

Communications

Tradition welcomes and encourages letters to the editor. Letters, which should be brief and to the point, should not ordinarily exceed 1000 words. They should be e-mailed to tradition-letters@rabbis.org. Letters may be edited.

COVENANTS, MESSIAHS AND RELIGIOUS BOUNDARIES

TO THE EDITOR:

I respect and learn both from Rabbis David Berger and Irving Greenberg (*Tradition* 39:2, Summer 2005). My remarks are not intended as a demurral, but as a suggestion regarding how dissent in our worldly Orthodox community ought to be undertaken. We would do well to read those with whom we disagree—but who are religiously observant—generously, as long as we are not dealing with misrepresentation of Torah or intellectual dishonesty.

There is a generous reading of an issue with which we disagree. When we consider a *view* to be “error,” we focus on the object, or *heftsa*. When we focus on the *person*, the *gavra*, we are impugning the individual’s *bona fides*. In my view, R. Berger is not offering a generous reading of R. Greenberg regarding the “Broken Covenant” doctrine and his view of Christianity.

There are two versions [*girsot*] of R. Greenberg’s “Broken Covenant” doctrine. If by “broken” we claim that the Sinai contract is null, not really binding, and merely voluntary, we do indeed have a theological problem because God tells us that the Covenant is eternal. The Torah remains binding, even in the Messianic era. If however we mean that belief is difficult to sustain after the Holocaust, and the covenant’s brokenness refers to a human inability to measure up to the Divine mandate and we understand R. Greenberg’s prose metaphorically, poetically, and generously, we can quibble with the idiom, but not the intent. He is, after all, an observant Jew. One does not consistently obey commandments out of thoughtless inertia or mindless nostalgia. One has a right to claim that R. Greenberg is wrong. R. Berger would have done better to identify what he takes to be the *heftsa* error, and avoid impugning, even by implication, the *gavra* that stands behind R. Greenberg’s *bona fides*. By regularly denying R. Greenberg the rabbinic honorific, we engage in an unseemly rite of revulsion. The late R. Shaul Lieberman loathed and condemned Mordecai Kaplan’s heresy, but

Communications

avoided diction that would not resonate and not be effective to the sensibilities of those to whom he spoke. And we know that in public discourse, Rav Soloveitchik avoided the denying of professional honorifics even of those whose integrity and competence he strongly questioned.

As a historian, R. Berger knows that Judaism, like pre-Christian paganism, stressed deed rather than doctrine. Judaism's concern with doctrine and systematic theology is a product of its encounter with Christianity. I believe that R. Yosef Albo's triad, that one must believe in God, that God commands, and that we are held accountable to obey those commands, are our universally accepted dogmas. It is ironic that we argue about doctrine but are very pluralist in the acceptable sins that we tolerate. Let God do the judging, and we should do the learning.

We are using the texts of the Torah canon selectively if we indulge our own biases and object to others based on matters of taste and not commitment. Beware the heresy hunt. Maimonides, R. Kook, and even our own R. Soloveitchik have been subject to subjective derision. This is a path we would do well not to travel.

(RABBI) ALAN J. YUTER
Baltimore, MD

DAVID BERGER RESPONDS:

Rabbi Yuter affirms that the "universally accepted dogmas" of Judaism, which remain in effect even after the Holocaust, include the beliefs that God commands and that we are held accountable to obey those commands. He chides me for heresy hunting and ungenerous reading for failing to interpret R. Irving Greenberg's position on the covenant in a manner consistent with these dogmas. In R. Yuter's view, one should not understand R. Greenberg's position as an affirmation that the covenant is "null, not really binding, and merely voluntary." Rather, the proper, generous reading is a metaphorical one in which the broken covenant refers to "a human inability to measure up to the Divine mandate" in light of the challenge to belief posed by the Holocaust.

Would that this reading were sustainable. R. Greenberg tells us that a paper by Roy Eckardt entitled "The Recantation of the Covenant?" thrust him into a religious crisis that lasted for years. Eckardt argued (in R. Greenberg's paraphrase) that in the wake of the Holocaust "God must repent for having endangered the Jews without providing for their

TRADITION

protection. . . . The only acceptable *teshuvah* for God would be to recant the divine covenant and thus remove the Jews from the extreme danger they were in. In light of this analysis, any further projection—by God or humans—of a covenant of demand that included the expectation that Jews must live by a higher standard (or else . . .) was outrageous and immoral” (p. 26).

R. Greenberg reports that he was torn by this presentation. On the one hand, the argument rang true; on the other, it meant that the very covenant for which Jews had died through the ages was to be retracted. After years of inner torment, however, he came to a realization that reconciled his conflicts:

Roy Eckardt was absolutely right. . . . But his prophetic insight was “off” in one way. The Abrahamic-Sinaitic covenant was not finished—but the *commanded stage of the covenant* [emphasis in the original] had come to an end. The covenant of demand (for higher standards of behavior for Jews) had been morally passed through the fires of the Holocaust—and had been found wanting. In a world where evil forces had access to extraordinary power while God did not intervene to guarantee the safety of the covenantal people, in such a world, any absolute insistence that the people of Israel live by a higher standard—or else—was inherently abusive. Such a demand was illegitimate, and therefore null and void, because it only exposed the Jews to greater danger. . . .

[However,] the Jewish people, though released from its imposed obligation by every logical and moral consideration of justice, chose to continue its covenantal mission. Some children of Israel were so in love with God; some, with the vision of *tikun olam* (perfecting the world); and some, with all the Jewish people who had ever lived, that they have voluntarily rededicated themselves to the covenant. . . . Morally speaking, God could no longer command, but God could lovingly ask for Israel’s partnership. And Jewry has responded with love and taken up that partnership again (pp. 27-28).¹

In some respects, this is a beautiful and inspiring passage, but, unless the term metaphor is stretched so far as to lose all semblance of meaning, it is manifestly inconsistent with R. Yuter’s interpretation or with the dogmas that he affirms.

It gives me no pleasure to say this. I expressed my youthful and in large measure abiding admiration for R. Greenberg in the review. My omission of the honorific “Rabbi” resulted from my following the standard practice of the academic publications to which I am accustomed

Communications

(where reviewers do not usually call authors “Dr.” or “Prof.”) and signaled no disrespect, let alone “revulsion.” While I cannot say that I have a rigidly consistent practice in such matters, I usually make sure to say “Rabbi” (or “R.”) in references to *rashei yeshiva* and pulpit rabbis (even those with academic credentials) but usually not when referring to individuals whose primary function is not rabbinic. (In one of my most recent publications, one will find within three lines references to “my distinguished brother-in law David Shatz” and to a question that “has been subjected to scholarly scrutiny by Jacob Katz, Haym Soloveitchik, Yisrael Ta-Shma, and Daniel Sperber.”²) My instinct was to see R. Greenberg primarily as a communal leader rather than as a functioning rabbi at this point in his career. Since I have used the term “rabbi” in print for non-Orthodox rabbis, I do not think there are grounds for suspicion that my failure to use it here was a “rite of revulsion.” If the omission of the honorific requires *teshuvah*, let my repeated use of it in this response serve as my *kapparah*.

I share R. Yuter’s concern that lines be drawn on the basis of commitment rather than taste. In my review, for example, I expressed considerable understanding for R. Greenberg’s use of the term “failed Messiah” to describe Jesus despite the storm of criticism that the formulation aroused among many Orthodox Jews. Nonetheless, I regard the faith component of Judaism as essential to its very definition, and I do not see it in quite such narrow terms as R. Yuter. I expressed my views on this question in a review essay in *Tradition* several years ago³ and was gratified to see that R. Aharon Lichtenstein wrote that that review had “set forth the matter with historical and theological precision.”⁴

It is not a matter of taste to reject or accept the position that the covenant is no longer binding. It is not a matter of taste to reject or accept the possibility that Jesus of Nazareth (or, as I noted in the review, the Lubavitcher Rebbe) is the Messiah and/or God incarnate. If we allow accusations of intolerance to deter us from guarding the boundaries of the religion bequeathed to us by our ancestors against attacks of this magnitude, the history of Judaism will have to be completely rewritten. The classic contours of the historic faith will crumble, and passersby, astonished as they behold the ruins, will ask, “Why did the Lord do thus to this faith?” And the answer, this time bearing an even more direct valence than in Deuteronomy 29:24 itself, will follow: “Because they forsook the covenant that the Lord, God of their fathers, made with them when he took them out of Egypt.”

NOTES

1. The short selection from this passage quoted in my review is on p. 27, not, as I erroneously indicated, on p. 26.
2. "Identity, Ideology, and Faith: Some Personal Reflections on the Social, Cultural and Spiritual Value of the Academic Study of Judaism." In *Study and Knowledge in Jewish Thought*, ed. by Howard Kreisel, Beer Sheva, 2006, p. 25.
3. "Must a Jew Believe Anything?" A Review Essay. *Tradition* 33:4 (1999): 81-89.
4. *He'emidah et ha-devarim al diyyukam ha-histori ve-ha-te'ologi*. See "Mishnah u-Gemara bi-Yeshivot Tikhoniyyot: Teguvat Ha-Rav Lichtenstein le-Ma'amaro shel ha-Rav Brandes," *Hatzofeh*, 14 Av, 5761, available at <http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/toshba/tochniut/mishna-4.htm>.

WOMEN'S *ALITOT* IN CONTEMPORARY SYNAGOGUES

TO THE EDITOR:

I fear that a sentence in R. Mendel Shapiro's response (*Tradition* 40:1, Spring 2007) might unintentionally reinforce the misconception that women are not obligated in *parashat Zakhor*. (He writes, "Similarly, women do not read or receive *maftir* of *parashat Zakhor* or on similar *Shabbatot* where congregants are obligated to hear the *maftir*.") *Zakhor* is a positive commandment that is not time-caused and it is also intertwined with the negative commandment not to forget. This is not the place for a discourse on women's obligation in *Zakhor*; one can look at *Yabi'a Omer* 8:54 for a presentation of the different views. However, I would encourage any congregation that chooses to follow the path of greater *kevod ha-beriyot* through greater participation by women to examine the matter of women's obligation in *parashat Zakhor* thoroughly and with *koved rosh* before deciding on their policy of women's inclusion or lack thereof in the public reading of *parashat Zakhor*.

Personally, I am always severely pained when my obligations in commandments are seemingly stripped from me. Rather, I would make a party to celebrate that I am obligated (to paraphrase Rav Yosef in *Kiddushin* 31a). Remember, we say "*asher kiddeshanu be-mitsvotav*"—we are all sanctified by the commandments—the more of us that are commanded, the greater the sanctification for the whole people of Israel.

(DR.) DEBBY KOREN
Jerusalem, Israel