On Ways and Visions: The Theological and Educational Thought of Irving Greenberg

Redemption: Central Paradigm of Jewish Religion

Redemption, he states, is "the central paradigm of Jewish religion." Derived from the biblical affirmation that "the human being is created in the image of God," this means, according to the rabbis, that "every single person is unique and equal, endowed with the dignity of infinite value. But in history, most human beings have been degraded or denied their due." Judaism as a religion of redemption, "affirms that this condition should never be accepted; it must and will be overcome."

When redemption is achieved, the world will become as it was meant to be: "life will triumph over its enemies—war, oppression, hunger, poverty, sickness, even death. In a world of justice and peace, with all material needs taken care of, humans will be free to establish a harmonious relationship with nature, with each other, with God." It is within the framework of redemption that we are to understand covenant. Covenant is no less than a divinely initiated partnership, which invites humanity to play an active role in redeeming the world, in making human life what it was meant to be when God created all human beings in His image.

God summons humanity to participate in the process of creating a redeemed world. In this process, God promises to accompany humanity every step of the way. The human partner pledges to start the process of redemption, to go as far as possible in his or her lifetime, to create life and pass on the vision and responsibility to the next generation and not to relent until the final goal is reached.

The people of Israel, as a people, understand its existence through the covenant. Israel "takes on a binding commitment to walk in the way of the Lord... teach the way of justice and righteousness as best it can; to remain distinctive and unassimilated in the world and thus hold up the message for all peoples to see: to create a model community showing how the world can go about realizing the dream; and to work alongside others...towards the end goal of redemption...For its part, the Divine is pledged never to abandon Israel." Sensitivity to Evil, Religious Obligation

Torah, "the distinctive way of life of the Jewish people," is initiated through the covenantal demands of the Bible, which are, in turn, woven into an elaborate tapestry by the rabbinic sages, in the halacha. Israel is thereby enabled to move toward redemption in a consciousness of covenant. Torah makes the long road to redemption personally and collectively meaningful. Amidst the sufferings of an unredeemed world, Torah gives strength to endure, to maintain the hope and even to make the life of Judaism joyous. This hope and joy become most conspicuous on the Sabbaths and festivals. On Shabbat, for example, we live as though in an already redeemed world, of spirituality, human well-being and intimacy.

A close reading of this discussion of redemption and covenant, and the understanding of Torah that follows from it readily yields a rationale and guidelines for the Jewish educator. These key terms demand, as religious obligations, sensitivity to evil and the responsibility never to make peace with it. They justify separate Jewish existence by Israel's mission of testimony which proscribes assimilation; they demand the life of community, as indicated by the documents, memories, and dreams of redemption, but never in splendid isolation. Indeed Jewish testimony is often with, and certainly "alongside" others. The regimen of Torah sensitizes us to the malaise of the world and provides us with a model through which we anticipate and act.

Choosing Among Conceptions of Jewish Life

Now, what Greenberg is suggesting to educators, adult learners, in fact, to Clal Yisrael, Jews as such, is to see and justify their Jewish lives primarily through one of the three dimensions within which, according to Franz Rosenzweig, the actual and potential relationships between God, humanity and the world transpire. These three dimensions are creation, revelation and redemption. A decision to focus on one.
rather than on another (or others) of them exposes to view discrete theological options, suggests certain conceptions of Torah and Jewish life (rather than others) and even, legitimate specific philosophies and theories of Jewish education.

For example, if my basic understanding of Judaism is nourished by the idea of Creation then I am likely to consider the sense of wonder, awe and gratitude as most fundamental to Jewish consciousness and life. I shall see the world as a wondrous world around me, within me, even to “other worlds,” at or even beyond the limits of my perception and imagination. I become aware that though I am a creature, I have also been created to become. I am amazed at that as well. Imperfections that I see in my world are more likely to seem like a deficiency in my orientation than a flaw in reality. If I lack amazement and an understanding “in depth,” I am spiritually suspect and religiously stunted, the kind of person who may well misuse the treasures and gifts entrusted to me or at my disposal.

When Creation is the prism through which I primarily view Judaism, Jewish tradition constitutes a constant reminder of what has been given to me and a medium to make me sensitive and responsible towards it. Thus, the Shabbat urges me to desist from technological creating for one day. Thus I learn to appreciate the pristine creation and to maintain the created balance between human creativity and creaturlessness. The festivals give me time, a pause, to more fully appreciate the world, but appreciation is not limited to them. Every time I make a blessing, I realize what has been given to me, what might also not have been, what I should never take for granted.

Revelation: “I Delight in Thy Statutes”

If Revelation is my central theological and educational category, I will consider the “essence” of my Judaism and its distinguishing feature to be the divine teaching, which inexplicably penetrates into human existence and imposes commandments on it. It is thus that demands my spiritual attention and loyalty. I observe the commandments, including the holy days established by the Torah and Sages, because “I delight in Thy statutes”; for me, every festival, indeed, every situation, is an opportunity to take on ol malchut shamayim and ol hamitzvot. In binding myself to these prescribed responses to circumstances, I may express doubts about this world; I find it easier to view it as a testing ground or a vale of tears than to anticipate its perfection. But I am enabled to endure it, I am lifted above it, through the Torah which not only gives meaning to life but, to the servant of God, is its meaning.

Redemption, as Greenberg suggests, then not only see the created reality as somehow, not perfectly, flawed, but I refuse to consider this as accidental or to accede to it. I am deeply troubled by evil and injustice. Nor do I agree that there is thereby something wrong with my sensibility or that I lack depth: the problem, I declare, is in human life and history, and even in nature. Redemption is needed to set right that which “went wrong” in creation itself or in history. Moreover, if historical existence is flawed I cannot even rely on God’s revelation to solve the problem for me, for I anticipate a different world and a different humanity than that in which and for which it was “given.” I may even suspect that the way humans interpret it will reflect their unredeemed existence. Thus I will see in the contents of revelation more of a paradigm, the outline of “ways,” than clear-cut and unchanging normative prescriptions for behavior.

So when I celebrate Shabbat, I see it as a harbinger of the day shekulo Shabbat, of a totally redeemed existence. If I am halakhically observant, each mitzvot reminds me, not of my obligation to be appreciative or obedient, but of my responsibility to keep the dream of redemption alive and to maintain the spiritual stamina to work for it.

Creative Tensions Amongst Theologies

It makes sense to posit that theologies of creation, as of redemption, will tend to be more religiously “liberal” than theologies of revelation. Halakha to the “theologian of creation” may suggest inhibition of creativity and “undue” channeling of spontaneous wonder; the “theologian of redemption,” as already noted, has to take history seriously. She may be wary of having his/her heritage blunted by laws which dogmatically present the norms of the past as perennial, and which, in their sanctity, seem to invite indifference to the profane, thus “unimportant” world. This is, of course, not necessarily the case. Furthermore, more religious thinkers are exclusively concerned with only one of the three dimensions. Yet, one would hardly expect a consistent theologian of redemption to be halakhic.

Rabbi “Yitz” Greenberg is a halakhic Jew, to the utmost extent that a theology of redemption allows. His thinking is much indebted to his teacher, Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik, the theologian of halakha, but also testifies to the redemptive theology of Hermann Cohen. Indeed, our author draws on many sources. He draws upon the kabbalistic notion of tzimtzum, that God “makes room” for human life and responsibility by withdrawal or self-limitation, and he learns a central insight from the Lurianic conception of shivirat kelem, the breaking of the vessels - that perhaps “the basic receptacles of reality were overthrown and damaged in the initial infusion of divinity into the world.” But Greenberg his insistence that modernity requires a rethinking, a reformulating of the demands of revelation, and respects the disciple and younger colleague of Emil Fackenheim. Like him, he sees Judaism as a drama of commandment and redemption within history.

On the Theology of Holy Days

In Greenberg’s Judaism of redemption and responsibility-through-covenant, the calendar of Holy Days of the Torah play a key role. The Pentateuchal pilgrim festivals of Pesah and Sukkot are the focal celebrations of redemption: Pesah is the paradigmatic event of salvation, teaching that humans are meant to be free, and Sukkot is the paradigmatic way, teaching that one must journey towards freedom, in the assurance of God’s Providence. And Shavuot celebrates covenant, the joining of God to the community of commitment which He invests with responsibility. The Shabbat, the center piece of Jewish time, makes the dream into a partial reality; the kidush of Shabbat inaugurates a sacred time which becomes, through the details of Sabbath halakha, a world of redemptive joy.

Yet, the havdalah celebrates the re-entry into the world of movement towards it, reiterating that “God is my salvation...I shall not fear.” As for the High Holidays, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, they present the Jew with the fact of death. Death is an “enemy,” but it must be confronted, and overcome. One cannot strengthen life and goodness if one is overwhelmed by death and guilt. Therefore, even in the midst of “living out death” on Yom Kippur, we ask God to “inscribe us in the book of life.” In the structure of the Jewish calendar it makes good sense for Sukkot, the way towards redemption, to follow the High Holy days when people stand face to face with their limitations and failures and find new strength for affirmation and achievement.

These Pentateuchal festivals represent the first “epoch” of the Jewish tradition, in which God established the covenant and showed the way. But, as noted, a theology of redemption takes history seriously, and Jews remember a second “epoch,” in which God was more hidden and more responsibility was demanded of His partners. They learned that the hidden miracles in which God appears to be absent, was His new demand for greater human responsibility; that the cessation of prophecy meant that rabbinic sages, in their controversies and decision-making, were now to chart the way of covenant.

Two festive and one sorrowful days come into the calendar in this epoch: Purim, Hanukkah and Tisha B’Av. Purim presents us with Mordecai and Esther, perhaps “Persianized” Jews who recognized their responsibility though no one. (One) told them explicitly “what to do.” And Mordecai knew all that had happened” (Esther 4:1) is the way that, in the second epoch, of God’s hiddensness, we learn what
He demands of us. Similarly, Judah the Macabee, several centuries later, recognized that the age of miracles was over and that "a human victory, helped by God, was an adequate basis for renewing the Temple." As for Tisha B'Av, it meant that, despite destruction, the covenant was not ended. Even, or especially, without the Temple, "the Jewish people had to be educated to see holiness hidden everywhere." The classic Jewish response to catastrophe is to renew life.

The Broken Covenant of the Third Epoch
Yet, Greenberg reminds us, there was never a divine hiddenness like that of the Holocaust; here, the paradigm of redemption seemed "shattered." In this, the third epoch of Jewish history, the covenant must be admitted to be broken, like the original tablets of the law, before there can be a renewal. Yom Hashoah marks that understanding and rededication. Unlike Purim, it celebrates no escape from genocide; even the Tisha B'Av model of destruction is inadequate. The covenant now includes those who have "broken" with the religious paradigm, who seem to sense that in an hour of such crisis, one can only speak of God by indirect, by stubborn belief in life. This belief is testified to in an enterprise and event of Biblical magnitude, the creation of the State of Israel. And thus, Yom Ha'atzmaut becomes the third epoch's festival of "resurrection and redemption." When it celebrates it is the result of human effort: thus it is not absolute, not unqualified, always reflecting controversy and compromise. Greenberg shows, for both Yom Hashoah and Yom Ha'atzmaut, where it is that the "religious" and the "secular" have contributed insights to understanding these days, to ensure that both might share in the meaning and responsibility of these events. For, in this third epoch, both religious and secular Jews appear to be needed. The former lovingly guard and preserve the paradigm; the latter see better the demand that in the present historical epoch there must be greater human self-reliance and autonomy than ever before. This makes them less willing to rely on the past. All are still covenanted, though some have not yet fully grasped the obligations of this hour and its significance, while others, because they stand amidst broken vessels, do not feel obligated by the tradition and its paradigm.

Saved from Quietism and Introversio
Greenberg's conception is attractive, evocative and often convincing. It is this-worldly, socially galvanizing, rooted in the past but not trapped in it. We have here an impressive framework for "tsaamai ha-miztvot," that yet makes ample room for those who cannot observe mitzvot, or cannot observe them in the author's tradition--from the quietism and introversion that may accompany theories of creation, and from the stern stoic or alienated self-righteousness of some theories of revelation. It also saves dignified Jewish identity from self-assured chauvinism, and permits loyalty to tradition without cultivating doggedly closed minds. It presents an educational program of religion without segregation and passivity, of allegiance with autonomy, of emotion not at odds with intelligence. Even more than his teacher Rabbi Soloveitchik, Greenberg takes seriously what modern science can do, how it enters our self-understanding, and shapes our interpretations of our tradition. Judging alone by the book before us, we can assume that the many young and older people to whom Greenberg has been the teacher, have discovered through and in him a Judaism which is sensitive, questioning, informed, and open, yet committed and comprehensive.

The use of the calendar, to teach and illustrate Judaism as an idea and a way is wise. Too often in our education, the holidays appear as a list of rituals and stories grown stale with mindless repetition. Yet, as Greenberg presents them, they tell the story of an idea, liberated from abstraction by halacha, marked by real solemnity (Yom Kippur) or even real humor (Purim). Moreover, they can speak to those for whom the everyday and daily character of Jewish obligation is still unacceptable, inexplicable or both.

Redemption Theology: Some Problems
Yet, a theology that leans so heavily on the model of Redemption, of faith and practice in the service of social idealism and ikkun olam, and admits so little dependence on the models of Creation and Revelation, does raise some problems. It is educationally inspiring that each person must carry the process of redemption as far as possible and then transmit the task to the coming generation. But, in fact, does this exhaust the educational task and does it adequately describe what Jews, guided by Judaism, should do and be? The fact is, of course, that most people, in most generations, actually affect very little of covenant history by their actions. Generally we cannot simply proceed from where our fathers left off; to conceive it that way may merely betray a "third epoch" notion, that of "progress." Does the way of Torah have meaning beyond what it does to facilitate redemption, in terms of morality (the goal) and morale (the way)? This problem is especially acute vis-à-vis the High Holy days. Isn't there more to death, guilt and failure than overcoming them? And isn't the demand that all significance be in this world somehow, well, unrealistic?

And what about the tradition itself? Greenberg argues persuasively why it cannot be "perfect." In a flawed world, viewing even the tradition of Torah as perfect is a kind of false Messianism; it is a claim that we already have what the world is moving women in the halakhic tradition cannot be "the last word" on it.) Moreover, if Jewish history goes through epochs of increasing, now absolute, human responsibility, albeit commanded by God, on what basis shall the commandments and halakhot of the first epochs be maintained in this third epoch? The halakhot of Yom Hashoah and Yom Ha'atzmaut, we, all Jews, are still working out, for we have adopted upon authorities, but have we any for previous epochs? If these epochs merely require witnesses to testify to the paradigm as such, should testimony of tradition oblige everyone, or only representative figures, or, at most, communities, to fulfill a thankless but necessary didactic (and dialectical) role? And in which sense is Torah, in addition to being the way of life of the Jewish people, revealed? Is only the demand for covenant existence divine, evoking the Torah as a response? Or is there revealed content too, spanning the epochs?

Rabbi Greenberg, Great Jewish Teacher
These questions must be asked because this being Greenberg's first book it is, hopefully, not his last one, for he is one of the great Jewish teachers of our generation. In volumes to come, he may well wish to give credit and more explicitly articulate those aspects of his thought that derive from the Creation and Revelation aspects of his religious personality and teaching. For while any of the three models, taken by itself and carried to an extreme, may be educationally plausible and readily formulated, it is unlikely to be true to the complexity of real faith and real life. Thus, while Greenberg well explains many commandments of Judaism through the Redemption model, even intimating that his model states exactly what Scripture and Sages meant, some mitzvot and even some events are not amenable to that -- and yet, his descriptions suggest that he is loyal to them too. For example, I am doubtful, as Greenberg seems to claim, that the "Shoah" actually teaches that God demands that we stop such events and that it is our total responsibility. That may be too much of an "answer." Further, he agrees that death is part of life, but his theory protests against that, perhaps too much. Will there really be no sickness and death in Messianic times? I know that there are prophetic and other sources to that effect but if that is the aim, in a world of total human responsibility, doesn't that mean that science will wrench the human situation from its moorings? On the verse, "And God saw everything that He had made, that it was very good," Rabbi Meir suggested that "moed" (very) be read as "mool" (death). Perhaps Rabbi Meir knew that the alternative, in the Third Epoch, is a "Brave New World" in which people see themselves happy, but, actually, are dead.
Redemptive Model, Superb 
Educational Theory 

Yitz Greenberg, like all educators, faces 
the dilemma of how to find the best possi 
ble educational theory for his students, in 
their environment, with the materials at his 
disposal. As educational theory, the 
“redemptive model” in this book, in its 
very consistency, is superb. But, like all 
educators, Greenberg must differentiate 
between his educational theory and the 
thought in which the theory is philosophi 
cally anchored and to which it is responsi 
able. Every religious teacher should keep in 
mind that even what doesn’t readily “trans 
late” into educational theory may be good 
thought. 

Of Hermann Cohen it was once said that 
his belief in the Ribbbon shel Olam was 
much greater than could be expressed in 
his neo-Kantian philosophy. The theology 
of redemption in this book is enormously 
rich, educationally. But I believe that Yitz’s 
thought—the result of authentic confron 
tations between the world of Torah 
and the world of the spiritual that take 
place within many a learned and thoughtful 
Jewish person—is more than his educati 
al theory—even when he is a great teacher. 
And I look forward to reading more of it 
and learning from it.

FOOTNOTES

1. Irving Greenberg, The Jewish Way, p. 18
2. J.W., p. 68.
3. J.W., p. 19
4. As developed in Franz Rosenzweig, The Star of 
   Redemption.
5. J.W., p. 322
6. Fackenheim, in his God’s Presence in History 
   (chapter 1, note 10) acknowledges that his term, 
   “epoch-making event” was suggested to him by 
   Greenberg.
7. The binding of God to covenant is suggested by 
   Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik’s “The Lonely Man of 
8. J.W., p. 267
10. Braishit Rabba 9:5