

For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter between Judaism and Christianity

by Irving Greenberg

Reviewed by Reuven Kimelman

Abstract: Greenberg's book blazes new trails in assessing the implications of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. By shedding new light on their checkered history and suggesting ways they could benefit from each other theologically, he seeks to forge an alliance to bring the world closer to redemption. This review assesses the effort, historical and philosophical issues, and suggests that the relationship between Judaism and Christianity be viewed through that of England and America.

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For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter between Judaism and Christianity by Irving Greenberg (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society 2004)

Reviewed by Reuven Kimelman

Irving “Yitz” Greenberg is one of the most exhilarating and innovative voices on the American Jewish theological scene. For over forty years Greenberg has played the role of religious *provocateur*, rousing the right and the left of the Jewish world out of their dogmatic slumbers. He was among the first Orthodox congregational rabbis to push in the early 1960s for Orthodox involvement in the Civil Rights struggle. By the mid-sixties he was urging us Yavneh members at Columbia University to intensify our involvements. I also demonstrated with him at Soviet Jewry rallies as far back as 1964, right after the founding of the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry (SSSJ). While working with him in the 1980s at CLAL—The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, I saw him promote the primacy of Israel in Jewish life and theology, Holocaust memorials and the centrality of the Holocaust in Jewish memory and education, Jewish leadership education, intra-Jewish collaboration, Jewish-Christian dialogue and other causes. Except for Abraham Joshua Heschel, I am unaware of anybody else on the American Jewish scene who was so consequential to so many modern Jewish passions. Like Heschel, Greenberg makes his impact through his activism and his theology.

Greenberg’s writings on Israel, Jewish power, the Holocaust, Jews in the university, the Third Era in Jewish history, pluralism, and Jewish-Christian dialogue have all been formative. In fact, in the book by the Israeli scholar Ehud Luz, *Wrestling with an Angel: Power, Morality and Jewish Identity*, Irving Greenberg is the only American to appear in the table of contents, in a chapter pregnantly entitled, “Sovereignty and Jewish Commitment after the

Holocaust.” No one can responsibly write on these issues without dealing with Greenberg’s salient contribution.

Greenberg’s new book, *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth*, does for Jewish-Christian relations what his first book, *The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays*, did for the holidays. As that one presented a philosophy of Judaism based on an analysis of the Sabbath and holidays, so this one presents a philosophy of Judaism based on a religiously pluralistic universe with special attention to Christianity.

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Subtitled *The New Encounter between Judaism and Christianity*, Greenberg’s latest book is a landmark in the Jewish re-evaluation of Christianity, while recording and even contributing to the Christian evaluation of Judaism. It consists of a collection of nine essays on the encounter between Judaism and Christianity, seven of which were published between 1967 and 2000, responses by five scholars of Jewish-Christian relations, and is followed by a seven-page study guide that provides study questions intended to facilitate comprehension.

According to a talk Greenberg gave at an Eternal Light award ceremony,¹ Christianity has a special relationship to Judaism, indeed “We are living in the heroic age of Jewish-Christian relations. This is probably the most important period of our

¹ See www.centerforcatholicjewishstudies.org/Content/news/news_issue2.htm

history since the first century, when the two religions separated. It may be even in a way greater because, in that separation out of faithfulness to the vision, out of faithfulness to the Gospel that they had experienced in their lives and in their thinking, a group of Jews went out to preach to Gentiles. Don't forget that in the beginning they were Jews! They saw themselves inside Judaism. They went out to preach the Gospel to Gentiles. They separated themselves and became a religion that reached millions and eventually billions of Gentiles.”

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Yet there is paradox: “Christianity became a gospel of love for the whole world,² but a gospel of anger, rejection, and hatred for the Jews. And Jews experienced it not as the world experienced it—bringing a message of redemption, [but] as a kind threatening majority that mistreated them. So the heroic age we are living through—it's almost like God is giving us a second chance to understand God's message at a much deeper level, I dare say, than that of the first century. And I have come to believe that God wanted to give birth to this new religion out of Judaism, not to replace Judaism, but to offer a new powerful, broad-scale way of reaching out and bringing closer billions of humans to the vision which we share with Christianity—of a God who is loving and present among humans, of a dream of perfecting the world and making it a world of dignity for all.”

This unprecedented reality convinces Greenberg that Jews and Christians should work together “to restore and to build the image of God as never before. And both religions have this in common. It is not just pluralism to understand that God's love is such that God could reach out to Christians in one way, to Catholics in one way, and to Jews in

another and it does not take away from God's love. And it does not take away from the dignity to recognize that each of these religions has the capability of raising people in the image of God. And therefore, to listen, to respect, and to learn from the differences rather than dismiss them, because the differences reflect human uniqueness, the differences honor the equality between us. So even though we have different views, we do not dismiss them. We learn from them sometimes to enrich our own understanding or at the least we see them as the actions of an equal, of a dignified worthwhile person who is following their path. And if we listen, we are inspired and it deepens us in our own way as well.”

What convinces Greenberg that this is the dawn of a new age of Catholic-Jewish relations is the achievement of John Paul II, who more than any other pope in history “affirmed that the covenant of the Jewish People is irrevocable, not superseded, not denied, not overridden but as a dignified, equal brother or partner in this work of creation. You do not understand how difficult, how heroic it is. Who could not have been moved at the sight of the Pope visiting Israel, frail and yet so strong. Spiritually, so deeply tuned in to express this kind of respect and reverence, and yes, love, and to struggle, the authority, who more than any other, wants to protect the Magisterium, to realize that the recognition of error, the admission of sin against the Jews is not a sign of weakness, it's a sign of strength. And has had the courage to push it, and again I am not saying things are perfect. There is a long way to go.”

Greenberg concludes, “So ours is the choice. And Judaism and Christianity can lead the way for the whole world to show that you can overcome past hatred. Yes, you can confront your own traditions, your own most sacred traditions, and reverence them, honor them, but neutralize them, or reinterpret them, or reapply them, and go beyond them as we develop a new level of trust and love

² This is quite a generous judgment in the light of the record described by the former Jesuit priest, James Carroll, in his book *Constantine's Sword*. Indeed, on many issues, Greenberg is more generous to Christianity than are many Christians. Part of Greenberg's strategy of ingratiating is to take the other at his best and then cajole him into living up to it. The “Reflections” at the end of the book by several prominent Christians testify to the efficacy of the strategy. See www.holiejewishstudies.org/Content/news/news_issue2.htm

with each other.” It is clear, as Rabbi Harold Shulweis wrote, that “Greenberg’s ‘partnership theology’ transcends the theologically correct acceptance of the legitimacy of each faith. With imaginative foresight, he calls for a covenantal coalition of faiths to help fulfill God’s dream of a universe created in God’s image.”

Also here Greenberg’s position dovetails significantly with that of Heschel.³ Forty years ago Heschel expatiated on the special nature of Jewish-Christian dialogue by focusing on what they share: “Both Judaism and Christianity share the prophet’s belief that God chooses agents through whom His will is made known and His work done throughout history. Both Judaism and Christianity live in the certainty that mankind is in need of ultimate redemption, that God is involved in human history, that in relations between man and man God is at stake; that the humiliation of man is a disgrace of God.” He also believed that the modern situation is unique, since “The Emancipation...has not only given us rights, it has also imposed obligations... we are deeply conscious of the vital interrelationship of religious sensitivity and the human situation.” For him Jewish-Christian dialogue was predicated on a common core: “The premise underlying both religions, namely, whether there is a *pathos*, a divine reality concerned with the destiny of man that mysteriously impinges upon history. The supreme issue is whether we are alive or dead to the challenge and the expectation of the living God. The crisis engulfs all of us. The misery and fear of alienation from God make Jew and Christian cry together.” Accordingly, Heschel argued for a Jewish-Christian coalition, believing that “unless we learn how to help one another, we will only weaken each other.” He thus asked “On what basis do Jews and Christians come together?” and answered “Whereas all of humanity can come together on the basis of the image of God in all,

Jews and Christians can also meet on “the level of fear and trembling, of humility and contrition, where our individual moments of faith are mere waves in the endless ocean of mankind’s reaching out for God ... where our souls are swept away by the awareness of the urgency of answering God’s commandment.” Admittedly, “we may disagree about the ways of achieving fear and trembling, but the fear and trembling are the same.”

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However divided we are by doctrine, we are united by “our being accountable to God, our being objects of God’s concern.” More specifically, he argued, “We are united by a commitment to the Hebrew Bible as Holy Scripture, faith in the Creator, the God of Abraham, commitment to many of His commandments, to justice and mercy, a sense of contrition, sensitivity to the sanctity of life and to the involvement of God in history, the conviction that without the holy the good will be defeated, prayer that history may not end before the end of days.”⁴ Both Heschel and Greenberg agree that, to cite Greenberg’s book, “The two faiths must learn to see themselves as two aspects of a general divine strategy of redemption” and that “these two religions model the truth that the love of God leads to the total discovery of the image of God in the other, not to its distortion or elimination” (p. 38). Both also argue the converse position that anti-Jewishness is really a disguised hatred of Christianity and its founder.⁵ And yet, the classical Christian image and treatment of Judaism and Jews undermines the Christian claim to be a religion of love and redemption. “The saddest part is that within the gospel of love there developed a permanent kernel of hate that only

³ See Reuven Kimelman, “Rabbis Joseph B. Soloveitchik and Abraham Joshua Heschel on Jewish-Christian Relations,” *The Edah Journal*, Kislev 5765. In fact, much of Greenberg’s book works out positions advanced by Heschel in the 1960s. Strangely, Heschel does not appear in the index, though his contribution is mentioned (p. 113).

⁴ “From Mission to Dialogue,” *Conservative Judaism* 21 (Spring 1967), 1-11.

⁵ In fact, Cardinal Johannes Willebrands wrote that Abraham Heschel’s article of 1966, “No Religion is an Island,” helped persuade him that “antisemitism is simply anti-Christian” *Church and Jewish People: New Considerations* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992) 162. For other testimonies, see John C. Merkle (ed.), *Faith Transformed: Christian Encounters with Jews and Judaism* (Collegeville, MN: The Order of Saint Benedict, 2003).

weakened its redemptive capacity” (p. 195). After all, what religion would “put its own mother down...[and] spit into the well from which it drank” (p. 151).

Still, many of the assertions are vintage Greenberg in their penetrating audacity. He contends that dialogue can help each religion correct the other’s deviations from its central message. Indeed, “The two faiths need each other to maximize the good and to offset the negative tendencies inherent in both as they follow their own distinctive path.” What went wrong when Judaism and Christianity dismissed each other? “Christianity skewed toward dualism, minimizing the religious significance of carnal matters, the law, and the body. Judaism slid into denigrating political and military power, and narrowed its concern *vis-a-vis* non-Jews” (p. 44).

Whatever the two religions could learn from each other, it is questionable whether the itemized flaws are the results of the falling out between the two. Greenberg’s list of Christian deficiencies already applied to Paul and much of the rest of first century Hellenistic Judaism. Similarly, his description of Judaism is more a result of the failure of the Bar-Kokhba revolt of the second century than of any issue between Judaism and Christianity. After all, when Judaism and Christianity separated in the first centuries, neither had political power. If anything, Christianity then was less interested in the exercise of worldly (read: political and military) power than was Judaism.

Independent of historical analysis, his point that “Each partner can recover main themes from the other, often by recognizing that this has been a minor theme in its own tradition” (p. 212) needs to be underscored. A good example is the attitude of several second century Church Fathers to the body and resurrection. Justin (*On the Resurrection* 7) and Athenagorus (*The Resurrection of the Dead* 13,18, 21-22) affirm both resurrection and a positive attitude to the body, indeed its wondrous workings. Justin explicitly correlates the preciousness of the body to God with the idea of resurrection. Indeed, his

understanding of the relationship of the body to the soul gives the impression that it was lifted from a discussion of rabbinic anthropology.⁶ He argues against those who say: “the flesh is a sinner so much so, that it forces the soul to sin along with it. And thus they vainly accuse it, and lay to its charge alone the sins of both. But in what instance can the flesh possibly sin by itself, if it have not the soul going before it and inciting it? For as in the case of a yoke of oxen, if one or other is loosed from the yoke, neither of them can plough alone; so neither can soul or body alone effect anything, if they be unyoked from the communion” (*On the Resurrection* 7).

Many of the assertions are vintage Greenberg in their penetrating audacity.

The case of Pope John Paul II is an instructive confirmation of Greenberg’s position that the purging of their anti-Jewish animus paves the way for Christians to recover muted aspects of their tradition. After all, the Pope who most transformed Catholic-Jewish relations is the very Pope who argued for the restoration of the equipoise between body and soul, refurbishing the muted aforementioned second century Christian tradition. He wrote: “As a result of reflection of the resurrection, Thomas Aquinas neglected in his metaphysical (and at the same time theological) anthropology Plato’s philosophical conception of the relationship between the soul and the body and drew closer to the conception of Aristotle. The resurrection bears witness, at least indirectly, that the body, in the composite being of man as a whole, is not only connected temporarily with the soul (as its earthly “prison,” as Plato believed). But together with the soul it constitutes the unity and integrity of the human being.”⁷

What about Judaism? What can Christianity contribute? According to Greenberg the themes of grace, love, and the pathos of divine suffering—covenantal all—were muted in modern Judaism

⁶ See Reuven Kimelman, “The Rabbinic Theology of the Physical: Blessings, Body and Soul, Resurrection, Covenant and Election,” in S. Katz, ed., *History of Judaism*, Vol. 4: *The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 946-976.

⁷ *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1997), 240.

because they were “deemed to be too Christian” (p. 223). Interestingly again, no modern Jewish thinker has done more to reinstate these themes, as noted above, than Heschel, especially in his books *The Prophets* and *The Heavenly Torah*, and no modern Jewish thinker has made more the case for openness to Christianity. John Paul II and Heschel hence confirm Greenberg’s point that viewing one another as enemies impoverishes both Judaism and Christianity by excluding those themes that became identified with the other, whereas viewing one another as partners enriches both theologically. On the other hand, Greenberg’s contention that “Jewry’s counter-self-definition to Christianity pushed Judaism toward its own breakdown forms: tribalism, legalism, asceticism, and denial of this world” (p. 195) is not as clear. It could be that when Judaism perceives itself to be self-contained it turns excessively inward and tends toward pan-halakhism, to use Heschel’s term, but the reinvigorated asceticism and denial of this world of some expressions of medieval Judaism have more to do with emulation of Christianity than rejection of it.

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One of Greenberg’s most provocative comments is that Jesus was not a false messiah, but a failed messiah, “one who has the right values, upholds the covenant, but ultimately did not attain the final goal” (p. 32). Even “Jews...who accept little of Jesus’ message should nevertheless appreciate Jesus’ service as a spiritual messiah to gentiles; he is not a false messiah, but a would-be-redeemer for

the nations” (p. 100). Greenberg extends the status of a failed messiah also to Bar-Kokhba (pp. 153, 227). It is not clear how the two can merit the same title. If anybody has gone down in history for opposition to political and military power it is Jesus.⁸ Yet he is praised, as is Bar-Kokhba, as “one who has the right values.” Even stranger, Greenberg contends that what Christianity could teach Judaism, namely, the non-denigration of political and military power, turns out to be more embodied in the popular image of Bar-Kokhba than of Jesus.

Greenberg also includes (p. 48) the late Lubavitcher Rebbe among the failed, or not-yet-successful messiahs. After all, is there a messianic claimant in our day of whom it could more accurately be said that he “has the right values, upholds the covenant, but ultimately did not attain the original goal?” As far as that goes it could be surmised that Greenberg would include Shabbetai Zevi, even though he repudiates any messiah “who turns sin into holiness” (p. 177). Could it not be argued that his apostasy to Islam was supposed to advance his redemptive mission to lift the holy sparks which were especially concentrated in Islam? For there are holy sparks that only the messiah could redeem, a task that required engagement with the anti-spark, namely, the *qelippah* itself. As the *Encyclopedia Judaica* (14:1238) points out, only a spy entering the enemy camp could pull that off.

This same generosity of spirit allows Greenberg to consider Muslims along with Christians to be “the people of Israel,” to be “recognized as Abraham’s cherished children, but only when they purged themselves of hatred of Jews and of supersessionist claims” (p. 40). If Greenberg is

⁸ Generally, such statements as “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” (*Matthew* 10:34) and “The one who has no sword must sell his cloak and buy one” (*Luke* 22:36) (which is why Jesus was asked “Lord, should we strike with the sword?” [*Luke* 22:49]), get excluded from portraits of Jesus. This is so much the case that it explains the following story which also illustrates how much progress has been made in Christian-Jewish relations. In the early 1970s, I was on the executive of the Jewish Peace Fellowship, a constituent of the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR). Chagrined that its British counterpart excluded Jews, the head of the FOR urged a change in policy. The British head refused, arguing that Jews were followers of the Old Testament (sic), which was full of violence. The American head asked me to respond. My response consisted of noting the anti-violence elements in the Hebrew Bible and the pro-violence ones in the Christian Bible. I then conceded that I was being unfair to the total witness of the Gospels and sought from him a similar admission with regard to the Hebrew Bible. He refused to respond to me directly, but did write to his American counterpart: “Dr. Kimelman must be wrong, otherwise there would have been no need for Christianity.”

using Israel and Abraham synonymously, there might be some confusion. True, part of the mythos of Christianity and Islam is their linkage to Abraham—Christianity by faith, and Islam by descent—but Islam does not claim to be “the people of Israel.” Moreover, Muslims do not constitute an ethnic group of common descent, and no Western historian holds that the first Muslims were descended from Ishmael. Sometimes it is hard to fathom whether Greenberg is making historical claims or rhetorical ones. True, the Jewish midrashic imagination identifies Christianity with Esau and subsequently Rome.⁹ Such a designation, however, has nothing to do with history, as Saadia Gaon noted over a thousand years ago.¹⁰ Furthermore, Christianity does not claim descent from Abraham, only that it shares the faith of Abraham, a surprising claim on its own since the Christian faith is that Jesus became the Christ more than a millennium later.¹¹ Greenberg also advocates granting them “most favored children status” based on their attitude to Jews and Judaism.

If Christianity proves to be a religion of love and consolation, i.e., the right values, then Jesus is a failed messiah, but if it teaches hatred of Jews and missionizes them, “then it proves that Jesus was a false messiah” (p. 177). This type of eschatological verification is redolent of Maimonides’ criterion of authentic messianism, as Greenberg himself notes (p. 227). Still, one wonders about the propriety of deploying eschatological criteria for pre-eschatological times. Even Greenberg expresses some reservations in the light of the Church’s reception of the film *The Passion of the Christ*. He

asks in desperation, “Will the Gospel of love never stop generating hate for Jews?” (p. 46). In any case, it is unclear how one’s lineage can be predicated on one’s behavior.¹² Of course, there is no problem if Greenberg is only “proposing that Christians are ‘honorary’ members of the House of Israel, spiritual descendants of Abraham and Sarah” (p. 96). In other words, Christianity should be granted the status of Israel *honoris causa*, as part of a “theologically defined family” (p. 97).

*Will the Gospel of love never stop generating hate
for Jews?*

What is the preferred analogy for a theologically defined family? Both filial and fraternal metaphors permeate Greenberg’s discussion. In any event, he believes that despite our bloody relationship, we remain blood (*siv*) relatives. The fraternal metaphor may be best understood in the light of the development of fraternal relations in Genesis. In fact, the first sibling rivalry was not over parental affection but over divine attention. The rift was terminated by Cain eliminating Abel. The Jacob-Esau conflict was resolved amicably, but each went his separate way. Joseph and his brothers, however, were not only reconciled; they went on to create the people of Israel. In the first case, the urge for fratricide was exercised, in the second it was exorcised, and in the third it was transformed into a partnership. Much of the history of Jewish-Christian relations raged over who was God’s favorite in the belief that victory belongs with vanquishing the other. More recently, the Jacob-

⁹ For the origin of the rabbinic association of Esau/Edom with Rome, see Louis Feldman, “Remember Amalek!” *Vengeance, Zealotry, and Group Destruction in the Bible According to Philo, Pseudo-Philo, and Josephus* [Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2004], 62-67. It may be related to the Hadrianic persecutions (see *Genesis Rabbah* 65.21). In any case, when Christianity took over the Roman Empire, they assumed the designation.

¹⁰ *Saadia’s Polemic Against Hivi Al-Balkhi*, ed. Israel Davidson (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1915), #76, 67.

¹¹ Paul claims, in *Romans* 4, to find scriptural support for his belief in justification by faith alone by referring to Gen.15:6 where Abraham accrues merit for having faith in God’s promises. Genesis, however, accredits Abraham for his faith in God’s promises, not for his belief in God *per se*. Moreover, the same word for merit (*tsedaqab*) is used in Deut. 6:25 to indicate the merit gained by complying with the Torah and its commandments. What could be accrued pre-Sinai by faith is accrued post-Sinai by deed.

¹² Unless Greenberg means something like Maimonides, who rules: “If someone is cruel and does not show mercy, there are sufficient grounds to suspect his lineage” (*Mishneh Torah, Hilkebot Matnot Eryonim* 10.2), apparently based on the talmudic statement: “Anyone who has mercy on people, it is presumed that he is of our father Abraham’s seed; and anyone who does not have mercy on people, it is presumed that he is not of our father Abraham’s seed” (*Betsab* 22b). Obviously, the seed of Abraham consists of an ethical DNA.

Esau model has gained currency. Each is reconciled to the existence of the other, but goes its separate way. Greenberg would have Judaism and Christianity adopt the model of Joseph and his brothers. Not only are both potentially parts of the house of Israel, but together they can bring about the redemption.¹³

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Whatever the historical reality, Greenberg has succeeded in focusing on the theological significance of the centrality of Abraham for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. After all, only Abraham was destined to become “father of many nations,” and only Abraham has achieved spiritual patrimony over about half of humanity. There is no figure in history to whom more people trace their lineage in one way or another than Abraham, so much so that the three religions are known as “Abrahamic faiths.” Only God is called father by more. To qualify as an Abrahamic faith, however, the faith would have to promote not only monotheism but ethical monotheism. For Greenberg, that means to promote the value of human life¹⁴ and to work for the perfection of the world. Those monotheists who devalue, even destroy, human life in the name of God *ipso facto* exclude themselves.

One of the most fruitful insights of Greenberg is that the *Sho'ah* and the rebirth of Israel constitute

revelational events for both Judaism and Christianity. The idea itself with regard to Judaism was first articulated by the Israeli poet Uri Zevi Greenberg over a half century ago.¹⁵ Our Greenberg, however, extends it to Christianity in the sense that both events “paved the way for new self-understanding by both faiths” (p. 23). In this vein, he affirms that “The most powerful confirmation of religious hope is that crucifixion and resurrection have occurred in this generation—in the flesh of the covenanted people” (p. 138). In this sense, the twentieth century is the religious flip side of the first century. Then Christianity saw the destruction of the Temple and the Jewish loss of political autonomy not only as punishment for the Jews but as evidence of God’s disengagement from their destiny. Now Christianity is more and more interpreting the *Sho'ah* and the State of Israel as evidence of God’s reengagement with the destiny of Israel and as a call for repentance on the part of Christianity for its teaching of contempt for Judaism. The Christian re-evaluation of Judaism, according to Greenberg, should be matched by a corresponding Jewish response.

As noted, Greenberg seeks to advance the goal of Jewish-Christian partnership by focusing on their common task. A familiar tactic of brotherhood conferences is to claim that all religions promote the love of neighbor, a claim which is equivalent to saying that humanity are united by the blood that courses through their veins. Heschel sought to avoid the banality of such generalizations by locating the commonality in our historical heritage and in our faith experiences. Greenberg, for his

¹³ For the history of early Jewish-Christian competition, see Reuven Kimelman, “Identifying Jews and Christians in Roman Syria-Palestine,” in Eric M. Meyers, ed., *Galilee through the Centuries: Confluence of Cultures*, Duke Judaic Studies Series, I, (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 301-331. Both Judaism and Christianity saw the elimination, or even better the conversion, of the other as the prelude to redemption. The Jewish vision was based on Obadiah 1:21; the Christian on Romans 11. The Jewish vision went on to envisage a time when Christianity would be transformed from arch-accuser (*qatigor*) to arch-defender (*sanegor*) of Israel; see idem, *The Mystical Meaning of ‘Leqhab Dod? and ‘Kabbalat Shabbat’* [Hebrew], (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes Press, Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2003), 173-176.

¹⁴ His expression, “the infinite value of the individual,” raises some issues. Any system that allow for capital punishment or war would have difficulty in affirming the infinite value of the individual. Were the individual of infinite value, a million more would not add value. Yet there are cases, however rare, when the *halakhab* rules that the life of the community takes precedence over that of the individual. Since in Hebrew parlance Infinity is used for God, whereas “a whole world” is used for man, it is more precise to speak of the preciousness of human life, as does R. Akiva (*Avot* 3.18) and the index to Greenberg’s book (p. 240). The modifier infinite is best left to the Infinite.

¹⁵ See Ehud Luz, *Wrestling with an Angel: Power, Morality and Jewish Identity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 92, 156.

part, contends that Judaism and Christianity are united by the master story of the triumph of life.¹⁶ By maximizing life and making it “ever more [to] resemble its ground, God” (p. 186), redemption will come about. Much of Greenberg’s sense of commonality between the two religions is based on their shared terminology. It assumes that phrases such as triumph of life, image of God, and redemption mean the same for both traditions. In actuality, classical Judaism and classical Christianity are more like Great Britain and America—divided by a common language. Both religions speak of redemption, salvation, sin, forgiveness, messiah, and monotheism albeit with divergent meanings.

For example, “the savior of Israel” rings quite differently for each. Even the expression “the triumph of life” may not have enough oomph to paper over differences with regard to life itself such as abortion, selective celibacy, stem cell research, and contraception.¹⁷ Moreover, is it correct to say that Christianity is driven more by “the triumph of life” than the salvation of souls? What about Judaism? Is it reducible to a catchphrase? One such attempt is Hillel’s response to a potential convert’s request to reduce the whole Torah to one *regel*, the Latin for “rule.” (The request is usually understood to be explain the entire Torah while standing on one *regel*, Hebrew for “foot.”) His rule was to start with not harming others¹⁸ and then go on and learn the rest. The emphasis on “go on and learn”¹⁹ illustrates how daunting it is to sum up Judaism in a one-liner. Complex phenomena do not easily lend themselves to distillations. Still, a good way of testing the Jewishness of a notion is to come up with a comparable Hebrew, or at least Yiddish/Ladino, equivalent. In English, the “triumph of life”

googles at over 6,000,000. The closest Hebrew equivalent may be the talmudic statement (*Makkot* 24a) that Amos sought to reduce the whole *mitsvah* system to one, “Seek Me and you shall have life” (5:4).

By maximizing life, redemption will come about.

A more important issue is whether a religion-centered civilization such as Judaism can be distilled to an essence. And would light would such a distillation shed? If humans resist reduction to an essence whether it be heart, brain, skeleton, passions, or soul, it may be that something as multi-dimensional as Judaism would also resist.²⁰ Nonetheless, were one forced to do so, one could not do better than follow Psalm 145 (“*Ashrei*”), which advances from the individual (145:1) to the community (145:10) to all humanity (145:21) joining in blessing God as sovereign over all,²¹ or that of the *Aleinu* prayer that awaits the day when divine sovereignty will extend to all humanity, as Zachariah says, “And the Lord will become King over all the earth; on that day the Lord will be one and His name one” (14:9). If Greenberg’s “triumph of life” is tantamount to making God sovereign over all, then he has successfully translated biblical parlance into modern idiom.

This translation fits much of his vision, for under the rubric of extending the acknowledgement and service of God, Isaiah envisages a day when “Israel shall be a third partner with Egypt and Assyria as a blessing on earth; for the Lord of Hosts will bless them saying, ‘Blessed by My people Egypt, My handiwork Assyria, and My very own Israel,’”²² and Zachariah foresees a time when Zion will

¹⁶ Of course, Greenberg does claim, “Judaism and Christianity share the conviction that the covenant with Abraham, Sarah, and their descendants is foundational. It is the starting point of our journey. Both affirm the authenticity and authority of the Sinaitic covenant that transformed Abraham’s way of God into the way of life of a people” (p. 191). It would be worth ascertaining how pervasive these convictions are among Christians, especially among those who take their cue primarily from Paul.

¹⁷ See Eliot Dorff, *Matters of Life and Death: A Jewish Approach to Modern Medical Ethics* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998), Introduction

¹⁸ *Shabbat* 31a.

¹⁹ Exactly what is missing in the similar efforts of Jesus (Matthew 7:12) and Paul (Romans 13:10).

²⁰ Even the Talmud indulged in such efforts; see the end of *Makkot*.

²¹ See Reuven Kimelman, “*Ashrei*: Psalm 145 and Its Rhetorical Structure,” in L. Hoffman, ed., *My People’s Prayer Book*, vol. 3 -- *P’sukei D’Zimra* (Woodstock: Jewish Lights, 1999), 31-39.

²² Isaiah 19:23; see Radaq as opposed to Rashi and Targum *ad loc*.

shout for joy at God dwelling in their midst, for “In that day many nations will attach themselves to the Lord and become His people (2:15).” Also, Zephaniah predicts the time when all the peoples will “all invoke the Lord by name and serve Him with one accord” (3:9).

As noted, Zachariah totally universalizes coronation theology: “And Lord will become King over all the earth; on that day the Lord will be one and His name one” (14:9). Noteworthy is the fact that of the ten kingship verses that are appended to the *Al Kein Neqaveh* section of the Rosh HaShanah *Aleinu* prayer, only this verse was retained in the later daily version. There it culminates the hope that all humanity will accept divine sovereignty. Since this verse now concludes every Jewish prayer service, it can serve as a motto of Judaism. In fact, the Rabbis understood the *Shema* verse to say: Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God (for now, but) the Lord will become one (for all).²³

The universalization of coronation theology can serve as an antidote to the exclusiveness of covenantal theology.

Isaiah also seeks to incorporate the non-Jew but by universalizing biblical covenantal theology. According to Rashi and others, he affirms that after God gathers in the dispersed of Israel, He “will gather in still more to those already gathered” (Isaiah 56:8). This approach of gathering in is accepted by Jeremiah (3:17) and adopted by Hillel (*Avot* 1:12), who promoted the love of humanity to attract them to Torah, i.e., Judaism. In contrast, the *Aleinu* prayer seeks to universalize divine sovereignty. For it, when all accept the sovereignty of God, God and His name will be one. Whereas Isaiah seeks the inclusion of the other, *Aleinu* seeks the extension of God to all. The universalization of coronation theology can serve as an antidote to the exclusiveness of covenantal theology, which

tends to be as exclusive as its fondest analogy—marriage. Greenberg circumvents this difficulty by asserting “There is enough love in God to choose again and again” (p. 42), for “no religion has a monopoly on God’s love” (p. 93). The flip side of that is God can also reject and reject again, unless choosing is always adding. The implication for the marriage model would be that God could take on additional partners but not divorce any. Alternatively, only the first wife is not divorceable while the status of the others is dependent upon their willingness to fulfill specific tasks and not mistreat the first. Even multiple choice exams have preferred answers.

This distinction flows from the fact that the chosenness of Israel is not analogous to the chosenness of Christianity: Jews are born into the people Israel, whereas Christians are baptized into Christianity. Thus converts do not just commit to the religion of Israel, but also join the people of Israel. Since only Judaism is initially an identity of birth, only the people Israel can be chosen intrinsically. Others can be chosen for specific tasks, but the chosenness remains task-specific. The election of Israel may be a source of blessing to all, for Israel may serve as theological *avant-garde*, as teachers or priests of humanity, as models of ethical nationhood, as God’s suffering servants, as “coworkers with others humans in the process of perfection” (p. 191), or as something else. Whatever the case, the fact of Jewish chosenness transcends any specific historical function, which is why the *Shema* liturgy follows Jeremiah (31:3) in affirming the eternal love of God for His people Israel.²⁴ The genius of this position lies in its capacity to focus on the special relationship that God confers upon Israel without forgoing God’s love for all. As Rabbi Akiva taught (*Avot* 3:18), “Humans are beloved, for they were created in the image of God. Still greater is the love in that it was made known to them that they were created in the Divine image, as it is said, ‘In the image of God were humans made’ (Genesis 9:6). Beloved are

²³ *Sifre Deuteronomy* 31, followed by Rashi; see Reuven Kimelman, “Blessing Formulae and Divine Sovereignty in Rabbinic Liturgy,” in Ruth Langer and Steven Fine, eds., *Liturgy in the Life of the Synagogue: Studies in the History of Jewish Prayer* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 21, 39.

²⁴ See Reuven Kimelman, “The *Shema*’ Liturgy: From Covenant Ceremony to Coronation,” in Joseph Tabory, ed., *Kenishta: Studies in Synagogue Life* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan Press, 2001), 9-105.

Israel in that they are called children of the Omnipresent. Still greater is the love in that it was made known to them that they were called children of the Omnipresent, as it is said ‘You are children of the Lord your God.’”²⁵

Greenberg’s generosity of spirit toward messianic and covenantal claimants is impressive. Whereas some draw circles around the chosen to exclude others, Greenberg draws larger circles to include them. The inclusion appears so comprehensive that exclusion is only possible by virtue of negative behavior. All are graded an A unless they fail. The question is whether “A”s lose their *cachet* in such a world of grade inflation.

This same inclusiveness characterizes Greenberg’s notion of pluralism. His discussion focuses on making distinctions between relativism and fundamentalism, and between pluralism and fundamentalism. He argues for a principled pluralism that recognizes “that there are plural absolute standards that can live and function together even when they conflict” (p. 201). We may hope that, in a future essay, Greenberg will explain in greater detail how this works. In the meantime, it is unclear whether Greenberg’s use of “absolute” means “absolutely true” or “totally binding.” He may mean the former, as when he says, “Pluralism is based on the principle that there still is an absolute truth” (p. 203). On the other hand, he uses the term to mean “totally binding” when he says, “The pluralist affirms absolute values but has come to know their limits. The absolute values do not cover all the possibilities. Pluralism is an absolutism that has come to recognize its own limitations” (p. 203), for “any truth may speak absolutely to me and others, yet it is not intended for others who may be spoken to by other revelations and chosen for another sector of service” (p. 205). Applied to Judaism and Christianity, the implication is that Judaism can be totally binding on Jews but not upon others who may find Christianity, or Islam, just as binding. In fact, Judaism does consider the Torah and its commandments totally binding upon Jews, but

only partially binding upon non-Jews. Still, it is unclear what is gained by using the term “absolute.” It would be helpful were Greenberg to explain more how something can be both absolute and limited, unless he merely means that it is absolutely binding upon a limited group.

The pluralist affirms absolute values but has come to know their limits.

Similarly, under the rubric of “The Dialectics of Religious Claims,” Greenberg argues that “no religion that is strong in one pole of the dialectic is likely to do full justice to the other aspect...Each tradition, truthful to its own vision, needs the other in order to correct and to exemplify the fullness of the divine-human interaction” (p. 177). This assumption that no single human perspective can exhaust the truth conforms to the midrashic (*Genesis Rabbah* 8.4) assertion that God’s, not man’s, signature is truth. Not being divine, humans can only approximate the truth. We might see ourselves not as possessors of the truth but, as James Carroll noted, “on pilgrimage toward it” (p. 248). Thus a different perspective, indeed a competing one, can supplement one’s understanding of the truth under the guise of a collaborative pluralism.²⁶

British-American relations can serve as a model for the Jewish-Christian relationship. In the seventeenth century there was only Britain. By the end of the eighteenth century, America had emerged and had broken with mother Britain. In the nineteenth century, Britain was dominant, with America rapidly catching up. The last century has witnessed the primacy of America. Britain and America have been the great exporters of the idea of democracy. Britain at its height followed the model of inclusion by incorporating countries into the British Commonwealth. America, for its part, in the last century sought to extend democracy more than extend its borders, as in the cases of Germany, Japan, Korea, Mexico and Iraq.

²⁵ Deut. 14:1. For God’s love of Israel in Deuteronomy, see Deut. 4:37; 7:7-08; 10:15; 23:6.

²⁶ See Reuven Kimelman, “Judaism and Pluralism,” *Modern Judaism* 7 (1987), pp. 131-150; and *idem*, “Taking Risks for Jewish Unity,” *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* 65 (1989), 197-203.

Similarly, in the first century BCE there was only Judaism. By the end of the first century CE, Gentile Christianity had emerged and had broken with its mother. In the second and much of the third century, Judaism remained dominant with Christianity on its heels. By the fourth century, Christianity predominated and turned with fury on its mother. Just as revolutionary America saw Tories as traitors, so early Christianity viewed Judaizers as heretics.²⁷ Now America views them only as Anglophiles, and can Christianity do any less? In any case, the two major powers, whose internal politics and foreign policy are most often in tandem and most committed to spreading their common ideals, are Britain and America. The hope is that Judaism and Christianity can become allies in extending the sovereignty of God.

How risky is premature messianism?

The analogy can be extended to the use of canonical literature. The American literary canon, based on the British with its own supplement, can be compared to the Christian canon based on the Jewish with its own supplement. The difference is that the inclusion of British literature into the American canon did not stop with the separation of America from Britain nor did America expound a replacement theory explaining why its canon should supersede Britain's. Similarly, the Jewish and Christian use of common literature should not stop at their separation. Rather a theological coalition of the willing should be learning from the other for the ongoing enrichment of both.

One of the issues dividing America and "old" Europe is whether democracy should be spread by stick or by carrot. Britain in partnership with Europe promotes the latter; in partnership with America, it promotes the former. Because America and Britain so often act in concert, Britain can have a stick-softening effect on American foreign

policy. The point is not that the stick or the carrot is the right strategy, but that commitment to a single strategy will miss opportunities for extending democracy.

If under the arch of democracy British-American relations can progress from enmity to comity, how much more so should Jewish-Christian relations under the providence of God move from one-upmanship to partnership. For as British-American cooperation underscores their common political base and international mission, so Jewish-Christian coalitions highlight their shared theological agenda and universal mission. In both cases, the distinctiveness of their role and history need not thwart the pursuit of common goals.

The road ahead will be full of bumps, potholes, and reversals. Undoubtedly some are ready to believe in complete faith that Irving Greenberg has paved a path over some of them. Others, also in complete faith, might fear driving headlong over the bumps lest it result in more potholes if not broken axles. The question is how risky is premature messianism. Some want *Mesbiah* Now, others—Peace Now. Nobody wants to wait. Nonetheless, if the choice is between tarrying or jumping head first, the better part of wisdom may be to tarry, or, at least for the foreseeable future, to hop gingerly.

In any case, this summary, even with its constructive critique, does not do justice to the plenitude of insights that suffuse every chapter. I have rarely been moved to make so many marginal notations. Working through a book that has innovatively thought through so many consequential issues was transformative. Anybody concerned with Judaism's role in a pluralistic theological world will perceive, upon studying this book, his debt to the pioneering analysis and religious courage of my teacher Irving Greenberg.

²⁷ See Kimelman, "Identifying Jews and Christians in Roman Syria-Palestine" 301-331.