

*David Singer*

Dr. Singer is a member of the Department of History at the Chicago State College.

THE CASE FOR AN "IRRELEVANT"  
ORTHODOXY:  
AN OPEN LETTER TO YITZCHAK GREENBERG

Dear Yitzchak,

It is with some misgiving that I address this open letter to you since I know that there are those individuals who will use it as an excuse for avoiding a serious confrontation with your views on Orthodoxy. Let me therefore state that I agree with much of your general analysis of Orthodoxy's current situation, as well as with many of your specific directives for Orthodoxy's future. The very fact that your writings have aroused such fierce opposition in some quarters indicates that you have touched some of Orthodoxy's more exposed nerves. In spite of the significant strides it has made in recent years, Orthodox Judaism is still bedeviled by a good deal of fear, paralysis, and unthinking rejection of any challenge to the status quo. If, therefore, I do dissent publicly from some of your ideas, it is only because I know that above all else you desire a frank and open discussion of the issues affecting Orthodoxy's present and future state.

It is not my intention in this letter to offer a brief summary, let alone a systematic analysis, of all your views on Orthodoxy.<sup>1</sup> There are, of course, numerous points that one would want to raise relative to your thoughts on such matters as Biblical criticism, the modernization of Jewish law, Jewish education, the Orthodox response to Conservative and Reform Judaism, Jewish-Gentile relations, etc. In this open letter, however, I want to limit my comments to two issues, though they are, I believe, particularly significant ones. The first concerns your approach to the problem of making Orthodoxy attractive to non-Orthodox

*The Case for An "Irrelevant" Orthodoxy: An Open Letter  
to Yitzchak Greenberg*

Jews. The second relates to your view of the attitude that Orthodoxy should assume toward the dominant values and beliefs of contemporary, liberal, American culture. The two issues are, of course, intimately related, in that any clear cut position on the first will largely dictate one's response to the second. Nonetheless, for purposes of analysis and clarification, I will attempt to deal with them separately.

It is clear from your writings that a major reason for your impatience with Orthodoxy is your belief that it is serenely presiding over the gradual demise of American Jewry, when in fact, as the bearer of the Tradition, it could be a major force for Jewish survival. On a number of occasions you have expressed the hope that American Jewish history will turn out to be a great adventure in freedom, but you have recognized that present realities seem rather to point in the direction of a suicidal escape from freedom.<sup>2</sup> The latter possibility has, in fact, been declared a certainty for the bulk of the American Jewish community by Charles Liebman:

Increasingly, Judaism will retain the identification of only those whose commitment is a very deep one, and those who are willing to pay the high cost of sacrificing age, occupational, or other associational group identities for their Judaism . . . They constitute only a small proportion of the Jewish community . . . From them we may expect increased Jewish identification . . . But from the majority of the American Jews, perhaps most of those who are today affiliated with Reform, Conservative, and even Orthodox synagogues, not to mention the Jewish Community Centers, there is no hope.<sup>3</sup>

Given the pressing crisis facing American Jewry, you have been understandably anxious for Orthodoxy to make a concerted effort to reach out to non-Orthodox Jews. As to the best way of accomplishing this, your view on the matter has been expressed quite forcefully.

If Orthodoxy is to speak to, and have an effect upon, non-Orthodox Jews, you repeatedly emphasize, it must first "go through the modern experience."<sup>4</sup> By this you mean that Orthodoxy has to make itself relevant to the needs of contemporary

## TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

Jews by addressing itself to their present situation. At the moment Orthodoxy is unable to communicate with non-Orthodox Jews because it operates on a different social, psychological, and intellectual wave length than the latter. This, you believe, is a result of the fact that Orthodoxy remains tied to a cultural style (normative, ascetic, ethnocentric, judgmental, and personal), separable from the Tradition, that is by now largely inoperative in American society, and thus in the lives of most American Jews.<sup>5</sup> If Orthodoxy is to reestablish a dialogue with non-Orthodox Jews therefore, it has to break decisively with its present cultural style and permit the Tradition to honestly confront both the dangers and possibilities inherent in contemporary life and culture. What this implies for the Orthodox Jewish community has been spelled out by you as follows:

Orthodoxy must change its identity from a fundamentalism to a religion, from preserving Judaism to affirming it and its sovereignty in modern culture . . . There is a need for the renewal of the process of imbuing the contemporary experience with religious import by applying religious values and practices to all areas of secular life. But this can only be done when Orthodoxy works through, in depth, the modern experience so that it speaks to this generation and in it . . . It must be crystal clear that [Orthodoxy's] affirmations do not proceed from being a cultural backwater, or because [it] does not yet recognize the problems that have been raised.<sup>6</sup>

The historical hour demands of Orthodoxy the faith that "Torah can survive by using our best talents and abilities rather than . . . our weaknesses and fears,"<sup>7</sup> and a willingness to put this faith to the test. If Orthodoxy is up to such a test, and genuinely comes to grips with contemporary life in all its complexities, you maintain, it can significantly affect the life and fate of American Jewry.

To anyone sensitive to the separate needs of Orthodoxy and of the American Jewish community as a whole, your program for Orthodox Judaism has an almost irresistible appeal. Yet, the question must be posed: Will this program in fact bring non-Orthodox Jews closer to the Tradition? There is no doubt that if asked, most non-Orthodox Jews would voice approval of your program, since it would make Orthodoxy more "modern." Be-

*The Case for An "Irrelevant" Orthodoxy: An Open Letter  
to Yitzchak Greenberg*

yond the fact that an Orthodoxy refashioned along the lines that you envision would be less of an embarrassment to the non-Orthodox, however, there is little reason to assume that it would significantly alter the latter's present patterns of religious belief and behavior. I say this because we have the example of Conservative and Reform Judaism to guide us. Whatever one's ultimate evaluation of these movements, they certainly deserve credit for recognizing the revolutionary transformations that have been affecting Jewry, and for attempting to cope with them. Yet, neither movement has been able to awaken any significant commitment to Jewish survival, much less religious life, among its constituents. If, then, Conservative and Reform Judaism are unable to reach non-Orthodox Jews in such a way as to make the Torah a living force in their lives, how can your program possibly succeed, when its ability to compromise and maneuver is limited by the halakhic framework? The painful truth of the situation has been described thus:

Orthodoxy cannot reach the masses of American Jews because they have no resonance for its message. Their total outlook on life, their values, their perceptions, their desires, are incompatible with Orthodox belief and practice . . . Unless we are prepared to accommodate ourselves to a basic change in belief and practice, we can do little more than hold our own.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, you can argue that Orthodoxy has nothing to lose by trying your program. It seems to me, however, that its net effect might be to drive away precisely those individuals who are really potential candidates for the Tradition and Orthodoxy.

While I am not aware of any study of non-Orthodox individuals who turn to Orthodoxy, personal observation leads me to believe that they tend to be of one type. Broadly speaking, religious groups offer their members solutions to one of two kinds of problems.<sup>9</sup> The more church-oriented groups, such as Reform Judaism, address themselves primarily to problems arising from societal demands. The more sect-like groups, such as Jewish Orthodoxy, on the other hand, seek largely to satisfy individual religious needs. Those people from non-Orthodox

backgrounds who are attracted to Orthodoxy, therefore, tend to be the "lost souls," those who have deep-seated psycho-religious needs that yearn for expression. They are not searching for ways of adjusting to American society, nor for solutions to the world's problems, but rather for personal meaning and salvation. Orthodoxy speaks to them because it offers an all embracing system of belief, and, even more important, a rigorous and disciplined (the stricter the better) code of behavior. Being penitent pilgrims rather than social prophets, however, these *ba'ale teshuvah* would, I think, find little of interest in your program for Orthodoxy, since it stresses the need for Orthodox Judaism to become much more actively involved in the major social issues affecting society. On the contrary, by bringing Orthodoxy into the mainstream of contemporary life, your program might well make it less attractive to the "lost souls." For them, one of the most appealing things about Orthodoxy is precisely its "irrelevance," its radical non-conformity to the values, attitudes, and life style of the "modern" world. They have had their fill of the latter and are looking for an alternative. This is why so many of the *ba'ale teshuvah* are attracted to Hasidism and other rightist movements within the Orthodox community.<sup>10</sup> Orthodoxy is meaningful and relevant to them directly in proportion to its variance from modernity. Since your program seeks to bridge the gulf between the two, it can hardly improve Orthodoxy's image in the eyes of the "lost souls."

I think it particularly important to bear in mind the relevance of Orthodoxy's "irrelevance" at this time because the pool of "lost souls" is definitely increasing. One of the most striking things about modern culture is the rapidity with which change occurs, and American culture is currently making a sharp dialectical turn. To most people college youth conjures up the image of socially involved student activists. Among a very small but growing segment of avant-garde college students, however, the goal of social transformation is being supplanted by that of personal salvation. These post-modern young people, who are perceptively examined in Theodore Roszak's recent book,<sup>11</sup> are veterans of various New Left movements, but despairing of reason, science, and social engineering, they are turning inward in

*The Case for An "Irrelevant" Orthodoxy: An Open Letter  
to Yitzchak Greenberg*

quest of individual meaning. In pursuing this quest they are following the lead of such gurus as Alan Watts, Norman Brown, Allen Ginsberg, Paul Goodman, and Timothy Leary, and are experimenting with mysticism, Zen, psychedelic drugs, astrology, and even magic. One such group of students at M.I.T. is described as follows:

... as the weeks moved on ... the students' true interests surfaced ... Asian philosophy ... meditation ... Yoga ... Zen ... Tibet ... *I Ching* ... Yang-Yin macrobiotic (brown rice) diet ... Maher Baba ... parapsychology, astrology, astral bodies ... Tarot cards, witchcraft, and magic. And underlying everything, of course, the psychedelic drugs.<sup>12</sup>

Quite obviously, as Roszak emphasizes, these "lost souls" are searching for a "counter culture" to contemporary life. Some of them may find it in Orthodoxy, but only so long as it remains "irrelevant."<sup>13</sup>

If I am correct in my arguments as to who are the most likely candidates for Orthodox Judaism, and as to how they may best be approached, then it is probably in Orthodoxy's strategic interest to be far more critical of contemporary, liberal, American culture than you believe is warranted. Your positive, though by no means wholly uncritical, attitude toward the dominant values and beliefs of contemporary America is fully consonant with your program of making Orthodoxy relevant to the lives of the masses of American Jewry. Since the overwhelming majority of American Jews are irrevocably committed to the present cultural consensus, Orthodoxy, pragmatically speaking, has no choice, if it wishes to reach the non-Orthodox, but to itself embrace the consensus. Against those who argue that such an embrace will prove deadly to Orthodoxy, however, you are quick to add that there is in fact much in contemporary American culture that can enrich and deepen Orthodoxy. This is a central contention of your recent study of "Jewish Values and the Changing American Ethic."<sup>14</sup> Thus, on both practical and religious grounds, you deem it vital for Orthodoxy to seek, wherever possible, a rapprochement with the current, liberal,

## TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

cultural consensus.

While the rapprochement that you seek with contemporary American culture is clearly the appropriate course of action if Orthodoxy is addressing itself to the bulk of American Jewry, it is certainly not so if Orthodoxy is seeking to attract the "lost souls." The latter are extremely dissatisfied products of the contemporary cultural scene, and are desperately searching for an alternative pattern of values and beliefs. In order to draw the "lost souls" toward Orthodox Judaism, therefore, it seems desirable to sharply disassociate Orthodoxy from the present cultural consensus. Rather than taking a "me-too" position, Orthodoxy should assume an adversary stance against the attitudes and ideas of the dominant culture. Orthodoxy needs a considerable number of men like Michael Wyschogrod and Milton Himelfarb, men who are devastating critics of "reflex liberalism."<sup>15</sup> By placing intellectual barriers between itself and the general society, Orthodoxy will, paradoxically, be building bridges that the "lost souls" can cross.

In closing this letter I am compelled to confess that I find myself thoroughly frightened by the program for Orthodoxy I have outlined. It is appalling to me to think of Orthodoxy becoming, to use the felicitous phrase of Eliezer Berkovits, the *Neturei Karta* to the nations. Yet, in the face of the seeming impossibility of reaching the bulk of American Jewry, might this not be the prudent course of action?

### NOTES

1. See the following articles by Irving Greenberg: "Jewish Values and the Changing American Ethic" *TRADITION*, Summer 1968, pp. 42-75; "Toward Jewish Religious Unity" *Judaism*, Spring 1966, pp. 131-63; "Jewish Survival and the College Campus" *Judaism*, Summer 1968, pp. 259-82; "The Cultural Revolution and Religious Unity" *Religious Education*, March-April 1967, pp. 98-100; "Jews or Zombies" *Jewish Advocate*, September 30, 1966; "Fifth Annual American-Israel Dialogue, Part Two" *Congress Bi-Weekly*, April 17, 1967; "Adventure in Freedom — Or Escape from Freedom" *American Jewish Historical Quarterly*, September 1965, pp. 5-21; "Identity in Flux" *Congress Bi-Weekly*, March 20, 1967, pp. 8-16.

## *The Case for An "Irrelevant" Orthodoxy: An Open Letter to Yitzchak Greenberg*

2. See the last two articles listed in note 1.
3. Charles Liebman, "Orthodoxy and the Jewish Community Center" *TRADITION*, Winter 1966, pp. 78-87, p. 83.
4. Greenberg, "Toward Jewish Religious Unity," *op. cit.*, p. 138.
5. Greenberg, "Jewish Values and the Changing American Ethic" *op. cit.*, *passim*.
6. Greenberg, "Toward Jewish Religious Unity" *op. cit.*, pp. 137-38.
7. Greenberg, "Jewish Values and the Changing American Ethic" *op. cit.*, p. 71.
8. Liebman, "Orthodoxy and the Jewish Community Center," *op. cit.*, p. 83.
9. For an excellent discussion of the church-sect dichotomy as it applies to Judaism see Charles Liebman "Orthodoxy in American Jewish Life" *American Jewish Year Book*, 1965, pp. 44-47.
10. See Rabbi Herbert Weiner's magnificent book *9½ Mystics* (New York, 1969) in which he describes his encounters with some of the more "way out" varieties of Orthodoxy that have attracted non-Orthodox Jews. As a Reform Rabbi with a suburban congregation who spends his free time visiting these "way out" groups, Weiner himself exemplifies something of the "lost soul" mentality I have in mind.
11. Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture* (Garden City, 1969).
12. Cited in Milton Himmelfarb "Paganism, Religion and Modernity" *Commentary*, November 1968, p. 90. Himmelfarb's article is an excellent discussion of the phenomenon I am describing. See also, Andrew Greely "There's a New-Time Religion on Campus" *New York Times Magazine*, June 1, 1969, pp. 12-18.
13. That a "way out" Orthodoxy can in fact attract post-modern college youth is indicated by the significant following of such men as Shlomo Carlebach and Zalman Schachter.
14. Greenberg, "Jewish Values and the Changing American Ethic" *op. cit.*, pp. 53-71.
15. In no way do I mean to associate Wyschogrod or Himmelfarb with the views expressed in this letter. I merely cite them as exemplary critics of the commonplace pieties of contemporary life and thought. Wyschogrod is Orthodox, Himmelfarb is not. For a sampling of their critical writings see: Michael Wyschogrod "The Jewish Interest in Vietnam" *TRADITION*, Winter 1966, pp. 5-19; Michael Wyschogrod "Conservative Trends in American Jewish Life" *Judaism*, Spring 1964, pp. 131-56; Michael Wyschogrod "My Commentary Problem and Ours" *Judaism*, Spring 1968, pp. 148-62; Milton Himmelfarb "Church and State: How High a Wall" *Commentary*, July 1966, pp. 23-29; Milton Himmelfarb "Two Cheers for Hedonism" *Commentary*, April 1965, pp. 61-65; Milton Himmelfarb "Hebraism and Hellenism Now" *Commentary*, July 1969, pp. 50-57.