust had only increased
his isolation among the few who were conversant enough in both Rabbinic Judaism and academic
discourse to be his interlocutors. As Alter put it, “From the viewpoint of the individual Jewish
intellectual whose Jewishness plays some serious role in his intellectual life, even a taste of such
fellowship is encouraging and morally supporting because the bizarre anomaly of his position among
other intellectuals, whether Gentiles or Jews, so often isolates him, perhaps sometimes makes him
wonder whether like-minded people really exist.”

For Greenberg, the dialogue across denominational boundaries was as significant as that
across faith lines. “I had never met such serious non-Orthodox Jews,” he recalled. Growing up in
the Orthodox world of Borough Park, and even while attending Harvard, Greenberg rarely
interacted with committed Jews outside the Orthodox community. Meeting Reform thinkers like
Eugene Borowitz, Jakob Petuchowski, and Arnold Jacob Wolf, whom he encountered as
knowledgeable Jews and not, as he had imagined them, Jewishly illiterate, was transformative. Just as

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Biblical religious laws. Conservative Judaism tempers its observance of these laws with a long tradition of rabbinical
reinterpretation, while Reform Jews are the liberals who emphasize the need for further adjustment to contemporary
needs.” Fiske went on to repeat his categorization of Orthodox Jews as fundamentalists. See "Religion: Jews Split on
'Dialogue'," The New York Times, April 30, 1967. Given his glowing account of the “anti-fundamentalism” of the Quebec
retreats, Fiske’s own biases seem plain: he saw interdenominational dialogue, or “Jewish ecumenism,” as he put it, as a
good thing, and Orthodox resistance to it as at best ill-conceived. It is thus worth pointing out that it was Fiske, the
religion reporter, and not Irving Spiegel, who covered the “Jewish beat” for the Times, who wrote the February 20 story
about the Boston conference that ambiguously implied that the parley would deal with theological matters, and thus
sparked the crisis.

37 Greenberg, Interview with Irving Greenberg, 2010.
Greenberg was coming to see Christians in a new light, he was also changing his view of non-Orthodox Jews. As he put it, “I stopped being a modern Orthodox rabbi and became a pluralist.”

This transformation did not occur overnight, however. Greenberg remained a professor at YU and the rabbi of the (Orthodox) Riverdale Jewish Center until 1972, only in the mid-1970s carving out a professional role for himself beyond and between denominational and organizational boundaries through development of the National Jewish Conference Center. But just as interfaith dialogue affected the way he thought about the image of God concept, the intra-faith conversation in the Laurentians led to developments in his approach to Judaism.

Most significant, the dialogues prompted Greenberg to begin formulating his theological views on the meaning of the twin events of the Holocaust and Israel for Jews in Jewish terms. History had been central to Greenberg’s thought from his undergraduate days at Brooklyn College, and continuing through his graduate work at Harvard and early career at YU. As we saw in chapter 2, his call for a more dynamic approach to halakha, articulated in the 1966 debate with Lichtenstein, was rooted in his historical worldview. But it was through the Canadian retreats that Greenberg further developed his theological understanding of God’s presence in history, and particularly how Jews relate to God through history, especially in light of the modern Jewish experiences of emancipation, Holocaust, and nationhood.

At one of the early retreats, Greenberg presented a paper entitled “God’s acts in history.” The effect of the paper, which has not been preserved, was acknowledged by Reform philosopher Emil Fackenheim, whom Greenberg met for the first time at the retreat. The “nucleus” of Fackenheim’s ideas presented in his 1970 work God’s Presence in History “was a paper given in 1967 to the members of the I. Meier Segals Center for the Study and Advancement of Judaism. I owe a

38 Ibid.
fundamental debt to Irving Greenberg’s concept of ‘orienting experience’: his stubbornly historical thinking has liberated me from some false philosophical abstractions.”

Fackenheim explained that Greenberg’s idea of orienting experiences, which he preferred to call ‘root experiences,’ were the historical events that gave rise to “past faith.” While historical events often strained past faith, they never destroyed it. The past faith’s “claims upon the present survived. But—and this is crucial—this past faith had not come from nowhere but had itself originated in historical events. These historical events, therefore, are more than epoch-making. In the context of Judaism, we shall refer to them as root experiences.”

Fackenheim identified the Exodus from Egypt and the revelation at Sinai as two paradigmatic root experiences, explaining that they were historical events which were perceived by the participants to manifest God’s presence and activity in the world, and which subsequent generations re-experienced in their own lives. “In reenacting the natural-historical event, [the Jew] reenacts the abiding astonishment as well, and makes it his own. [Emphasis in original.] Hence the ‘sole Power’ present then is present still. Hence memory turns faith into hope… Thus the reenacted past legislates to present and future. Thus, in Judaism, it is a root experience.”

In the idea of ‘orienting,’ or ‘root,’ experiences, we find an articulation of Greenberg’s understanding that we identified in chapter 2: namely that God is not diminished, but rather made visible, through historical contextualization. History provides the narrative within which to

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40 Ibid. 9.

41 Ibid. 14. Fackenheim went on to deal with modern secularism and the Holocaust as threats to the possibility of a God who acts in history. His ultimate conclusion was the same as the position he had articulated in a 1967 symposium published in the journal *Judaism* and in an article from the same year published in *Commentary*, from which he quoted: “Jews are forbidden to hand Hitler posthumous victories. They are commanded to survive as Jews, lest the Jewish people perish. They are commanded to remember the victims of Auschwitz lest their memory perish. They are forbidden to despair of man and his world, and to escape into either cynicism or otherworldliness, lest they cooperate in delivering the world over to the forces of Auschwitz. Finally, they are forbidden to despair of the God of Israel, lest Judaism perish.” Ibid. 84. See also: "Jewish Values in the Post-Holocaust Future: A Symposium," *Judaism* 16 (1967); "Jewish Faith and the Holocaust," *Commentary*, August 1, 1968. Drawing on a traditional understanding that the Torah contains 613 commandments, Fackenheim concluded that this new, post-Holocaust imperative, constituted number 614.
understand how people and the divine, in particular times and places apprehended, understood, and related to each other—and thus extends an invitation to those in the present to do the same. As Fackenheim puts it, “the ‘sole Power’ present then is present still,” and available. Yet the idea of orienting experiences creates an additional layer of understanding: we in the present do not partake of an unmediated relationship with the divine, but rather experience the divine through the stories and accounts of how previous generations understood the original orienting event. “In every generation, one is obligated to see oneself as if s/he had personally left Egypt”⁴² implies a hermeneutical stance that values not only making personal meaning of the Biblical account of the Exodus, but understanding how other generations did so. The relationship of God and those present at the orienting event, as well as that between God and later generations as they re-enacted the oriented event, become openings to an historical narrative communion in which people in the present relate to the divine, even as they relate with those who lived generations before.

As we have seen, this view already conveyed challenging, potentially radical, implications for Orthodox self-conceptions. What was equally, and perhaps more challenging—not only to Orthodoxy, but to all Jews—was Greenberg’s contention that the Holocaust and the creation of the state of Israel constituted new orienting events. Beginning around 1970, Greenberg gave lectures about these themes, which were developed through the interdenominational dialogue in the Laurentians and in relationships, like that with Fackenheim, that developed from it.⁴³

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⁴² "Mishnah Pesachim 10:5," (my translation). See also the Passover Haggadah.

⁴³ The Columbia Spectator featured an advertisement for a Holocaust remembrance ceremony in April 1971, sponsored by the Council of Jewish Organizations (advised by Rabbi Charles Sheer, who had been Greenberg’s assistant rabbi at the Riverdale Jewish Center) which included a lecture by Greenberg entitled “The Religious Implications of the Holocaust.” "Advertisement: "Commemoration of the Holocaust of European Jewry," The Columbia Spectator, April 19, 1971. Greenberg also spoke at a 1972 symposium on “American Jewish Youth and the Holocaust,” sponsored by YIVO, the Institute for Jewish Research. The JTA quoted Greenberg as saying that “To wallow in the events is to cheapen.” Here again, there is little indication that Greenberg was angry with God, but rather was already articulating his position that the Holocaust demanded greater human responsibility for the covenant. "Rabbi Says Holocaust Must Be Viewed Objectively, Not Emotionally," Jewish Telegraphic Agency 1972. Greenberg likewise used the Holocaust and Israel as
An Emerging ‘Holy Secularity’

The earliest example of Greenberg’s emerging views is a 1970 lecture at Seton Hall University on the place of Israel in Jewish and Christian theology. In attendance at the conference were 50 Jewish and Christian scholars who gathered in “an attempt to pick up the interfaith dialogue debilitated by three years of crisis in the Middle East.” After a halting beginning, in which he said he “could not recall a paper that inspired in me as much pain and resistance as this one,” Greenberg quickly got to his thesis: “As best we can discern, from the point of view of the Jewish covenant, the rebirth of the state of Israel is one of those normative events which shapes men’s understanding of the covenant and of life itself. It is one of those major events of God’s acts in history by which His continuing concern and presence is revealed.” Paralleling Fackenheim, Greenberg explained that, “For Jews, the central orientating experience has been the Exodus.” The phrases “God’s acts in history,” and “root experiences,” suggest that Greenberg’s words here expressed something quite similar to the paper he delivered in Canada that had prompted Fackenheim’s reaction.


44 Paul L. Montgomery, "A Dialogue of the Faiths at Seton Hall," The New York Times, October 29, 1970. Where hopes had been high before the May 1967 conference in Boston that a new era in interfaith relations was opening, the next month brought the Six Day war, when many Christian institutions, including the Catholic Church, were officially either silent or hostile to Israel. Within the Jewish community, the war had an enormous effect, simultaneously evoking fears of a second Holocaust, pride in Israel’s military victory, and messianic hopes based on what appeared to be a miraculous victory. Thus the war upended previous interfaith discussions, and the American Jewish Committee and Seton Hall’s Institute of Judeo-Christian Studies aimed to revive the dialogue.


46 Ibid. 5.
Using language he would return to time and again in later writing, Greenberg said that the event of the Exodus, however it is understood, communicates the message that “the ultimate truth of the world is not the statistical fact that the majority of humans who ever lived have lived nameless and burdened lives and died in poverty and oppression. Rather,” evoking the Talmudic passage from Sanhedrin cited above, “the decisive truth is that man is the object of God’s concern and love, that he is of infinite value, that he who saves one life is as if he had saved an entire world. Man is meant to be free. Man will be redeemed.”47 This message of the Exodus, which Greenberg noted also suggests a messianic ideal, became the framework for a whole network of laws and customs intended to suffuse every aspect of life with a redemptive consciousness. This reflected another

47 Ibid. 6.
aspect of the Exodus paradigm, namely its focus on the material reality of flesh and blood, and not an escape into otherworldliness.

Yet precisely because of its rootedness in this-worldly history, the Exodus paradigm, which Greenberg identified as coextensive with the covenant at Sinai, had to be open to testing, adaptation, and interpretation in light of historical events. “Because history is open and circumstances change, because man has freedom even to disobey God, because God is neither fixed image nor possession, new events in history may illumine the covenant or unfold new dimensions of covenant living.”

Critically, this historical openness enabled Yohanan ben Zakkai and the Rabbinic movement to respond to the crisis brought about by the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE. In Yohanan’s eyes, “the destruction was an event which could not be denied but it should not be accepted as replacing the central orientating experience either.” Rather, he found a way to “admit the event, but to denature its potency and somehow fit it into the traditional system which [was] orientated by the Exodus experience.”

For Greenberg, this response became a blueprint for how Jews could and did respond to the Holocaust, which presented shocks to Jewish self-understanding as great as those of the destruction of Jerusalem nineteen centuries before. “There is one fundamental classic action response to such overwhelming tragedy in Jewish tradition,” he said. “It is the factual reaffirmation by action of meaningfulness, worth and life—by acts of love and life giving.” Greenberg quoted Fackenheim, saying that in the shadow of the Shoah, the act of bringing a Jewish child into the world took on ultimate significance:

To raise a Jewish child today is to bind him and his child on the altar even as father Abraham bound Isaac. Only those who do so today know that there was no angel to stop

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48 Ibid. 10.
49 Ibid. 14.
the process and no ram to substitute for over one and one-half million Jewish children in our lifetime. Such an act then can only come out of resources of faith, of ultimate meaningfulness—of Exodus trust—on a par with or superior to father Abraham at the peak of his life as God’s loved and covenanted follower.

Beyond this, Greenberg suggested, “The State of Israel reborn is the fundamental act of life and meaning of the Jewish people after Auschwitz.” According to Greenberg, one who failed to see this could not grasp the theological significance of Israel as a nation-state. On this basis, Greenberg argued that, “After Auschwitz, the entire secularist-religionist dichotomy collapses.” The most strident secular atheist “involved in Israel’s upbuilding is in the front line of the Messianic life force struggling to give renewed testimony to the Exodus as ultimate reality, to God’s continuing presence in history proven by the fact that His people after the Holocaust still survive.”

In the presence of a Jewish parent who has a Jewish child, “Before such faith who shall categorize in easy categories the secular and the devout Israeli or Jew?”

50 Ibid. 23-24.

51 Ibid. 26. It should be noted that Greenberg’s language here evokes parallels in the writings of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935), chief rabbi of British mandate Palestine, who made very similar arguments on behalf of secular Zionists. Additionally, it is worth quoting Greenberg’s sharp remarks about the silence of many Christians in May and June of 1967, particularly since, while Greenberg could be outspoken, his writing is rarely angry. This is perhaps a glimpse of what Greenberg meant when he described himself as ‘swooping down like an avenging angel!’ “At the risk of offending here, I must speak. When men of God are silent before the prospect of another genocide in June 1967, when all kinds of legitimate or normal considerations (theological hang-ups about secular Israel, concern for Christian Arabs, concern for holy places, etc.) operate to prevent action to save human life (not to mention: the covenant people); whereas a self-avowed ‘atheist,’ root source of much modern atheism, such as Jean Paul Sartre can speak out even if he has to break with his own deepest political alliances and self-images in his links to Arabs and third world figures because he knows, above all, another holocaust cannot be allowed—then which is the man of faith, the man of God? Are we to take title, self-definition, official dress, common judgment—even personal sincere profession—as crucial or does the action not speak for itself? If not, then what is the whole point of the parable of the Good Samaritan?” [In a footnote Greenberg added: ‘By an act of great self-restraint I refrain from quoting Matthew, Ch. 13.’]
With this last observation, Greenberg provided a new and powerful articulation of an idea he would come to call “holy secularity.” As we saw in the previous chapter, Greenberg had already developed an expansive notion of halakha as both subject to political action within the Jewish community, and as a model of an ethic of power for political leaders. This reflected Greenberg’s complication and blurring of the categories of secular and religious. Emerging from the dialogue movements, and drawing on inspiration he had first taken from reading Dietrich Bonhoeffer years earlier, Greenberg articulated an additional dimension to his secular-religious inversion: in light of modern Jewish experience—including emancipation, Holocaust, and nationhood—God was now more hidden from traditional areas of apprehending the divine, but especially present in those areas of life that had been deemed secular: In a post-Holocaust world, the basic act of having a Jewish child was no longer basic, but a profound statement of faith in the continuing viability of the Biblical covenant; the material work of building a state of the Jewish people, using state power to care for images of God who had, just two decades earlier, faced eradication, was a tangible manifestation of

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52 Greenberg argued that the Holocaust signaled the start of a new era, a “third cycle in Jewish history,” one characterized by the radical hiddenness of God, which invites and demands greater responsibility from human beings. Building on the inversions of secular and religious, public and private, that had informed his discourse of halakha years earlier, Greenberg offered a new articulation of his thesis: “I believe that the style of this third cycle will be a more ‘secular’ style. I would call this style a ‘holy secularity.’ It calls for holiness that is even more radically in the world.” Greenberg defined this new term as “a secularity that is willing to experience the religious in daily life, that understands the roots and the transcendent without which it becomes demonic.” Where the secular without the limitations of holiness and an awareness of the transcendent led to Josef Megele playing God by choosing who would live and who would die, holiness bracketed from involvement in the world was an empty gesture. Holy secularity represents the awareness that “after the burning of those children, there is no longer any statement of religion, there is no prayer that can be truly credible—except in the presence of the act of recreating life, except in pulling children out of burning pits and restoring them, except in the State of Israel—or an equivalent ‘secular situation’ in which human beings are given the dignity of God and the image of God is restored.” “On the Holocaust: The Need to Remember,” in Perspectives, ch. (New York: CLAL, 1977).

53 “Sometime in the early ’60s,’ [Greenberg] picked up Bonhoeffer’s Letters and Papers from Prison. Caught up in the optimism of the 1960s while attempting to assimilate the Holocaust’s effects on the Jewish people, Greenberg found the book resonated with his soul. According to Greenberg, it was the words written on April 30, 1944, predicting movement toward a completely religionless time, that ‘leaped off the page’ at him.” Stephen R. Haynes, The Bonhoeffer Legacy: Post-Holocaust Perspectives (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 26.
God’s presence in the world. The state, which was typically understood as a secular enterprise, was in fact a site of deep religious significance.

Greenberg extended this notion not only to the Jewish collective, but to all human beings. Modernity and the Holocaust had affected Jews in particular ways, but also had significant impact on other collectivities (e.g. Christianity and its various sub-communities). For Jews, holy secularity could be applied to locate religious significance in nation-building, social welfare activity, and political advocacy for Israel and the freedom of Soviet Jews; for humanity, it could be applied to justify public health and anti-poverty programs and activism for human rights. Most of these areas had come to be understood as secular enterprises, the realm of the state. In the mid- to late 1960s, with religious figures in Civil Rights and anti-war activism as a backdrop, a new formulation aimed to reframe the secular-religious dichotomy. Most notably, perhaps, Harvey Cox published *The Secular City* in 1965, in which he argued for a similar reorientation in approaching the question of secularism. Likewise, these were years when Liberation Theology was beginning to be articulated in the Catholic Church (Gustavo Gutierrez would publish *A Theology of Liberation* in 1971), which advocated a more robust, religiously-rooted political activism. Greenberg can thus be viewed as yet another expression reconfiguring the boundaries of secular and religious.

But Greenberg saw unique Jewish inflections to contrast his approach with the general alignment he saw taking place between liberal Christians and radical politics. In his 1966 address to the Religious Education Association, he said: “I find frequently a strong tendency in all too many liberal Christians to identify simplistically with the new left or with the third world—as if the underdog is automatically righteous. To identify totally with the world, however, is to betray the dialectic of religious living. It is to surrender the duty to unite, in one commitment, total immersion in the immanent with the complete awareness of the transcendent.” Here Greenberg drew on his
view of halakha as an ethic of power rooted in dialectic (which we explored at greater length in the previous chapter) to critique what he saw as an insufficiently-considered liberalism among some of his Christian interlocutors. Yet he also noted that Cox himself “has tried to balance his paean to the secular city with a new stress on this need to dissociate and play a critical role within it.” Greenberg suggested that their historical experience of emancipation had already equipped Jews with this instinct: “Jewish theologians who were fresh from Auschwitz and from a century and a half of excessive identification with the world found it difficult to fall into one-sided readings of Cox’s identification with the world in the first place.” In the movements of emancipation and revolution in Europe over the preceding centuries, Greenberg suggested, Jews had largely shed their traditions in favor of the secular movements of modernity. Yet the Holocaust came to teach that secularism and modernism were not unabashed goods, but rather contained within them profound possibilities for evil. 54

To his largely liberal Christian audience at the REA conference, as in his other encounters with Christians dialogue partners, Greenberg positioned himself as not just a Jewish ally, but also a gadfly who came from a community that did not historically occupy a position of power. Yet America offered unique possibilities for leveraging this position to develop political Jewish political power, particularly in the wake of the societal shifts in values that took place in the late 1960s and early 1970s—shifts that questioned institutional authority and increasingly welcomed expressions of formerly-persecuted ethnic and religious minorities. Greenberg would seize on these cultural shifts, and over the next decade would become a principal figure in developing public narratives of the Holocaust for both internal Jewish communal purposes, and American public life. We will explore this more in the next chapter.

By way of concluding our account here, it is important to note that while Greenberg began to formulate some of these ideas before participating in dialogue movements\(^5\) he only began to articulate them in writing and teaching during and after his encounters with interlocutors outside the Orthodox Jewish community. Greenberg would reflect that, “whatever the later conflict, I remained personally in love with the Orthodox community and its way of life, its thick texture of observance, its strong family and communal bonds, its learning and its passion for Israel.”\(^5\)\(^6\) But by the mid-1960s, he found it increasingly difficult to make an intellectual home within YU and the community around it, instead coming to see his own work, like his notions of the holy and the secular, as a project of inverting conventions of received categories. Just as holy and secular now demanded renegotiation, Greenberg saw a need and opportunity to reimagine the meaning of halakha by working in dialogue with non-Orthodox thinkers, and to reimagine the conception of the tzelem elohim through his encounter with Christian partners.

Ultimately Greenberg would leave both YU and his pulpit in 1972 to be the founding chair of Jewish Studies at City University of New York, a move that allowed him to operate outside the institutional constraints of denominations.\(^5\)\(^7\) At the same time, he also began to organize the National Jewish Conference Center and focus his efforts on “secular” organizations like United Jewish Appeal and Jewish community federations, which likewise operated independent of

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\(^5\) See in particular Greenberg’s earliest published talk, a speech to the Yavneh organization in 1962, in which he laments, “We are living in Messianic times, yet our motto seems to be ‘business as usual.'” “Yavneh: Looking Ahead, Values and Goals,” Yavneh Studies 1, no. 1 (1962).

\(^6\) "On the Road to a New Encounter between Judaism and Christianity: A Personal Journey", 16.

\(^7\) It is also worth noting how the university, as an institution outside the Jewish community, enabled this move, which would be repeated by many of the attendees of the Segals Centre retreats, and their students, as the field of Jewish Studies took shape. As Fiske had observed in his column about the group, “They have had little impact on denominational policies, and their concern for issues rather than institutions may ensure they never will.” Fiske, "Religion: Rethinking by Jews; New Challenge Emphasizing Emotion; Double Attack; Praying Together”. Greenberg contributed to this development in significant ways, both as the founding chair of Jewish Studies at CUNY, and as part of the advisory group and colloquium that would give rise to the Association for Jewish Studies in 1969-70. See Leon A. Jick, ed. The Teaching of Judaica in American Universities: The Proceedings of a Colloquium (Association for Jewish Studies, KTAV Publishing House, 1970).
denominational interests or constraints—and constituted a separate sphere of influence and power.

After 1967, when so many Jews felt a renewed sense of both connection to Israel and its vulnerability, and in the wake of the general cultural shift toward multiculturalism and ethnic pride of the late 1960s and early 70s, and with the critique of “suburban synagogue” life mounted by both student activists and the younger generation of rabbis meeting in Quebec, the federation world seemed like pristine territory for Greenberg to cultivate followers who would embrace his philosophy. It was both largely free of questions of denominational doctrine on the one hand, and ripe for an intellectual approach that gave meaning to fundraising for material welfare on the other.

“The Nazis said, ‘Jewish life is not worth one-half a cent to put it out of its misery,’” Greenberg taught. “And one Jew, and another and then another said, ‘I say a Jewish life is worth a million dollars!’ That became the power and testimony of UJA and Israel!”

By the early 1980s, when Greenberg wrote these words, he was established as a powerful figure, recognized as the leading intellectual in the federation movement, and sought out for his input by a growing number of philanthropists interested in Jewish life, both through federations and their own private foundations. The world of Jewish communal fundraising proved highly receptive to his idea of holy secularity, and raised doubts that Greenberg had sold out, that he was simply telling people what they wanted to hear, giving fundraisers and contributors a theology to match their interests. But the historical record suggests otherwise, because, as we have seen here, he was espousing this philosophy in a very different context—an interfaith academic-theological conference—several years before his federation work began in earnest. In his 1970 talk at Seton Hall, Greenberg said, “The most widely observed mitzvah in the Jewish community—reaching far beyond the synagogues—is United Jewish Appeal and Israel bonds. To give to these is to give in


light of Auschwitz and Israel simultaneously.” He noted that American Jews now regularly bought Israeli products, traveled to Israel, observed Israel’s independence day as a holiday, and adorned their homes with Israeli artwork. “Not that there is not a mixture of commercialism, vulgarity, over-religious misjudgment in some of this,” he observed dialectically. “This is always to be when the folk takes the lead in creating and when something new is emerging. Many Israelis have spoken critically about the dangers of political idolatry involved.”

Within a decade Greenberg would be able to say similar things about the Holocaust—largely through his own efforts to bring it to the center of American Jewish life alongside Israel.” How he aimed to shape public images and collective memories of the Holocaust, as well as the image American Jews had of themselves and the image that America had of American Jewry, will be the story of the next chapter.

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CHAPTER 5
Images of God, on Screens Small and Large

One of the recurring themes I have highlighted throughout the preceding chapters is the centrality of the idea of images in Yitz Greenberg’s thought and teaching. Greenberg developed the concept of images in two particular ways: First, through the foundational importance he assigned to the idea of humans as *tzelem elohim*, the image of God; second, through his understanding of the role of mass media in modern Western society. We have noted how these concepts interwove in Greenberg’s thought, particularly in chapter 3, when we explored how Greenberg saw media portrayals as developing the way individuals and collectivities recognized or obscured the image of God in Vietnamese civilians.

In this chapter, we will excavate two moments in Greenberg’s career in which he attempted to influence mass media projects. The first is the NBC miniseries *Holocaust*, which aired in April 1978. The second is the film production of *The Jazz Singer*, starring Neil Diamond, released in 1980. In both cases, Greenberg articulated key elements of his teaching that we have touched on before: the dignities and capacities of humans arising from their image of God status; the inversion of holy and secular; the importance of dialectic; and the demand for an historical consciousness that was open to past, present, and future. In the case of the *Holocaust* miniseries, Greenberg focused particularly on the power of mass media to shape collective memory of the Holocaust as an event and its victims as individuals, as well as the responsibilities and limitations that came with that power. In the case of *The Jazz Singer*, Greenberg attempted to put into an on-screen narrative his ideas about the image of God, Jews in contemporary America, and the notion of tradition as conveyed through parent-child relationships. Our analysis will be framed by these themes.
Chronologically, these two moments come several years later than the period we have focused on up until now, thus a brief explanation is in order. As noted at the close of the previous chapter, beginning in the early 1970s, Greenberg’s work shifted more squarely out of the Orthodox community and into communities beyond Orthodoxy, particularly the non-synagogue communal realm of Jewish organizations. In these years, Greenberg experimented with different approaches to promulgating his teaching through education programs and retreats in conjunction with local and national Jewish federations. He also established his own organization, the National Jewish Conference Center (NJCC), to serve as a hub for this activity—partially a think-tank, but also a programming and resource center for Jewish communities and organizations. He developed relationships with donors, primarily through his speeches and the study retreats he led. In the process he established an independent financial and power base for his work, which would prove indispensable. As we will see, while Greenberg would still engage in public controversies in the newspaper, he was no longer doing so over the self-image of American Jewish Orthodoxy for an audience of Orthodox Jews, as he was in 1966. Rather, Greenberg was now engaging with public media on a national scale over the image of Jews in American society, and human beings in the contemporary world.

**Holocaust in 100 Million American Homes**

For four nights, from April 16-19, 1978, NBC aired the 9½-hour miniseries *Holocaust*. Starring Fritz Weaver, Rosemary Harris, Michael Moriarty, James Woods, and Meryl Streep in her television premiere, the production was intended to be NBC’s response to the immensely popular
ABC production of Alex Haley’s *Roots* the previous year.¹ It worked: Nielsen estimated that nearly 100 million people viewed at least part of the broadcast. Within the American Jewish community, the miniseries marked a seminal moment. Never before had such a massive audience—nearly half of all Americans—tuned in to a mass-media production, much less one of such duration, featuring such a central narrative about Jews, Judaism, and Jewish history.²

Leading up to the production, Jewish organizations realized that this was a unique opportunity to engage Jews in their own history. Barry Shrage, a program professional at the Jewish Welfare Board in New York, organized an interagency committee to develop a companion study guide to the docudrama for use in synagogues, schools, and homes. In a show of cooperation that reflected the unprecedented nature of the broadcast, the committee included representatives from the American Association for Jewish Education, Jewish Welfare Board, United Synagogue

¹ The 1977-78 television year marked an unprecedented level of competition among the Big Three television networks, and *Holocaust* was understood as one of a number of major undertakings and innovations, which included other miniseries devoted to the life of Martin Luther King, the Hindenburg, a fictionalized account of the Nixon presidency, and primetime broadcast of the Super Bowl. Significantly, this was a moment when the networks were unprecedentedly profitable, making competition fierce but also enabling production of otherwise risky ventures. “Even the flops pay off today,” noted critic Les Brown. Blockbuster miniseries such as *Roots* could mount “an assault” on a network’s foes. See Les Brown, “T.V.: The Networks Slug It Out,” *The New York Times*, August 28, 1977.

² In studies of the development of the Holocaust in American life, the NBC broadcast is generally viewed as a watershed event. “Without doubt the most important moment in the entry of the Holocaust into general American consciousness was NBC’s presentation, in April 1978, of the miniseries *Holocaust,*” writes Peter Novick. Hasia Diner points to *Holocaust,* along with *Schindler’s List* and *The Pianist* as examples of “popular culture texts” through which Americans “consumed the Holocaust.” Alan Mintz calls *Holocaust* the catalyst for “the move from awareness to memorialization,” an assertion supported by the fact that President Jimmy Carter announced the creation of the President’s Commission on the Holocaust two weeks after the miniseries aired, which the New York Times directly linked to the miniseries: “Perhaps aware of the public interest in the history of the Jews stirred by the recent television series *Holocaust,* Mr. Carter paid particular attention to the Jewish past—a theme that is also one of [Israeli Prime Minister Menachem] Begin’s favorites. In the past, Mr. Carter said, ‘Jews often suffered religious discrimination, inquisitions, pogroms, and death.’ Noting there was no formal monument in this country to the victims of the Nazis, Mr. Carter announced that a commission would be appointed to report to him in six months on a suitable memorial ‘to insure that we in the United States never forget.’” Bernard Gwertzman, “Supported for Israel Affirmed by Carter on 30th Anniversary,” ibid., May 1, 1978. David Roskies observes that the ultimate effect of *Holocaust* was that “the unfathomable, ineffable Event took on a poignant and personal face.” The experience of viewing the intertwined fictional stories of a Jewish and a German family, the Weisses and the Dorfs, “in the privacy of one’s own home, with or without commercial interruption, may have broken the last taboo associated with the destruction of European Jewry.” See: Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (New York: Mariner Books, 1999), 209; Hasia Diner, *We Remember with Reverence and Love* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 373; Alan Mintz, *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 23; David G. Roskies, "What Is Holocaust Literature?,” in *Jews, Catholics, and the Burden of History*, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Pres, 2005), 157-212.
(Conservative), Union of American Hebrew Congregations (Reform), and National Commission on Torah Education (sponsored by YU), “along with Dr. Irving Greenberg and the staff of the National Jewish Conference Center, who served as educational consultants to the project.”

Greenberg saw media as a central instrument for Holocaust education, and for shaping public discourse about the Holocaust specifically, and Jewish identity more broadly. Notes from a 1978 meeting entitled “NJCC Media Programs” showed that Greenberg and his associates viewed mass media as a form of outreach to the unaffiliated. “Our environment is full of messages,” the document stated. “Media have the potential of enriching Jewish learning/living in terms of total environment; Media (if enriched with Jewish content) has ability to reach American society.” The notes went on to sketch out media projects the NJCC might undertake: developing resources for public and private education and for families in the home; encouraging national media to “include a major Jewish component (Black, Puerto Rican, Italians are major).” The memo concluded, “We will

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4 By this point, Greenberg was recognized as “one of the most effective individuals working to place the Holocaust at the core of American Jewish thought,” and American public discourse on the Holocaust. Novick, The Holocaust in American Life, 199. Greenberg himself had long harbored a love of theater and movies, having served as a drama counselor at summer camp as a teenager. In college he sketched out ideas for novels and musicals. As an academic in the 1960s, he wrote of the shaping power that mass media could have and identified mass communications as one of the formative forces in contemporary society. In 1968, writing of the need for religions to respond creatively to the times, Greenberg predicted, “The culture will become more pervasive and the mass media can reach deeper and deeper into the groups with alternate images and models of living. Apparently films do affect people even more deeply than books and identify them with the other, pace Marshall McLuhan. The key to religious survival and to variety and plural cultural trends in an increasingly homogenized world depends on the creative solution of this challenge.” Greenberg, "The New Encounter of Judaism and Christianity". See also Greenberg’s address at the 1966 convention of the Religious Education Association, in which he displays both his theorizing about the role of mass media in society and demonstrates his bona fides as a movie buff: “The technological and transportation revolution that has made ‘thy neighbor’ a universal concept; the industrialization and new mobility that have led to extraordinary interchange of population; the mixing in the urban technopolis — all are multiplied a thousand fold in their impact by vicarious, but real, total encounter with others through communication media. ‘Nothing human is alien to me’ is not a humanistic slogan in the age of the TV documentary or the breakdown of a priori restraints on content in literature and film. Who could imagine twenty years ago that the world of homosexual queens of Last Exit to Brooklyn or the world of sadomasochism of The Story of O would be part of the experience of middle class America, or that The Other America would begin to impinge strongly on the Affluent Society? Who could imagine the growing validity of the masses of colored men for the West in light of conditions fifty years ago?” "The Cultural Revolution and Religious Unity".
not do all ourselves; stimulate others, guide, advice, help obtain funding.”5 Thus the Holocaust miniseries provided Greenberg and the NJCC with an enormous opportunity: to put the Holocaust at the center of American public life through the force of a major prime-time television event, which would, they hoped, have positive effects on both American society at large and on Jewish identity within the Jewish community.

The Holocaust and Collective Memory in Greenberg’s Teaching

It is important to pause here to discuss how Greenberg understood and was teaching about the Holocaust at the time of the miniseries. By 1978, Greenberg had developed a reputation as a central figure in Holocaust education and activism. For over a decade he had been traveling around the country, and increasingly around the world, to lecture and teach, and building a network of devoted followers across the United States. Through a consulting agreement, since 1974, the NJCC had shaped the educational program at the General Assembly of North American Jewish federations (GA), the largest annual gathering of Jewish communal volunteers and professionals from across the range of communal organizations. Greenberg’s popularity was such that by the 1977 GA, the New York Jewish Week would report that while “700 people eager to hear [former Israeli Prime Minister Golda] Meir stood jammed together like a rush-hour subway crowd for over an hour outside a part of the hotel ballroom… the larger segment of the ballroom was filled with some 1,800 people listening to Rabbi Irving Greenberg lead an Oneg Shabbat [Shabbat fellowship event] on the Holocaust.”6 Through his travel and writing, Greenberg had cultivated a significant following within the federation community and was acknowledged as its guiding Jewish educator.

While the subjects of Greenberg’s writing and teaching in this period ranged from Jewish holidays to pluralism to sexual ethics, the implications of the Holocaust increasingly became his central focus. Jews and Christians, not to mention the rest of society, “have gone on since 1945 as if nothing had happened to change their central understanding,” he wrote in 1975. “But it is increasingly obvious that it cannot be done, that the Holocaust cannot be ignored.” This represented a recapitulation of Greenberg’s rhetoric vis-à-vis Orthodoxy in the mid-1960s, now directed at a broader population of American Jews and Christians: where Greenberg had critiqued Orthodox Jews a decade earlier for failing to fully deal with the challenge of modernity, now he broadly critiqued Jews in particular and humanity as a whole for failing to fully deal with the implications of the Holocaust.

For Jews, Greenberg argued, the challenge of the Holocaust was braided with the challenge of the establishment and existence of the state of Israel—to respond to history, to live in the present. The Jewish community had failed to absorb the Holocaust and Israel into public ritual and collective memory, and was therefore ignoring the most significant historical reality since the destruction of the Jerusalem temple and the development of Rabbinic Judaism 2,000 years before. As he put it to participants at a United Jewish Appeal conference in 1975:

To be a Jew, classically, since the very beginning, has been to live by the great events of Jewish history. It has meant a commitment not just to understand the event, but

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7 Beginning in the mid-1970s, the NJCC published lengthy essays by Greenberg on each of the Jewish holidays. These were later collected and edited into the book, *The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays* (1988). He also published short pieces regularly in *The Jewish Press*, the *New York Jewish Week*, and other wide-circulation Jewish publications throughout the 1970s-90s. As we saw in the previous chapter, he regularly appeared in newspaper and magazine articles that sought to portray a diversity of Jewish positions across the denominational spectrum, and those that aimed to articulate responses of Jewish and Christian leaders to an issue. We see throughout the dissertation that he was quoted frequently in *The New York Times*. But he was also quoted and appeared in publications beyond the *Times* audience, such as an article in *Redbook* in 1974 entitled “What to tell your child about God” that included short responses by Sister M. Martin de Porres Grev, Martin E. Marty, Mrs. Billy Graham, Oral Roberts, and Greenberg. Irving Greenberg, "What to Tell Your Child About God," *Redbook*, January, 1974.

to live it in personal life… In that sense, I would say: in the life-time of our people in this generation, we have lived through two events of the magnitude of the Exodus and of the destruction of the Temple—those events which set Jewish life and gave the content to Jewish faith for thousands of years. These are overwhelming events, deeply contradictory to each other and yet deeply related—the Holocaust and the rebirth of the State. To be a Jew one must understand and live by both.⁹

In chapter 2 we explored how Greenberg understood the imperative to live in the present, which distinguished him from the formalist halakha of Soloveitchik and his followers. In chapter 3 we saw how Greenberg applied that demand, through his own conception of halakha, to the Vietnam War. And in chapter 4 we showed how Greenberg developed the idea of “orienting experiences” as foundational for his understanding of how humans relate to God through historical events. Now Greenberg built on all of these cornerstones to establish a new claim, one that he made repeatedly in his theological writings at this time: the twin events of the Holocaust and the creation of the state of Israel constituted revelatory events on the level of the revelation of the Torah at Sinai and the development of Rabbinic Judaism after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE.

As such, they implicated Jewish life at all levels. The Holocaust-Israel double-helix upended received understandings of secular and religious, and invited a new paradigm of holy secularity, as we saw in the previous chapter. It also called for study, commemoration, and ritual so that the events could enter collective memory, rather than be repressed. Greenberg expressed this at the conclusion of the same 1975 speech for UJA:

Confrontation with the Holocaust means not just a new depth of understanding of Israel and of religious life in Israel, but the sense that I personally am living though it, together

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with my fellow Jews. I am convinced that a thousand years from now, Jews will re-enact the Holocaust; they will eat the rotten bread of Auschwitz, or the potato peelings of Bergen-Belsen and tell the story—as do we now eat the matzoh and the bitter herb of Passover, so that each one of us will know how to act accordingly. 10

These ideas, and Greenberg’s active and persuasive promulgation of them, put him at the center of a major shift in American Jewish life that took place during the 1970s. While Jews had engaged in discussion, reflection, prayer, and internal commemoration of the Holocaust since the end of the Second World War, 11 in the 1970s “this inward-looking activity was supplemented by the demand that the Holocaust be actively memorialized by the mainstream American Jewish community and even by the people of the United States and its government.” 12 Small-scale commemoration of the Holocaust would no longer be enough. Following the calls of Greenberg and others, the Holocaust in the 1970s would come to be publicly memorialized through institutionalized days of remembrance, establishment of centers for study and commemoration, and development of Holocaust curricula for use in both Jewish and public schools. In the best known and most dramatic example of this trend, President Carter would establish the commission on the Holocaust, for which Greenberg would serve as director and whose very existence would bear his imprimatur, ultimately resulting in creation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum on the National Mall in Washington.

10 Ibid.

11 See in particular Diner, We Remember with Reverence and Love.

12 Mintz, Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America, 23.
From the outset, Greenberg had intended for the NJCC to highlight the Holocaust in its efforts to engage American Jewry. In his 1970 proposal for a “Center for Jewish Thought and Values,” Greenberg listed “Confronting the Holocaust” as the first “problem area to be investigated, studied, and then translated into tangible program.” In 1975 the NJCC’s emphasis on the Holocaust led to the creation of a distinct division within the operation, Zakhor: The Holocaust Resource Center, which coordinated and promoted Holocaust memorialization and education. Zakhor served as a hub for the emerging network of scholars, activists, survivors and their children, who, like Greenberg, wanted to see greater public engagement with the Holocaust. The division,

13 Irving Greenberg, "A Proposal for a Center for Jewish Thought and Values in Conjunction with a Center for Jewish Education," Papers of Rabbi Irving Greenberg, Harvard University Library, 22: 17
headed by Michael Berenbaum, organized conferences, consulted on curriculum development, 
published a journal, and worked with local communities to establish Holocaust education centers.

The NJCC and Zakhor would pave the way for the President’s Commission and its successor U.S. Holocaust Memorial Commission: the bulk of Commission members, who were themselves Holocaust survivors, were board members of Zakhor; Elie Wiesel, whom Carter appointed chair of the Commission, was the co-founder and honorary chairman of the NJCC; as noted above, Greenberg served as director of the commission, while Berenbaum served as deputy director; and as we saw at the very outset of this dissertation, Greenberg’s influence on Stuart Eizenstat played a profound role in leading to Jimmy Carter’s creation of the Commission.

Mediating the Ineffable: Wiesel, Greenberg, and the Holocaust Controversy

For all these reasons, Greenberg welcomed the NBC production. Yet not everyone involved with the NJCC was fully behind the project. In particular, the Center’s honorary chairman and co-founder, Elie Wiesel, was outraged. On the Sunday of the premiere, April 16, Wiesel took to the pages of the New York Times to voice his disapproval.

“Untrue, offensive, cheap: as a TV production, the film is an insult to those who perished and to those who survived. In spite of its

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15 The journal, Shoah, was short-lived, producing only 4 issues in 1978 and 1979. Nevertheless, it served as a key nexus point for academics, theologians, and activists in Holocaust commemoration. Its editorial board, chaired by Greenberg, included, among others: Berenbaum (who would go on to direct the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum); historian Yaffa Eliach; Emil Fackenheim; historian Raul Hilberg; Lawrence Langer (founder of Facing History and Ourselves, a key actor to this day in bringing Holocaust education into K-12 schools across the country); Christian Holocaust theologian Franklin Littell; Alvin Rosenfeld; Elie Wiesel; and John Ruskay (who would go on to become president of UJA/Federation of New York).

16 The history of Zakhor is a fruitful area for further research. Some materials have been preserved in file cabinets at CLAL. Other materials can be found in Greenberg’s archives at Harvard, and likely in the papers of Elie Wiesel.

17 The Wiesel-Green argument has been written about in several books and articles. In particular, see the accounts in Novick, Mintz, and Roskies. My intention here is not to recapitulate that history, but to highlight Greenberg’s role in the controversy.
name, this ‘docu-drama’ is not what some of us remember about the Holocaust.” The script took too much artistic license at the expense of historical accuracy, Wiesel said. The miniseries bit off more than it could chew. “Too much, far too much, happens to one particular Jewish family and too much evil is perpetrated by one particular German officer.” The Weiss family, the Jewish protagonists of the film, somehow experience everything from Kristallnacht to Babi-Yar to Thereisienstadt to Auschwitz. Likewise the leading German character, Erik Dorf, is involved in every one of these same episodes. “In film as in literature,” Wiesel argued, “it is all a matter of credibility. Were the film a pure work of fiction or a straight documentary, it would achieve more. The mixture of the two genres results in confusion.” He went on to conclude, however, that the issues with the film were not unique; rather the challenge here was the challenge posed by all literature, and even speech, about the Holocaust: “The Holocaust? The ultimate event, the ultimate mystery, never to be comprehended or transmitted. Only those who were there know what it was; the others will never know… What then is the answer? … The Holocaust must be remembered. But not as a show.”

A week later, Gerald Green, the screenwriter of Holocaust, responded. While conceding some of Wiesel’s minor points of historical inaccuracy, Green forcefully defended the project against Wiesel’s central argument. “Mr. Wiesel objects that we try to tell it all. Why not? Is Elie Wiesel to be allowed a monopoly on the subject, to be the self-anointed and only voice of the Holocaust?” Green went on to suggest that Wiesel was motivated to attack the miniseries out of jealousy at its commercial success and fear that it would displace his own work as the definitive word on the subject. “Mr. Wiesel need not be appalled nor have any fears. The viewing of ‘Holocaust’ will create a surge of new interest in the subject. More of Elie Wiesel’s books will be sold than ever.”

In the final section of his rebuttal, Green brought Greenberg to his defense, using Greenberg’s introduction to the interagency study guide as his evidence: “Let me conclude with a comment from Rabbi Irving Greenberg, one of the most distinguished Holocaust scholars in America, and a professional associate of Mr. Wiesel’s. While acknowledging the limitations and built-in deficiencies of a television program designed for a mass audience, Rabbi Greenberg wrote: ‘It is a breakthrough. Tens of millions will see with their own eyes and experience in their own homes a shadow of the incredible and unprecedented total assault on Jews and humanity. It is a challenge to our consciences, and to our teaching and learning ability that we study along with it, in order to deepen our understanding of the incomprehensible.’” Green suggested that Wiesel should address himself to Greenberg. “He may, in the soft and gentle light of a rabbi’s study, find it in his heart to reconsider his harsh judgment.”

The next Sunday, April 30, the Times printed 16 letters about the miniseries and the Wiesel-Green contretemps, including notes from Public Theater director Joseph Papp (who sided with Wiesel on artistic merit but with Green on the overall importance of the broadcast), Rabbi Wolfe Kelman of the Conservative movement’s Rabbinical Assembly (siding with Wiesel), and NBC’s head of public relations (who addressed neither Green nor Wiesel, but instead the negative review by the Times’ television critic John O’Connor). General opinion, in the Times and elsewhere, seemed to follow Green’s assessment. Joseph Papp’s letter in the Times acknowledged that, despite all its artistic shortcomings, “‘Holocaust’ was a contribution to understanding what actually happened.’ (Papp couldn’t bring himself to make a full-hearted compliment, however: “These are minimal accomplishments, admittedly, but on the tube, that wasteland of mediocrity, they loom large.”)

Reviewing the production in Time, Frank Rich acknowledged the limitations of television in general.

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and commercial TV in particular. And yet, Rich observed, such concessions were worth it. “Were the show exhibited in movie theaters, no one would sit still for its 9 and a 1/2-hour running time. Were it produced for PBS, Holocaust probably would have been drowned in a sea of historical minutiae. By creating their show for NBC, the authors have forced themselves to be equally responsive to the demands of both prime-time show biz and historical accuracy. They prove that such a marriage of commerce and art can bear remarkable fruit.”

Among the 16 letters in the Times that Sunday was one from Greenberg. First Greenberg attempted to settle a dispute about chronology. Wiesel had asserted that “many Jewish and non-Jewish organizations supported the project and promoted it among their members. But they did so before they could view the programs.” Green denied this. For the record, wrote Greenberg, he wrote his introduction to the study guide on the basis of the script only, without seeing the film. In fact, Greenberg said, Wiesel had offered to write the introduction, but withdrew after viewing it.

Greenberg went on to draw a distinction that had yet to be articulated in the public discussion, and that would prove to be significant. According to Greenberg, the reason that Wiesel rejected the program while Greenberg embraced it was that “Mr. Wiesel is a physical survivor of the Holocaust and I am not.” The miniseries would inevitably fall short in the eyes of survivors, Greenberg observed. “Written and produced by people who had not ‘lived through’ the Holocaust, the program

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21 Wiesel asserted the same in a separate letter in the same issue. See Elie Wiesel, "Wiesel Answers Green," The New York Times, April 30, 1978. This does beg the question, however: How did Wiesel see the miniseries while Greenberg did not? In an email correspondence 35 years after the fact, Greenberg did not directly address the question, but suggested that his letter should be understood in the context of the broader relationship he shared with Wiesel. Greenberg recognized early on that Wiesel was the best possible spokesman for Holocaust memory and education. He also acknowledged that Wiesel had a sense of purity about the Holocaust—the very sensibility that Wiesel displayed in his column about the miniseries. Keeping Wiesel's reputation and standing intact was crucial for the larger goals that he and Greenberg shared. It is possible, though Greenberg never confirmed or denied it, that Greenberg’s statement that he wrote the introduction only on the basis of the script, was designed to give cover to Wiesel, with the implication that, had Greenberg seen the actual production, he would not have praised the production as much as he did in his introduction. Irving Greenberg, E-Mail Correspondence, June 10, 2013 to Joshua Feigelso.
conveyed a typical beginner’s reaction: Why did they not resist? Out of sympathy, it then focused on military resistance. But survivors and those who have ‘worked through’ the Holocaust realize the overwhelming force and cruelty that made death inescapable and often a relief… More important, they realize that just living as a human being, refusing to abandon family or religion or dignity was the true, incredible everyday heroism of millions who died and the few who survived. The absence of this insight may be the gravest flaw of ‘Holocaust.”

As Alan Mintz has noted, the controversy surrounding ‘Holocaust’ was as significant as the event itself, particularly in the way in which it exposed two emerging camps within the burgeoning community of scholars and activists dedicated to Holocaust memory. Wiesel’s response exemplified one pole: the Holocaust is a mystery, it defies language, it cannot be represented. “The ultimate event, the ultimate mystery, never to be comprehended or transmitted.” Green’s counterargument was that, despite the inevitable vulgarization, depictions of the Holocaust were essential for reaching a broader audience and preventing a recurrence of the genocide. Greenberg’s letter put him in the position of peacemaker between Wiesel and Green, and, by extension, between survivors and non-survivors. In essence, he triangulated their positions by means of dialectic. On the one hand, Greenberg agreed with Wiesel that the Holocaust is fundamentally a zone of ineffability; nevertheless, it must be talked about, depicted, and taught. Greenberg put this sentiment into the imagined words he would have said to Green, had Green come to his study. Greenberg would have advised him to “plead guilty” to Wiesel’s charges, with an explanation: “I did the best I could, which was utterly inadequate. I am troubled and implicated in the box-office needs that shaped our domestication of an awesome event. Yet, for opening up the consciousness of millions, my entire life-work is justified.”

Marking the distinction between Holocaust survivors and the rest of the world was a crucial move. In a few sentences, Greenberg was able to 1) honor Wiesel’s arguments about the ineffability of the Holocaust, 2) preserve and further reify Wiesel’s untouchable, prophetic status, and 3) agree with Green’s larger point, that despite its flaws Holocaust was a force for good. Wiesel and Greenberg would continue and deepen their association in the months to come. Green later wrote to Greenberg that, “I thought your letter to the Times was fair, well-argued, and reasonable, and I thank you for it.” By positioning himself between the two partisans—and aided by the fact that Wiesel and Green were both highly charged in their dueling letters—Greenberg emerged as the voice of the reasonable middle. “This is simply a note to thank you for the letter you wrote in today’s Times about the Wiesel-Green controversy,” theologian Eva Fleischer wrote to Greenberg. “Your letter, more than anyone else’s, sounded a note of reconciliation which I feel is now needed… Your letter can, perhaps, help bring back a calmer climate, and I do thank you.”

The Dialectic of Dialectic: Conflict and Reconciliation in Greenberg’s Work

In evaluating Greenberg’s role in the Holocaust controversy, Eva Fleischer’s observation is highly significant. In so many of the settings in which Greenberg worked, he positioned himself as a conduit between competing poles. He aimed to be a translator between Orthodoxy and the rest of the Jewish world, between Jews and Christians, between student protestors and establishment authorities, between liberals and conservatives. Even more than this: He understood himself, and he envisioned all human beings fundamentally to be, bridge-builders between past, present, and future.

24 Gerald Green, "Letter to Irving Greenberg," May 4, Papers of Rabbi Irving Greenberg, Harvard University Library, 19: 17

25 Eva Fleischer, "Letter to Irving Greenberg, April 30," April 30, ibid. This dynamic, whereby Greenberg played conciliator and mediator between the purist Wiesel and the political realities of the world, was also central to the President’s Commission on the Holocaust. See Linenthal, Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America’s Holocaust Museum, ch. 1.
As I argued in Chapter 2, Greenberg’s dynamic understanding of history saw a fluid relationship between those alive today, their forebears and descendants. This fluidity militated against modern views that saw a rupture between past and present, just as it pressed against formalist and ahistorical philosophies like Soloveitchik’s.

A major problem with this fluid understanding, however, is that it can seem opportunistic, rootless, expedient. In the case of the Holocaust controversy, Greenberg’s embrace of the production left him vulnerable to critique from Wiesel and other survivors that he was giving cover to the commercial interests of NBC, and that he was, rather than honoring the memory of Holocaust victims, in fact betraying them by allowing their suffering to be packaged and sold—the charge Wiesel lobbed at Green. Greenberg had developed trust and credibility with Wiesel and the larger survivor community, so he did not receive this criticism. And, as always, he framed his embrace in terms of the dialectic of halakha he had articulated in the late 1960s: The choice between taking no steps to bridge ideal and real, versus taking the step, in which case “one does become a de facto collaborator with the existing system. But without this ‘collaboration’ nothing would be achieved.” For survivors, as for Lichtenstein in 1966 or radical antiwar protesters in 1969, Greenberg’s pragmatic dialectic could be viewed as an act of transgression.

Yet when he faced the choice of this brand of collaboration or adhering to a strict ideological line—which, as we have seen, was frequently—Greenberg almost always chose the role of conciliator. This suggests that it was not simply a matter of philosophical commitment, but something with deeper roots. And here I would draw us back to how Greenberg had described his relationship with his parents in chapter 2, and my comments there. We noted there that, like so many of his Orthodox contemporaries, Greenberg venerated his parents, and particularly his father.

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26 Greenberg, "Jewish Tradition and Contemporary Problems", 11.
Even more that this: in contrast with many of his generational peers, he did not reject, but embraced the Jewish tradition of his parents, even after he had experienced the “shattering” encounter with modernity at Brooklyn College and Harvard. By his own account, he never abandoned traditional practices like daily prayer and wearing *tefillin*, even when he was in his deepest depression and anger at God over the Holocaust. And theologically, he did not go the route of a theologian like Richard Rubinstein, who argued that the Holocaust represented the death of God, nor did he become an apologist for God and seek to justify the suffering of the Six Million, but rather developed the dialectical notion of Voluntary Covenant, in which the post-Holocaust Jewish people are invited to voluntarily renew the covenant with a hidden, but still-available and loving God. (This will be explored further in the next chapter.)

All of this points to an hypothesis that Greenberg was fundamentally conflict-averse. With the notable exception of his public feud with the elders of YU (and even in that case, those elders were nameless, and Greenberg toned down his rhetoric in his follow-up letter to the editor), in the major events in which he was involved, and in the fundamental elements of his teaching, Greenberg played conciliator, reconciler, triangulator. Greenberg’s intellectual and philosophical dialectics and inversions seem rooted in his personality—a personality that, while conscious of suffering, still believed in and yearned for redemption. This could be construed as naïvete. In my view, it rather reflects a deep-seated optimism that simply would not be crushed, no matter the weight of suffering it encountered. “The ultimate Jewish statement is the Messianic statement,” Greenberg said in 1975, the year his father died. “This union of Jews that is determined to create life is the faith that is reborn, purged by the fires of Auschwitz, and determined never to forget them. A faith that is based

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28 This is not to discount Greenberg’s activism, particularly on behalf of Soviet Jews, in which he participated in acts of civil disobedience, which inherently required an openness to conflict.
on the total reality of that kingdom of night can never be broken by setbacks; it can never be
destroyed by encounter with the realities of human beings with all their failures and complexities.
Such a faith will yet bring redemption.”

Hello, My Friend, Hello: An Image of Generational Dialogue in The Jazz Singer

Another way to understand Greenberg, which is less psychological and more historical, is to see him as deeply animated by fears of generational rupture, and a consequentially violent loss of tradition. In the next chapter, I will offer a theoretical evaluation of this idea, which I believe is key to understanding Greenberg’s work. In the remaining portion of this chapter, however, I want to delve deeper into this theme by exploring Greenberg’s involvement in the 1980 remake of The Jazz Singer.

Greenberg became involved in the project in late 1979, when he received a letter from Lee Javitch, board chair of the renamed National Jewish Resource Center (formerly the NJCC). Javitch’s college roommate and best friend, Jerry Leider, was a Hollywood producer behind an upcoming remake of the classic 1927 Al Jolson film. The new production would star Neil Diamond as Yussel Rabinovitch/Jess Robin and Laurence Olivier as his father, a devout Orthodox cantor. Javitch had seen the script, and asked Greenberg to comment on it. After submitting an 8-page, single-space memo in December 1979, Greenberg reviewed a revised script, and offered another 13-page note in February 1980.

As in the original Jolson production, the basic outline of the plot rested on the tensions arising as the young, Americanizing Jess enacts a story of secular assimilation: rejecting the tradition of his parents and ancestors—seven generations of synagogue cantors—in favor of a career as a pop

29 Greenberg, "Confronting the Holocaust and Israel,"
music singer who performs on Jewish holidays and marries a non-Jewish woman. The major narrative conflict revolved around the question, which would Jess abandon: His dream of making it in the secular world as an American pop singer, or his loyalty to the religious tradition of his ancestors? The negotiation of this choice provided the plot resolution.

Greenberg identified a number of problems in the script, including the ways it portrayed Judaism as guilt- rather than joy-focused, and specifically seemed to use the Holocaust to develop an image of contemporary Jews as observing traditions solely out of a sense of their debt to the past, rather than a volitional choice in the present. The producers seemed oblivious to the notion that contemporary Jews could actually want to maintain Jewish tradition for positive reasons. They were, rather, perpetuating images of a conflict between secularism and religion that aligned with a generational conflict between youth and their parents and grandparents.

Predictably, Greenberg suggested ways of highlighting the dialectic between the generations and seeking resolution through mutual understanding, rather than by either father or son rejecting the other. In one of Greenberg's proposed endings, Jess comes to his dying father, a Holocaust survivor, on the eve of Yom Kippur, in “a scene of revelation. For the first time a survivor who has always wanted to communicate with his son, but could not, gets a little communication through. And the son who has, in his rebellion, been unable to communicate that he cares for his father, or for the tradition, or for what he has broken from, now can show that he does have real feelings.”

The father is able to reflect on his own life. “He should confess to his son, that he now regrets the way in which he handled their relationship. In retrospect he realizes that he personally felt guilty for surviving.” The father admits that he blames himself for living while his wife and the rest of his family died during the Holocaust. “He realizes now that he tried to load that guilt onto his son.” The
father observes that “the murderers are not the ones who feel guilty, but it is the victims (the survivors) who feel guilty.”

Greenberg also suggested that this deathbed scene be used to surface another aspect of generational conflict, the contradictions engendered by the openness of American society. The father “realizes that he could not accept the fact that life in America was his own second life which was a miracle to be appreciated, but rather continued to mourn for his first life and tried to get his son to live his first life. He is sorry. Still Judaism does mean a lot to him. Seven generations of Raboniwitz’s [sic] did pray Kol Nidre. So in a way he could not help himself.” The cantor wanted to “reach out and tell his son many times” that he understood why his son wanted to achieve fame and success in America. He realizes how grateful he is for America, “which had given him and all survivors dignity and acceptance after such terrible persecution.” And yet, he could not bring himself to say this “without feeling that he was betraying his past and the loved ones as well.” On the specific issue of intermarriage, the father would admit that he could see that Jess’s non-Jewish wife Molly was a good woman for him, but he couldn’t square those feelings with his commitments to “keep Judaism alive.” All he could see in Molly, and all non-Jews, were Nazis. “But in a way perhaps he even accepts or welcomes the fact that his son or grandson will have a different conception of Gentiles—because he doesn’t want the hatred to go on.”

In these suggestions, Greenberg was attempting to give greater depth, and to generate sympathy for, the image of survivors. Most noteworthy is the way in which he addressed the challenge Wiesel had identified in the media debate over *Holocaust*: the difficulty survivors faced in trying to communicate not only the ineffable nature of the events of the Holocaust, but the complex emotions attending the fact of survival. Greenberg saw in the father the opportunity to give voice to them. Likewise, Greenberg aimed to develop a richer portrayal of Jewish immigrants, survivors or
not, who continued to embrace and enact religious traditions. They were not benighted and backward, as classical formulations of secularism might construe them, but rather had genuine and complex inner lives that motivated their behaviors.

The father would continue to tell his son that he is nevertheless heartbroken that the chain of seven generations of Raboniwitzes singing Kol Nidre will be broken. In “a dramatic twist,” the father would “release” his son from his obligation to sing Kol Nidre, but Jess would respond that he has decided to do it voluntarily. Here Greenberg evoked a key image he would emphasize throughout these memos: voluntary commitment to tradition. As noted above, and as will be explored further in the next chapter, Greenberg’s theological response to the Holocaust came to center on the notion of voluntary renewal of the covenant. Where Jewish tradition had, for millennia, been predicated on a notion of the obligatory nature of the covenant with God, now the covenant was open to acceptance or rejection. Greenberg saw this not as a concession to a post-Holocaust world, but a reflection of progress brought about by modern emancipation: human beings could now freely choose to commit themselves to practices and traditions that had previously been imposed on them. In the narrative of Jess Rabinovitch and his father, Greenberg saw the possibility for portraying on screen an image of how this theological view played out in the lived relationship between father and son. The effect, he hoped, would be to stir similar conversations between parents and children, and to change the collective image of how generations approached each other.

Deeply related to this was Greenberg’s approach to the portrayal of intermarriage, an issue that was increasingly dividing the Jewish community. In December 1979, as Greenberg was writing the first of his two notes to the producer Jerry Leider, Rabbi Alexander Schindler, president of the Reform movement, formally called for the movement to recognize as Jewish anyone who had one
Jewish parent, and not only children of a Jewish mother, as traditional Jewish law had long maintained. Schindler explicitly rooted his call in the fact that the Jewish intermarriage rate was approaching 40 percent, and in the majority of those cases it was a Jewish man marrying a non-Jewish woman. “The right of these men to determine the religious character of their children must be secured,” he said. “Here is still another way to make certain that our grandchildren will be Jews, that they will remain a part of our community and share the destiny of this people Israel.”

Orthodox rabbinic leadership rejected the Reform move as both a grave breach with Jewish tradition and as bad policy. Announcing a commission to combat assimilation and intermarriage, Rabbi Bernard Rosenzweig, president of the Rabbinical Council of America observed, “In many communities the rate exceeds 50 percent. If this trend is not reversed, the whole fabric of Jewish communal structure will suffer irreparable damage.”

For Greenberg, intermarriage was a particularly challenging issue, because it pit his traditionalism on the one hand—he was, after all, still self-described Orthodox and a member of the RCA—against his belief in voluntarism on the other. His general view, reflected in the memos to Leider, was that Jews should feel free to marry whomever they wished; at the same time, they should be educated in such a way as to develop the voluntary desire to marry another Jew—not out of guilt, but out of positive choice. And in the event of an intermarriage, a couple should be presented with an inspiring image of Judaism such that the non-Jewish spouse would commit to Judaism and raising Jewish children.

In his Jazz Singer memos, this position came through in suggestions that, after the death of the father, both Jess and Molly say kaddish, the traditional liturgy of mourners, which would open

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31 "Orthodox Group Forms Unit to Combat Intermarriage Assimilation," June 20, 1979
“the ambiguous possibilities of maybe she will raise the children as Jewish [sic]. I don’t think the producer or the writer are ready to accept the idea of her converting even though Elizabeth Taylor did it. I personally would have inserted that request by the father also.” The ambiguity—did she convert to Judaism or not?—would blur the image sufficiently that the various constituencies could see what they wanted to see. But what everyone would see was a couple embracing a traditional practice in honor of a deceased parent, keeping faith with the past.

Greenberg actually went as far as writing dialogue—not just offering notes, but actually writing a scene—in which Rivka, Jess’s Jewish wife whom he leaves to be with Molly, lays out the price of intermarriage: “We were not just born out of love—we were born after terror. We are the life after death. Our life isn’t the same. We are carrying a burden—to carry on, to leave something behind. Can you really find it in yourself to turn your back on them? It’s not just me, Jess. Your father told me to ask you: can you leave all that—and all of them—for a Gentile woman? Can you allow yourself that?” Instead of a harsh response that would suggest Rivka’s words were a guilt trip, Greenberg wrote that Jess’s response “should be sad—a little shrug.” Jess would then go to the door and say, “Not even what I owe to my mother, not even what I owe to 6 million dead is going to stop me now.” Then he adds: “Maybe they gave me the strength to do what I have to do. Rivvie, It’s pulling at me. I’m torn. Is that what you want Rivvie, that it pull me down into the piles of the dead? I’ve got to be free to live. Rivvie, let me go.”

By way of concluding the story, Greenberg imagines Jess giving a long dedication speech again—this time not only to the television audience about to hear him perform on Yom Kippur eve (as he chooses to go on TV rather than take his father’s place at services), but also to American Jews. He would sing Kol Nidre, but he would sing it on TV. And before doing so, he would offer a dedication, to
all the fathers who knew that they should not have crowded their children but could not help themselves; who laid upon them the life they could not live for themselves but who deeply regretted that they couldn’t get through to their children. He dedicates it to all the sons who had to refuse to respond to their fathers and never could tell them in their lifetime how much they had been shaped and how much they loved them. To all the husbands who loved and went after another woman but never quite forgot the guilt of the wife and family they had left behind. To all those who had to stand by helplessly while their loved ones died or were slaughtered and could not lift a finger and who relive those dreams every night.

As Jess sings Kol Nidre, the camera shows the congregation, including Rivka, in tears, “in a way that suggests forgiveness.” Ultimately, Greenberg concluded, the script “ends as it is written, with a performance by an artist who is at one with his audience and at peace with himself.”

The main point of all his suggestions, Greenberg wrote, was “to give a more human, more Jewish, more dramatically moving treatment.” The image Greenberg wanted portrayed was one that could evoke the dialectics, complexities, and contradictions he saw in the post-Holocaust American Jewish experience. Critically, that image would negotiate the conflicts between generations, between past and present, between old world and new, not through guilt, but through honoring the multifaceted agency of the image of God. If the producers took his suggestions, Greenberg wrote, they “could turn this film into a positive, deeply touching phenomenon of the kind that Fiddler on the Roof became because it respected both love and tradition, sex and family, the new values and the old ways.”

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32. "Memo to Jerry Leider," February 21, Papers of Rabbi Irving Greenberg, Harvard University Library, 4: 34.
The Dilemma of the Holy In the Secular

In the final cut, many of Greenberg’s suggestions appear to have been incorporated. Jess is presented sympathetically—he wants to honor his father and Jewish tradition, and is torn about his decision to leave New York behind. Rivka is the one who suggests that she and Jess divorce, rather than Jess casting her off, and it is only after this moment that Jess embraces Molly. Jess reconciles with his father, and it is Molly who encourages Jess to sing Kol Nidre in his father’s place, with the line, “I may be a shiksa, but I know what this holiday is. It’s Yom Kippur, and it’s about forgiveness.” Molly embraces Jess’s Jewish heritage, memorably cooking him a Shabbat dinner that—innocently and comically—features a pork roast (which Jess appears not to eat), and lighting Shabbat candles before Jess makes the Friday night kiddush. There is no intimation that Molly converts or that Jess asks her to, but the message is unmistakably not that of assimilation. Rather the film suggests that American Jews can remain true to their tradition even as they pursue commercial and financial success: Jess is able to sing Kol Nidre and sing on national television without any conflict, just as he is able to build a family with Molly and call his son Chaim, despite the fact that she does not convert to Judaism.

At the same time, despite Greenberg’s focus on the Holocaust, the film deals hardly at all with it. Jess’s mother is killed by terrorists, though it is unclear when and where her death takes place. Cantor Rabinovitch does make reference to the suffering and persecution of the Jews as the chief reason to remain loyal to the tradition, though specific mention of Nazis or the Holocaust is never made. Both Greenberg’s concerns and hopes about how survivors might be portrayed seem to have been ignored. Greenberg has no credit in the movie, and beyond sending the revised script
there is no record that Leider wrote any communication to him.\textsuperscript{34} Perhaps Leider incorporated Greenberg’s suggestions about the portrayal of Jess and Molly while rejecting those about the Holocaust. But just as likely, it could be that the script evolved to a place similar to Greenberg’s ideas about American Jewish identity, and diminished the place of the Holocaust, under the pull of market forces. As Greenberg noted, the zeitgeist was more aligned with an interest in ethnicity and particularity than the initial script reflected; perhaps the creative team came to see this on their own as well. Perhaps they found that a more complex treatment of Jess and Molly would better reflect the attitudes of their potential ticket-buyers.\textsuperscript{35}

This highlights one of the difficult dimensions of Greenberg’s approach of seeing the holy in the secular. As I have noted, Greenberg strongly affirmed many elements of modernity conventionally associated with secularism, most significantly the creation and expansion of human rights and freedoms, the related development of the autonomous self, the advance of science, and the distribution of wealth to the poor and middle classes through both market economies and the welfare state: “Not to forget the tremendous number of people who are still living in poverty, the fact remains that more people than ever before in human history have achieved this state of relative liberation, including the extension of the life span, and the growth of the pursuit of happiness. The American Declaration of Independence… claims that the right to the pursuit of happiness is self-evident, no less! This is an extraordinary shift from the historical acceptance by humankind that in

\textsuperscript{34} When asked in an interview 33 years later whether Greenberg had any influence on the script, Leider, who was still actively working in Hollywood, responded, “Would it bother you if I told you that I have no recollection of the memo you’re talking about?” He also had no idea who Yitz Greenberg was. When asked if many people had comments on the script, Leider responded, “There’s an old saying in Hollywood: If the guard at the gate has a good idea, use it. So yes, we took lots of comments.” Jerry Leider, Telephone Interview, June 5, 2013, 2013, Joshua Feigelson.

\textsuperscript{35} They may well have been wrong—or may not have gone far enough in depicting the normalization of interfaith relationships—as the film was a commercial and critical flop. Reviewing the film in the New York Times, Janet Maslin wrote that the plot, with its focus on the difficulties that Jews have in relating to other people, “makes not one bit of sense anymore.” Janet Maslin, "Film: The Jazz Singer," \textit{The New York Times}, December 19, 1980.
fact its fate is oppression, tyranny, poverty and early death.” For Greenberg, these developments reflect a greater capacity for God’s image to be realized in the world during the contemporary age than at any time before. More people are able to live better, freer lives—lives worthy of the designation *tzelem elokim*, image of God.

And yet, in affirming the religious significance of such basic modern American secular categories as personal autonomy, self-expression, and material success with such enthusiasm, Greenberg left himself vulnerable to the accusation that he was simply telling people what they wanted to hear. While Greenberg acknowledged that he would rather that Molly convert to Judaism, he nonetheless embraced her—and had Cantor Rabinovitch embrace her—even as she didn’t formally join the Jewish people. For Leider, and for many others, the notion that a rabbi—and, significantly, one who they saw as an orthodox rabbi—would acknowledge such a possibility, much less embrace it, could lead them to hear only the melody of affirmation in Greenberg’s message, while missing the dialectical counterpoint of challenge.

There is truth here. Greenberg’s emphasis on voluntarism, and his constitutional and philosophical distaste for open conflict, combined to yield an approach to Jewish life that, by design, spoke to a wide swath of American Jewry on terms that they found agreeable: no guilt, celebration of individual choice and creativity, celebration of material success. Leider could read Greenberg’s memos as endorsing the key elements of his film, just as Jewish federation donors could hear Greenberg’s teachings about the religious significance of fundraising as endorsing key elements of their Jewish lives. Both of those readings were true. And yet, Greenberg also told those same audiences that they should embrace—voluntarily—traditions and practices like Shabbat, Jewish

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holidays, *kashrut*, and expensive parochial education, that were not so easy to enact, but rather significant dissociation from general society. That is, he wanted a new generation of American Jews to freely take up the traditions of their parents and grandparents—not to break with them, and not to live their parents’ lives without identities of their own, but to carve out a dialectical middle. In this chapter I have shown how Greenberg imagined portraying these impulses on the small and big screens. In the next and final chapter, I will offer a theoretical reflection on this animating impulse of Greenberg’s teaching, and the ways in which his work can speak to the history of twentieth century American Jewish life and the field of Religious Studies.
CHAPTER 6

Conclusion: Relationships, Presence and the Present

“All revolutionaries are partricides, one way or another.”
~ Yuri Slezkine

“And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers.”
~ Malachi 4:6

In the first chapter, I laid out the main questions that have driven our exploration until this point: Who was Yitz Greenberg, and why was he significant for American Jewish life in the late Twentieth century? Over the last four chapters, I have attempted to answer those questions through excavating a number of significant moments in Greenberg’s career that were previously undocumented or insufficiently examined, in a way that both highlights important dimensions of his thought and teaching, and enables us to understand the significance of those moments and ideas by situating them in a broader historical and intellectual context. Along the way, I have flagged several major themes in his teaching that I believe help us understand why Greenberg was as influential in as wide an array of settings as he was. These include: the concept of the image of God and its relationship to modern Western subjectivity and society; the potential of mass media for reflecting and nurturing ways of inhabiting individual and collective subjectivity; and the inversion of conventional meanings of holy and secular, particularly through the frame of Greenberg’s understanding of halakha.

Foundational to, and encompassing all of these, is the way people in the modern West relate to themselves, one another, and other beings, both in the synchronous world we physically inhabit, and in worlds beyond the dimensions of space and time we generally perceive. In Chapter 2, I
argued that Greenberg’s approach to historicism was ultimately an expression of how he envisioned human beings relating to God and to humans of past and present. In the chapters since, I have traced themes that are all further expressions of this idea. The image of God is not simply an intellectual construct—it is, as we have seen, a way of understanding people in relation to themselves, each other, and the divine. Mass media is only powerful because of the relationships, both imagined and experienced, it reflects and develops. Holy secularity is not merely an interesting inversion of discursive categories; it is an orientation to, and a reflection of, how people order their relationships and priorities.

In this concluding chapter, I want to reflect further on this meta-theme of relationships and imaginaries, presence and the present, in order to suggest some additional ways that studying Greenberg’s teaching and career might benefit scholars of religion.

I. Tradition: Parents, Children, and Memory

To begin, I want to bring us back to a point I raised in the second chapter, about the way Greenberg talked about his parents. I noted there that the reverent, venerating kind of language Greenberg used to talk about his father, the talmid chacham “of awesome proportions,” and his mother’s “elemental piety,” are not only not uncommon, but I would suggest, for many, constitutive of Orthodox Jewish identity in the twentieth century. I noted that Greenberg distinguished himself from others of his generation who, like him, were raised in homes that observed traditional practices, and attended the same day schools and yeshivot that Greenberg did. Yet where many of his peers left Orthodoxy behind, Greenberg continued to adhere to traditional practices and intellectual frameworks. However attenuated his relationship with the Orthodox community around
YU became, and however much he participated in interdenominational activities, throughout his life he identified as Orthodox and never joined another denomination.¹

With that observation in mind, I also want to call attention to Greenberg’s sensitivity to generational conflict. We saw this in the concern Greenberg expressed to the Fulbright committee about the social costs of pitting youth against their elders, either through romanticizing youth or dismissing them. We saw it again in his script suggestions for The Jazz Singer, where he aimed to enable Jess and his father to communicate and free their relationship of guilt or coercion.

Building on both of these observations, I want to suggest that they point to a fundamental connection between the issue of historicism we explored in chapter 2, and the question of how individuals and generations negotiate their relationship with each other through tradition and cultural memory. Parents and grandparents are custodians, shapers, transmitters, and facilitators of memory for their children and grandchildren. This dynamic is largely coextensive with the function of tradition within family and cultural life: parents and grandparents guide the development of cultural memory in children through the enactment of traditions, what David Gross calls “a conversation stretching over time.”² The stories parents and grandparents share with their children, the way they tell them, the way they answer questions about the past—in short, the fundamental educational work of parenting and grandparenting—make parents and grandparents among the most powerful influences in shaping the memories and cultural imaginaries of their children and grandchildren. Depending on how tradition is presented, and how parental authority is exercised and experienced, one’s relationship with the past is formed. As Paul Ricouer puts it: “Between individual

¹ Into his seventies, Greenberg continued to attend services at the Riverdale Jewish Center, the synagogue where he was the rabbi from 1966-1972, and which current YU president Richard Joel also calls home. This despite the fact that other options exist—a Conservative synagogue that is even closer to walk to, and the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, the flagship of Rabbi Avi Weiss and his “Open Orthodox” movement and home to Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School, where Greenberg now teaches regularly.

memory and collective memory the connection is intimate, immanent, the two types of memory interpenetrate one another.”

It may be helpful to pause here and consider Chaim Potok’s *The Chosen* as an illustration of my developing argument. In 1967, just as Greenberg was bursting onto the scene of American Jewish public life, *The Chosen*, Potok’s first novel, became a New York Times bestseller for ten months. The story of Modern Orthodox teenager Reuven Malter, his nemesis-turned-friend Danny Saunders, heir to a Hasidic dynasty, and their respective fathers, reached the top of the bestseller list on October 1, putting Potok in a league with Saul Bellow and Philip Roth, whose books *Herzog* (1964) and *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969), were, respectively, also number one bestsellers by American Jewish authors.

Reviewing the novel for the *Times*, Eliot Fremont-Smith noted it was a “tale of religious conflict and generational confrontation.” But it was a particular kind of generational confrontation. Most notably, it was not an all-or-nothing battle—either accept the parents and their traditions, or reject them in favor of a new identity. The stakes were not over loyalty to Jewish tradition or life in the radically new secular culture beyond the old neighborhood. Rather, as Kathryn McClymond notes, unlike the dominant trend in American Jewish literature at the time, which generally focused “on the angst of rejecting one’s Jewish identity as a necessary prelude to living a full American life,” in the story of Reuven, Danny, and their fathers “the problem is how to work out one’s Jewish identity in light of being an American—but never to leave one’s Judaism behind.”

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It seems to me that Potok, who was a close friend of Greenberg’s in adult life, shared Greenberg’s aversion to generational conflict. That didn’t make him blind to the reality of conflict, but it did lead him to weave a tale in which relationships between parents and children, between tradition and modernity, while tested, ultimately endure. As literary scholar Sheldon Grebstein notes, *The Chosen* appeared against the backdrop of the dramatic movements of the late 1960s: “the disintegration of the family, the Vietnam conflict, the campus rebellion. Concomitantly, the novel is centrally concerned with the conflict between parents and children integral to all these events, but, unlike what happened all too often in reality, it allows the young to gain maturity, personal fulfillment and freedom in abundant measure, yet not over their parents’ dead bodies.” Grebstein notes that the youth, “the champions of the New,” are the heroes of the novel. “Nevertheless, the parents’ role has also been reaffirmed.”

To move back now to the more theoretical plane, Potok’s depiction is built on and plays off of a conception of adolescent development, particularly as experienced in America in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, that involves taking responsibility for oneself as an adult. This frequently involves questioning previously held assumptions and teachings, and not accepting them solely on the basis of authority. Memories and traditions which have been shaped as fact by parents and grandparents become subject to interrogation. Questions whose provisional answers have been shaped within the framework of parental authority are revisited within an emerging framework of self-authorship. All of this happens in *The Chosen*, just as it does in the work of Potok’s and Greenberg’s contemporaries.

Yet it is important to linger for a moment and note two separate motions at play within this process: The first involves the adolescent’s separating herself from adult authority; the second

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involves composing, becoming the author—and authorizer—of one’s own sense of self. The first finds expression in individual and cultural sentiments like the general impulse to question authority—that is, to discount and rebel against claims made by parents and other adult authority figures simply because they are made by adults. All previously received memory and tradition becomes subject to suspicion. In the case of Danny Saunders in *The Chosen*, this is the process playing out as he surreptitiously makes his way to the third floor of the public library to read forbidden books like the works of Freud or Fichte.

The second process, what theorist Sharon Daloz Parks refers to as “emerging on the other side of shipwreck,” involves the lessening of attitudes of suspicion and an openness to the possibility that the cultural memory and tradition carried by adults may bear wisdom and truth, and need not be questioned and resisted solely on the basis of its association with those adults. Parks identifies this activity with recomposing a sense of home, a concept we will come back to. For the moment, we should note that this second movement also finds expression in the case of Danny Saunders, as he negotiates his relationship with his father and the Hasidic tradition to which he is heir at the end of the novel. While Danny shaves his beard and cuts his hair, he explicitly does not reject Judaism, Jewishness, or his relationship with the Jewish past.

Within the first movement, that of questioning and casting off authority, lies a powerful dynamic. Lionel Trilling signals this in reflecting on the emergence of modern conceptions of selfhood in Western literature. Trilling reminds us of “the violent meanings which are explicitly in the Greek ancestry of the word ‘authentic.’ *Authenteo:* To have full power over; also, to commit a murder. *Authentes:* not only a master and a doer, but also a perpetrator, a murderer, even a self-murderer, a suicide.” We should not discount, Trilling observes, “how ruthless an act” it can be to

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assert one’s individuality in the face of a culture that requires, or is perceived to require, obedience and conformity. The possibility of violence—physical, emotional, or otherwise—lies at the heart of the separation movement, on both the individual and communal levels: a child may rebel against her parents, a generation may rebel against the establishment. Negotiations between generations may, of course, not come to violence—and most frequently they don’t—but Trilling’s observation is a reminder of the powerful forces at play in the nexus of cultural memory between one generation and the next.

This violent undertone is the same impulse to patricide that Yuri Slezkine identified as central to the revolutionary movements of modernity that we mentioned in chapter 2, and that I brought as one of the framing quotations for this chapter. The fear of that violence is what drove Aharon Lichtenstein to chastise Greenberg in their 1966 debate. As we saw there, violence—directed towards tradition itself—was what Orthodoxy saw and feared in the intellectual move of historicism.

And for good reason: historicism had indeed been used for revolutionary purposes, and not just on a grand scale, but on the local level of individual subjectivity. The modern western subject, the (violently) self-authorizing person that Trilling identifies, comes to be within an assumed orientation to past and authority shaped by historicism. “History is first learned by memorizing dates, facts, names, striking events, important persons, holidays to celebrate,” observes Ricouer. At this stage, history is perceived “as ‘external’ and dead.” But gradually those things which were external move inward, “a certain violence coming from the outside presses in on memory.”

History—a past which was outside of us—makes a claim on our memory, the narrative or collective memory within which we have been raised. History is generally experienced as outside of that, and at

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the adolescent stage it can present itself as a wedge with which to overturn personal narrative and collective identity. History becomes a tool of separation and differentiation—a tool that many Jews, as many other moderns, would use to leave behind a tradition they saw as stifling and guilt-inducing. Labeling a past as history enables tradition to be displaced, allows it to be removed from the present. Historicism enables a rupture, an absence of cultural memory and tradition, to open up.

But for many, that shattering shipwreck and the absence it brings about demand resolution. Home has to be reconstituted, through a process of negotiation between generations. Such a process is, inevitably, a work of contradiction and paradox. Melanie Landau helpfully observes: “On the one hand, our traditions form our home. And on the other hand, they sometimes need to be remade in order to make them feel like home.” This reflects the developmental nature of generational conflict and individuation. Children need to assert their own authority over the tradition, both as a way to mark their self-authorship separate from their parents, and as a means of recomposing their own relationship with their parents and their collective memory. And yet, Landau notes, “the tradition is not simply and only ours to make our own. The value of tradition comes from a sense of continuity with the past.” Remember or adopt the tradition without questioning, and one risks not developing self-authorship; move too far from the tradition, and one attenuates her claim to be part of it; forget, reject, or fail to assimilate the tradition, and one breaks with the past altogether.10

To return again to The Chosen for a moment: One of the most noteworthy things about Reuven’s father is that he is a critical Talmud scholar—that is, he studies the Talmud in historical

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10 Melanie Landau, Tradition and Equality in Jewish Marriage: Beyond the Sanctification of Subordination, Continuum Studies in Jewish Thought (New York: Continuum, 2011), 2. See also Gross, The Past in Ruins: Tradition and the Critique of Modernity, 14. It is also important to note here that I am assuming a notion of subjectivity that privileges agency in the ways we have been discussing it here: to be an adult means to exercise one’s capacity for choice. One of the available choices, of course, is to submit oneself to the tradition, and to resist any notion of innovation or accommodation to perceived new values. This is an important observation advanced by Saba Mahmood, which provides a useful frame for considering the choice of ba’alei teshuva, “secular” Jews who take on an Orthodox lifestyle. See Saba Mahmood, Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005).
context, something that Reb Saunders categorically dismisses. Yet that study does not lead Professor Malter, or Reuven, to break with Judaism; they both remain devout adherents of Orthodox practice. Likewise, Prof. Malter is deeply engaged in the present, as a person engaged with the news, as a Zionist activist. The father and son are bonded in their study of the past—as in the long essays Prof. Malter delivers to his son about the history of Hasidism in the guise of a Shabbat evening conversation, at home, over a cup of tea—and in their engagement in the present. In the Malters, Potok portrays a version of the kind of living relationship between past and present, between parent and child, that Greenberg was teaching and writing about at the same time.

The choices of how one generation relates to the previous generation thus bear close resemblance to the choices of how it relates to the past through its collective memory. An individual, and a generation, can cut itself off from its past and its parents. Or it can closely hew to the traditions of mother and father. Or it can go away and come back home, recomposing the cultural memory of the parents and grandparents into a new, and yet continuous, tradition. The point to note for us is the overlapping categories of parents and past. In our journey to adulthood, as both individuals and collectivities, we assume authority by negotiating our relationship with previous generations, with the memories they bear and the traditions they carry. To a greater or lesser degree, our relationship with our forebears is bound up with our relationship with the past.11

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11 Ricœur: “Whether personal or collective, memory refers back by definition to the past that continues to be living by virtue of the transmission from generation to generation; this is the source of a resistance of memory to its historiographical treatment.” Ricœur, Memory, History, Forgetting, 303. This last remark, about resistance, corresponds with the very strong familial architecture of Orthodoxy and its simultaneous resistance to historicism: the distancing necessary in establishing an independent subjectivity—with the potential for violence Trilling observes—is the nub of the challenge in the project of Modern Orthodoxy.
II. Between History and Memory: Yitz Greenberg and American Jewish Life

The story of American Jews in the 1960s and 70s, as of Americans in general, was one of generational conflict: over Vietnam, gender and sexuality, political priorities, ways of relating to past and present, to tradition, to authority. It was, as Daniel Rodgers puts it, an age of fracture, when “conceptions of human nature that in the post-World War II era had been thick with context, social circumstance, institutions, and history gave way to conceptions of human nature that stressed choice, agency, performance, and desire.”12 For many, it was an age of shattering and shipwreck that begged a recomposition of home.

What made Greenberg significant and effective was the way he navigated this reorientation for a wide swath of the American Jewish community in the 1960s and 70s. This came about particularly through his teaching, first at YU and then in speeches at synagogues, Federation dinners, and eventually scores of study retreats in the 1970s. (His published writings frequently reflected edited versions of his talks, and almost always contained ideas he taught orally.) In these encounters, Greenberg helped many American Jews, from a broad range of backgrounds, to understand themselves, as individuals and as a collective, as simultaneously at home in contemporary America, and at one with Jewish tradition. His dialectical method enabled many Jews to feel that they could be authentically Jewish and American without Trilling’s violence or Freud’s neurosis. He gave a large segment of American Jewry a language through which it could honestly express itself.

One letter to Greenberg, written by someone who had just heard him speak at a National Jewish Welfare Board General Assembly session, speaks for many more upon whom he had an effect:

Dear Dr. Greenberg,

I’d be dishonest and deceitful if I chose not to acknowledge how much hearing you forced me to listen to my own insides. It’s easy to hear a speech—much harder to listen to one’s own feelings.

I’ve been chosen for a Young Leadership group and, why me? Leadership I’m as capable of as anyone. But the question “Jewish Leadership, why me?” is not so easily understood or answered. Hopefully, I thought, they’ve made a mistake. But if they’ve made a mistake in choosing me I can’t afford to make a mistake in the assumption of my responsibility.

Coming from a reform background, I was instructed (lovingly, of course) not to marry a gentile, but I was denied pride in my Jewishness. It could be me finding Christmas ornaments right now had I not married someone who loves and takes Judaism very seriously. I still must learn through and grow from feelings of gratefulness that [gentells? Word unclear] like me, and from “The Fixer” who profoundly says, “I’m Jewish, otherwise innocent.” It’s easy to be Jewish at the G.A. amongst friends equally seeking Jewish ties because of anti-Semitism—it’s hard to speak out my Jewishness amongst gentiles—someone might hear!
But I do not want to be the pitiful boy in the concentration camp who, when his number was called, had not had the joy of Jewish experience. The question for me is not anymore Why live in the image of God, but How?

Hearing you speak helps me face myself, hear myself, and want answers. Thank you for that exploration.¹³

Sincerely,

Gene Brown

Brown’s letter reflects the way that Greenberg’s teaching aided the renegotiation of Brown’s relationship to Jewish memory—which had heretofore been animated by a sense of guilt, and now seemed approachable from a position of strength. After hearing Greenberg, Brown went from an attenuated relationship with Jewish collective memory to a fulfilling one—and without a violent revolution against either Judaism or America. Brown particularly highlighted the imperative of the Holocaust, and the image of God concept, which we have noted were two of the central pillars of Greenberg’s teaching. In correspondence, interviews, and anecdotes, it becomes clear that the message Gene Brown heard was one that thousands of other young Jewish leaders likewise heard from Yitz Greenberg, from Orthodox students at YU in the 1960s to the Conservative, Reform, and unaffiliated Jews he encountered after leaving YU in 1972.

¹³ Gene Brown, "Letter to Irving Greenberg," Papers of Rabbi Irving Greenberg, Harvard University Library, 55: 23. Based on the fact that Brown wrote the letter at a General Assembly meeting of the Jewish Federation movement, and given the reference to Young Leadership, it is likely the letter was written when Greenberg and the NJCC were running educational programs for the Federation Young Leadership division in the mid-1970s.
Through his writing, and even more so through his relentless schedule of lectures and retreats, through which he directly reached thousands and indirectly tens of thousands more, Greenberg influenced the way a large part of American Jewry understood itself. As I have argued, central to that self-conception was how individuals and collectivities constituted themselves in relation to the past. I began to elaborate this point in chapter 2, but want to return to it here by focusing on Greenberg’s own relationship with the past, which informs all of his thought, writing, and teaching. As we saw in chapter 2, Greenberg reconceptualized conventional understandings of historicism. Where historical thinking was understood by many moderns to lead to the absence of the divine in history, Greenberg saw the locating of events within their historical context to do precisely the opposite: inviting people in the present to relate to the divine in their own time and place, just as their forebears had done in theirs.

That conceptual move is foundational to understanding the influence Greenberg achieved, because it enabled people like Gene Brown to simultaneously be at home as modern, college-educated Americans and as tradition-observing Jews, without the fear of a violent confrontation between those spheres and the concomitant need to choose either one and reject the other, or live with both in a state of bifurcation. His 1974 address at the United Jewish Appeal study conference, later published as a stand-alone pamphlet, is a good example. It begins:

On the 9th and 10th days of the month of Av in the year 70, the Roman legions in Jerusalem smashed through the fortress tower of Antonia into the Holy Temple and set it afire. In the blackened remains of the sanctuary, lay more than the ruins of the great Jewish revolt for political independence. To many Jews, it appeared that Judaism itself was shattered beyond repair.
Greenberg went on in this address to draw direct parallels between the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the Holocaust of European Jewry two thousand years later, with the implication that the Jews of 1974 confronted very similar challenges to those faced by Yohanan ben Zakkai and the founders of Rabbinic Judaism.

Was there really a God who cared? Were the Jewish people’s promises from God now revealed to be an illusion by the triumph of the pagans and pagan gods? Had God really called Israel to a covenant? Had God now rejected His people—perhaps called a new covenant or a New Testament into being? These were the kind of painful questions Jews had to ask themselves. Even those Jews who remained faithful had to ask: What beliefs could they still affirm honestly? How can Jews serve God now that the main channel of the past is cut off and destroyed? Most important of all was the pedagogic question: How maintain the integrity of the Jewish people and communicate the tradition [emphasis added] in the face of the challenging, sophisticated, fascinating Hellenistic culture, backed by the prestige of majority status and its connection with the bearers of political power?\(^{14}\)

This passage reflects the multiple layers of Greenberg’s engagement with and framing of the Jewish past. On one level, the past becomes a story from which to draw lessons about the present: The challenges we’re facing have parallels in history, he is telling his audience, and we should study them to inform our own actions. This implies that there is value to studying the past, but it also keeps the past at a remove: that happened then, and we inhabit a different time and place in the present.

But Greenberg takes the relationship with the past further than this. The past is not really so separate from us. It isn’t only that the choices we face are similar, but the story of the past actually

reaches out to exercise authority over us: it shapes our sense of home, responsibility, and power. By telling the story of the destruction of Jerusalem and Yohanan ben Zakcai’s response to it, Greenberg implicitly says to his audience: We are the heirs to the tradition they transmitted and developed; that tradition shapes the horizons of our individual and collective subjectivity; and it can do so even more if we acknowledge it, learn it, and embrace it. But if we make a choice to forget the tradition, we not only betray the memory of those who came before us, we have a hand in its death. There is utility in knowing and studying our history for making our own choices in the present, but beyond this, we owe something to that history because it is our history: it matters not just because it is useful, but because it is ours. Study of the past is not only an exercise in objectively studying data, but a subjective activity in which we locate our own story within a larger collective narrative. In this frame, in Saba Mahmood’s formulation, “Tradition… is not a set of symbols and idioms that justify present practices, neither is it an unchanging set of cultural prescriptions that stand in contrast to what is changing, contemporary, or modern. Nor is it a historically fixed social structure. Rather, the past is the very ground through which the subjectivity and self-understanding of a tradition’s adherents are constituted.”

Thus Greenberg operated between two poles of engagement with the past: one that uses the tools of historical scholarship to isolate and understand the past while keeping it at a critical remove, the other that sees a continuity of collective memory between past and present, both for individuals and communities. His teaching is situated between the discourses of history and memory, the worlds of academe and the pulpit, the roles of professor and rabbi. Each checks and leavens the other: the historian’s objectivity checks against the messianist impulse in a fully subjective experience of the past, in essence saying to the would-be messianist, “Don’t think that history is coming to an end; the

15 Mahmood, Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject, 115.
past may bear resemblance to the present, but the present is its own situation, distinct from the past.” And the subjectivity of memory dampens the historicist break with the past, saying, “Don’t think that history has nothing to do with us, or that we have no responsibility to it; the story of the past is our story, it is the narrative within which we locate ourselves.”

Greenberg’s ability to access and weave together both of these discourses made him both intellectually credible and emotionally compelling to his audience of committed Jews whose college educations outpaced their Jewish ones, who came of age in the ‘age of fracture’ following the violent rupture in the life and collective memory of the Jewish people brought about by modernity, emancipation, the Holocaust, and Zionism; and who harbored a relationship with Jewish history in which they had not yet come to see themselves. “Personal as well as collective memory is enriched by the historical past that progressively becomes our own,” writes Ricouer.  

For Gene Brown’s generation of American Jews coming of age in the 1960s and 70s, Jewish history was frequently still a dead or foreign object, imposing a burden experienced as guilt, failing to inspire a sense that individual Jews and the collective generation of which they were a part were not only the custodians of a museum of the Jewish past, but actors in a living story of Jewish history that continued to unfold. By offering a compelling narrative of Jewish history and presenting it as a shared and living cultural memory, that is, as a network of relationships between people who lived before, people who live now, people who live in the future, and a divine being who relates to them all, Greenberg inspired thousands of Jews like Gene Brown to imagine themselves into—to be in relationship with—a collective Jewish imaginary.

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III. Power Within Relationship

I want to underscore this last point about relationship. The reason the past matters, according to Greenberg, is that it is ours: We have a relationship with the past. Here it is important to return to the comparison of the past and ancestors. The years we have studied in the preceding chapters were ones of broadly perceived generational strain. Writing about the publication of Philip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint* in 1969, Alan Cooper notes the way in which the book spoke to a large cultural impulse: “This was February 1969. Hippies, flower children, the Beatles, rebellion against the older generation were the order of the day.” It was a time of generational rupture. But it was also a time of reclamation of tradition, an interest in exploring roots and forging relationships between generations past and present, as exemplified in the success of Alex Haley’s book and miniseries by that name in 1977, which we noted led to the broadcast of *Holocaust* the following year.

Greenberg’s teaching was thus a response to the late 1960s sensation of rupture, and aligned with the mid-1970s interest in ethnicity. Greenberg emphasized the centrality of relationships between generations, and the danger of a generational rupture, which mirrored and overlapped with his view of tradition. If one—and this applied to both an individual and a generation—was to develop into healthy adulthood that combined capacities for both a critical objectivity and an engaged subjectivity, then one had to develop the capacity for relationship: between parents and children, between people in communities, between present and past and future. For Greenberg, this capacity for relationship was located in the recognition of human beings as images of God, and in the idea of covenant. To the degree that people saw and treated each other as created in God’s image, the greater the dignity and depth of their relationship. And to the degree that Jews recognized

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and embraced a relationship with tradition and the past, the greater their expression of the covenant between the God of history and the Jews of the present.

Much of this makes Greenberg sound like other Modern Orthodox rabbis of his time. He shared their understanding of tradition as “neither a slavish adherence to old formulas, nor a romantic veneration of the ‘good old days’ which strips the past of all its meaningfulness for the present.” He would agree with Modern Orthodox Rabbi Norman Lamm—who, with Soloveitchik’s support and blessing, succeeded Belkin as president of YU in 1976—that tradition is “a commitment by the past to the future, the promise of roots, the precondition of a healthy continuity of that which is worthy of being preserved, the affirmation that the human predicament in general, and the Jewish situation in particular, are not frighteningly new, but that they grow out of a soil which we can know and analyze and use to great benefit.”\(^\text{18}\) For the same reason, he would admire and share Orthodoxy’s emphasis on children and family, which he agreed were the primary zone within which subjectivity, including relation with the past, was formed.

But Greenberg also held a more dynamic view of subjectivity and selfhood than Modern Orthodoxy was willing to tolerate in its public discussion, at least by the late 1960s. This view of subjectivity was reflected in both Greenberg’s teaching about the image of God, and his understanding of *halakha* as an ethic of power. Where Lamm in 1958 would decry “slavish adherence to old formulas,”\(^\text{19}\) by the 1970s and 80s, a different discourse had become normative in the Modern Orthodox community, one which emphasized obligation and duty—stronger frames of responsibility that seemed to diminish individual agency and demand greater submission to an

\(^{18}\) Norman Lamm, ”The Need for Tradition: The Editor’s Introduction to a New Journal,” *Tradition* 1, no. 1 (1958).

\(^{19}\) Ibid.
idealized halakha. Greenberg eschewed such conceptual frames, and went further down the path of subjectivity and agency in both human-human and human-divine relationships. In particular, his encounter with the Holocaust was transformative. As we saw in Greenberg’s testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and his speeches about Vietnam, one of the chief lessons he drew from the Holocaust was the imperative to resist all systems that diminished the image of God, which he identified with the individual’s capacity to be a free agent. Greenberg argued that religious systems, including Orthodox Judaism’s practice of Jewish law, were just as susceptible to corruption as other power systems. If tradition and the past became a means to constrict, rather than enhance, humans’ creative capacities to act freely—which Greenberg saw as the essence of their status as God’s image—then they were failing the test of the Holocaust. Memory and history were both bearers of the potential for violence: history by its casting-off nature, memory by its capacity to smother the individual through becoming nostalgia, the inability to deal with the world in the present. The individual, and the community, had to constantly check that their motivations and actions were not erring too far to one extreme or the other—that is, to live in a constant state of dialectic. Greenberg again wanted to move away from the potential for violence through a

20 See, for instance, the discussion of the contrasting approaches to halakha between the legal realism of Emmanuel Rackman and the increasing formalism of Soloveitchik in Kaplan, "From Cooperation to Conflict: Rabbi Professor Emanuel Rackman, Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik, and the Evolution of American Modern Orthodoxy". In particular, Kaplan notes that, whereas in the 1950s Soloveitchik appears to have seriously entertained an approach to halakha that reflected an impulse to innovation and real-world problem-solving, by the early 1960s he had abandoned any serious interest in such an approach in favor of a more academic approach to halakha. Soloveitchik instead adopted a Kierkegaardian approach that emphasized submission to the eternal law, in spite of whatever struggles an individual or community might have. As Kaplan notes, this “means that some of the edge—by no means all, not even most—is taken off the inability of halachists in certain circumstances to find solutions for burning halachic problems.” Greenberg, like Rackman—who Kaplan argues grew increasingly radical over the years—would not settle for a halakha that did not respond to human needs, nor a public discourse that swept away those needs with a mandate to submit.

21 Svetlana Boym’s reflection is helpful here: “At first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time—the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition.” Svetlana Boym, The Future of Nostalgia (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xv.
reconceptualization of how Jews could relate to the past rooted in a dialectic between discourses of history and memory, secular and holy.

And here we come to a contradiction at the heart of Greenberg’s philosophy. As we showed earlier in this chapter, and as we saw in the thought of Emil Fackenheim in chapter 4, Greenberg saw the past as a commanding force. The fact that a Jew’s ancestors had developed cultural memories out of historical experiences gave those experiences a special status as Root Experiences, experiences that had the power to command ritual performance and ethical behavior. Yet such a formulation chafed against Greenberg’s deep commitment to a modern notion of voluntarism and individual freedom, whereby the past could not force people of the present to do anything. The past could make demands, but the present generation was free to reject those demands. And the Holocaust uniquely reinforced both ends of this paradox: the past cried out to be remembered, but God’s absence in the Holocaust also left the present generation completely free not to do so.

By 1982, Greenberg had formulated this as the idea of “Voluntary Covenant,” according to which the covenant between God and the Jews was shattered in the Holocaust. “Morally speaking,” he wrote, “God must repent of the covenant, i.e., do teshuva [repentance] for having given his chosen people a task that was unbearably cruel and dangerous without having provided for their protection. Morally speaking, then, God can have no claims on the Jews by dint of the covenant.” Greenberg suggested that the narrative of the Jewish past, and therefore the claim of that past on Jews of the post-Holocaust present and future, was broken. The Holocaust so fundamentally upended the narrative of Jewish history that Jews could no longer experience the past, and God, as making any claim on them. “The fundamental shift in the nature of the covenant can be put yet another way. It can no longer be commanded,” he said.
If Greenberg had left it at that, he would potentially be in a similar place to theologian Richard Rubenstein, who in his 1966 *After Auschwitz* argued that the covenant was dead. But—and we by now, I hope, might add, of course—Greenberg did not leave it at that. While the authority of the covenant as an agreement between Israel and God was no longer binding on a Jew or the Jews from birth, according to Greenberg, “the Jewish people, released from its obligations, chose voluntarily to take it on again.” That is, after the Holocaust, “we are living in the age of the renewal of the covenant. God was no longer in a position to command, but the Jewish people was so in love with the dream of redemption that it volunteered to carry on its mission.”

Greenberg thus turned powerlessness into power: the Jewish experience of the Holocaust ultimately yielded a renewed and recalibrated human-divine relationship built on a greater degree of individual and collective agency, and a greater degree of subjectivity in Jews’ assumption of the covenant. On the other side of shipwreck, Greenberg offered his audiences a vision of a recomposed collective memory, one that acknowledged the brutal realities of history and incorporated them into a renewed historical narrative. In so doing, Greenberg was taking up the work that Yosef Yerushalmi would identify in the same year in *Zakhor*—work that Greenberg had

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23 Irving Greenberg, "Voluntary Covenant," in *Perspectives*, ch. (New York: CLAL, 1983), 34-35. It is not my aim here to give a full assessment of the idea of Voluntary Covenant, as much as to show it as the destination of a trajectory set in motion during the years explored in the preceding chapters. For a more thorough philosophical-theological treatment, including several important critiques, see Katz, ""Voluntary Covenant: Irving Greenberg on Faith after the Holocaust" and Michael L. Morgan, *Beyond Auschwitz: Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

24 Greenberg explored much the same terrain in a parallel essay, *The Third Great Cycle of Jewish History*, in which he outlined a progressive diminishment of God’s overt presence in the world which was matched by a greater degree of human responsibility to be moral agents in the world. The first era, of Biblical Judaism, ended with the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple and the end of the age of miracles; the second era, Rabbinic Judaism, ended with the Holocaust; the third era was the post-Holocaust age of voluntary covenant. Greenberg, "*The Third Great Cycle of Jewish History*."

been doing for more than a decade—of developing a discursive frame conscious of the dialectic of history and memory and attempting to transcend it.

**IV. Reorientation or Disorientation?**

Yet that might be too charitable a characterization of Greenberg here. While dialectic can be a powerful tool for maintaining contradictions, it can also be intellectually useful when one doesn’t want to choose sides. As in so many of the situations we have seen, Greenberg’s penchant for dialectic can be read as both a principled move on the one hand, and a convenient dodge on the other. In particular, the notion of Voluntary Covenant offered a culture with a seemingly ever-increasing sense of the sovereign self a theology to match: there could be no covenant without the covenantal people, and therefore human beings were truly at the center of the divine-human relationship. In a short but searing critique, Reform Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf wrote that Greenberg’s essay amounted to a “bold denial of a central Jewish view. Here unravels the whole skein of Jewish self-understanding.” After the Holocaust, God was not dead, but God could only exist in the world on human terms. By understanding the covenant to be voluntary, Greenberg made it difficult to talk about stronger frames of responsibility like duty and obligation—frames that Soloveitchik, and the Orthodoxy that had left Greenberg behind, came to emphasize more and more. As Wolf, the Reform rabbi criticizing the rabbi he labeled in quotation marks as “Orthodox,” wrote, the result of Greenberg’s approach was that “we are just about all the God there is left in the world. Greenberg has systematically deconstructed Judaism.”²⁵

To elaborate this point, we can frame Wolf’s question this way: If the past has no authority to make claims on the present, then does the individual exist within any framework of responsibility?

²⁵ Wolf, “The Revisionism of Irving Greenberg”. 
to memory? Greenberg says yes, but only after the individual chooses to become bound by it (this was the dynamic he tried to effect dramatically in his suggestions for the deathbed scene in The Jazz Singer). Such an approach is radically destabilizing to long-held Jewish theological conceptions about the authority of the covenant, which presuppose that the laws of the Torah are obligatory, as in Moses’s words, “I am making this covenant, with its oath, not only with you who are standing here with us today in the presence of the Lord our God but also with those who are not here today,” and in the Talmudic dictum that one achieves greater divine reward for fulfilling commandments than for voluntary action.

Beyond this, Greenberg’s notion is also remarkably optimistic. Where Rubenstein would see the Holocaust as marking the death of God, or Elie Wiesel would dwell in the ineffability of the Holocaust (while simultaneously producing a voluminous literature on the topic), Greenberg would walk to the edge of the abyss, peer in, and proclaim not God’s death or a duty for silence, but an opportunity to relate to God even more:

The Holocaust calls on Jews, Christians, and others to absolutely resist the total authority of this cultural moment. The experience frees them to respond to their own claim, which comes from outside the framework of this civilization, to relate to a divine other, who sets limits and judges the absolute claims of contemporary philosophic and scientific and human political systems. To follow this orientation is to be opened again to the possibilities of Exodus and immortality.

27 Babylonian Talmud Kiddushin 31a, Bava Kama 87a, and Avoda Zara 3a
28 Thanks to Yehuda Kurtzer in sparking my thinking about this point.
29 Greenberg, "Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity and Modernity after the Holocaust", 31.
This comes in the same essay in which Greenberg speaks, as he frequently did, of children thrown directly into the ovens of crematoria so that the Nazis could save the fraction of a cent it cost to gas them. It exists uncomfortably, in frank contradiction, with Greenberg’s espousal of a chastened God whose covenant is no longer binding.

And it must be noted as well that Greenberg taught this philosophy in service of political projects that institutionalized Jewish power, in both Israel and America. Wolf, who founded the liberal political action group Breira to advocate against Israeli settlement construction and for Israeli negotiation with the PLO, called Greenberg’s theological ideas a thinly-veiled “political teleology,” and accused “Greenberg’s complex theological dialectic of being a cover for the new Jewish chauvinism.”

As we have seen, Greenberg’s teaching emphasized the divine imperative and proto-messianic reality for the re-establishment of the Jewish state—an implication of his inversion of secular and holy: the state was not only a secular enterprise, but bore theological significance. That teaching helped position Greenberg as a leading force in the emergence of Jewish political power in the 1970s and 80s, which wove together a narrative of Holocaust memory and American economic, military, and diplomatic support for Israel. His work with young adult Jewish leaders in the early 1970s put him in the position to shape their philosophy and opinions when they became institutional leaders in later years. As we noted, it was at a retreat with Greenberg through the Jewish Federation of Atlanta that President Jimmy Carter’s chief domestic policy adviser, Stuart Eizenstat, would awaken to a new relationship with Jewish collective memory, and particularly with the Holocaust, which would ultimately prove pivotal in creating the Holocaust memorial museum on the National Mall, as well as countless Holocaust memorials, museums, and educational programs, in

30 Wolf, “The Revisionism of Irving Greenberg”
communities across the country.\textsuperscript{31} Greenberg’s narrative twinned the Holocaust, the nadir of Jewish alienation, with Israel, the “return of the Jewish people to history.” Where the Holocaust was the ultimate experience of loss of home, failed responsibility (of world Jewry to save its European brethren, and of the world to save the Jews), and powerlessness, Israel was the ultimate return to home, the ultimate assumption of responsibility (maintaining a state), the ultimate expression of power.

Thus, where the Holocaust represented God’s ultimate absence, Israel represented God’s ultimate presence, but in its post-modern manifestation, through human—by which Greenberg meant, in this context, Jewish—agency. God’s radical hiddenness was actually God’s radical presence—a paradox. “If the divine presence resided on Jerusalem’s holy mount, then [after the destruction of Jerusalem] the hidden God could be found everywhere. So synagogues could be located anywhere. By this logic, the God who, after the Holocaust, is even more profoundly hidden must be found everywhere.” And by this logic, God was found precisely in those areas deemed secular, particularly in the creation of Israel as a preserver and developer of Jewish life. “The State shifts the balance of Jewish activity and concern to the secular enterprises of society building, social justice and human politics. The revelation of Israel is a call to secularity; the religious enterprise must focus on the mundane.”\textsuperscript{32} Greenberg’s theology thus supported a robust exercise of American Jewish political power on behalf of Israel, and the presentation of Israel as the necessary response to the Holocaust. This had the effect of making the case for Israel into not only a political matter, but a

\textsuperscript{31} "The Eizenstats and Carter: Stu and Fran Most Observant Jews of President's Circle"; Eizenstat, "In Praise of a Visionary Leader".

\textsuperscript{32} Greenberg, "The Third Great Cycle of Jewish History", 10-11. It is important to note how closely Greenberg here echoes similar sentiments to Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, first chief rabbi of British mandate Palestine. Like Greenberg, Kook blurred secular and religious, writing of the holiness of secular Zionists. His teaching provided the foundation for the Israeli movement of Religious Zionism, and after 1967 for the Greater Israel movement spearheaded by Kook’s son, Zvi Yehuda, that advocated settlement in the newly-conquered West Bank and Gaza Strip. Greenberg seems to have arrived at a similar view to Kook independent of a major encounter with his teaching, and he was not a public advocate for settlement construction.
moral one as well, and created a dynamic where publicly criticizing Israel was inviting the accusation that one was betraying the memory of the victims of the Holocaust. Negotiating with Israel’s enemies could be critiqued as a repeat of Neville Chamberlin’s appeasement of Hitler at Munich in 1938. Under such terms, it becomes very hard to argue about Israeli security policy if one wishes to maintain political standing in the American Jewish community, as the power of Holocaust memory becomes the ultimate trump card in a political debate.33

There is truth in this critique, and Greenberg deserves a share of responsibility for developing the theological framework that supported (and supports) it. Yet it would not be accurate to suggest that Greenberg himself engaged in this kind of rhetoric, even if he contributed to a conceptual undergirding that enabled it. Greenberg publicly voiced his personal opposition to settlement-building in the West Bank in the 1970s34, supported the negotiations to create a Palestinian state on the West Bank during the Oslo peace process, and wrote about Israeli abuses and excesses of power, which he viewed as an inevitable result of having power in the first place. This didn’t excuse those abuses and excesses, which he argued needed to be confronted and minimized. But Greenberg was emphatic that, in light of the powerlessness of the Holocaust, the power of self-defense and preservation that came from having a state and home, and the assumption of responsibility it entailed, was preferable to the alternative. And he viewed public criticism of Israel by American Jews as detrimental in an environment in which Israel’s legitimacy and existence was continually under attack. “Dangerous alternatives tempt us at every step: undermining Israel or

33 Cf. Wolf, as well as Novick, The Holocaust in American Life.

34 “Rabbi Greenberg, who acknowledges that he has ‘wrestled’ with the issue in his own mind, said in a recent interview, ‘Personally I’m not in favor of the policy [of settlement construction].’ But he sees the real issue as whether or not Jews and Arabs can live together peacefully, the real purpose of the policy as allowing Israel ‘to prove its right to settle’ in the West Bank.” Linda Charlton, “Israel’s Settlements Stir Intense Debate among U.S. Jews” The New York Times, July 6, 1979.
abandoning it through excessive criticism and faulty judgments—or betraying Israel by giving it a moral blank check and uncritical love.”

As on so many other occasions, such a dialectical position made Greenberg into something of a Zelig for many American Jews: He could be claimed both by those on the political left and right. He could be claimed by the Orthodox and the non-Orthodox, by religious and secular, clerical and academic. He could be Rabbi Greenberg or Dr. Greenberg, Yitz, “Yitz,” Yitzhak, Irving (Yitz) or just Irving, “Orthodox rabbi” or “world-renowned Jewish scholar.” The literal variety of ways in which Greenberg was referred to in his publications reflects this shape-shifting nature: Greenberg could be what he perceived would be most effective in communicating his message. He was conscious in his self-presentation. On the one hand, this reflects his unique capacity to speak to a wide range of audiences and communities; on the other, it opens him to accusations of unrootedness and a lack of integrity, of simply telling people what they wanted to hear.

Yet I think such a judgment goes too far. Greenberg certainly had a deep aversion to the possibility of irreparable shattering, to pushing so hard that he would risk the alienation of his audience. He consistently sought to preserve an orientation of relationship. So his dialecticism, which enabled him to argue opposing positions simultaneously, seems to be reflected in—it is beyond my scope to say motivated by—that fear. That does not, in my view, mean that Greenberg lacked integrity. Bona fide pandering would have entailed telling his audiences only what they wanted to hear, and Greenberg categorically did not do this. Just the opposite, he regularly challenged them:


36 One particularly glaring example of this was Greenberg’s 1967 article in Religious Education, where he listed his name as Irving Greenberg and his professional affiliation as “Faculty of the Canadian Center for Advanced Jewish Scholarship; Rabbi, Riverdale Jewish Center, New York.” At the time, Greenberg was a full-time professor of history at YU. The Canadian Center was the weeklong summer retreat organized by David Hartman (see chapter 4). But because he was writing about interfaith dialogue, he felt the need to distance himself from Soloveitchik, and thus did not include YU on his byline. "The Cultural Revolution and Religious Unity".
to confront the reality of the Holocaust, to own up to the meaning of Israel in their lives, to increase their knowledge and observance of Jewish tradition, to critique themselves and the movements and societies of which they were a part. While Greenberg’s dialecticism perhaps had emotional roots, he took pains to develop it as a principled approach.

Thus I see Greenberg and his notions of holy secularity and voluntary covenant not as pandering or even primarily politically motivated, but as genuinely attempting to bridge a potentially unbridgeable divide. The same Yitz Greenberg who sought to ameliorate conflict between generations, conflict between parents and children, conflict between the Orthodox and non-Orthodox, conflict between Jews and Christians—the same Greenberg, inevitably it seems, sought, through the idea of voluntary covenant, to triangulate, reconceptualize, and ultimately heal a potentially shattering conflict between the Jews and their God.

Did he succeed? In many ways it seems too early to know. Within Orthodoxy, Greenberg is decidedly a marginal figure, irrelevant in all but the most liberal circles. And yet, those liberal circles have demonstrated shoots of new growth in recent years, from the establishment of rabbinic schools for men and women, to the development of Orthodox social justice movements and organizations, to increasing tolerance and embrace of public discussion of previously-taboo conversations about gender, sexuality, and power. Recent scandals involving rabbinic abuses of power have opened up public conversations that can trace their roots to Greenberg’s 1966 Commentator interview—and strikingly, neither Yitz nor Blu Greenberg has seen the need to speak out publicly, as it is their students, and their students’ students, who are doing so. Thus, even though at this stage it would seem that Greenberg failed to achieve his aims in the Orthodox community, history is still unfolding. We will only know with more time.
Outside the Orthodox community, it is likewise too early to pass judgment. As we noted in chapter 1, Greenberg’s efforts succeeded in inspiring a significant segment of young Jewish leaders in the 1970s and 80s—like those who attended the Camp Barney Medintz retreat with which we opened this study—to greater interest in and practice of Jewish ritual and learning. His push for these non-Orthodox Jews to send their children to Jewish day schools and summer camps resulted in a significant increase in the number of these institutions. His teaching of the religious significance of Israel and American Jewish support for it likewise contributed to a high degree of affinity between American Jews and the Jewish state. And yet, if recent surveys are any indication, these successes, even if they lasted beyond that generation, did not significantly alter the way that most American Jews inhabit their Judaism. Greenberg’s priorities, of ritual observance and communal participation, are less and less the priorities of today’s American Jews. Thus we can say that, while Greenberg may have stemmed the tide he saw cascading over American Jewish life in the late 1960s, he does not seem to have turned it.

The most significant area where this isn’t true is the Holocaust, which continues to be a central, even dominant, event for American Jews. The 2013 Pew Research Center survey of American Jews found that 73 percent of respondents said that “remembering the Holocaust” was “essential to being Jewish,” the highest item on a list that included “leading an ethical/moral life,” “caring about Israel,” “observing Jewish law,” and “eating traditional Jewish foods,” among others. So where Greenberg may have failed in these other areas, he clearly succeeded with the Holocaust. Yet even for Greenberg, that success may belie a greater sense of failure. For while he

unquestionably advocated for greater Jewish awareness and commemoration of the Holocaust, and even for its acknowledgement as a revelatory event on par with Sinai, he never saw the Holocaust as divorced from the rest of Jewish tradition and Jewish life. Indeed, it is not too much to say that Greenberg saw the privileging of the Holocaust at the expense of the rest of Jewish memory as a tragedy—one that he helped to create. By succeeding in pushing the Holocaust to the center of American Jewish consciousness, and bringing institutional power to bear in the service of its commemoration, while failing to successfully and sustainably engage Jews in the rest of Jewish memory, Greenberg unwittingly brought about a Jewish self-image in which Auschwitz is not just on par with Sinai, but comes to displace it. Even so, as the generation of survivors dies out and Jewish memory develops at a greater remove from their lives, things may well change. Only time will tell; we are still too close to these events to offer anything stronger than the most provisional interpretation.


As the art of asking questions, dialectic proves its value because only the person who knows how to ask questions is able to persist in his questioning, which involves being able to preserve his orientation toward openness.39

~Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*

In this closing section, I want to reflect on the ways in which studying Greenberg can inform the study of religion in America. While Greenberg has been the object of this study, I believe that as a historical theologian he also holds some utility for scholars of religion today—not necessarily in the formulations he conjured, but in his ability and willingness to straddle worlds, to complicate our vision of strict binaries of the religious and the secular, the holy and the profane, the present and the past. We may not use Greenberg’s idea of holy secularity, or his approach to historicism, as theoretical tools in religious studies; but I believe that he is a theorist who can help us make theoretical moves, and I would like to take these last few pages to elaborate on this point.

In his analysis of the condition of tradition in the contemporary Western world, David Gross comes to advocate an approach to relating to the past—specifically through text, but which we can extend to any interpretable thing within a tradition—that he worries is becoming more and more difficult to actualize. It is “neither to embrace the traditions contained in texts so totally that one tries simply to repeat or relive them, nor to collapse the past into the present.” Rather, Gross, drawing on Gadamer, suggests, “in a true dialogue with tradition, one stays firmly planted in the present while asking difficult questions of the tradition and allowing tradition to ask difficult questions in return.”\(^4^0\) We inhabit the present and relate to the past—neither cutting ourselves off from it by making it radically other, nor allowing it to dictate anything to us. Rather, we have a dialogue with the past, where we and our past are both subjects in an I-Thou, rather than I-It, relationship.

I would suggest that Gross’s notion tracks closely with Greenberg’s teaching, attempting to carve out a conceptual space beyond the binary of history and memory: the past is both separate from and close to us. It becomes available for relationship. The past is an interlocutor in a

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conversation in which both we and it have authority. But where Gross limits himself to discussing the relationship of past and present through tradition, Greenberg goes further and includes the dimension of the divine: It is not only that we relate to the people and events of the past in our dialogue through and about tradition, but that God is present in and emerges through this conversation. “The covenantal way is undergoing a major reorientation in light of the Holocaust and the rebirth of Israel,” Greenberg wrote. “We are living in an age of renewed revelation,” which has led to the writing of Scriptures. The revelation and the new Scriptures, he suggested, have been obscured for two reasons: the first is the statement of the tradition itself that new revelations will not happen and new Scriptures cannot be admitted, which Greenberg suggested was merely a hedge against supercession, but not a reflection of reality. The second was that, “in accordance with the third era”—the post-Holocaust era—“they are, by definition, hidden. The destructive event and the redemptive one are so obscured, flawed and ambiguous that it is easy to miss their religious significance altogether.” That is, we have been so conditioned by the disenchantment of modernity not to see the divine in the workings of the world that we could fail to see God’s presence in the unfolding events of our own time. The Scriptures of this new secular era “do not present themselves as Scripture but as history, fact, and sometimes, as anti-Scripture. Revelation has been successfully obscured thanks to the deep hiddenness of the events and the continuing grip of modern ideas which seemingly cut off human culture from revelation channels.”

41 Greenberg, “The Third Era of Jewish History: Power and Politics”, 24-25. Greenberg articulated this very idea in his earliest published writing, a 1962 speech to the Yavneh student convention, which he began with a long parable about what would happen if the Messiah appeared in the contemporary world: No one would notice him, he said. “I fear that our generation is illustrating this story. We are living in Messianic times, yet our motto seems to be ‘business as usual.’” “Yavneh: Looking Ahead, Values and Goals”.
Greenberg’s ideas about dialogue with the past, the role of tradition, and individual subjectivity put him in conversation with theorists such as Alisdaire MacIntyre and Charles Taylor. But his identification as a rabbi, and his inclusion of God, revelation, and his messianic streak, attenuate that conversation and more comfortably situate him as a theologian. This reflects a dynamic highlighted by Robert Orsi, who in describing pilgrims to Catholic shrines who experience apparitions of the Virgin Mary, asks, “What words or categories of interpretation are there for phenomena such as these?” The moment we invoke the divine in our scholarly account, we are challenged. “How do we talk about what happened, first at Lourdes (and at other sites where the transcendent breaks into time and comes face to face with humans in the circumstances of their everyday lives), and then afterward, as the result of what happened at Lourdes, there and at all the other Lourdes?” While Rabbi Greenberg can comfortably use a word like revelation, Orsi argues that our modern, critical, academic language lacks a vocabulary for describing such events because it is rooted in a Western worldview “under the sign of absence. Time and space are emptied of presence.” What words, what conceptual categories, can we use?

Orsi suggests we begin with a notion of “abundance.” At the root of all the later observances, rituals, embodiments and physical memorializations of Lourdes and other shrines, Orsi says, “Before everything else there was the event of the presence of the human and the divine to each other.” There was a relationship, and the promise of relationships: between people both present and past, a collective memory, and a divine being that exists within the cultural imaginary.

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42 Michael Morgan directly compares Greenberg with MacIntyre and Taylor, who “not only saw the need to accept the historical situatedness of human agency and to seek, within that context, transcendent standards or principles to guide human conduct and people's lives; they also sought to clarify and defend the coherence of this position. Greenberg does not attempt this philosophical task, but he does exemplify the framework of a principled and situated Jewish selfhood. He constructs a theological narrative for a post-Holocaust Jewish world and elicits the ground and direction of its authoritative source. The voluntary covenant is the expression of a situated Jewish commitment to the purposes of traditional Jewish existence, reinterpreted and conceived as the human articulation of the divine plan. After Auschwitz, Greenberg claims, this is the most authentic way of being Jewish and hence the most acceptable rereading of the Jewish past.” Morgan, Beyond Auschwitz: Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought in America, 139.
He observes that abundant events serve “as a focusing lens for the intricacies of relationships in a particular area at a particular time, meaning for all the hopes, desires, and fears circulating among a group of people as these were taking shape at a certain place and a certain time.” A girl at Lourdes beholds the Virgin Mary, and that moment of the transcendent breaking through to the material world becomes the touchstone for others to experience something of that moment. What is key here is that the girl has a relationship with the Virgin, and that relationship gives rise to other relationships between people, things, and beings from beyond the material world—to an imaginary, a community, a cultural memory.43

Catholic and Jewish cultural milieus are, of course, different. Orsi’s comment that “relationships ultimately gave way, as they always do in devotional Catholicism, to things,” is not immediately translatable to Jewish life. But I would offer that one Jewish translation would be this: relationships ultimately give way to stories, narratives, material symbols, and ritualized commemoration. That is, relationships become the basis of cultural memory. Relationships become the story of the past, and the possibility and continuance of relationship thus becomes the story of the present and future. What Greenberg, Orsi, and Gross all agree on is that we can expand our vocabulary—even our experience!—of presence without sacrificing our capacity for critical thought. People, including scholars, including moderns, experience the presence of beings from beyond the sensorial present—whether from the past or from a present that transcends the one we are consciously aware of.

To say such a thing not only does not betray our responsibilities as scholars, it rather fulfills them by self-consciously checking some of modernity’s problematic impulses. “The past does not exist independently from the present,” writes Michel-Rolph Trouliot. “Indeed, the past is only past

43 Orsi, “Abundant History: Marian Apparitions as Alternative Modernity.”
because there is a present, just as I can point to something over there only because I am here. But nothing is inherently over there or here. In that sense, the past has no content. The past—or, more accurately, pastness—is a position. Thus, in no way can we identify the past as past.”44 Our relationship with the past, like our relationship with the divine, is a part of our cultural imaginary. Where Gross, Orsi, Trouilliot and others aim to make this point by reaching out from an academic tradition and reclaiming elements discarded in the wake of the reformations of modernity, Greenberg did the same by problematizing Jews’ modern self-conceptions and inviting them into a dynamic relationship with their past, their present, their tradition, and their God.

In so doing, Greenberg was drawing on a relationship inherent in the shared roots of the words present and presence. To return to a remark from Ricouer we saw in the introduction, “Death is implied in the very act of doing history… Death marks, so to speak, the absent in history.”45 So much of modern self-conception aims to develop an orientation of objectivity, of detachment—that is, of being unattached, unrelated. At the heart of that orientation is a mark of absence, the same absence Ricouer attaches to historicism. We relate to the past through absence: the absence of the dead who are no longer here, who are no longer present; the absence of a divine who may have lived in the past, but in ceasing to exist in the present, is not present. To be present means to exist in the present. To experience the presence of others means to inhabit a relationship with them in the present, whether they are physically present or not. In emphasizing absence, in positing the superiority of objectivity and detachment over subjectivity and relationship, modernity created room for new frames of knowledge and experience to emerge, at the cost of tremendous violence to bodies and collective memories.

44 Trouillot, Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History, 15.
45 Ricœur, Memory, History, Forgetting, 365.
A new generation of scholars, of which I am a part, aims to develop a scholarship of presence. Across from them, a new generation of clergy, of which I am also a part, seeks to develop its own discourse of presence. In Rabbi Dr. Irving Yitz Greenberg, we can discern one model for the kind of scholarship, the kind of discourse, and the kind of subjectivity we are trying to develop.
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Editor’s Note: The following is the fourth in a series of articles about YU—its schools, faculty, and students. This particular article, written by Freshman Harold Goldberg who has been working on this since September, is a crucial article for all to consider.

Dr. Irving Greenberg is an associate professor of history at Yeshiva College, and is also currently serving as rabbi at the Riverdale Jewish Center in The Bronx, New York. Dr. Greenberg earned a B.A. from Brooklyn College in 1953, an M.A. from Harvard in 1954, and a Ph.D. from Harvard in 1959. Ordained from the Beth Joseph Theological Seminary in 1953, he taught American History at Tel-Aviv University in 1961-62 on a Fulbright scholarship.

What do you believe is the essential element in Jewish Theology?

The covenant idea, the belief that an infinite G-d is concerned for man and will enter into a personal relationship with him.

The Noahic covenant implies that instead of destroying man each time that he sins, G-d will work with man, whatever his actions. G-d seems to have sanctioned man’s freedom and accepted the fact that he tends to sin. Man’s evil tendency suggests the need for at least one group to continually fulfill man’s potential for living according to G-d’s will, to continually testify that G-d exists. Ideally, the Jews perform this function by accepting the covenants of Abraham and Moses—by fulfilling their halachic obligations to man and G-d. We must testify to ourselves, to non-religious Jews and to gentiles.

I believe that the definition of a Jew is one who takes the covenant idea seriously, who struggles to find its validity in his own life. It doesn’t matter to me whether one calls himself Reform, Conservative or Orthodox. However, I identify with Orthodoxy. Although too many Orthodox Jews merely accept the covenant doctrines and do not attempt to find their relevance to modern life, I still think that Orthodoxy has the largest number of people who do take the covenant idea seriously.

Do you feel that the categories of “Reform,” “Conservative,” and “Orthodox” have any meaning?

The main reality in these categories is an institutional one. But too often the three classifications only blind one’s vision. Today Judaism intellectually is shattered in a thousand different directions, and when we admit this, we’ll be able to begin struggling with the real problems facing the American Jewish community. These classifications make it seem that any problem which arises can be neatly fit into three boxes, each one representing a denominational view. But this is just not true.

What is the primary problem facing today’s Orthodox community?

Orthodoxy refuses to come out of the East European ghetto psychologically. In the ghetto, Orthodoxy floated off into its own world and it is still living there. Furthermore, Orthodoxy refuses to show sympathy to those who respond authentically to the fact that Orthodoxy has lost all connection with modern life. Conservative and Reform have taken the risk and dealt seriously with the problem of Judaism’s relevancy to modern life, but I believe that they came up with the wrong answers.

1 Goldberg, "Dr. Greenberg Discusses Orthodoxy, Y.U., Viet Nam & Sex"
Orthodox Jews inherit the notion that Judaism entirely transcends the temporal, that Judaism should be independent of local culture. We’ve come to think that a relationship with the Divine means separation from current or everyday life.

But on the contrary, our acceptance of the Mosaic covenant and of Jewish law is tantamount to the belief that G-d intervenes in the temporal, and that we can experience infinite values in a concrete worldly experience. Thus, Jewish history is a history of human responses to the Divine approach—to Torah, Prophetic and Talmudic values, and mitzvot. Some of these human responses have lead [sic] Jews to experience their Zelem Elokim and some have not.

The central issue in Judaism today is this: What are the concrete experiences that can lead us to an experience with G-d?

**Ideally, how does Orthodox Judaism believe that Jews can experience the Divine?**

Orthodoxy believes that the Divine can be experienced through the observance of every halachah. Yet, Orthodoxy has escaped into the purely ritualistic realm of halachah, has homogenized [sic] halachah and has made a routine out of it. I think that the basis of Orthodoxy’s escape is the belief that Torah cannot stand up to the challenge of contemporary civilization. Thus, our withdrawal from society is a means of “saving” G-d or covering up his “weakness.” This attitude reflects our cowardice, for G-d and His Torah have enough vitality to live in any situation. Our desire to withdraw is an indication of our unwillingness to admit that our beliefs are shallow. One with a religious attitude would not ignore America, but would question why we were brought her, and how we can utilize America for the realization of Jewish personal and social ideals.

Orthodoxy should not unrealistically deny that conditions have changed, but should explore what meaning many of the mitzvot can have for us today. The willingness to explore is the valid component of certain Conservative approaches, but I often disagree with the Conservative application of this principle. Too many time [sic] the Conservative movement changes halachah because popular opinion demands the change. I believe that changes in halachah should not be the result of popular opinion, but the result of deliberate consideration by the gedolim.

**How can Orthodoxy—halachic Judaism—become relevant in America?**

Orthodoxy must undertake three tasks. First, we must recognize that a democratic society not only liberates us from persecution, but can also energize us. In the past we had to survive among barbarism. The premium that we paid for survival was the perversion of the idea of the Chosen People; we came to think of ourselves as inherently better than others. But our only unique characteristic is an obligation to live in a holy manner by observing commandments, to set an example.

The pressure of the ghetto is now removed, and democratic America can eliminate our superiority complex and return us to our ideals of human equality and social justice. We should not necessarily accept all of America, but at least w should explore its attitudes and integrate those that illuminate and deepen our traditional Jewish framework. For example, we should recognize that it is our religious responsibility to participate in the current civil rights struggle.

Secondly, Orthodoxy must train a body of scholars in the new fields of study, especially in Biblical criticism.

We should acknowledge a debt to Bible critics. They have shown that the Torah is not toneless, but has elements in common with the temporal experience of the ancient Near East. This does not undermine our faith because the Jewish idea of a holy life is the proper utilization of the temporal. However, contemporary scholarship denies G-d and sees only the temporal qualities of the
ancient Jew. We need Jewish scholars who assume that man can relate to G-d. This type of Jewish scholarship would illuminate our understanding of the ancient Jew, it would enable us to understand the exact point of meeting between the Divine and the temporal. We would be able to see how the ancient Jew utilized the temporal in a Divine manner.

Denying either the Divine or the temporal is no answer to the questions raised by Biblical scholarship. We need to undertake Biblical scholarship in order to more fully understand our own revelation. We should be committed by faith to the Torah as Divine revelation, but what we mean by ‘Divine revelation’ may be less external or mechanical than many Jews now think.

The third main task confronting Orthodoxy is a thorough re-examination of the Shulchan Orach [sic]. The purpose of halachah is to transform the mundane into the holy by the utilization of the halacha which applies to any given experience. But today, there are some experiences which halachah doesn’t cover adequately, and we are unwilling to apply many halachot that deal with contemporary problems. The Poskim aren’t meeting their responsibility in updating and fully applying our law codes. This inaction represents a denial of one of the basic tenets of Judaism: that our tradition may be applied to any situation. In short, the halachah has broken down.

What are some major contemporary problems to which we could apply halachic principles and laws, but don’t?

Two such problems are the war in Viet Nam and the American attitude toward the welfare of our society.

Instead of taking the halachic outlook on war seriously, the bulk of today’s Orthodox Jews back President Johnson’s policy with the un-Jewish tendency to ‘render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s.’

Only Jews are bound to observe halachah, to base their views and actions about the Viet Nam war upon halachah. But in the spirit of a democratic society, we can suggest that others accept our attitudes and follow our actions.

Judaism longs desperately for peace, and the prophetic vision sees peace as the only basis of any redeemed world order. But the real task today is to avoid sweeping moralisms and get down to the specifics about how to wage peace.

As I mentioned before, the essence of halachah seeks to realize the Divine in concrete human situations. In perfecting the world, we may unavoidably collaborate with the evil in reality until that evil is overcome. This is necessary, but, in turn, we have to participate in the world without accepting it as it is. Thus, sin and purity are inextricably mixed and every step toward the kingdom of G-d may involve treading down some ideals. This anti-utopian quality of halachah enables the Torah not to abandon the secular realm to Satan or Caesar [sic]. We, therefore, avoid pacifism because it would pave the way for the triumph of evil incarnate. Instead, we must embrace the necessary policies, even if they are morally ambiguous, even if they have negative side effects. Specifically, we cannot a priori exclude war as a policy, but must judge its validity in specific cases.

The Rambam defines war as necessary when the enemy seeks to annihilate Jews. Talmudic and post-Talmudic sources go farther. They say that forces which seek to destroy’s [sic] man’s dignity and spiritual needs may be opposed with the same vigor as the forces which seek to destroy man physically. In recent times, the Chofetz Chaim ruled that all the laws of Sabbath, Yom Kippur and other restrictions which are waived to save a life in danger may be waived to save a man from spiritual annihilation.

In order to determine whether war is ‘necessary,’ the halachist must be well versed in the given military-political situation. Certain aggressive forms of Communism might be judged as intent
on the spiritual annihilation of man. But this is precisely the nub of our judgment on Viet Nam. We must judge whether Ho Chi Minh works a basic denial of human life and dignity on his people, or whether there is a possibility that his government is the best possible one in this situation.

We must determine if a neutralist or Titoist solution is possible. If so, this would not be considered as a necessary war. On the other hand, if containment of an aggressive Communism is necessary here, the war can be justified and accepted (without whitewashing its moral shortcomings).

It follows that we must bend all our efforts to secure a full airing of the issues by the administration. Jews and other religious groups should make it clear to the administration that they are prepared to grapple with the real issue and do not demand a purist flag-waving justification.

If the war is found to be justified, we would be open to the elements of evil, but we must seek to minimize them. There is great resistance among all clergymen to getting involved in operational details of a war situation, yet it may be here that the greatest saving of human lives can be achieved. For a simple order to win a war frequently leads to unlimited excess. Once informed, we must descend to the political marketplace and demand those specific policies of our government which best preserves the dignity and life of the Vietnamese.

_Halacha_ requires serious peace attempts before any war is prosecuted. Here, too, clergymen must be informed before they can decide whether the U.S.’s recent peace efforts were adequate, whether the Administration’s apparent unwillingness to negotiate with the Viet Cong was based upon strategy considerations or upon a fear of domestic and political reprisals.

If the peace efforts were limited by political consideration, Jews and other religious groups should have exposed them as inadequate. I believe that religious groups have more influence than they think, and if we pledge to the Administration that we will not campaign on generalizations but in the political arena, we can insure the Administration that it will not suffer political losses if it seriously explores the chance of peace with the National Liberation Front, even if such exploration falls through.

The _halacha_ demands that one risk the possibility, but not the probability of losing his life in order to save another’s. Should the present crises escalate to a potentially nuclear one, we would be in a different _halachic_ category, and would seriously have to review our stand. However, I do not think that we are now in a potential nuclear situation. Thus, religion’s task is to think concretely, accepting the moral ambiguities, rather than give vague, idealistic preaching.

Although _halacha_ requires the full sharing of responsibility by the entire society in the time of necessary war, the moral objector is still exempt. Contrary to present American law, the Rambam recognizes the legitimacy of objecting to a specific war without being opposed to war in general. I think that this would be in order now. Nor need we fear the results. It is a mark of the security and commitment of the democratic society that only it could afford to allow such dissent. We desperately need sincere rebuttal and challenge because we should be aware of the tentative reeds on which we base our judgment; of the ambiguity of our stands and of the inescapable side effects that may flow.

**Two Functions**

Drawing on its historical tradition, Judaism can see two functions for itself today concerning the present attitude in American toward the welfare of society. One function is the prophetic-messianic role. That is, to pose a radical alternative to current behavior and warn of serious punishment if obedience does not follow. The second role of Judaism is that of healing and reconciliation. Of embracing the qualities of goodness and value which are in the status quo; of working soberly within the existing conditions for limited and gradual change; of healing and
soothing the inescapable inequities and existential evils of sorrow and death which no reform can ever cure. Today the gradualism and sobriety have their spokesmen, but they are so steeped in complacency in the face of serious problems that it is time to take up the prophetic theme again. Basic to the prophetic framework is the requirement that Jews possess a social conscience and exercise it.

The central moral principle of the Torah is the belief that man is created in the image of G-d, and this implies that any act or policy which humiliates or ‘shrinks’ a person is an act of desecration of the Divine image. Belittling man drives the Divine presence out of the world. Thus, Jews are required to eliminate those conditions—physical or psychological—that humiliate people.

Before a man can live a spiritual life, he must be able to satisfy his bodily needs. The Rambam says, ‘The well-being of the soul undoubtedly comes first in rank, but the well-being of the body, which involves the government of the state and the establishment of the best relations among men, is first in nature and time. The well-being of the soul can only be obtained after that of the body is secured. The well-being of the body is only possible when man has all his wants supplied.’

**Poverty**

Thus, Jews must stand for an increased war on poverty. It has been estimated that it would take $10 billion to lift all the families now under the poverty level over the threshold. Even though it would be $10 billion that would repay itself a thousand times over, we have only a $1 billion program against poverty. It is our religious duty to involve ourselves in politics and peak up for an increased poverty program.

Although material well being is necessary for leading a spiritual life, present day American has taught us poignantly that material well being does not itself insure the acceptance of spiritual values. On the one hand, the great amount of leisure time in America allows for creativity and craftsmanship which modern, mechanize work—especially in factory settings—does not provide. Yet, most Americans do not utilize their time for personal fulfillment.

**Controls**

Manufacturers are increasingly turning people into mere uncontrollable consumers to take in the ongoing flow of goods. The producers break down traditional impulse controls with a constant flow of hidden and open persuasion techniques, with stimulation by provocation, by sex, or by fear. This is especially effective on children. In Erich Fromm’s analysis, people feel more and more dependent on irrational consumption for their worth and no longer see the self as worthy for its own sake. Eventually, people sink into a state of psychological helplessness.

The solution to irrational consumption and the resulting spiritual emptiness is not asceticism, but purposive impulse control, where one is in control enough to decide what he wants, to choose his own ___ in pure impulse. Man cannot seek deep human relationships, intellectual rewards, creation and enjoyment when he is manipulated into what others want for him. Rather, man must make his own choices. This is the very heart of Judaism, for without freedom man cannot be a servant of G-d.

America also needs self-control on a national level in order to plan ahead for its own citizens. Once society has learned to control its passion for consumption, it could give buying power to Appalachia, to the chronic poor and to the Negro. In raising these groups’ standard of living, there would be an opportunity to teach impulse control to them and thus give them the chance to experience their own spirituality.
Thus, to help eliminate material and spiritual poverty, Jews are obligated to proclaim the value of self control, for nothing but self control can destroy America’s consumption ethos which causes our indifference to poverty and psychological wandering. Through serious federal regulation of honesty in business and advertising, Jews must demand that the manipulators be mastered, for they cause the consumption ethos. In short, Jews must offer a merciless critique of the materialism, success ethic and complacency of our age, and we must, equally vigorously, assert the positive value of self control.

The belief in restrictions for business need not suggest that the ideal political philosophy in the Jewish view is Socialism. Private property is legitimized by the Torah, but it is not supreme. Social values remain most important, and private property is legitimate only so long as it meets certain social obligations. In today’s industrial context, the Poskim should creatively apply the halachic principle that private property must justify itself to public needs. We should involve ourselves in specific contemporary problems, for our law can be effective in and should be utilized in every historical context that Jews find themselves.

In the past, Jewish law utilized radical methods to insure human dignity. For instance, the sabbatical and jubilee years brought about redistribution of land and wealth to equalize possession and prevent permanent impoverishment. Similarly today we should not fear, but welcome serious government intervention when it contributes to the public welfare. In short, I believe that our belief both in the supremacy of human values and private property suggests that we Jews in American should strive for a type of welfare capitalism.

What is one main experience which halachah doesn’t adequately cover?

Sex. Tanach doesn’t look upon sex as an evil; the prohibition of negia is based upon a technical halachah—that a girl is in a state of nidah until she performs t’vilah in the mikvah. The fact that unmarried girls are not permitted to go to the mikvah reflects the reaction of the Poskim in the Middle Ages to the looseness of morals of many, who, having gone to the mikvah, felt free to do anything. If the traditional felt that sex itself were wrong, we should not have associated sex with the holy mitzvah of mikvah. Instead, we would view celibacy as a higher state of holiness, as it is viewed in the Catholic tradition.

Today the Poskim should recognize that there is nothing wrong with sex per se, and should promulgate a new value system and corresponding new halachot about sex. The basis of the new value system should be the concept that experiencing a woman as a zelem Elokim is a mitzvah just as much as praying in Shul. The Poskim should teach people that the depth of one’s sexual relationship should reflect the depth of his encounter. Sex has come to be considered as a secular activity only because Poskim have abdicated their responsibility in examining its true meaning.

Sex is a religious activity and we abuse it by ignoring it. No value system is free of its practical problems and this new value system might lead to an increased tendency by some to violate halachah. But still, this new approach to sex, even with its problems, would be much better than our present suppression of such a deep and meaningful activity. Indeed, I believe that more people would end up observing for they would see relevance and rationale in the new halachic categories.

Is Yeshiva University meeting its responsibility of educating an intelligent American Jewish laity?

I think that YU is primarily turning out secularly oriented students who are overlayed with an abundant practice of orthodox ritual. In short, the student’s values are not spiritual ones.
In my history classes we plot charts outlining the progress of history. The Middle Ages is invariably considered one of the lower points. This is because students have absorbed the Enlightenment philosophers’ view of history that pervades contemporary secular society. The Enlightenment viewed a religious age, such as the Middle Ages, as inferior. Another Enlightenment attitude in our society and in YU students is the belief that science will ultimately solve all of man’s problems.

Boys who keep Shabbat still measure a person by how much money he makes. Yet, Shabbat is supposed to teach us the intrinsic values of existence independent of what we can make or produce. In other words, the YU student doesn’t take the principle out of the halachah; he draws few implications from halachah as far as human behavior and attitudes are concerned.

Many of the students believe that they are wrong in undertaking secular studies. But secular activity is not wrong if one brings to it a religious attitude—an attempt to transform it into a religious activity.

Too many of those who leave YU or withdraw psychologically and intellectually from it are not the ones who can’t take the double program. All too frequently, they are the students who are ethically and religiously most sensitive, and who are, therefore, affronted by the system. The best students are selected out of the system.

What do you think of YU’s expansion as a university?

I believe that the center of gravity is shifting from the religious divisions and the college to the University. Yeshiva College is definitely a cultural backwater. Furthermore, in the University’s new schools there is not even an attempt at some form of double program. But the fact is that we need people with an Orthodox outlook to study the academic and professional disciplines. For instance, we need people to study the new medical knowledge.

Yeshiva College would need courage to recruit students who show interest and ability in the new programs needed—such as a re-examination of the Shulchan Orach and Biblical criticism. But so far, it hasn’t show the courage. The insistence on sticking to routine academic interests can lead to interesting ironies. When I, for one, sought to shift my field of concentration from American intellectual history to recent Jewish intellectual history, it was made clear to me that I should stick to American history, a field that raises relatively few intellectual problems for today’s Orthodox Jews.

I recognize that there are good reasons for the expansion of the University. The standards and prestige of YU are raised all around. It is easier to get money for YC. Judaism should serve the community. But YU’s expansion should steer it away from its purpose in creating an undergraduate collegiate division. Dr. Revel, the founder of YC, said, ‘The goal of education, according to Judaism, is the preparation of man for, and his dedication to, his duties as a member of his family, country and faith.’”
APPENDIX B: Greenberg Clarifies and Defends His Views

To the Editor:

I should like to respond to a number of the criticisms of the interview with me published in the last issue of the Commentator, and to reply to some of the questions posed to me. Finally, I would like to comment on the reaction to the interview.

The purpose of the interview was not to give an overall, rounded view on all questions, but, in response to the interviewer’s questions, to point out the possibility of a position operating within the classic halachic framework that would be willing to relate symbolically and sympathetically to the modern experience and shape it with the categories of halachah. I sought to show that our current weakness, is not in Torah but in ourselves. If we had the courage to recognize our own weaknesses and to study our full tradition, its fullest relevance and depth would emerge again.

Contrary to the impression created by the furor, the affirmation that the covenant of G-d and Israel as expressed and lived in halacha is the central strand of Judaism; the plea that we stop escaping our present situation but instead “experience infinite values in (our) concrete worldly experience;” the attempt to indicate possible applications of halachic principles to current problems (Vietnam, social welfare, etc.)--i.e. the bulk of the article, constituting 70% of the text, is unexceptionable and is, in fact, agreed with by a number of Roshei Yeshiva in principle, if not in specifics of judgment in each case.

This was an attempt to respond to Rav J.B. Soloveitchik’s call in his superb Ish Hahalachah: “Halachab says that any religiosity which restricts itself to a side corner of a group, sect, or party, and becomes the portion of a specially privileged group alone--its gains are outweighed by its losses...” (Talpiot, Vol. 1, 3-4, p. 679, my translation.)

“The service of G-d, according to the conception of halachab, is fulfilled (in addition to learning Torah) in the realization of its fundamentals in the real world... The longing of the soul of the ish halachab is for the perfection of the world in the Kingdom of lovingkindness (chesed) and justice (tzedek)--the realization of the a priori ideal creation called Torah or Halachab in the precincts of actual life.

“The halachab is not enclosed within the fortress walls of the house of worship, but penetrates in all corners of life. The marketplace, the street, the factories, stores, a person’s house, meeting houses, houses of celebration (batei mishteh), etc., etc. are the scene of the life of religion... The true Mikdash is the area of daily life for there is where halachab is realized. Gedolei Yisrael, the men of halachab, shine in their ethical glory and illumine (ethically) their society.” (Ibid., p. 709)

“Rav Chaim Brisker was asked: what is the calling of the Rabbi? R. Chaim answered: To protest the neglect of the lonely and abandoned; to protect the dignity of the poor and to save the exploited from the exploiters.” (Ibid., p. 708.) (Note: Let me make it absolutely clear that I do not imply that Rav Soloveitchik is involved with or identified with anything said in the interviews. G-d forbid that his name be associated with anything that has been so besmirched or attacked. I cite Ish Hahabalachab only as the classic intellectual source for the call to apply halachab to contemporary situations.)

I further presume that my comments on Yeshiva University are legitimate and I only regret that they have not been stated more publicly and forcefully by those circles that should lead the effort for YU’s religious destiny. I would appeal to those who have been diverted by the “emotional” issues and have closed their minds to the interview to at least reread the above parts

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1 Irving Greenberg, "Letter to the Editor," ibid., May 12,
and ponder them. I do not merely seek to justify myself, but feel that these ideas deserve a hearing and should not be overshadowed by side issues.

1. On Orthodoxy, Conservative, and Reform

Let me respond to the three main questions posed to me: The point of this section was that the three categories no longer neatly exhaust reality and that not every religious response can be dismissed by fitting it into a pigeon hole. Granted that in Orthodox, the growingly influential leadership and laity are committed to halachah, while such elements are far more peripheral in Reform and Conservative.

But we must recognize there are individual Jews who call themselves other names who accept halachah or are seeking to rediscover it for themselves. More important, we must learn to take seriously the questions that bothered or motivated these groups, even as we reject their answers. For their questions are real questions, tormenting most Jews in the modern world, and only when we take them seriously will we begin to answer them. (We tend to simply dismiss, but see Rav Kook's understanding of the "chutzpah" of our generation in Ikvei Hatzen, Essay "Hador," and other sources.)

Nor should ideas be ignored simply if labeled Conservative or Reform. They should be judged on their merits as measured by a rich and complex understanding of the classic halachic tradition. I would concede that I exaggerated by ignoring the differential Orthodox obedience to halachah, but I did so in the belief that we are far too self-congratulatory and fail to recognize how, in our own quiet way, we work out our own equivalents—"leaving out" or neglecting many halachot.

Certainly the ideal Jew keeps all the mitzvot (this is what I mean by "taking the covenant seriously"). But of how many people can we say he struggles to keep the covenant? The entire section (and interview) was said in the spirit of Rav Yisroel Salanter’s dictum: “Before I learned Mussar, I criticized the world and justified myself; when I learned Mussar, I criticized the world and criticized myself; after learning Mussar, I justified the world and criticized myself.”

I am convinced that such a self-criticism and justification of the world (i.e. dropping our self-righteousness and empathetically understanding our fellow man’s motivations) would increase our own religious depth and our influence on others.

2. On Revelation--and Bible Criticism

On this I specifically reject the liberal religious solution to the conflict of criticism and faith which answer that Torah is merely the product of humans “inspired by G-d.” (Cf. at the end of Question 3: “Jewish history is a history of human responses to the Divine approach--to Torah, Prophetic, and Talmudic values and mitzvot.”)

Nor have I any desire to make Judaism merely an ethical system. We are elected--chosen--by G-d, whether we like it or not--and indeed, amazingly enough, whether we live up to it or not. But contemporary Biblical scholarship (Wellhausen has been dead now for a long time) has enriched our understanding of the meaning of Tanach--and this despite its secular humanist bias. I anticipate an even greater enrichment when we develop our own Biblical scholarship by men who believe that G-d does communicate with man but who will not work from an apologetic or stereotyped ___.

(Historical Note: Nor does this even mean using any one “modern” method solely. Some years back, in a Pinchas Churgin Memorial Lecture, Rav Aharon Lichtenstein pointed to the possible uses of the techniques of literary criticism--such as New Criticism--for deepening our insight into Torah. In 1962, when I returned from Israel, I suggested bringing Rav Yehoshua Bacharach here to teach Bible. Rav Bachrach has developed a moving and insightful systematic shitah of using
Midrashiim and traditional commentaries to capture the existential meaning of Tanach. But as he lacked academic credentials and responsibility, he was not invited.)

Still we cannot think that the Torah has been placed in the setting of the ancient Near East by contemporary scholarship. My comment that Divine revelation “may be (italics added) less external or mechanical than many Jews think” simply means that I believe we can legitimately move from the assertion that the Torah was given totally without reference to the actual human situation in which it was given. (I am fully aware that there is a legitimate stream of thought that holds the above view.)

We can move to the recognition that it was given to Moshe and Israel in a particular time and setting and its imagery or conceptual material may be expressed in that language and cultural context. (On this, compare Rambam’s far more radical suggestion in his Moreh Nevuchim, Fiedlander translation, pp. 322 ff.) The Torah’s eternal message is not dimmed by this insight but the problem of parallels or evolution and science etc. can certainly be handled more effectively.

In addition, I believe that we need generations of our own scholarship to explore and illuminate the entire Tanach. Nor need we block such scholarship a priori from encountering the throes of contemporary scholarship and evidence. Many of the questions raised by Bible critics were touched upon or even treated by Chazal, etc. We may grapple with these questions again. (Rav Chaim Heller z.l. did significant work for this whole area.) There will be time enough to evaluate whether this new scholarship will give us acceptable conclusions or even will deepen our faith. I believe that we can be disciplined enough to reject conclusions that do not meet our tests of validity when, and if, this becomes necessary.

3. On Sex

This is the one area, I feel, where the sensational interpretations, although incorrect, had some color on the basis of language. I regret this. This answer--as a number of others--is a summary of a much larger essay in preparation, which cites sources and treats the question in great detail. (Incidentally this essay is a matter of public record, having been made at Yavneh convention in 1964. Parts of its [sic] were discussed in my class in 1964 in “Ethical Thought in the 19th Century.”)

I read the interview in the context of my longer essay and failed to detect the possible misinterpretations it could be fitted to. I regret this very much, not only because it clearly hurt me, but because it gave such an excellent handle to those who wish to prevent consideration of the issues raised. And, of course, it drove off supporters who really agree with my basic theses.

It may sound naive, but it seems to me that at Yeshiva University one has a right to assume that discussion of sex assumes a marital state. But granting the language, it appears to me that there is a grave moral obligation to check and ascertain the author’s true meaning in such a case rather than to seize upon the most damaging possibility and use it to attempt to destroy someone.

I must take the blame for not having clarified the language. However, since premarital interpretation is wrong, the whole furor became a case of shefichut damim. I can only stand in wonder at the morality of not even making a phone call to check. I note that in so doing, the people involved have directly violated the example laid down in Shabbat 127b, where there was a direct physical presumption of sexual immorality but the people correctly were dan l’kaf zchut and without even asking! But let me get to a brief synopsis of my thesis.

I believe that there are two strands to the experience of sex within the halachic framework. Rabbi Meir experienced niddah as the separation which restores the freshness and desirability of the woman to her husband when they come together. (Cf. Talmud B., Niddah 31b.) Rabbi Eliezer, keeping the same halachot, experienced sex domeh k’mo shekafo shed, as an almost demonic experience. (Cf.
especially the second and third interpretations of this phrase quoted in the Mechaber in Orach Chayim, siman 240, se’if 8). I think we can see these two themes in the halachic experience. (Cf. possibly the language of the Mechaber and the Ramoh in Even Ha Ezer, siman 25, se’if 2.)

Although we are fond of dismissing Christianity as anti-the body and rejecting sex, I believe that the negative attitudes have won out in our own thinking. We have come to view sex not just with tzniut but with shame. How else can we understand the almost universal shunning of this topic in the public or private YU curriculum? (The hilchot niddah seminar given by one man at YU is a notable and honorable exception as far as shunning is concerned.) The failure to deal with it directly seems to fail to live up to the Talmud’s principle “Torah bee v’ilmod ani tzaree ch.” (Cf. Berachot B. 62a.)

The whole furor about pre-marital sex seemed to imply that after marriage there is no problem of halachic observance. But, as is well-known, mikvah and taharat hamishpachah are the most widely neglected mitzvot of all the daily life mitzvot. Since these do not involve the financial sacrifice of keeping Shabbat or the social difficult of keeping kashruth, we should ask ourselves: Why are these mitzvot so neglected? My thesis is that it is because Western civilization has focused on sex as a) a narcotic in an advanced human condition and b) as a form of untrammeled self-expression (even without reciprocity.)

On these two grounds, I believe that we could fight quite successfully and indicate the ultimate failure of such an ethic to give meaning or satisfaction in life. But contemporary civilization has also stressed sex c) as an expression of the communication and love in a ___ husband-wife relationship with particular emphasis on a new mutuality and significance for the woman. Here is where we have failed for we have not related the halachah to such a concern. Yet dialogue and communication on all levels—including but not exclusively or necessarily the sexual—is what is involved in expressing the zelam Elokim of another person. If damt Elokim is the klal gadol batorah (cf. Dr. Samuel Belkin’s In His Image), then recognizing it and respecting it is a positive act.

Therefore, we should reemphasize (or rediscover) the positive strand in halachah, the strand expressed so beautifully by Tanach’s use of sexual imagery as the allegory of the highest relationship of G-d and Israel—and shift the emphasis to the positive value of sex as a mode (among many) of encounter rather than as exploitation. Thus, Kadesh atzmecha b’mutar lach would come to mean not merely that our separation makes us different but that our permitted sexual relationship, b’kedushah, is different—more reciprocal, more tender. (This I take to be the intention of the halachot in Orach Chayim, Siman 240, especially se’if 2, 3, 5, 7, 9, 10. 12. 15.)

Calling such sexual relationship a religious act is quite legitimate. To cite only one source among many, Ra Yaakov Emden in his Siddur (see Hanhagga Leyl Shabbos, Siddur, p. 158) says: Know that (sexual) union done properly, at the proper time, with the proper intention, is a holy and ____ matter. Let not a man think that in union there is something shameful or twisted, G-d forbid, G-d forbid. For union is called yediah “to know”... and it is self-evident that if there were not in this matter great holiness, the Presence of G-d (Shechinah) is with them.”

Might such a shift in focus lead to shift in halachic stress! If there would be sufficient halachic authority (admittedly, in itself, a highly debatable issue) it might be conceivable. For one, the justification of Rav’s verbal endearments (cf. Berachot 62a) that a wife’s expectations are higher in our society and more would be need to please her. The focus of the halachic concern might be more balanced between fear of innocent actions leading to violations and the concern to preserve conjugal love as a value in holiness. This would have to be done carefully weighing the competing values in a halachic situation. Of course the focus on a positive attitude raises the danger of increased violations of the requirements of prishut. But, I believe, on balance, many more would observe and be
influenced by halachah in a crucial area of life itself. And not to be flippant, even those who sin might well have a criteria for restraint or reduction in sinning.

Some may argue that such distinctions would legitimate sinning but I would cite the example of Rabbi Yisroel Salanter who when he could not get a man to keep his store closed on Shabbat, worked on him and persuaded him to at least not keep records of his transactions. Moreover, I think we underestimate the vacuity of much of modern life. We do not appreciate how much people would undertake or sacrifice for something that gives them direction, purpose and value in life. This is preeminently the power of halacha. We should tap it fully.

Let me also add that which I consider to be the greatest correction needed by the interview. Due to the interests of the questions asked, the interview gives the impression that I believe that the crucial area for our consideration is our relationships with the general society. (Actually the interview did not purport to be a balanced presentation of all my views.) But for the record, let me say that actually I believe that the internal problems are the decisive and crucial issues for survival and relevance.

I believe that it is the challenge of the meaning for our destiny of the European holocaust; the challenge of the Messianic implications of the rebirth of Israel. With the exception of Rabbi Soloveitchik's Kol Dodi Dofek, we have been simply inadequate to the unbelievable magnitude of the Divine in a hidden way in our times; the need for sanctification and relating religious experience of the daily life and experience of the Jew in America and Israel, especially the experience of affluence and freedom; the moral crisis of the plight of Soviet Jewry and our reaction to it; the desperately needed overhaul of Jewish education and the revival of hussar, ethics and religious experience--these will ultimately decide our success or failure.

Never has a generation been so starved for spiritual nourishment, for a healing mission of Torah. Perhaps we have improved and strengthened, but surely we have not been up to the scope of the need. However, I believe that the internal issues are linked to the general community issues. If we drop our siege mentality, if we shift from mere preservation of our tradition to an attempt to apply it and explore it in every way, if we have the courage to ask the modern questions so that the Torah will give us the answers to the questions which bother us, I believe the resultant revival would not be content to turn inward but would reach out to our fellow Jew and the world in its plentitude and love and desire to serve as G-d's witnesses.

Lastly, may I comment on the reaction to my interview. Naturally, I am disappointed. No one likes to be attacked or labeled. However, I am particularly disappointed not only in the failure to check or clarify which is a minimum moral obligation but in the inability to at least say: If such and such is true, then I reject it. Such inability bodes ill for our capacity to open a desperately needed dialogue with ourselves.

There must be leeway to make statements wide of the mark if we are to develop the precise formulation. There must be leeway for exploring views which may ultimately be rejected. The net hysteria generated has done much to foreclose serious consideration of these problems by students who would profit from such consideration. At the same time, it will undoubtedly frighten some people into not speaking up for legitimate viewpoints. Such a result would be tragic at a time when the entire Jewish community is on the brink of a hirur teshuvah because it begins to see the disastrous results of its assimilationist policies. Similarly, we ourselves have built up our strength to the point where we can begin to deal more fully with questions and overcome problems. It says something depressing about a community which places the worst possible construction on a position and thus forecloses encountering it rather than places the best possible construction and learns from it.
Finally, part of the problem seems to be that in our current temper, criticism is identified with rejection. Such unrefined thinking can only dismay us. Rav Yisroel Salanter once said that to be a good Jew, you have to have ever midah—and its opposite. We have become monochromatic good Jews. We have proven brilliant at standing fast, accepting, obeying.

But there is also a need—to right the balance—for self-criticisms, self-questioning, and exploring. We are great at emphasizing the external quality of Torah but much less skilled in bringing it into contemporary situations. But we must learn to do both—not because we reject, but because we affirm. Even the quality of skepticism can be used properly to deepen ourselves and our faith. Orthodoxy—and Yeshiva University—would both be far stronger if there was an open and free discussion, and self-criticism.

When I speak of Orthodoxy and Yeshiva, I speak as an impatient lover, not as an outsider. Only when we care fiercely enough will we stop playing it safe. Only when we stick out our necks and learn new languages and new skills and new insights and even make mistakes—not recklessly but as we try to bring out the maer she batorah—will men come to believe in our seriousness—and in G-d. Otherwise men will say, “Only people who do not know the facts, or the questions, or the contemporary experience still remain committed.” Such an impression destroys the believability of Torah. Courage—intellectual mistruth nefesh—can only increase its believability and effectiveness in our lives and in the world.

Response to Mr. Silver:

I never claimed the Gedolim are oblivious to the contemporary situation. I too follow Rabbi Jakobovitz’ column regularly and, mirabile dictu, even read some the Shaalot U’Teshuvot in the original tongue. (Incidentally, although I have not done a scientific survey, I would estimate roughly that the entire impressive list is dwarfed by the annual output of scholarship in American colonial history—a topic of purely historical-antiquarian interests.)

It’s all a matter of how you view the glass—half empty or half full. The sheer range of modern problems is staggering and even a half hearted attempt to deal with them might appear impressive—except by comparison with the problem. (Even here this list may look more impressive than it is.) Thus in education of women, we still do not have a full validation of a responsibility to provide a full Torah program for women; In stock ownerships, the problem of moral responsibility for the company whose shares one owns has not been fully explored; Israel Independence Day debates still focus on Hallel with or without a brachah rather than the grandeur of the nes.

Sometimes the response has been partial and slow; at times grudging or under the oppression of public opinion. In short much has been done—more in technical an procedural issues, less in the areas of quantitative modes of experience and broader thought and value issues, which are the strongest challenges today. I should also add that a number of Gedolim who have sought to apply halacha to modern questions such as Rav Eliyahu Henkin, shlita, and Rav Moshe Feinstein, shlita, on specific issues have been attacked in personal and harassing manner as Karaim.

By “breakdown of halacha” I simply mean that people no longer obey and that even observant Jews may live by other values as they observe certain mitzvot, mitzvat anashim melomada. I take these facts to be self evident. Since I believe the halachah to be the divine vehicle I can only assume the results reflect weak leadership in the face of situations in unusual flux.

As for halachic “change,” I include in this term expansion, adaptation, application, changes of strategy as well as re-evaluation of halachot. To their eternal credit and our gain, our historic Gedolim have led this process. Naturally I am speaking of using halachic norms and this is clearly stated in my answer to question #4 in the interview.
Lastly it was feared that premarital mikvah would lead to promiscuity. That is the point that I am making. But the ban on premarital sex should not be interpreted to prove that sex forever after, per se, is evil but that it needs kiddushin to be holy, i.e. to be done in kedushah.

Dr. Irving Greenberg
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Editor’s Note: The following is an open letter from Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein. Rabbi Lichtenstein, rosh yeshiva in RIETS and a former professor of English at Stern College, has semicha from YU and a doctorate from Harvard University. This letter concludes the year’s series of discussion on YU and its schools. It will be continued in the fall.

Dear Yitzchak:

It really wasn’t very cricket of you to have written and/or superintended your article--text and commentary--for some eight months while leaving barely eight days at year’s end for any reply. There is obviously no time now for a full and proper response. So please consider this as just an expression of personal reaction rather than a thorough reply, much less the formulation of an alternative position.

Given the gravity of the issues involved, my opening complaint may seem a bit trivial. In a sense, it is. I mention it, however, because it is peripherally related to a genuinely basic issue. I do not refer to any of the substantive points you’ve raised but rather to the fundamental posture implicitly assumed throughout the article and explicitly described in its exegesis. As I understand it, you sought, perhaps primarily, not so much to present your own views on a number of issues, but simply to stir up discussion of them, to rescue them from the tundra of obscurity to which a conspiracy of apathy and silence had consigned them. And unless I sorely miss the mark, I very much suspect that, despite the furor and the attendant unpleasantness, you think that you’ve succeeded and that you therefore feel both vindicated and content.

Well, I agree wholeheartedly with the aim--but I take issue with your mode of pursuing it. Basic problems should be discussed. A Torah-Halachic Weltanschauung vis-a-vis contemporary problems does need to be formulated and expressed. The need for such a formulation is great at any yeshiva, simply because Bnei Torah must learn, at the personal level, to integrate their total experience with a Halachic framework, and, at a more general plane, to develop genuine Halachic solutions for problems confronting the community at large. At our yeshiva, however, it is paramount. Inasmuch as we do, albeit with varying degrees of enthusiasm, include general culture as part of our students’ education, we incur a collective debt to them and to ourselves to help them grasp the relation--be it one of complement, irreconcilable conflict, or fruitful tensions--between Torah and a given aspect of Madah. To place the full burden of integrating two worlds upon the individual student is neither fair to him nor in the best general interest of Halachic Judaism. For the simple fact is that in most cases, the student either cannot or will not do it, with the result that, assuming that he remains Orthodox, he either withdraws into a sort of observant secularism--a life largely motivated by secular values although regulated by religious norms--or retreats into a traditional bastion in order to avoid confronting the contemporary world altogether. These alternatives are by no means of equal merit. The first, even if sincere, is a shallow formalism while the second constitutes a genuine path to avodat hashem, which, despite its lack of sophistication, I prize most highly. Simple piety and naive faith may lack a certain dimension but, whether or not they take cognizance of contemporary trends, they are of infinite moment. However, as far as meeting the overall challenge of imposing malchut shamayim upon society and history, both are clearly

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1 Aharon Lichtenstein, "Rav Lichtenstein Writes Letter to Dr. Greenberg," ibid., June 2,
deficient. Of course, I oversimplify--there are all sorts of intermediate shadings--but I’m sure you’ll recognize these as two directions which a rather substantial number of students are inclined to take.

The need for some authoritative Halachic and philosophic guidance is therefore clear and present. However, precisely because this is so vital and so sensitive an area, handling it requires the greatest possible care. And here I must take issue with both your precept and your practice. You contend that ‘there must be leeway to be wide of the mark if we are to develop the precise formulation. There must be leeway for exploring view which may ultimately be rejected.’ This is a nice nineteenth century notion and it has a pleasant liberal ring about it. Moreover, within certain limits, it is perfectly valid and thoroughly Jewish. But is it relevant to the present situation and is its supposed manifestation in your article consonant with the proper discharge of our responsibility? Anyone who undertakes to discuss an issue publicly, if he takes that issue seriously, assumes a double obligation: of inquiry and expression. He is morally bound both to come as close as possible to the truth and to be as accurate as possible in communicating that truth. Not just as possible for him. As possible for persons who, given the difficulty or the gravity of the issue, can genuinely be said to be reasonably competent to discuss it. With all due respect, there are matters about which you and I have no business issuing manifestos altogether. And of course the more serious the problem, the greater the responsibility to be precise--of, if need be, to remain silent. Where the reality of error is genuinely regarded as a disaster, its possibility will be neither lightly regarded nor easily dismissed. How much margin of error is allowed on the Gemini flights?

As regards our particular problem, I think this is the crux of the matter. A leading Conservative scholar once told me how he had been struck by the manner in which he observed the Brisker Rav, zatzal, approach a Halachic question. “Reb Velvel,” he said, “pondered a sheyla as if it were a medical question.” Precisely. His commitment to Halacha and his conviction of its truth was such that any pronouncement concerning any aspect of it assumed the character which medical advice has for a responsible doctor--the same caution, the same aversion to potential error, the same sense that something terribly important is hanging in the balance. We do not, most of us, have this sense. Unfortunately, Halachic realities do not live for us with the visceral vividness of a stomachache. But oughtn’t we at least strive for such existential immediacy?

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Any responsible plea for leeway in erring with respect to momentous issues can only become valid after we have established a reasonably high standard of accuracy as concerns both inquiry and expression--only after, to take up the theme of Arnold’s ‘Hebraism and Hellenism,’ we have not only gone by the best light we have but taken care that our light be not darkness. I frankly question whether your article--for which the plea is made in your comment--meets this test. Putting the matter in its best possible light, it contained a number of statements which, by your own admission, were, albeit unintentionally, either exaggerated or misleading. To be sure, there was some clarification in your explanation. But is this really the best way to handle problems of crucial importance? Can the initial impact of such an article be easily dismissed? And what of those who, like Browning’s grammarian, had ‘mastered learning’s crabbed text’ but missed the comment? Let us remember that from a Torah-Halachic point of view, the issues discussed were no piddling matters; and that, on the face of it, substantial portions of the article therefore contained explosive implications. Let us remember, moreover, that a number of key statements were so vague or misleading that a great many people, neither intelligent nor malicious, regarded your second statement as a more of volte-face than an explanation. Personal friendship and basic decency presents me from suggesting this interpretation, but the fact remains that a comparison of the two articles could support it--and this is damning enough. How could one know, for instance, that “the definition of a Jew”--perhaps the most crucial statement in your article--does not refer to a minimal
Jew in the Halachic sense (for then it is far too narrow) nor, as you told me orally, to the ideal and maximal Jew (for then it would be too broad) but to (I believe these were your words) “a Jew who deserves to be regarded with respect as a religious person?” From your printed comment I gather a slightly different explanation, that the Jew in question was the ideal Jew after all but that the phrase “taking the covenant seriously” means keeping all the mitzvot. I do not question either interpretation nor, honestly, am I concerned about their difference. But I must simply ask: Don’t you, in the light of your comment, take away with the left what you give with the right? If your discussion was confined to such Reform and Conservative Jews as keep or at least subscribe to all the mitzvot, then isn’t your trumpet call to ecumenism and tolerance muted to an appeal for acceptance of a few individuals? I simply point out that it makes for internal inconsistency so that the article was, in this sense, misleading.

Or again, what are we to understand by ‘the fact that Orthodoxy has lost all (my italics) connection with modern life.’ I don’t ask whether this is true or false. I simply ask what does it mean. Is there, then, no remaining link between ourselves--you and I are Orthodox, too--and modern life? The overall position you advocate is itself open to question. We might ponder the wisdom of Fulton Sheen’s remark that ‘he who marries his own age will find himself a widower in the next.’ Be this as it may, however--I do agree with you to a point--can your statement of presumed fact stand scrutiny?

Or, to take another example, doesn’t a statement like “democratic America can eliminate our superiority complex and return us to our ideals of human equality and social justice’ require--both as an explicitly normative and implicitly historical dictum--a great deal of clarifying amplification? And when you contend that ‘in short, the halachah has broken down,’ are you referring to halachah itself or to its scholars and interpreters? Or, if you would contend that the two are identical, doesn’t this need to be elucidated? And isn’t any breakdown partly a problem of communication?

All of this no doubt strikes you as an unfairly ad hominem argument. It isn’t and it certainly isn’t meant to be. The point is simply that we must, collectively, develop a much keener sense of responsibility as regards the discussion of Halachic and theological problems. The mishna advises, chachomim hizaharu b’divreichem, and anyone who has even had occasion to observe gedolei yisroel first-hand--to have shimush in the genuine sense--knows the caution with which they approach basic issues. He knows, moreover, that the reticence which you always ascribe to ghettoization, spiritual paralysis, or what have you, is frequently due to a superior sense of responsibility, to z’hiruth, in the best sense of the word, as a positive moral and intellectual quality. If, as the pasuk tells us, movet v’chayim b’yad lashon, then the proper exercise of language--and I do not say this only as a professor of English--is indeed a matter of supreme importance. It entails both a bein adam lamakom and a bein adam lechavero, an obligation to a reader or listener as well as to truth. By ‘the proper exercise of language’ I do not mean simply the use of clear and logical statements a la symbolic logic but the evocation of the whole range of effects, implicit as well as explicit, connotative as well as denotative, emotive as well as intellectual, through which language exerts its powerful influence over us. Thus, I take exception not only to the apparent substance of the original section on revelation but to the suggestion implied in the juxtaposition of the two adjectives in the statement that ‘what we mean by Divine revelation’ may be less external or mechanical than many Jews now think.’ Are we to assume that external revelation is ipso-facto mechanical? Or again, I originally objected not only to the Halachic implications of the section on sex but also to a sentence like, ‘Tanach doesn’t look upon sex as an evil.’ Is there no suggestion that with Chazal it was different? And doesn’t driving this sort of wedge between the two have extremely serious potential? Mind you, I am not suggesting that these nuances were consciously intended. I
merely point out that they are there; perhaps by accident rather than design, and that in an article such as this they probably oughtn’t be there.

The caution requisite to any responsible discussion of basic issues becomes doubly important when the medium employed is the printed word. Scripta manent. There are liberties one may allow oneself in thought or speech which personal discipline should reject in print. There is a finality about publication that, even in an age in which ‘publish or perish’ has gutted the scene with so much intellectual trash, make Rav Yosef Ber’s comment still apt: ‘Not all that is thought should be spoken, not all that is spoken should be written and not all that is written should be printed.’

I am not unaware of the objections which may be raised to this position. It will be argued that it tends for authoritarism; that it limits popular discussion; that it rests upon an abiding sense of insecurity, that its stress upon caution and responsibility leads to an insistence upon definitive truth which bars valuable tentative insights from the public arena; that it forecloses the whole process of groping discussion through which truth is gradually discovered; that, finally, it stifles not only expression but inquiry inasmuch as it fails to recognize the value of what Keats called ‘Negative Capability,’’ that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries and doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason-Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught form the penetration of a mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge.’

These are sound objections but, as regards the popular discussion of basic issues, they are hardly decisive. The exchange of ideas, the dialectical clash of thought and thought which ‘the century of hope’ (as F.S. Marvin dubbed the nineteenth) so admired, is important, but we must be wary of the price. Are we prepared to justify, morally and theologically, the spiritual causalities which may result from statements which are wide of the mark as we grope along toward a hopefully more precise formulation? Perhaps some loss is inevitable no matter which course we pursue, and it’s just a question of losing some of the presently committed in exchange for a host of prospective ‘proselytes.’ Even if this should be the case, we would be confronted with a formidable moral issue but, in any event, every precaution must be made to keep any loss to a minimum. I submit that this involves far more care than I think you are willing to exercise. No doubt, there is such a thing as overcaution; perhaps the reluctance of the beit hara__ [N.B. unclear in original], or, to take an example from your own field, of Lord Acton, to publish is an instance of it. But the line needs to be drawn far beyond yours. And I do think that there is a basic distinction between discussion and publication. Horace’s dictum about waiting nine years between writing and publication may be too severe. But the underlying principle is sound. We would do better to do more tentative groping orally before rushing into print. ‘Negative capability’—in one sense, it was basic to Rav Chaim’s approach (‘fun a kashe shtarbt men nit’)—can be fruitfully exercised in more fluid forms of inquiry and discourse (although even then with caution) before encasing our gropings in the hard cast of print. Before we start ‘shaking up the kids’ (to use a term you’ve kicked around Yavneh) let us remember we are dealing with human lives and their spiritual destinies. Were you a medical—rather than, as my Mosheh calls it, a ‘study’—doctor, would you be as ready to embark so freely on this kind of experimental enterprise?

In light of the foregoing, I might add that I was a bit taken aback by your reaction to criticism of your article. You express shock that people denounced it without consulting you for an interpretation, and suggest that their failure to be melamed z’chuth was tantamount to sh’fichut damim. These are strong words with which to denounced your critics. (By the way, have you phoned them all to be sure they were accurately quoted an that you have the authorized interpretation of their remarks?) But is this stance of pained martyrdom and pious shock really in order? Exception
was taken by various readers to certain views which the article, as just about everyone—not only Kanaim—understood it, seemed clearly to espouse. In the minds of many, if not most, readers, no alternative interpretations even suggested themselves. But even if some alternative did seem barely possible, was one bound to accept it rather than criticize the clear and palpable sense? Must one engage in all sorts of intellectual tergiversation rather than criticize views which he considers objectionable and harmful? You argue that you should have been consulted. Perhaps, but that would only have enlightened a few callers (after all, there would then have been no public clarification) and left the article, as generally understood, intact. Of course, wherever some doubt existed—and remember that for many none did—no personal judgment upon you ought to have been passed without clarification. Whether or not an author has special and superior authority to interpret his works (literary critics have debated the point heatedly) certainly no moral judgment of him as a person can disregard his interpretation. But as long as the article seemed plainly to present what you subsequently described as objectionable position, I don’t see why its critics should be faulted.

Of course, ‘at YU one has a right to assume a marital state’—except when the context clearly dictates otherwise. The opening paragraph of that section speaks of ‘a girl’ rather than a woman (again, connotation is important) and it explicitly discusses a supposed prohibition against unmarried girls’ undergoing t’vilah. Moreover, is the fuss and fanfare only made as long as one assumed that you were referring to premarital sex. When I first read the section, I thought that, although I disagreed with it, I at least understood it. I did not think, as did many, that you were advocating premarital sexual relations. I know you too well and regard you too highly to have considered this. I rather thought that you felt that various other forms of erotic activity (need I enumerate them?) common to the modern American scene should be permitted if not encouraged. Now that my mistake has been corrected, however, I confess that I don’t understand the tenor of your discussion altogether. ‘Today,’ you tell us, ‘the poskim should recognize that there is nothing wrong with sex per se, and should promulgate a new value system and corresponding new halachot about sex.’ With reference to a marital situation, I am at a loss to understand the statement and its implications. Is it conceivable that poskim, by and large, have heretofore not recognized ‘that there is nothing wrong with sex per se?’ Were they so obtuse as to overlook the fact that even when conception is impossible, onah, periodic marital relations, is obligatory mid’oraita? Indeed, if one should betroth a woman on the condition that he not be bound by this obligation, the kiddushin is valid but the stipulation is void inasmuch as it violates a Halachic precept so that he is a masveh al mah shekasuv batorah. And did most of them forget, for instance, that the Halacha specifically singled out shabbat and yom tov, periods of holiness, as occasions on which the mitzva of onah must be especially observed, inasmuch as this would constitute a mode of their proper celebration? Did not most rishonim hold that a husband who wishes to leave on a trip must first ‘remember’ his wife sexually, even if this involves transgressing the halacha of p’risha samuch l’veset? Or, to take another example, did not the Rambam hold that a woman’s simple statement that she finds her husband sexually incompatible is sufficient ground for compelling him to divorce her?

No doubt, within the Halachic framework, different attitudes towards the subject of sex have, in the course of time, developed. Some poskim have been more positive than others. This is both inevitable and desirable. However, in this area as in others, the objective character of Halacha sets certain limits within which differences then prevail. It defines, roughly, the ends of the spectrum. And I think that it would clearly exclude the notion that there is something ‘wrong with sex per se’ at one end as it would exclude very different romantic excesses at the other. The gemara in Erubin pretty much speaks for itself. ‘Rav Huna said in the name of Rav: Whoever sleeps in a
room in which dwell a man and his wife of him the pasuk says, The wives of my people you have driven out of the home of her pleasures.’

It would have been rather difficult therefore for anyone to have construed your original remarks as referring to marital relations as this would have left you fighting a straw man. (The thesis against which you argue in your clarification is rather different; those remarks I understand perfectly, and, I might add, I’ve thought about them myself.) Similarly, with regard to the ‘new halachot’ which you want promulgates. Leaving aside the question as to whether and how this can be done, once one learned that you were referring to a marital state, it became difficult to see just which changes were desired. Even after your clarification, I’m still not too sure. I surmise that you are referring to a few nebulous halachot—there are not set down as definitive norms—concerning modes of and approaches to coitus, or that you are thinking not of revising old halachot but rather of establishing new ones, in hitherto uncharted territory. In either case, the problem would be primarily one of attitude and hashkafah, of stress and focus, rather than psak in the narrower sense of the world. Within the existing Halachic framework, concerning marital life, there is little in the way of absolute norms which could be changed so as to produce the sort of axiological shift you advocate or which could really widen acceptance of the Halachic approach in this area. Do you seriously believe that it is the content of a couple of halachot which deters people from observing taharat hamishpacha? Is there anything in hilchot niddah that can be changed (assuming that he basic concept would be retained) so as to wipe away popular objection? Isn’t it the basic concept rather than any of the Halachic details which people resist?

Anyone reading the original article, which is much vaguer than the comment and with almost no hint of the thrust of the latter, would naturally have assumed that the hue and cry about new halachot had to involve significant departures in the only area in which departures could make a real difference—the premarital. Rather than angrily attack your readers, then, oughtn’t you better recognize that they read it honestly as it is seemed to read and simply clarify your position without charging them with your figurative crucifixion? From the tone and substance of the article, I think it is clear that you know much of it was controversial. So why the surprise over the ensuing controversy? You ‘rocked the boat’—to use one of your expressions—and wonder that there are waves. You set out ‘to shake up the kids’ and wonder that they’ve reacted. Perhaps some of the reaction was a bit intemperate, although, if pressed, one could perhaps make out a case for what Edgell Rickword called ‘the value of ‘negative emotions.’ But to the extent that the intemperance was based upon misunderstanding, let’s recognize that the onus was not primarily the reader’s and take it from there.

We come back once more to the question of responsibility. Perhaps I oughtn’t to have harped on it at such length but I think an appreciation of it is crucial to any meaningful public discussion of basic Halachic issues. AS to the substantive problems touched on in your article, there is much which, had time and space permitted, I would have liked—even after the clarification—to discuss. As you well know, there are substantial portions with which I am in general agreement. The appeal for more intensive and extensive application of Halacha to the social and political realm is very much in place, and I am inclined to agree with most of the specific positions you take in this area, especially as regards poverty and consumption. I also think that your diagnosis of the current state of YU is generally sound, although, if past discussions are any index, I would disagree with your remedies. On the other hand, there is much which I just reject. I omit mention of your discussion of revelation because, although I would have reservations concerning things you’ve said about this on other occasions, I’m not precisely sure of what you mean here. But there are other points. The implied thesis which, I believe, you have made explicit on other occasions, that whatever
areas of Halacha are not relevant to the contemporary scene are, broadly speaking, not relevant at all, is wholly untenable. I believe--again, in the light of previous discussions--that I would challenge your analysis of the extent and the mode of the insufficient application of Halacha in certain areas, as well as, and more crucially, the reasons for this and therefore the remedies for it. Furthermore, I suspect that you greatly overestimate the extent to which the ‘right’ liberal solutions could be arrived at by increased Halachic effort and that you correspondingly underestimate the possible real conflict between traditional and modern values. Also, I would take strong issue with even the clarified version of your section on sex—not such because of its specific attitude towards sex itself, as because of a much more basic question: a misconception of the nature of the relation between kodesh and chol. The two are related and integrated by they are hardly identical. Havdalah, no less than kiddush, is a basic mitzvah.

Then, there are a few matters of tactics or emphasis. While agreeing that we need to place greater stress upon the social and political application of Halacha especially as regards Eretz Yisroel, I do not think that we should immerse ourselves in American society to the extent you seem to advocate. Our primary goal must be the more selfish--yes, selfish--one of surviving as a viable tradition; and I simply cannot buy your thesis that this can be better done by much greater involvement in American political life. The concept of priorities and of an axiological hierarchy must be our guiding principle. I would similarly disagree with your tactical approach toward Conservative and Reform Judaism. (I speak now of your clarifying statement; the apparent import of the original statement I reject entirely.) Of course, I agree that there are individual Reform and Conservative Jews whose religious experience, viewed as a subjective phenomenon, must be regarded seriously as a genuine striving for kedusha which therefore has value. For that matter, the same is true of many Christians, Moslems, or others, for whom their religion serves as a vehicle for attaining a measure of spiritual fulfillment. However, if we shift the discussion to another plane and ask what is the objective character of Conservatism of Reform as readings of the Torah, as God’s revealed word and of the tradition derived therefrom, the answer is that it is wholly invalid. In dealing with this area, therefore, we need to stress two points concurrently: that the subjective experience of non-Orthodox Jews may have genuine religious content and value but that their interpretation of the Torah is in error and must be rejected outright. I take it that you think the second point, while perhaps correct, should now be discussed, if at all, sotta voce, but that we must trumpet forth the first fortissimo. My own position is--and I have stated in my shiur--that, difficult as it may sometimes be, we need to stress both, the second no less vociferously than the first. Given all the pressures for latitudinarianism, we cannot afford to relax our efforts to maintain the integrity of Torah and Halacha.

Finally, I must really object to the strident tone of much of the critique of contemporary Orthodoxy and some of its Halachic leaders. In this respect, the article--as well as other Cassandra-like public denunciations you’ve made on other occasions--seems strangely out of keeping with your citing Rav Yisroel Salanter, about justifying the world and criticizing oneself. Aren’t one’s fellow Orthodox Jews part of the world?

But all this requires full discussion and I must come back to my original point. It can’t really be done in a working week. I’ve merely ticked off areas of agreement or disagreement, rather than defined attitudes. Perhaps when time permits and my thinking on some of these problems has ripened, od chazon lamoed. In the meantime, I hope that you’ll read this as it was written--not as an attempt to castigate or excoriate but as a plea, albeit at times a pungent plea, for a more careful and more responsible approach to the public discussion of basic Halachic and theological issues.
With best personal wishes,
Sincerely,
Aharon