

BOOK REVIEW

Yitz Greenberg and Modern Orthodoxy: The Road Not Taken, edited by Adam Ferziger, Miri Freud-Kandel, and Steven Bayme (Academic Studies Press, 2019), 310 pages

Reviewed by
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The “road not taken” is a captivating framing for a book. How would our community look different today if we had elevated alternative perspectives decades ago? How would the contours of our devotion to Torah and *mitzvo*t have been shaped had our parents and teachers made different choices? What is the essential foundation upon which our community’s formidable strengths rest? Could we have solved some of the enduring challenges that vex our community had we oriented our institutions around different values? The “road not taken” is an engaging framing device to animate the study of intellectual history. Why do we think as we do? How did people see the world differently in the past?

The “road not taken” is also the organizing theory for a stimulating, recent volume dedicated to the life and thought of Rabbi Irving (Yitz) Greenberg, an educator, rabbi, and public intellectual who is one of the most influential figures in modern Jewish life whose thought and leadership can still fairly be described as “the road not taken.”

The collection begins with an autobiographical reflection by R. Greenberg himself. In 48 pages, he describes his childhood, religious and secular education, and his rapid rise to prominence as a member of the Modern Orthodox intelligentsia as the founding rabbi of the Riverdale Jewish Center and as a professor at Yeshiva University in the early 1960s during the heady intellectual environment nourished by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik. R. Greenberg then explains the circumstances of his gradual marginalization from the center of Modern Orthodox life, followed by his pivot towards an ongoing fruitful and impactful professional life rooted in the secular academy and Jewish communal leadership serving the broader, non-Orthodox world.

R. Greenberg’s position as a founder of the new Jewish Studies department at City College of New York in 1972, at a time when Jewish Studies courses and departments were expanding across North America, paved the way for his founding in 1974 of a think-tank, CLAL, The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, to promote Jewish pluralism and literacy. The embrace of multiple Jewish denominations and the different beliefs they espoused further marginalized R. Greenberg from his

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erstwhile Modern Orthodox colleagues even as CLAL, alongside his position at City College, gave R. Greenberg scores of new students and colleagues among the non-Orthodox majority of American Jews.

R. Greenberg explicitly frames this pivot as the result of an Orthodox community unwilling or unable to grapple with challenging questions posed by modern life and modern values and for which Orthodoxy, even its ostensibly Modern variants, had no compelling answers. In R. Greenberg's words: "I concluded that the Orthodox... would need to upgrade various moral positions in our heritage, lest it be experienced as ethically inferior. Successful adaptation would also require broader or more sophisticated understandings of classical concepts such as revelation, authority, covenant, etc." (13). R. Greenberg could not refrain from promoting that "upgrade" of Orthodoxy, and the Orthodox community resisted those efforts. The editors of this volume implicitly accept R. Greenberg's framing by organizing the volume around a series of articles that address elements of traditional Orthodoxy in need of "upgrade" according to R. Greenberg.

It is hard to evaluate R. Greenberg's claims, because, as a product of the world as it developed—the "road taken"—I cannot escape my own education and acculturation within an Orthodox community that by and large was not shaped by R. Greenberg's alternative vision. Reading paragraph after paragraph of his autobiographical essay, I kept wanting to ask: Precisely which bold answers are you suggesting? What kind of halakhic creativity is needed? Could you share the halakhic analysis that could justify or explain the position you are suggesting?

At the same time, the spheres in which R. Greenberg has had the most influence on the American Jewish community have been so transformed in the past 50 years that it is hard to recognize how much of what I take for granted about American Jewish life did not exist at the outset of R. Greenberg's career and activism. The premise of my own conversations with non-Orthodox rabbinic colleagues has been a mutual admiration for Torah scholarship, recognition that *beit midrash* study is at least as authentic as other methods for analyzing Jewish texts, and respect for ritual observance. The local Jewish Federation where I live, along with others in major American cities, funnels hundreds of thousands of dollars each year from their mostly non-Orthodox donors towards Jewish day schools of all kinds. R. Greenberg may not have succeeded in convincing most Orthodox Jews to embrace a pluralistic stance with regards to non-Orthodox denominations, but Orthodox Jews benefit from the pluralism with which non-Orthodox Jewish movements understand and appreciate Orthodoxy.

This volume emerged from a 2014 conference that has since become the annual Oxford Summer Institute on Modern and Contemporary Judaism. Sixteen scholars gathered to share and discuss papers that shed light on the various landscapes that could be illuminated by following roads not taken. Despite this framing, these ideas and issues have nonetheless percolated through our community. They continue to be confronted and accommodated by members of our community as well as by those at our community's periphery.

I remember hearing about the conference when it took place, and regretting that I was not a participant. That sense of jealousy has not abated by reading the published papers. How stimulating it must have been to discuss matters of great importance with a cadre of top scholars and intellectuals. As a published volume, however, the collection is somewhat uneven and not as stimulating as I imagine the conference must have been. There are better treatments available of some of its topics (even by the same authors), and the connection to R. Greenberg, as a symbol for contemporary Orthodoxy's road not taken, is not sustained throughout all the essays.

Among the more interesting chapters is an article by Tamar Ross deploying postmodernism to add depth to R. Greenberg's Holocaust theology. The modern rationalism of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik was an important inspiration and intellectual lodestar to R. Greenberg. Yet, Ross observes, R. Greenberg encountered the Holocaust without recourse to Rav Kook's philosophical legacy. She introduces Rav Kook's thought to expand and deepen the discourse around questions raised by R. Greenberg in the American context.

Alan Brill's exploration of what is signified by the "Modern" descriptor of Modern Orthodoxy continues his longstanding project of introducing greater linguistic precision and intellectual rigor to our community's self-understanding. This is an important project in its own right but not crucial to evaluating R. Greenberg and his symbolic role as a road not taken.

Sylvia Barack Fishman's analysis of sexual mores of contemporary Orthodox Jews and related demographic trends is a valuable contribution to a topic at the very core of our community's health and survival, and she deftly summarizes some of the fraught discourse surrounding these topics over the past 50 years, but since she never demonstrates a specific pivotal moment where Modern Orthodoxy rejected one option and chose another, her contribution does not advance the implicit thesis of the volume that R. Greenberg presented a distinct road not taken.

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Marc Shapiro's essay takes up the question of religious pluralism and the nature of seemingly contradictory religious truth claims. Here, R. Greenberg's controversial embrace of religious pluralism is placed in the context of other Orthodox rabbis and public intellectuals who have also embraced a modicum of religious pluralism in their own efforts at peaceful reconciliation with other religions, especially Christianity. Shapiro describes the controversy that erupted following the publication of the first edition of R. Jonathan Sacks' *The Dignity of Difference*. R. Shlomo Riskin and R. Eugene Korn's similar efforts at reconciliation have also been controversial among Orthodox Jews. Yet this very story undermines the framing of a "road not taken" insofar as other Orthodox rabbis have picked up the baton of pluralistic respect for other religions.

I was particularly impressed by Steven T. Katz's contribution to the volume which is a respectful confrontation with one of R. Greenberg's most provocative ideas—the evolutionary and periodical unfolding of Jewish history and the era of "voluntary covenant." This idea, inspired by R. Greenberg's intellectual and emotional confrontation with the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel, posits that God has gradually withdrawn from the affairs of human beings, leading to increased spheres of activity where human agency and free will can reign. Within this paradigm, the Holocaust and the emergence of the State of Israel ushered in our current reality of maximum freedom and minimal divine intervention in human affairs.

Katz's contribution to this volume models how controversial ideas and those who espouse them do not have to be demonized. They can be evaluated fairly and confronted before they are ultimately rejected or accepted. The relevant question at this stage is not one of policing Orthodoxy's border, but whether or not an idea is true or helpful. Katz asks whether the remnant of Torah and *mitzvot* that survives in R. Greenberg's formulation of our post-Holocaust epoch is sufficiently vital to sustain Jewish life and inspire religious devotion. He further points to alternative religious interpretations of twentieth-century Jewish history, which undermines R. Greenberg's sweeping theory of historical development that is predicated on there being only one religious meaning to the momentous events of the twentieth century.

Too often, our community avoids asking hard questions to which we do not have satisfactory answers, simply, it seems, because we may be afraid of the questions. Even more problematically, the halakhic and intellectual leadership of the Modern Orthodox community seems to devote more intellectual firepower towards rejecting answers that it

deems to be problematic than it does towards formulating alternative solutions. Katz evaluates R. Greenberg's ideas and offers probing questions, while preserving a respectful and even admiring tone, and in that way helps readers understand their own commitments and beliefs.

I recently mused that nearly every rabbi serving a Modern Orthodox congregation in the United States is a student of Rabbi Soloveitchik, the student of one of his primary students, or the student of one of those second-generation students. This observation can be evaluated separately from the cogency and relevance of the Rav's ideas and does not indicate that they are any more correct or helpful than alternatives. But, to take another example from R. Greenberg's generation of a road not taken, the brilliance of R. Eliezer Berkowitz's writings do not correspond to the relative paucity of his disciples in positions of leadership committed to spreading his ideas. If we set aside the history of ideas and focus instead on the history of the reception and replication of ideas, we must pay attention to the institutions that perpetuate and refashion our community as it educates new generations of Modern Orthodox Jews. Once R. Greenberg's professional focus shifted to serving the non-Orthodox Jewish majority, it was all but determined that his vision would become a road not taken for Orthodoxy. Historical junctures that decide the road not taken from the road that is taken are not determined exclusively or primarily by debates over ideas. Some roads are paved.

In July 2020 R. Greenberg accepted an academic position at Hadar, the "post-denominational" institute for Jewish study that "empowers Jews to create and sustain vibrant, practicing, egalitarian communities." The press release announcing this new position touted R. Greenberg's enduring commitments to the Modern Orthodox community, but, with this new role, his primary students will continue to be those outside the orbit of Modern Orthodoxy.

Serving as a senior rabbinic figure and faculty member at an institution like Hadar is consistent with the pluralism that R. Greenberg has advocated for decades and is the latest iteration of his decision to teach beyond the confines of the Orthodox community. Those Orthodox rabbis and educators who see R. Greenberg as a mentor are, one suspects, those who see him as a role model for a form of Orthodox rabbinic leadership whose sphere of influence is the entire Jewish People. For this reason, evaluating R. Greenberg's career from the facet of the influence he did *not* have within Orthodoxy, obscures the choice that R. Greenberg made in 1972—and repeated as recently as in July 2020—to use broad

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platforms to disseminate ideas he cares about to the widest possible audience.

The parallel career of R. Greenberg's wife, Blu Greenberg, is a helpful and convenient contrast. Starting in the 1970s her published essays and books set out an agenda for Orthodox Jewish feminism that was subsequently reinforced and promoted through her role in founding the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA) in 1997. That agenda, which includes *aguna* advocacy, expanded ritual opportunities for women, and promoting women's leadership, has dominated much of our community's debate and discourse until today. Her positions remain controversial, and she has many detractors alongside supporters, but the controversy is an undeniably Orthodox controversy about issues that pertain to internal Orthodox concerns.

This volume is thus not a comprehensive account of how and by whom Modern Orthodoxy was shaped and guided over the past 60 years, but rather elaborations on the ideas and causes that were championed by R. Greenberg and marginalized by most other Modern Orthodox Jews. But here too the contributors and editors of the volume may have overstated the ways in which R. Greenberg can be said to represent a road not taken for Modern Orthodoxy.

R. Greenberg's autobiographical essay centers on a controversy that erupted at Yeshiva University in 1966 when the student newspaper printed an extensive interview with R. Greenberg that revealed comments and opinions which were seen as provocative and objectionable. R. Aharon Lichtenstein, then a young scholar and Yeshiva University faculty member, penned a response which pushed R. Greenberg to moderate some of his language, but the exchange of published letters came to symbolize an estrangement between R. Greenberg and one of the more open-minded Modern Orthodox thinkers.

In the volume's final essay Adam Ferziger returns to this binary between R. Greenberg's liberalism and R. Lichtenstein's conservatism and undermines it in a way that forces a new reading of the central question of the book. The questions that R. Greenberg posed to American Orthodoxy in the 1960s remained on the agenda of our community. And R. Lichtenstein himself, who exemplified the Modern Orthodox intelligentsia for so many decades, was at the forefront for much of the progress made within our community along so many of the fronts presented by R. Greenberg back in the 1960s. R. Lichtenstein endorsed respect and admiration for non-Orthodox Judaism and non-Orthodox Jews. R. Lichtenstein and his students modeled Orthodox piety that was married to a sense of social responsibility to the broader world. R. Lichtenstein and

his students created and promoted new ways to invite women into the *beit midrash* and the corridors of advanced Torah scholarship. R. Lichtenstein's responses to the opportunities posed by modernity were not typically radical, but they did not shy away from challenging facts and they were not timid.

If Ferziger is correct, Modern Orthodoxy never conclusively rejected an honest confrontation with the challenges posed by R. Greenberg in the 1960s. Instead, as historian Zev Eleff argues in his recent book, *Authentically Orthodox: A Tradition-Bound Faith in American Life* (Wayne State University Press), American Modern Orthodoxy has shifted in ways that are quite similar to broader trends in American religion. The liberal religious version of Modern Orthodoxy, championed by R. Greenberg in the 1960s, waned along with the liberal religious version of other American religions as that revolutionary decade was subsumed by the Evangelical wave that swept Reagan to power.

So what, then, is the "road not taken" when it comes to the thought of R. Greenberg? His career has been fruitful and impactful. And some of the challenges he identified as central to Modern Orthodoxy in the 1960s were taken up by others in the following decades, whether or not they acknowledge the fact that R. Greenberg got there first. The road not taken was the opportunity to proactively shape Orthodoxy to embrace modernity as a compelling source of moral authority and, perhaps more importantly, the road not taken was the sense of obligation to shape Orthodoxy to meet the demands of a promised and inevitable future that was sure to come. As R. Greenberg describes his youthful perspective, "I concluded that the new modern civilization was so dynamic—and had brought with it such political/economic/social advances—that it would win out historically and become pretty much universal" (13).

This aspect of R. Greenberg's writing and his teaching evokes a sort of "End of History" utopianism, as though the major questions of faith and morality had been answered and resolved conclusively and all that remained was the technical work of fixing the halakhic barriers to achieving that vision. But, of course, history has not ended. Liberal democracy is not ascendant in world affairs and Modern Orthodoxy, in any form, is not ascendant within the broader Orthodox community. The confidence and moral clarity of R. Greenberg's voice are missing from our shuls and *batei midrash*. But, if the future of Orthodoxy is going to take advantage of a road that was not taken in the past, it will need to combine the prophetic voice of R. Greenberg with careful halakhic scholarship. If the Torah is indeed a life-affirming

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endorsement of religious humanism, something I believe to be true and desperately wish our community would understand, our generation will need to convince our fellow Orthodox Jews to see the Torah this way from arguments that build from first principles and that convince as much as they assert and inspire.

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