

## *Rabbi Yitz Greenberg and the Possibilities of Progressive Halakhah*

The Freehof Institute of Progressive Halakhah, 2021 / תשפ"א



[Rabbi Irving "Yitz" Greenberg](#), currently a Senior Scholar-in-Residence at Mechon Hadar, is one of the more fascinating personalities on the contemporary Orthodox scene. We should emphasize "Orthodox" because, despite [his forward-looking and pluralistic tendencies](#) that have long put him [at odds](#) with [the Orthodox rabbinical establishment](#), he has always identified as "Orthodox" in his personal practice. And while he has nurtured open relationships with non-Orthodox Jews and Jewish movements throughout his professional life, he most assuredly does not affiliate in any official way with those movements, Conservative, Reform, or otherwise.

All of this is noteworthy, because Rabbi Greenberg has lately declared his affinity with the outlook of progressive *halakhah*. And we at the Freehof Institute are happy to extend him an honorary membership (unless, of course, such membership would further sour his relationships with said Orthodox rabbinical establishment).

The declaration to which we refer is Rabbi Greenberg's [Facebook post](#) of July 19, 2021. The post is a consideration of how Jewish religious practice ought to register and respond to the existence of the State of Israel. Of particular interest is the following suggestion relating to the days of mourning for *hurban hayayit*, the destruction of the Temple and of Jewish sovereignty:

I also believe that the days of fasting and mourning should be turned into days of rejoicing and celebrating - the sooner, the better... Weddings, haircuts, and new purchases should be permitted during the three weeks... (R)abbis should consider shortening the fast of Tisha B'Av. As it is, at minchah on 9 Av, we put on tefillin - a signal that the intensity of the sense of loss of the Temple has peaked and the beginning of a happier, more normal day is coming. Maybe in time, minchah will become break-fast as we turn to joy on these days of Jewish rebirth in the Holy Land.

Coming from a self-identified Orthodox rabbi, these are daring halakhic proposals. Yet they are hardly original. The most daring idea of all, the ending of the Tisha B'Av fast at *minḥah* time, has already been [adopted](#) by the Israel Masorti (Conservative) movement's *Va'ad Halakhah*. (Dissenting opinion [here](#); English summary [here](#); our discussion of the issue [here](#).) Rabbi Greenberg, careful scholar and thinker that he is, surely knows of this ruling, which makes his failure to cite it an unfortunate lapse in academic protocol (not to mention intellectual integrity). On the other hand, since it's evident that he is appealing specifically to *Orthodox* rabbis, he may well be thinking that any mention of those pesky non-Orthodox heretics would simply stir up further opposition and distract from his argument. Either way, we're glad that he has endorsed a progressive halakhic position. Perhaps, just perhaps, we can expect more of the same from him?

We express that hope because it's clear that Rabbi Greenberg accepts one of the major elements of our progressive halakhic outlook. The conclusion of his post - "Now we need more of the decisors of the Jewish people to admit that the greatest redemption in Jewish history has happened in this lifetime and begin to give it serious religious expression" - is perfectly in line with our governing assumption that *halakhah* exists within history and is capable of responding positively to it. When the Temple was destroyed, the Rabbinical authorities of the day quite appropriately responded to that historical catastrophe by ordaining the fasts of Av, of Tevet, and of Tammuz. In our time, the history of the Jewish people has taken another dramatic turn with the establishment of the State of Israel. As Rabbi Greenberg reminds us, it is only right and reasonable that *halakhah* (and the rabbis who teach it) should register that change.

Those Orthodox decisors will no doubt reply that in the absence of the Temple we do not yet enjoy true redemption, so the fasts and other observances must continue in full. We progressives, of course, do not anticipate the rebuilding of the Temple. And while we can agree that full redemption has not yet come to the Jewish people and to the world, we identify "redemption" as something radically different than the restoration of the *korbanot*, the sacrificial cult. We don't know how Rabbi Greenberg thinks about the sacrifices. But his post clearly shows that he stands with us in this critical respect: the restoration of Jewish national sovereignty, even in the absence of the Temple, is a key turning point in history to which *halakhah* ought to respond.

But let's not stop here. The reestablishment of a Jewish state is surely not the only dramatic historical change that has significantly altered Jewish life. Modernity has witnessed many such changes. The Scientific Revolution of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and subsequent scientific and technological progress, the Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the movements of political and social liberalism, including the struggles for racial and gender equality, the Shoah and the totalitarianism that precipitated it - all of these (and we could name so many more) have transformed the world into something radically other than the one our ancestors knew. Simply put, we now live in a very different world, and the question for teachers of Torah and *halakhah* is how we shall respond to that undeniable reality. And those teachers *have* responded, in one way or another. Many of the halakhists in Rabbi Greenberg's Orthodox community are frightened of these transformations. They believe that the proper response of Torah, which is eternal and therefore never changes, is to reject them as fundamentally opposed to Judaism. We on the other hand believe that while Torah may be eternal our understanding of Torah's message most definitely changes with history. Like our Orthodox counterparts, we believe that *halakhah* is essential to Judaism and to Jewish life. But precisely because we accept the liberal and

progressive worldview that modernity has bequeathed to us, we are committed to reading and understanding the *halakhah* in a way that is consistent and coherent with that worldview. And we are convinced that a Torah and a *halakhah* that *don't* speak affirmatively to a world governed by those commitments will strike the vast majority of our people as alien, insensitive, and unsuited to serve as a framework for religious life.

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg's life story is that of a rabbi who stands proudly at the intersection of tradition and change. He has distinguished himself as a spokesperson for a thoughtful and (dare we say it) progressive modern Orthodoxy. He believes, as we believe, that *halakhah* must affirm the best of what modernity has taught us. So we're happy to welcome him into the fellowship of progressive *halakhah*. *Y'hi ratzon* that he and the rest of us continue to challenge, provoke, and learn Torah from each other.