



Choosing life: Rabbi Irving (Yitz) Greenberg's magnum opus

I HAVE admired and respected Rabbi Irving (Yitz) Greenberg most of my adult life, since I was a young rabbi. And I have had many occasions to meet him and interact with him over the years, which have been part of my Jewish and interreligious journey.

One of the greatest theological and programmatic pioneers in the Modern Jewish Orthodox world of the 20th and 21st centuries, Rabbi Greenberg, formerly of New York City (Riverdale, the Bronx) is now a citizen of Israel, living in Jerusalem. At the ripe young age of 91, still full of idealism and energy, he has recently completed his magnum opus entitled *A Triumph of Life*, which is indeed a triumph in his personal/professional life, which are indelibly intertwined. As he writes in his acknowledgments, “this book expresses the sum of a life time of thinking,” and I would add of action.

Rabbi Greenberg has not just been a serious thinker and writer for several decades but he has been an activist and a pragmatist. He founded and influenced many important institutions in America in his active rabbinate, such as SAR (Salanter Akiba Riverdale High School, a Modern-Orthodox Jewish day school located in the Riverdale section of the Bronx, New York, which was founded in 2003); CLAL, the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, which was (and still is) a pioneering pluralistic Jewish think tank and programmatic organization; the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (where he served as chairman from 2000-2002). These dynamic and vital institutions – which continue to thrive to this day – are translations into reality of his theology and his many creative and courageous ideas.

Still active today, Rabbi Greenberg serves as president of the J.J. Greenberg Institute for the Advancement of Jewish Life, named in memory of his son J.J. Greenberg, and as Senior Scholar-in-Residence for Hadar Institute.

He was born in Brooklyn and in 1953 was ordained there at the Beis Yosef Yeshiva. He was one of the founders of the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry and earned a PhD in history from Harvard University. In the 1970s



GIL COHEN-MAGEN/POOL/REUTERS

Mourners attend the funeral of American-Israeli hostage Hersh Goldberg-Polin in Jerusalem on September 2, 2024. ‘When the Goldberg-Polin family funeral procession passed through, the streets of Jerusalem were lined with thousands of people, expressing their grief and their solidarity with the family,’ Rabbi Greenberg posted on Facebook. ‘Our family stood there too, some waving Israeli flags.’

he served as professor and chairman of the Department of Jewish Studies of City College of the City University of New York.

Rabbi Greenberg lived most of his life in New York City, until he and his wife Blu, a pioneer in Jewish Feminism and Israeli-Palestinian women’s dialogue, made Aliyah to Israel about 5 years ago, where they live near some of their children and grandchildren in Jerusalem. Naturally, he is deeply involved in the life of Israel, and devotes a major chapter in this new book to Israel (more on this below.)

One of the many things that I like about this book is that it is a book not only for Jews, but for all people who are working to perfect the world. In his Introduction, Rabbi Greenberg



Rabbi Irvin (Yitz) Greenberg.

COURTESY writes:

This book is written, first and foremost, to unpack and illuminate the meaning and the heroism of being Jewish, for all who consider themselves Jewish, and for those who appreciate, uphold, support and love them. I hope it will appeal to non-Jewish readers as well, especially to Christians, partners in the struggle to overcome millennia

of hostility and delegitimation. People of all religions must work together to repair the world, politically, economically, culturally and turn the Earth in to the paradise all humans deserve. Readers committed to social justice in its various forms will find in these pages a rationale for universal human dignity and an agenda to realize this vision.

As someone who has spent most of the last 30 years engaging with leaders and members of other religions to do just this, this book spoke to me very deeply. It offers not only a vision for a better world, but it outlines the ways that we human beings can go about the business of tikkun olam, repairing the world, which is an essential Jewish concept for Rabbi Greenberg. Moreover, it is a very positive book, which focuses on the preciousness and the holiness of life, which is very much needed in our world today, which is beset with so much death and darkness.

As someone who has lived in Israel for the past 45 years, I was intrigued by Rabbi Greenberg's courageous chapter on Israel. He has spent much time in Israel over the decades but now that he lives here, he is deeply involved in our struggles and challenges.

Rabbi Greenberg has written before about the issues of the use of power in the Jewish state and he does so poignantly again here. Indeed, he stresses the need for ethics to go along with power, which is probably more important today than ever before. In this powerful chapter, Rabbi Greenberg is not afraid to be critical of the current government of Israel, especially the extremism within it. For example, he acknowledged that when Israel's democracy came under attack, beginning in December 2002 and throughout 2023, the attack was exacerbated by the extremists within the religious Zionist community in Israel:

The extreme religious/nationalist right's legislative agenda favored its own interests to the detriment of women, Israel's non-Jewish Arab population, gays and lesbians and other minorities. The extremist forces sought to expand the jurisdiction of rabbinical courts at the expense of independent oversight despite the fact that many of those bodies had been marred by corruption, sexism and intolerance for other religious views. The most extreme nationalist, ultra-Orthodox parties in the governing coalition, together with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, proposed judicial legislation designed to end the judiciary's independence—a clear and present threat to Israeli democracy.

Part of this chapter was clearly written after

the debacle of October 7th, 2023. On the one hand, Rabbi Greenberg says quite clearly that much of World Jewry was standing by Israel in the months after the October 7th massacres “despite its being led by an extremist government.” Diaspora Jewry still believed that the vision of the state of Israel that upheld human values would win out, “even if Israel fell into the hands of wrong leadership for a period.” On the other hand, Rabbi Greenberg remains a positivist and even an optimist:

As I write these words in December 2023, I believe that Israel's record and performance since its birth justifies this faith. With the passage of time, the classic Zionist narrative will win out. The vision enshrined in Israel's declaration of independence of a state that guarantees “full freedom of conscience, worship, education and culture” is stronger than the ethos of any ruling coalition.

What can I say? I hope that he is correct. But I admit that I am a bit less optimistic than he is about this.

Rabbi Greenberg's optimism shines even after the events of October 7 and even though the Israel-Hamas War is still going on. This is because he is a man of faith and courage, a visionary ethical religious leader. Not only does he feel that Israel will be successful in ending Hamas's power, but he also feels that it will become a better society than it is now:

Its population, united by lives sacrificed and suffering in war, will arise, change leadership, and strive to create a more ethical, inclusive society. I even believe in a long-term process in which militant Palestinians turn from undermining the Jewish state toward more democratic, societally constructive, autonomous self-rule. Following this path can win back the trust of Israelis and open the door to a Palestinian state that could live in peace with Israel.

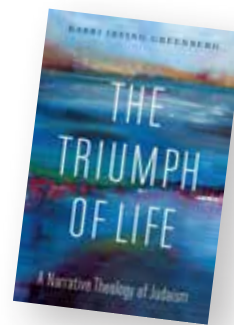
I would add that Israeli Jews will also need to change their attitudes to Palestinians, learn their narrative, understand their suffering, and change their own policies in order to finally try to live in peace with their neighbors. Both sides have to accept the fact that neither side is going away, and that the pursuit of peace will be more beneficial to both peoples than

ongoing wars.

With all this said, this important book is not mostly about Israel but about Judaism, in what Rabbi Greenberg calls “the third era of Jewish history.” In the final chapter of the book, he deals extensively with this theme. He fervently believes that the Jewish People have a distinct role in this new era:

In the global work of tikkun olam (repairing the world), two distinctive paths have emerged. In the State of Israel, a Jewish majority can strive to build a society that is a microcosm of a repaired world. In the Diaspora, especially in the United States, Jews can lead in advocating human rights, welfare capitalism and other efforts to promote life.

We recently completed our annual period of *Heshbon Nefesh* (searching our souls), which began with Rosh Hashanah and ended with Yom Kippur. During this time, we were continually mindful of Rabbi Greenberg's call to celebrate life, as it says in the special liturgy of these days: “Remember us for life” In this thought-provoking book, he reminds us of the centrality of choosing life over death, peace over wars, reconciliation over retribution, and the importance of doing this with leaders and followers of other global world religions. ■



**The Triumph of Life:
A Narrative Theology of Judaism**

Rabbi Irving Greenberg
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