

BLU GREENBERG AND IRVING (YITZ) GREENBERG

by NANCY WOLFSON-MOCHE



They are considered by many to be modern Orthodoxy's First Couple, or rabbinic royalty. Separately, each has shaped and led organizations, published books and articles, lectured widely, served as a religious and communal leader, and been recognized with numerous honorary degrees and awards from religious and lay organizations. Both endorse a more egalitarian form of Orthodoxy, encourage Jewish-Christian dialogue, and promote Jewish pluralism through intrafaith discourse. While their personal styles and approaches are different, they complement, support and respect each other wholly and deeply. Individually, Rabbi Yitz and Blu Greenberg have each influenced and given voice to a generation. Together, they have raised five children and endured the loss of one child and one

child-in-law. Throughout their long and influential careers, they have been exemplars of consummate collaboration, grace and dignity.

Yitz calls the period of his adult lifetime – post-Holocaust, post-Israel – a transformative time for the Jews, “the end of Jewish exile and powerlessness and the beginning of the intent to assume power in Jewish history – a shift back to the Biblical Age...” This new-found freedom challenges Jews to make informed choices, he says. He has dedicated himself to guiding people in making these choices throughout his varied career as a university professor of history and Jewish studies; as a congregational rabbi; as founding president of CLAL (The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership), established to strengthen the American Jewish community through learning as well as to foster interdenominational dialogue and cooperation; as president of Jewish Life Network, an organization whose goal is to revitalize Jewish identity by creating new institutions and initiatives that will enable Jews to make “informed, balanced and inspired Jewish choices”; as the author of six books and numerous articles; and as a frequent lecturer.

Blu has been a pioneer in Orthodox feminism. Her first book, *On Women and Judaism* (1981), was the first authoritative attempt to reconcile feminism and Orthodoxy. Her second book was the widely read *How to Run a Traditional Jewish Household* (1983) in which she provided what her husband calls her “major, major unfinished contribution: Orthodoxy for the masses.” Now in its thirtieth printing, it is an information-filled handbook including anecdotes, family customs and recipes – a perfectly pitched blend of objective reporting and personal storytelling. In 1997, Blu founded JOFA (the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance) “to expand the spiritual, ritual, intellectual and political opportunities for women within the framework of Jewish law.” She is also part of the Women, Faith and Development Alliance’s *Breakthrough* Summit Leadership Council. A passionate promoter of interfaith dialogue, Blu feels that her own encounters with followers of other religions have enriched her life and deepened her Jewish identity.

Blu

A self-described “mild-mannered yeshiva girl,” Blu Greenberg was “the least likely candidate to become an Orthodox feminist activist.” Although it may have been improbable, Blu’s evolution from yeshiva girl to feminist was a rational and progressive one. Of her path, Blu says, “I’ve been on an incredible spiritual and intellectual journey – without ever really leaving home.”

Born in Seattle, Washington in 1936 to Rabbi Sam and Sylvia Genauer, Blu (short for *Bluma*, “flower,” in Yiddish) was the middle child of three girls. She calls her father her hero, and her mother a role model. Her mother taught her to be honest, which Blu considers to be her own greatest strength in dealing with Orthodox feminist issues. Sylvia Genauer, ninety-three years old at the time Blu was interviewed for this project, was so truthful that she could not refrain from criticizing where she saw injustice or impropriety even when she knew it would not win friends or influence people. Greenberg describes her parents as opposites because, in contrast to her straight-shooting mother, her father, Sam Genauer, never said a harsh word about anyone. He was a doting father who delighted in celebrating his daughters’ learning and accomplishments. Their middle-class home was nurturing and joyful, rich with the love of tradition and Jewish learning, where it was tacitly understood that being Orthodox was a privilege, never a burden. “I knew my place and liked it – the warmth, the rituals, the solid, tight parameters,” she writes in *On Women and Judaism*.

Blu has no memory of becoming a bat mitzvah because it was a non-event. Bat mitzvahs simply were not a ritual practiced in American Orthodox communities in the late 1940s. They were becoming more common among Conservative and Reform Jews, but in her community having a bat mitzvah “signaled that someone had stepped over the boundaries of tradition, had violated *Halacha* (Jewish law),” she explains. Rather than envy the boys whose bar mitzvahs marked the first time they went up to the Torah, read from it and addressed the community, the girls were relieved to be excused from this “public ordeal.”

In fact, the inequity built into the situation didn't really hit home until twenty-four years later, in 1972, when Blu was already a mother of five. On the last Shabbat of her husband's seven-year stint as rabbi of the Riverdale Jewish Center in Riverdale, New York, she arranged for her three sons to surprise their father by each leading some part of the synagogue service. They were rewarded with pride from their parents, praise from the community, and two dollars each from their grandparents the following morning. It was the financial reward that provoked their oldest daughter, Deborah, then eight, to complain that it wasn't fair. Her older brother, Moshe, who was ten, retorted, "Well, so what, you can't even do anything in the shul!" Re-counting this exchange Blu writes, "Click, click, I thought to myself, another woman radicalized."

Blu's own "radicalization" was very gradual. Growing up in Seattle and then in Far Rockaway, New York (the family moved when Blu was ten), the only unconventional aspect about her was a tomboyish fearlessness and love of sports. Tracing the course of her radicalization, Blu cites a series of "isolated, sporadic, unconnected events" beginning in her junior year at Brooklyn College, when she spent seven months studying in Israel at a Hebrew teachers' institute. Her Bible teacher was Nechama Leibowitz, who later became something of an institution herself, famous for her *gilyonot* (Torah worksheets of guided questions) and her uniquely engaging teaching method. Leibowitz, the first woman Blu had encountered who was well-versed in rabbinic texts, was brilliant and an extraordinary role model. In fact, Blu was so motivated by her that she wanted to take a year off from college to remain in Israel to learn with Leibowitz. However, neither her parents nor friends approved, so she returned home.

Disappointed, Blu realized that had she been an Orthodox male of the same age wanting to study with a special Israeli rebbe, it surely would have been encouraged. Back in Far Rockaway, she continued to work on the *gilyonot* and quickly moved into the next slot on the Orthodox expectations scale. Blu cites this as an early example of her quiet discontent with the status quo, but it is also an indication of her quiet determination and her willingness to work

within the existing framework; together, these have shaped her deliberate – and effective – *modus operandi* as an Orthodox feminist.

Learning is an inherited passion. Ordained as a rabbi, her father did not have a pulpit but worked in the family's wholesale men's clothing business. He was a family man; after his family, Talmud, not tailoring, was his true passion. He spent an hour each morning studying Talmud with a rabbi friend before his commute, worked with aspiring young rabbis, and always taught a community Talmud class.

In retrospect, Blu says, her greatest regret is not having studied Talmud with her father. It never occurred to her to ask. (She did eventually take courses in Talmud at Yeshiva University, and, for a period of time joined *Daf Yomi*, a daily regimen in which thousands of Jews study a page of Talmud each day, in order to finish the whole 2,711-page work in seven and a half years.)

At that time, Talmud simply wasn't something girls generally learned. In elementary school, the girls studied Israeli folk dancing while the boys immersed themselves in Talmud. In the yeshiva high school Blu attended, Talmud was not taught, while at the affiliated boys' branch, it was studied for three hours each day. By the mid-1980s, many Orthodox women had become respected Talmud scholars and teachers. To Greenberg, whose platform for Orthodox feminism is based on the principle of "distinctive but equal," some rituals still seem more male than female (like wearing a tallit or putting on *tefillin*, neither of which Blu does), and others more female than male (like candle lighting), but learning, in her view, is gender blind.

But while growing up Orthodox, Blu accepted that certain subjects of Jewish learning were male. It was only during the time spent in Israel in her junior year in college that she learned to question that convention. Her roommate, Barbara Edelman, took her to a bookstore in Meah Shearim (an ultra-Orthodox Jerusalem neighborhood) where Edelman bought herself several complete sets of "sacred texts." Greenberg followed, and felt a thrill on many levels, which she relives each time she opens those books and sees her name inscribed in the front flap. Ownership of the texts planted the

seeds for what would become Greenberg's controversial contention that for Orthodox women to fully own ritual and prayer, they must participate in it.

Blu Genauer, the "mild-mannered yeshiva girl," left Israel in 1955 to resume her studies at Brooklyn College, met a young rabbi named Irving Greenberg on a blind date, and two years later, at the age of twenty-one, married him. Yitz jokes that a friend gave him a list of names of four eligible girls; Blu's name was not first on the list. "But she was the most popular modern Orthodox girl in New York in the 1950s and her name sounded so exotic – I had a mental image of a bleached-blond nightclub singer – that I called her first," he says.

She turned out to be a cerebral dark-haired beauty who looked more like a concert pianist than a cabaret singer. He is three years older than she, but he claims she was emotionally more mature, more ready for marriage and a family. "Blu was certainly the teacher and the pace-setter [in our marriage]," Yitz acknowledges. "I was totally unprepared for marriage; she really trained me. And I feel, in retrospect, I didn't appreciate what I was getting into...it was just one of those gifts of life, a gift from God. Marrying Blu certainly transformed me."

Yitz

Tall and lanky with bright blue eyes, once-blonde hair, and a round face, he is quick to beam his toothy, heartfelt smile. He often dresses in preppy khakis and button-down cotton shirts, looking like the academic he was for twenty years, first at Yeshiva University (1959–1972), and then at the City University of New York (1972–1979).

Greenberg was born in Brooklyn in 1933 to Polish parents who had immigrated to the U.S. eight years earlier. "Blind luck" is how Greenberg describes his father Rabbi Eliyahu Chayim Greenberg's decision to come to America before the Holocaust that would claim one of Eliyahu's two sisters, four of his wife's six brothers and the rest of their families. Eliyahu and Sonia Greenberg arrived in New York with two daughters in their early teens; their two sons, Harold and Irving, were born in Brooklyn.

From the moment the older Greenbergs arrived in the U.S., their dream was to become all-American, although unlike many other immigrant Jews, they would not give up their religious practices. When their second son was born, they wanted to name him after his great-grandfather, Yitzhak, but they thought the name would be a stigma since it didn't sound mainstream American. At his *brit* (circumcision ceremony), they chose the name Irving, which they felt was a good white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant name for their eleven-pound baby. "Of course, I've spent the rest of my life trying to get back to Yitzhak," Yitz says.

Eliyahu Greenberg's father had died when he was a child. His mother could not support him, so she sent him away to *yeshivot*. "My father grew up as a poor, poor orphan," Yitz says. "He lived by his wits, meaning he was brilliant; very, very sharp and talented. So, to him, learning was everything." It was his meal ticket, since the brightest students were the ones who got invited into people's homes for dinner. In exchange for the meal, they would teach at the table. Learning became his currency, taking priority over his emotional needs. Yitz's father did not openly express affection to his children and he hardly ever schmoozed or talked about daily life occurrences, but he showered them with learning.

Eliyahu's American dream was that his son become the rabbi of a large American synagogue, which Yitz realized when he became rabbi of the Riverdale Jewish Center soon after his thirty-second birthday. Ordained as a rabbi in Poland, the elder Greenberg could not get a pulpit in Brooklyn because his spoken English wasn't good enough. (The family spoke Yiddish at home.) He taught Talmud daily in an immigrant congregation "for pennies" and he became a *shochet* (ritual meat slaughterer), rising at three in the morning, coming home blood-spattered at one every afternoon. He would change into clean clothes, open the Talmud and turn to learning with his congregation and his children, including the girls. They had little money, living "spartanly," but Yitz, who keeps a picture of his parents on his desk at home, hardly noticed, since the family's values were intellectual, not financial or emotional. "My father could only

translate love in terms of intellectual learning,” he says. “He would love you by learning with you.” His father also had a passionate love of the Jewish people and an anti-establishment streak that especially expressed itself in a fierce opposition to injustice.

As a result, “my father shaped the primordial structures of my thought at the level before ideas are grasped or put in words,” Yitz says. He attributes his style of teaching to his father’s model: one that integrated humor, covered a lot of ground, packing in as much material as possible, while articulating it clearly and simply so it would be accessible to everyone. Yitz’s manner of speaking also may reflect his father’s: he often asks a question, answering it in the same sentence; one of his most frequently used expressions is “that’s the heart of it” (not surprising, since he grew up taking concepts, not feelings, to heart); his speech is peppered with “in other words” because he is adept at rephrasing and restating, just as the Talmud does; and he often prefaces statements with the words, “it’s interesting,” because he genuinely is interested in so many different points of view.

His father wanted to reach the group, not be a part of the group. “Hanging out” was as foreign to him, and ultimately to Yitz, as a Brooks Brothers suit. “My father couldn’t understand why my brother and I would want to waste time hanging out with friends, and he influenced me,” Yitz says. Birthdays were ignored and except for on Shabbat, the family hardly ate meals together because that, too, was perceived as a waste of time. His mother – “the rock of the family, a deeply religious woman with a quiet strength and selflessness, who supplied the family’s stick-to-it determination” – would feed each child separately at whatever time he or she returned home after school. Yitz, a self-described “goody two-shoes and an over-achiever,” would read while he ate so as not to lose any precious studying time.

Years later, as a newlywed, when Yitz brought the *New York Times* to the table, Blu did not conceal her disappointment; in her family meals were social occasions. Yitz not only conformed, but is still grateful for having learned “social skills” from Blu. Now a “pescatarian” (fish-eating vegetarian), Yitz doesn’t have childhood

memories around food or Shabbat or holiday meals. He remembers singing and studying on Shabbat, but not eating. “I’m not a big food maven,” he says. Sitting and talking in the living room of their Riverdale home where there is always something to eat set out on the coffee table, Yitz takes two pretzels from a glass bowl and holds them for several minutes, neither tempted nor distracted enough to actually eat them. “I always joke that I don’t get any credit for kashrut because I’m not really sacrificing anything,” he says.

Yitz has a slight but perceptible accent traceable to the yeshivot of Boro Park in Brooklyn where he was educated (at Yeshiva Etz Chaim and Yeshiva University High School). He went on to the secular Brooklyn College, simultaneously attending a *mussar* yeshiva (where the emphasis was on ethics and character building) called Bais Yosef. Most of the students were Holocaust survivors and Yitz considers his three years there “some of the great moments of my life.” He recognizes each of the two institutions as being sound: the secular one (Brooklyn College) “much less filtered by Orthodoxy,” and the religious (Bais Yosef) “much less filtered by modernity... To the strong but independent pull of both institutions, I credit my tendency to this day to go for dialectical approaches to religious questions rather than to reach resolved positions,” he told Shalom Freedman in 1998 in a series of conversations that comprise the book *Living in the Image of God*. By the age of twenty, he had gotten *smicha* (rabbinical ordination) and graduated summa cum laude from Brooklyn College.

He moved on to Harvard – the only graduate program to which he applied – where he got both a master’s in American history in 1954 and a PhD in American intellectual history in 1960. Although he had been ordained as a rabbi seven years before, Yitz always intended to have a secular career as an academic. “There is a tradition of not making the Torah into a source of livelihood,” he says. Under the influence of his *mussar* yeshiva, his plan was that his life would express religious values, but his career would be secular. In part, he was motivated by the American dream of economic and social mobility, after seeing his parents struggle financially.

Right out of Harvard, Yitz got a teaching post in the History Department at Yeshiva University. Although he was hired to teach secular American and general history, “YU represented the religious and secular brought together.” Of this decision to alter his professional course even before setting out, Greenberg says, “the choice reflected unmet needs to work with and realize my Jewish religious urges.”

The next year, Yitz was awarded a Fulbright fellowship to teach American History at Tel Aviv University. With their newborn son Moshe, he and Blu spent the academic year of 1961–1962 in Jerusalem. The teaching load was light, and Yitz immersed himself in reading about the Holocaust, which would become a lifelong passion (he served as chairman of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council from 2000–2002). When he returned to YU he began lobbying to teach a course on the Holocaust. Ironically, there was a lot of resistance to the idea – at the time, such courses were being taught in only two other American universities – and it took two years before the class was offered under the euphemistic title, “Totalitarianism and Ideology in the 20th Century.”

Put off by his struggle to get the Holocaust into the curriculum at a Jewish university and by YU’s general resistance to his shifting focus to Jewish studies, when the Riverdale Jewish Center pulpit was offered him in 1965, Yitz took it, retaining his position as chairman of the History Department at YU. He calls the subsequent seven years “the golden years of our lives...a time of pure happiness.”

The children have since grown and left home, and Blu and Yitz have moved into a different house in Riverdale, but the newer home, now often bustling with grandchildren, still resonates with the activity and joy of the household in those early years.

In 2002, Yitz and Blu suffered a tragedy when their youngest son, Jonathan Joseph, “J.J.,” died at the age of thirty-six on *Shabbat Shuva* (the Shabbat before Yom Kippur) after a bicycling accident in Israel.

J.J. was the executive director of Jewish Life Network, the organization that he helped establish in 1994 with Michael Steinhardt,

its chairman and founder, and Yitz, its president. At their home after his death, Blu and Yitz spoke of J.J.'s quirky acts of kindness and integrity, like his custom of calling family and friends at 12:01 A.M. on their birthdays and anniversaries, covering his head with a towel when he couldn't find his *kippah*, and never throwing away a sheet of paper unless it was used on both sides.

At the funeral outside of Jerusalem, Yitz eulogized his son. With his characteristic ability to explain even the inexplicable, he concluded by offering the blessing of a *Kohen* (priest) to everyone present, in J.J.'s memory: "May God bless you with a child so loving, so kind, so good, so continuously supportive and protective, so wise, so Jewish, so devoted to *clal Yisrael*, so modest, so funny, so gentle, so zany, so weird, so individual, so free of spirit, so religious, so cool, so honest that even if you knew, as we now know, that at the end of thirty-six years, the life together would conclude with this unspeakable heartbreak, with this inexplicable tragedy, with this endless pain, you would still say, 'Give me this child.' Every day of our life with J.J. was a permanent blessing."

Blu

"We are all trying to hold onto J.J.'s life story," Blu says, meaning they want to remember the person (son, brother, grandson, uncle) that he was, and recognize all the work he did, large (like his work on behalf of the Birthright Israel project, conceiving Makor in Manhattan and his contribution to making Orthodoxy cool) and small (like the mitzvot he did daily, helping whomever needed help, and donating twenty percent of his income to charity).

The family created a website dedicated to J.J.'s memory (www.jjgreenberg.org) and Blu is working on a book about her son. "I'm going to have to find a way to weave together his life and my grief," she says with typical candor. Her grief, she explains, has three pieces. First is the lack of closure. She spoke with her son nearly every day of his life, except on the last day. Second is simply that she misses him, daily. And finally, there is the sadness about the future he will not have.

When asked how he would like to be remembered, Yitz replies, “I’d like to be remembered in part as the husband of Blu and as the parent of my children. That’s good enough.” It was Yitz who, sometime in the late 1960s, picked up *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan’s bestselling 1963 book, for Blu because he thought she ought to read it. As an associate professor of history at Yeshiva University at the time, Yitz had more than a passing interest in the socio-political trends emerging in America, and Friedan’s book intrigued him.

Having given birth to five children in six years, Blu describes herself in the 1960s as “content and fulfilled, not in search of women’s liberation.” Her plate was full with childrearing, getting a degree in religious education, getting a second master’s degree in Jewish history (the first had been in clinical psychology), and teaching college part-time. She says she read the book, “engaging the matter intellectually and at arm’s length.” She considered the issues carefully. “I did not come to feminism out of a sense of oppression or deprivation. In fact, the anger frightened me,” she remembers. “Nevertheless, I understood that the underlying basis was just, and I could not easily let go of the idea.”

Friedan’s idea was to examine the root of the widespread malaise that was growing among American women, thus triggering change. But feminism had been brewing long before the publication of Friedan’s groundbreaking book. Jewish feminists who were Orthodox and frustrated with their not being counted (literally) or being unable to participate in key rituals could walk away from Orthodoxy and become Conservative or Reconstructionist or Reform, gaining those rights in a heartbeat. Blu and many others were not willing to give up the basic tenets of Orthodoxy. Many Jewish feminists found fault with traditional rabbis and criticized the family unit. Blu, on the other hand, held rabbis as her heroes (beginning with her father and her husband) and deemed family “the defining structure and most important aspect” of her life.

The challenge for Blu became how to marry feminism and Orthodoxy without compromising or letting go of the principles of

either. “I came to understand that it is far easier to destroy systems than to build them up. So when other feminists were speaking of taking down walls and doors, I was cautious about destroying what I knew had taken centuries to create,” she wrote in 2005.

A team player, Blu is an enthusiastic supporter of structures and infrastructures. “An organization can change the world,” she states. Since its establishment, she has helped nurture JOFA from a casual kitchen roundtable into an international alliance. Her concern for peace in Israel led her, in 1989, to help establish the Dialogue Project to promote communication between Jewish and Palestinian women. More recently, Blu also cofounded One Voice: Jewish Women for Israel and the Federation Task Force on Jewish Women. She has served and held leadership positions on boards too numerous to list in full: EDAH, Project Keshet, U.S. Israel Women to Women, *Hadassah Magazine*, *Lilith* magazine, the International Research Institute on Jewish Women, and the Jewish Book Council of America are among them.

Because of her respect for organizations, it is not surprising that Blu says the pivotal moment in her life was in 1973 when she was asked to be the keynote speaker at the first National Jewish Women’s Conference in New York. With her characteristic humility, she describes the invitation as a “fluke” and “a call from God.” In systematically researching her talk, given at the McAlpin Hotel in New York City to an audience of about five hundred women, she delved deeply into the Jewish sources on women. It confirmed her assumptions that the tradition “was filled with benevolence toward women,” yet it also exposed “pockets of disadvantage, disability and discrimination.”

For Blu, and for the small group of Orthodox rabbis, including Yitz, who supported her position, the key was – and still is – giving women equal status in the synagogue and the ritual within the parameters of traditional Jewish law (*Halacha*). Blu maintains this is possible if there is flexibility in interpreting the law. Blu and Yitz – and scores of other distinguished scholars and rabbis – assert that written into Jewish law is the proviso that it be contextual,

reinterpreted within the context of each particular historical time; in this way the law remains relevant and vital for all generations.

“Judaism has often adapted to innovations based on the dynamic interchange between individual needs and community sensibilities, between the questions and the answers in the *halachic* literature, between new societal norms and ancient traditions,” Blu says. “The full dignity of women, as images of God, is an external idea that we must integrate into our heritage.” Blu’s maxim became, “Where there’s a rabbinic will there’s a *halachic* way.”

Yitz

In 2005, Yitz developed a year-long program called *Limdu Heitev* (learn goodness). The goal for *Limdu Heitev*, he says, is to “articulate a post-modern or pluralist vision for Orthodoxy, meaning an Orthodoxy that would not be withdrawn or triumphalist, but more embracing and affirmative of the rest of the [Jewish] community.”

He continues, “That’s what the Jewish people are about. There’s an alternative to universalism, where we’re all one great humanity, and particularism, where I’m my tribe and I kill/reject every other tribe that I don’t care for. So we’re trying to create a post-modern Jewry that is integrated, and it stands that it’s part of humanity but it is a distinctive family and a distinctive tribe and it has its own values and its own models, but it knows its limits and it doesn’t say that we are the only ones who have models or insights...or have contributions to make.”

Pluralism was – and still is – the goal of CLAL, the organization Greenberg helped establish in 1974. CLAL was formed to encourage formal dialogue among rabbis of all denominations, and later became committed to promoting dialogue among the Jewish community at large. During this time, and as an outgrowth of work he did at CLAL, he wrote *The Jewish Way* (1988). His first Jewish book, it is a thorough explanation and interpretation of all the Jewish holidays. Greenberg served as president of CLAL from 1979 until 1997, although he says he only intended to work there for five years. “A lot of my life has been serendipity,” he says of the opportunity he

was given to establish a Jewish Studies Department at City College (which he chaired from 1972–1979), that in turn led to the opportunity to create the JJRC – National Jewish Resource Center, which later became CLAL.

CLAL was born after over a decade of active dialogue with Christian clergy. “I joined the dialogue, very frankly, not to come to love and understand Christians, but really kind of to say ‘stop teaching hatred about me,’” Yitz says of his decision to get involved in Jewish-Christian exchange in 1962. He and Blu were motivated to join in this ongoing conversation as a response to the Holocaust. “How do you get Christians to reformulate their thinking about Judaism?” was the question they sought to answer. But, as he recounts in his book *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter Between Judaism and Christianity* (2004), the Christians they met were so wonderful, open, sympathetic to the Jews, and ashamed of what Christianity had done in the Holocaust that as time went on the Greenbergs became more and more appreciative and respectful of Christianity in general.

Finally, Yitz concluded that, “if you can get people of such decency and quality who are willing to really criticize themselves and determined to change their own religious teaching in order to make it a vision of love...this is the key to breaking anti-Semitism.” He writes of the spiritual intensity he witnessed that “lifted my Jewish religious life to a new level...Soon I felt an obligation to re-present Christianity, within the Jewish world, as a faith with independent value and dignity.” Of his years of positive involvement with Jewish-Christian dialogue Yitz says, “I came to scold and I stayed to praise.”

Greenberg has been criticized for this position by the Orthodox Right, but he remains grateful for the positive influence of the Christians with whom he established strong, lasting bonds. He credits them with having taught him “the techniques of dialogue,” which he then brought back into the Jewish-Jewish dialogue, through CLAL. While he entered into the Jewish-Christian dialogue seeking to reformulate Christian thinking, he came out of it thinking about “how do you reformulate Jewish thinking about Christianity?”

Reformulating Jewish thinking about Judaism is part of what Yitz did as president of Jewish Life Network from 1994 until 2007. The theory behind JLN is “to create a community that has enough educational and personal, experiential Jewish experiences to choose to be Jewish in an open society. The alternatives are trying to recreate this separation [that we had in the ghettos of prewar Eastern Europe] or giving in to assimilation [as so many American Jews have done].” Whereas fundamentalism says that choice undermines commitment, JLN suggests that choice intensifies commitment. Yitz is aware of the constant conflict between the reconciliation of inherited values with new opportunities.

JLN supports Jewish day schools, camps, Israel travel and study (through Birthright Israel), youth and college (Hillel) movements, and intensive adult learning. Newer programs include extending the education push to preschoolers (through JECE – Jewish Early Childhood Initiative) and to the just-born (through participating in the “PJ Library,” a Harold Grinspoon Foundation program that distributes books and educational materials to Jewish families). In the planning stages are the creation of a central Jewish Retreat Center, a follow-up program to Birthright Israel trips, and Fund for Our Jewish Future, a national fund to subsidize locally driven projects that fit into Jewish Life Network’s objectives.

Unfinished Business

What are their objectives now? Both Yitz and Blu want to spend more time writing. Highly skilled masters of the craft, both note that you can reach more people through books than you can through public speaking. Blu is working on the aforementioned book about J.J.’s life, completing another that takes a new look at the ancient rite of *mikveh* (ritual bath), and beginning a book called *Kosher Friends* about how to host kosher friends if you have a non-kosher kitchen.

Of Blu’s still unfinished but steadfast determination to render women distinct but equal under Orthodox Jewish law, Yitz says, “I feel that she’s doing something that’s very, very important, and I

think historically, she will win...I don't know if [she will win] in my lifetime, but I'm highly confident that in somebody's lifetime, this will come to be."

Of Yitz, Steven T. Katz wrote in *Interpreters of Judaism in the Late Twentieth Century*, "No Jewish thinker has had a greater impact on the American Jewish community in the last two decades." As he moves to the next stage of his career and dedicates more time to writing, Yitz says he'll be addressing a tremendous backlog of unpublished ideas. "I've been so busy creating organizations that I never got my books published," he says.

Taking time off to write has been a recurring goal for Yitz. In 1974–1975, he went on sabbatical to Israel to write a theological approach to the Holocaust. His father passed away during that year and Yitz didn't write the book; that remains one of his goals. (He published several articles on the subject and co-edited *Confronting the Holocaust: The Impact of Elie Wiesel*.) Before his father's death, Yitz tape-recorded Eliyahu Greenberg's reflections and memories of his life in Poland; this is another seed of a book waiting to germinate, along with a collection of essays. Perhaps most important is a book that he has begun writing, with the working title *The Triumph of Life*. It argues that Judaism's main message is life affirming and life sustaining: Life wins.

"So what is the meaning of life?" Yitz asks rhetorically. "The Jews faced that question and they concluded that life is a partnership between God and humanity. Life is making sense of this world and improving it and doing *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) in one's own time." This seems a perfect description of his and Blu's life work, focused on developing and affirming a range of vital alternatives to encourage Jews to find their own Jewish way.

Yet, there is much to be done, and Yitz is not sanguine about the future of Judaism. "For the Jewish people it's a very scary race between disintegration and renewal...And it's not a race that I think we're winning," he says. "In fact, we're probably taking heavy losses as we talk." And with that he heads back to his desk to continue doing his best to reverse the tide.