

# Rabbi Irving Greenberg

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## In Praise

by *Aryeh Rubin*

### The Greatest Jewish Thinker of Our Time

In honor of Rabbi Dr. Irving “Yitz” Greenberg’s eightieth birthday (May 16, 2013), Targum Shlishi and I are proud to launch this website celebrating his life’s work. We wish him a very happy birthday and many more years of good health and productivity. Along with thousands of his disciples, I consider Yitz a mentor, a teacher, and a major inspiration in my life. I undertook this project to create a lasting testament to his profound impact on the Jewish people and to make widely accessible the teachings of one of the greatest Jewish thinkers of the last half-century, one whose contributions have helped shape the philosophy, actions, and approaches of modern Jewry.

You will find a treasure trove on this website, including a wide range of his lectures (audio, video, and text versions), articles both scholarly and for a more general audience, columns, monographs, information about the organizations he has founded and led, and much more.

### Meeting Yitz

The first time I heard Yitz speak remains an event frozen in time, preserved in my memory through the strong emotions his words evoked in my nineteen-year-old self. While a sophomore at Yeshiva University, I spent a weekend with some friends in Riverdale. It was Shabbat morning at the synagogue and the rabbi rose to speak. Most of our group snuck out, but for some now-unknown reason I decided to stay. Listening to Yitz’s sermon that day forty-four years ago was revelatory—I felt like the clouds had cleared, that much that had been hazy suddenly came into focus. I had never before heard a rabbi like him. The depth of his thinking and his theological vision, the intensity of his presentation, and his seamless blending of the sacred and the contemporary rooted me to my seat. I do not remember the *parsha* that week, nor do I even recall the contents of the speech. But I remember with clarity the feeling that I was fundamentally changed. Thanks to Yitz, my outlook was forever transformed and, I firmly believe, improved: my relationship to Judaism deepened and my commitment to our people strengthened, and it all began with that one speech.

Somehow, he showed me that there was a different path without the religious fairytales and philosophical contortions that were so commonplace in the rhetoric of the Orthodox institutions of the day. It was a generous approach, it was liberating, and it was revolutionary to me.

It wasn’t just me. At that time, Yitz was a professor in the history department at Yeshiva University. Many of my fellow students took courses with him or came to know him, and his influence, his example, helped people find their *shlichut* and forge a more meaningful path. One friend who had been planning to become a lawyer instead became a historian; another went into education rather than his father’s business. Both went on to make significant contributions to the Jewish world. As for me, after I graduated college I took a year off, bought a car in Paris, and traveled across Europe tracing my parents’ escape routes and visiting the sites of eleven concentration camps, which while commonplace now, was novel in the early 1970s. A few years later, I founded *Jewish Living* magazine, which Yitz said was my response to the Holocaust—and he was right. These are three examples among hundreds of similar ones from the students at YU at the time, but Yitz’s impact has reached far beyond the walls of any classroom, synagogue, or even organization (and he was the founder of many valued organizations). To a group of Jews who came of age in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Yitz the *mitnaged*, who was ordained by a *musar* seminary, was the ultimate Chassidic-type rebbe. Wherever and whenever he held his *tisch* (court), be it in the classroom or at his Shabbat table, his charisma and *chidushim*, his insights and inspiration, his wisdom and his love, moved and inspired a generation.

Yitz Greenberg has arguably had a greater influence on American and world Jewry through his work—his writing, his teaching, the institutions he has run—than any other leader or teacher of his era. Whether you have heard of him or not, whether you are familiar with his teachings or not, if you are involved in the Jewish world, he has impacted your life. If you have any affiliation with a major Jewish institution, your experience has been influenced by Yitz and his thinking. If you have attended a Holocaust Yom HaShoah event, celebrated Israel Independence Day, visited the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, encountered Russian Jews in the United States or Israel—all were shaped by Yitz, all are very much his legacy. If teaching about the Holocaust was part of your or your children’s school curriculum, if your synagogue service and programming is creative and interesting, if your day school curriculum and teaching methods are innovative, if you know someone who went on Birthright Israel, if you have, over the years, made note of the positive evolution in the relationship between Christians and Jews, then you are a beneficiary of Yitz’s wisdom and leadership.

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“The Holocaust is the most radical counter testimony to both Christianity and Judaism. After the Holocaust, no statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of the burning children.”

## Getting to Know Yitz

Despite knowing and being influenced by Yitz since I was nineteen, it was not until about ten years later, in the late 1970s when I published *Jewish Living* magazine, that we spent significant time together and got to know each other personally. Working on the magazine was an extraordinary and heady experience, a period of unbridled creativity filled with brainstorming sessions and debates, new ideas and lofty visions, all of which sought to improve the state of Jewish life. Yitz was on the advisory board, he was a sounding board for me personally, and he contributed articles to the publication.

When *Jewish Living* was forced to close and I was saddened and out of a job, much of the Jewish intelligentsia and financial backers with whom I had worked closely essentially dropped me. But Yitz was different. Not only did he constantly prop me up, but he insisted that I accompany him to his afternoon classes at law firms and investment banking houses so that I would be out and about and my network would expand. He was very generous with his time and contacts, and stuck by me until I landed on my feet. I tell this story not only to convey my own experience of being shored up by Yitz, but because I was by no means unique—countless people could tell similar tales. Yitz has a very special and very old *neschama*, the kind of evolved and insightful soul the prophets of biblical times must have possessed. And while that is certainly a very personal story, it underscores everything that motivated me in conceiving and funding this website. I am privileged enough to have known Yitz for years—I want to share his work with the world at large, so that people who don't know of his work can become familiar with his groundbreaking ideas and his brilliant mind, and can also glean a sense of the man himself.

All too often, celebrated intellectuals and leaders of major institutions are aloof and unapproachable. Not Yitz. He is the same special and wonderful person with everyone—accessible, humble, a *baal midot tovot*, polite, compassionate—a man who cares deeply about his fellow person. He is a man of intense personal charm, one who is forthcoming, accessible, and empathetic.

## A Revolutionary Thinker

While Yitz's personal presence and his message had an immediate and dramatic influence on me, it was only over time that I came to a deeper understanding of the radical nature of his thinking on topics including the Holocaust and its impact, the Covenant, the State of Israel, modern Orthodoxy, modernity, pluralism, Christian-Jewish relations, and so much more. Yitz is an original and even a revolutionary thinker who throughout his career has offered creative approaches to integrate the past with modernity and brought innovation and a breath of fresh air to a people depressed by the impact of the Holocaust and by the silence of its leadership. Interestingly, when he was not yet thirty years old, in 1962, he delivered a speech to the Yavneh convention (see the [Lectures, "Read"](#) page on this website) in which he essentially set forth the foundation of so much of his future thought. In the speech, he noted that the Holocaust has "radically changed being a Jew...every Jew...must make something of it or face the ultimate absurdity of risking his life for something meaningless to him." Reading the text of this speech, it is fascinating that in it we can see the seeds of so much of what developed into Yitz's philosophy.

One of his primary messages is that the horrific and lingering effects of the Holocaust and the rebirth of the State of Israel necessitate a significant change in the structure, approach, and liturgy of the Jewish people and their establishments. He has consistently posited that "we are living in one of the great moments of transformation and rebirth in the religious history of Judaism and Jewry." Citing Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Yitz reminds us that "to live in such a moment is a *shlichut* (mission)," and urges all of us to act accordingly. Yitz teaches that in the wake of the Holocaust, Jews must unite—pluralism needs to be a central principle for all Jewish denominations, ethnic branches, and institutions. He demonstrates to the generations that the vitality of our Jewish lives—the ethics and values that make up the very essence of a meaningful Jewish existence—is dependent on our ability to incorporate these fundamental changes, to integrate pluralism, into our very core.

His commitment to pluralism extends beyond the Jewish world to include a tolerance and a welcoming of ideas from other people, from other philosophies, and from other religions. This is particularly evident in his efforts to advance Jewish-Christian dialogue. His message has always reminded us that all of humanity is created in God's image, stressing the value of all human life.

He has always insisted that we incorporate the best of the secular values of the modern world with those of the teachings of our tradition. But unlike much of the secular and liberal world, both Jewish and Gentile, his idealism does not undermine his sense of realism; he has always remained aware of the precariousness of Jewish existence, of the looming threats of destruction that hang over the Jewish people and the State of Israel. And he has always stressed that the viability and strength of the State of Israel must never be compromised.

On this site we have posted several speeches and articles in which Yitz daringly explores and explains his idea of the voluntary Covenant—a response to the Holocaust that some of us had at various times, but dared not express aloud. The Holocaust, Yitz says, broke the Covenant between God and the Jewish people—it was no longer commanded, but was now voluntary. There are several lectures and writings on the voluntary Covenant on this website, including his landmark piece, "The Third Great Cycle in Jewish History," on the [Monographs webpage](#). The idea of this being the third cycle in our history is pivotal in framing our historical moment within the larger thrust of Jewish history; I personally found this explanation so compelling that the very name of this foundation, Targum Shlishi, was inspired by this idea, which teaches that the Jewish people have entered a new, third era of interpretation, building on the legacies of the Temple and the Rabbinic eras while creating a Judaism relevant to contemporary life.

## Controversies

Being kind and even gentle, as Yitz is, does not mean he is not a fighter. In fact, arguing with Yitz has been among my life's most valued learning experiences. In his career, Yitz has engaged in more than one now-legendary debate. Two that come to mind, both in the 1960s, are his debate with Aharon Lichtenstein in the pages of *The Commentator*, the Yeshiva College newspaper, and his exchange with Shelomoh Danziger in the pages of *The Jewish Observer*. Both exchanges, which are [documented on this website](#), broke new ground.

## Personal Life/Family

In speaking of Yitz's thought and its evolution, no discussion is complete without mentioning the impact of his wife and intellectual partner, Blu, a leading feminist. Blu is a prolific author in her own right, and on this website you'll find articles that the two co-wrote. Together the two ignited a movement that effected some very real and palpable changes in the Orthodox Jewish feminist movement. And look how far we have come. Today we have a yeshiva that ordains women, and Shira Hadasha services in which women are equal participants with men are now held across the world.

It was the Greenbergs' encouragement that led our family to a pioneer bat mitzvah service in Miami for all three of our daughters that incorporated a women's tefillah service in which the bat mitzvah led the prayer services and read the Torah and Haftorah.

## Career Highlights

The productivity of Yitz Greenberg staggers the mind. He is a rabbi, a history professor, and a leader of organizations, and in his career he has done all of these things, many of them simultaneously. He has authored several books with another on the way in the near future, dozens of monographs, hundreds of articles, given thousands of speeches, has been a scholar in residence at an untold number of synagogue and Federation events and retreats, and has been the keynote speaker at scores of venues over the last fifty-plus years. Then there are the leadership positions he's held at organizations, many of which he helped to found and all of which he helped to shape. The summary that follows is by no means all-inclusive.

In the 1960s, Yitz was a rabbi at the Riverdale Jewish Center; a professor of history and then chairman of that department at Yeshiva University; a founding member of the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry, the historic movement that helped free Russian Jewry; a founder and primary influence on the development of the SAR Academy, a cutting-edge Jewish day school in Riverdale that to this day serves as a model for other schools, both Jewish and secular; and he helped establish Yavneh, a religious organization on college campuses that influenced a generation of future Orthodox leaders and served as a model for other campus organizations.

In the 1970s and 1980s he was a founder of the Association for Jewish Studies, the leading academic organization for Jewish studies on college campuses; a professor in the department of Jewish Studies and then chairman of that department at the City College of the City University of New York; the founding president of CLAL, the National Jewish Center for Leadership and Learning, which pioneered Jewish learning and a deepening of Jewish identity in the Federation world and advocated pluralism in Jewish life; and the founder of Chevra, a subset of CLAL that brought rabbis of all denominations together for sessions of learning. He was also a prominent leader in the movement to integrate Holocaust memorialization into US culture, working initially with Zachor: Holocaust Memorial Center, the first organization to promote the creation of Holocaust memorial centers, which ultimately led to the creation of the President's Commission on the Holocaust, of which Yitz served as executive director, recommending and realizing the creation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

In the 1990s, Yitz was the founding president of the Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation. His time there was characterized by accomplishments like the creation of Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education (PEJE) to create new day schools and advance Jewish education; the founding of MAKOR, a music performance and gathering space to reach out to young Jews in their twenties and thirties; the establishment Birthright Israel, the now-legendary program that has brought more than 340,000 young people to Israel; the formation of the Synagogue Transformation and Renewal (STAR); and Jewish Early Childhood Educational Initiative (JECEI). He has also worked with many other organizations, including the Wexner Institute.

## Today

Regrettably, as the years pass, much of Modern Orthodoxy has lost its vision and progressive foresight, following the lead of the ultra-Orthodox in a shift to the right. Yitz—the Orthodox promoter of pluralism, who focused much of his time on helping Federation and secular Jews become more grounded in their Jewishness—in some ways became more marginalized within the right-wing branches of Orthodoxy.

I am still struck by the irony that today's Modern Orthodoxy, operating at a time of unparalleled Jewish self-actualization and societal influence, is more influenced by the vision of *haredi* leaders such as the Chazon Ish and Rabbi Aharon Kotler, whose *gestalt* was formed in a time and space of powerlessness, zealotry, and a harkening back to an epoch long past, than the realities of the day. I can only wistfully imagine what the unity and success of organized American Jewry might have been had Yitz's voice been more widely heeded by the Orthodox institutions.

I sincerely believe that Yitz's teachings, integral as they have been to the development of the Jewish people over the last

half century, will be even more integrated into the corpus of our Jewish agenda in the decades to come, helping to determine the future of our people. While doctoral dissertations on various aspects of Yitz's work are currently in progress by at least two scholars that we know of, Yitz's biography has yet to be written, and his influence has only begun to be realized. To that forward-thinking soul who will eventually write Yitz's biography, may I suggest a working title—having examined Yitz's legacy through the prism of history, I think you will find Rabbi Dr. Yitz Greenberg: *A Prophet in Our Own Time* quite appropriate.

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