

# God after the Shoah: Rabbi Dr. Irving “Yitz” Greenberg

Rabbi Darren Kleinberg

## **1. Important Dates**

- 1933 - Born in Brooklyn, NY.
- 1953 - Ordained by Yeshiva Bais Yosef.  
B.A. in history from Brooklyn College
- 1960 - Ph.D. in American history from Harvard University.
- 1959 - Began teaching American history at YU.
- 1961 - Fulbright visiting lecturer in American history at Tel Aviv University.
- 1965-1972 - Rabbi of Riverdale Jewish Center
- 1965-1973 - Faculty member at CCNY
- 1973 - Founded the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership (CLAL). Director until 1997.
- 1975 - Founded, with Elie Wiesel, Holocaust memorial organization, Zachor.
- 1979 - Served as director of the President’s commission on the Holocaust that led to the founding of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.
- 1991 - Called up on heresy charges by the Rabbinical Council of America.
- 1998-2007 - Served as founding president of Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation.
- 2000-2002 – Served as Chairman of the United States Holocaust Museum’s governing body.

## **1. Publications**

### **Books:**

*Confronting the Holocaust (1978)*

*The Jewish Way (1993)*

*Living in the Image of God: Jewish Teachings to Perfect the World (1998)*

*For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter between Judaism and Christianity (2004)*

### **Articles:**

*Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity, and Modernity after the Holocaust (1977)*

*The Third Great Cycle of Jewish History (1981)*

*Will there be One Jewish people by the Year 2000? (1986)*

*Towards a Principled Pluralism (1986)*

*Voluntary Covenant (1993)*

## **2. Personal Encounter**

In 1961, all my religious positions blew up in the course of an explosive confrontation with the Holocaust. I went to Israel with my wife, Blu, and our newly born first child, Moshe, to serve as a Fulbright visiting lecturer in American history at Tel Aviv University...Within a few weeks...I was caught up in a reading frenzy about the Holocaust. Soon the encounter with the *Shoah* took over my days and nights...I spent all my time reading about the Holocaust. At first, the reading was done at the Hebrew University library; then, increasingly, my time was spent at Yad Vashem...In the winter, the building was cold; but the chill in my soul was icier. The grip of death and destruction penetrated and froze me to the bone. Shock followed shock. Outrage, humiliation, and fear took over, and soon my religious life was invaded by tormenting doubts and moral revulsion. How could God have allowed this to happen? Where was God? The events seemed to make a mockery of the prayers I had mouthed all my life. – and

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of all the hopes, expectations and norms in which I had always been so firmly and happily ensconced. I was drowning religiously...I continued to observe *halakhah*, although the religious questions now took over my life. There were mornings when I would put on my tefillin and then sit there, overwhelmed by horrifying sights and disturbing sounds from *Shoah* sources that flashed through my mind, unable to recite the words of the siddur.

*Excerpt taken from: Greenberg, Irving. For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter Between Judaism and Christianity. Philadelphia: JPS, 2004.*

### **3. Holocaust Theology**

...the next necessary step is to go beyond specific responses to the Shoah toward accepting the Holocaust as a *touchstone* of theology, which leads to the transformation of the core paradigm—that gauge of coherence that we apply to judge specific positions. When the Holocaust is recognized as a touchstone, then the test of the validity of theologies is not just the criteria of intellectual and moral coherence but whether the position is credible in the presence of the Holocaust or in light of the implications of the event. (For example, the ideas that religion should be predicated on the essential goodness of human nature or that sickness and suffering are providentially inflicted on people because they sin are beliefs whose validity would be more difficult to uphold in light of the implications of the Shoah.) But at the same time, the encounter with the event leads to a transformation of the categories that themselves are used to judge and to incorporate religious responses. This more radical (root) response is a recognition of the massive weight of this event and the fact that it shattered many fundamental assumptions of established worldviews in Judaism and modern culture during the course of its unfolding...

*Excerpt taken from: Greenberg, Irving. Theology after the Shoah: The Transformation of the Core Paradigm. Modern Judaism. 26.3 (2006): 213-239.*

Since there can be no covenant without the covenant people, is not the covenant shattered in this event? In Elie Wiesel’s words: “The Jewish people entered into a covenant with God. We were to protect His Torah, and he in turn assumes responsibility for Israel’s presence in the world...Well, it seems, for the first in history, this very covenant is broken.” Or as Jacob Glatstein put it: “We received the Torah at Sinai/and in Lublin we gave it back/Dead men don’t praise God/The Torah was given to the Living.” ...

...morally speaking, God must repent of the covenant, i.e., do *teshuvah* for having given his chosen people a task that was unbearably cruel and dangerous without having provided for their protection. Morally speaking, then, God can have no claims on the Jews by dint of the covenant.

What then happened to the covenant? I submit that its authority was broken but the Jewish people, released from its obligations, chose voluntarily to take it on again. We are living in the age of the renewal of the covenant. God was no longer in a position to command, but the Jewish people was so in love with the dream of redemption that it volunteered to carry on its mission.

*Excerpt taken from: Greenberg, Irving. “Voluntary Covenant.” Perspectives: A CLAL Thesis. (1984): 27-44.*