

Introduction to
Irving Greenberg, *Cloud of Smoke
Pillar of Fire*

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AT THE CORE of Irving Greenberg's work is a genuine confrontation with the Holocaust. More than any other Orthodox thinker of our age, Greenberg attempts to deal with the implications of this critical event in human history. He does not shy away from the task even when it challenges his faith and puts him at odds with his community.

The co-editor (with Alvin H. Rosenfeld) of *Confronting the Holocaust: The Impact of Elie Wiesel*, Greenberg is most closely identified with the issue of pluralism in Jewish life. His widely publicized, award-winning essay "Will There Be One Jewish People in the Year 2,000?" catapulted the problem of Jewish unity to the forefront of communal concerns. Although he was not the first to note the dangers of a schism, his essay drew significant attention. Having left the comfort of a secure academic appointment at New York's City College, Greenberg created CLAL—the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership—in order to promote intra-Jewish dialogue.

Although a popular theologian, the form of Greenberg's many publications often masks an intensive, systematic theological endeavor in which Jewish thought is reformulated in the aftermath of the Holocaust and the rise of the State of Israel. With exceptions such as "Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire" (a condensed version of this seminal work follows), the bulk of Greenberg's works has appeared in pamphlets, oral presentations, and newspapers articles—odd but important forums for serious theological discourse.

With each publication, Greenberg refines the implications of his original insight that the Holocaust and the State of Israel have initiated the third great era in Jewish history. The very nature of the divine-human relationship is being transformed before our eyes, according to Greenberg. Even though the *content* of that covenant has been altered and the relationship between God and the Jewish people has changed, continuity remains in the covenant that binds Israel and God.

The descendant of a distinguished rabbinic family, Greenberg was born in New York City in 1933. An ordained rabbi, Greenberg is also a

Harvard-trained American historian. Unlike most of his Orthodox colleagues who speak of the simultaneity of Biblical and Rabbinic teaching—written and oral revelation—Greenberg daringly writes of transformations and discontinuities, of the shifting role between Israel and God and the revolutionary impact of history.

According to Greenberg, in the Biblical era God is more active. Divine intervention includes commandment and historical reward. The human role is essentially passive and obedient. The symbol of the covenant, circumcision, is "sealed into Jewish physical existence, and thus is experienced in part as 'involuntary.'"

In the Rabbinic era, Jews were called by God to a new level of covenantal existence. "God had 'constricted' or imposed self-limitation to allow the Jews to take on true partnership in the covenant." Direct revelation ceased, Greenberg argues, "yet even as Divine Presence became more hidden, it became more present; the widening of ritual contact with the Divine goes hand in hand with increased hiding." Divine presence is to be found in Torah study and in deeds of kindness and graciousness; God is not only in the Temple but in a seemingly secular environment.

Greenberg also speaks of a shattered covenant in the Holocaust. Following Elie Wiesel and Jacob Glatstein, Greenberg recognizes that the Holocaust has altered our perceptions of God and humanity. He offers a powerful verification principle, which must become the test of religious integrity after the Holocaust. "No statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of the burning children."

Greenberg argues that the covenant was broken in the Holocaust, but the Jewish people chose voluntarily to renew it. "We are in the age of the renewal of the covenant. God is no longer in a position to command, but the Jewish people are so in love with the dream of redemption that they volunteered to carry out the mission." The choice to remain Jews, Greenberg argues, is a response to the covenant with God and between generations of Jews.

Greenberg gives new meaning to the religious vocation of our age. The task of Jewish existence—and of all authentic religious existence after the Holocaust—is to recreate the divine and human images that were destroyed in the Holocaust, to respond to death by creating life, and to continue the Jewish people's journey in history. Jews must labor to bring redemption.

Unlike other Jewish theologians who denounce Christianity for its indifference and its participation in the Holocaust, Greenberg also explores the implications of the Holocaust for the Christian vision of God, humanity, and redemption. This theological treatment paved the way for authentic Christian encounters with the Holocaust, such as those found in the work of Paul van Buren and Robert McAfee Brown. The following essay was originally the keynote address for an international symposium on the Holocaust held at the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine, in New York City, June 3–6, 1974.

Paul Tillich once wrote that the theologian must stand both inside and outside the theological circle of faith. He must describe the spirituality that is the hallmark of a religious tradition while also understanding the world beyond the circle of faith. A denizen of two worlds, the theologian must explain one domain to another.

Greenberg clearly follows Tillich's dictum. He describes the power, passion, and poignancy of traditional Judaism to assimilated Jews and gentiles—his 1988 book *The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays* is one splendid example—and he translates the attraction and the danger of modernity to those inside the circle of faith. To Greenberg's credit, he speaks to both groups without losing the ability to live meaningfully in either world.