

Jewish Historical Studies
Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England

Review:

Yitz Greenberg and Modern Orthodoxy: The Road Not Taken

David Ellenson^{1,*}

How to cite: Ellenson, D. 'Yitz Greenberg and Modern Orthodoxy: The Road Not Taken'. *Jewish Historical Studies*, 2021, 52(1), pp. 302-305.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.jhs.2021v52.023>.

Published: 03 June 2021

Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the journal's standard editorial peer review.

Copyright:

© 2020, The Author(s). This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC-BY) 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>, which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited • DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.jhs.2021v52.023>

Open Access:

Jewish Historical Studies is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

*Correspondence: dellenson@brandeis.edu

¹Brandeis University, USA

Yitz Greenberg and Modern Orthodoxy: The Road Not Taken, edited by Adam S. Ferziger, Miri Freud-Kandel, and Steven Bayme (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2019), ISBN 978-1-61811-749-6, pp. viii + 308, \$119.

Considering the career of Rabbi Irving “Yitz” Greenberg, and reading the comprehensive and critical tribute accorded his life and thought in *Yitz Greenberg and Modern Orthodoxy: The Road Not Taken*, I thought of the positional parallels between the role of Rabbi Greenberg in our era and that of Rabbi Esriel Hildesheimer (1820–1899), the great nineteenth-century champion of modern Orthodox Judaism. In 1851, Hildesheimer established a *yeshivah* in Eisenstadt, Hungary, where, for the first time in Central European history, secular subjects were included in the curriculum. As a result, the ultra-Orthodox Rabbi Akiba Yoseph Schlesinger pronounced a ban of excommunication on him and charged that only sinners who cause others to sin would emerge from Hildesheimer’s Eisenstadt *yeshivah*. Furthermore, Rabbi Hillel Lichtenstein, Schlesinger’s father-in-law, wrote that Hildesheimer was “a man of deceit . . . wrapped . . . in a garb of righteousness which outwardly justifies his deed, like a pig that stretches forth its hoofs . . . so that many are caught in his net. . . . His every tendency uproots Torah and fear of God and plants in their stead apostasy and heresy in Israel” (this passage is quoted in my study, *Rabbi Esriel Hildesheimer and the Creation of a Modern Jewish Orthodoxy*, published by the University of Alabama Press in 1990, on p. 43).

Conversely, Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Spektor of Kovno, the great nineteenth-century Eastern European rabbinic decisor after whom the rabbinical school at Yeshiva University is named, wrote glowingly of Hildesheimer, who also established the modern Orthodox Rabbinerseminar in Berlin in 1873, observing that, “God dealt mercifully with us and gave us my dear friend . . . learned in Torah and renowned for his piety, our teacher Rabbi Esriel”. The latter employed “his strength to fortify the pillars of religion in Germany, to magnify Torah, and to glorify his *yeshiva* which is a tree of life” (quoted *ibid.*, p. 164). As the fine essay in this volume, “What is ‘Modern’ in Modern Orthodoxy”, by Allan Brill indicates, arguments and dissent within Modern Orthodoxy are as old as Modern Orthodoxy itself, and there is ample historical precedent for Yitz Greenberg’s rocky journey.

Yitz Greenberg and Modern Orthodoxy contains twelve superb essays based

on lectures delivered by preeminent scholars like Brill at a 2014 Oxford conference devoted to the work and thought of Greenberg. The editors' splendid "Foreword" and the dazzlingly honest chapter, "Modern Orthodoxy and the Road Not Taken: A Retrospective View", by Greenberg himself, offer an excellent introduction to the issues and arguments that have surrounded Greenberg, and informed the Orthodox Jewish world throughout his lifetime. The subsequent essays offer ample commentary on these matters and afford both scholars and laypersons great insight into the conflicts and opposing positions that have marked, and continue to mark, Orthodox Judaism in the modern world.

In his opening essay, Greenberg compellingly describes his biography and the evolution of his thought. He was raised in Brooklyn, in a home that was punctiliously observant of traditional Jewish ritual and immersed in Jewish learning. Yet, the Greenberg home was also an inclusive and pluralistic one, and it is clear that Greenberg's characteristic intellectual modesty, the infinite love he possesses for the entirety of the Jewish people and the State of Israel, the openness he displays towards Christianity and other religions, his respect for critical academic scholarship, and his concern for human dignity and sexual equality were all fostered by the characters of his father and mother and the spirit that marked their home. The influence of the Holocaust, his doctoral studies at Harvard, the feminist impact of his equally gifted wife Blu on his sexual ethics, and his appreciation of the necessity of religious equality for women in Judaism, his respect for Reform and Conservative Judaism, and his belief in a "covenantal pluralism" that embraces the religious integrity of Christianity and other religious traditions have all combined to shape him as the intellectual leader of an "open Orthodoxy" that reaches out to the entirety of the Jewish people and the larger world.

His attention to the contemporary situation has earned Greenberg both praise and condemnation, and he has frequently been the target of harsh critique. Greenberg himself, as well as other essayists in the volume, capture the pain he felt following the interview he gave in 1966, as a faculty member at Yeshiva University, to *The Commentator*, the Yeshiva College student newspaper. In it, he offered an embryonic but forthright account of his then nascent thoughts on many of the aforementioned subjects. This led to an excruciating conflict with his faculty colleague, Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein. Lichtenstein, who later moved to Israel to serve as Rosh Yeshivah at Yeshivat Har Etzion, and was awarded the prestigious Israel Prize for Jewish Literature, was exceedingly critical of the views Greenberg

had expressed in that interview. The controversy led Greenberg to leave Yeshiva for a Jewish world located at best on the fringes of mainstream Orthodoxy, and brought about his ideological alienation from “centrist Orthodox Judaism”. Yet, Greenberg did not retreat from the principled commitments expressed in that interview, and for the past fifty years he has devoted himself to creating a narrative that “could be persuasive in an open society in the full presence of other religions and cultures” (p. 52). He has determinedly and courageously maintained his devotion to the creation of a Modern Orthodoxy that “must relocate itself solidly inside” a postmodern setting, and share the “fate, the challenges, and the experiences of all Israel” (p. 52).

In his opening essay, Greenberg also candidly acknowledges his disappointments with many of the rightward turns Modern Orthodoxy has taken. The chapters by Jack Wertheimer and Samuel Heilman on the state of Modern Orthodoxy and the character of the contemporary Orthodox rabbinate confirm much of his assessment about the ever-growing “hareidization” of the Orthodox world. Yet, as other essays in this volume indicate, Greenberg’s successes may be greater than he himself imagines. Indeed, the final essay in the volume, by Adam Ferziger, on “The Greenberg–Lichtenstein Exchange and Modern Orthodoxy”, demonstrates that Lichtenstein himself ultimately came to adopt stances on issues of sexuality, critical biblical scholarship, Reform and Conservative Jews, and the value of their institutions similar to those Greenberg had first put forward five decades earlier. Furthermore, as the chapters in this book reveal, given his marginal status, Greenberg’s theological and ethical influence has been remarkably pronounced both within and beyond the Orthodox precincts of the Jewish world. The superb essays by Alan Jotkowitz, Darren Kleinberg, James Kugel, Tamar Ross, and Sylvia Barack Fishman on how Greenberg has influenced their views and the stances of many others on medical ethics, post-ethnic Judaism, revelation, Christianity, Reform and Conservative Judaism combine to make this point convincingly. Steven Katz and Marc Shapiro similarly express their appreciation for Greenberg and his impact on Orthodox spokespeople and their approach to the influences of history, the Holocaust, the State of Israel, other religions, and critical scholarship on the theological postures of modern Orthodoxy, even as they offer thoughtful critiques of what they view as his excessively humanistic affirmations and overly liberal religious embrace of the “Other”.

Miri Freud-Kandel has contributed a compelling essay, “On Revelation, Heresy, and Mesorah – from Louis Jacobs to TheTorah.com”, that sheds additional light on many of the positions and analyses of other authors in this volume. Her description and presentation of the passions that Louis Jacobs and his writings elicited when it was proposed that he become Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, and his subsequent departure from the Orthodox world for the world of Masorti Judaism, are not only of interest in themselves. They provide the reader with ample material to reflect on how Greenberg, in contrast to Jacobs, has managed to remain part of the Orthodox world, and how Modern Orthodoxy may yet walk in directions pursued by Greenberg for a lifetime.

By collating and editing the essays assembled in this volume, Ferziger, Freud-Kandel, and Steven Bayme have done students of Modern Orthodox Judaism a great service. They provide serious critical and respectful insights into how Rabbi Greenberg, to paraphrase the words that Rabbi Spektor uttered about Hildesheimer more than a century ago, has striven for a lifetime to “fortify the pillars” of Orthodox Judaism, and “glorify Torah” while acknowledging the challenges and questions that remain regarding the success and fulfillment of his visions and stances in the world of Orthodox Judaism.

David Ellenson