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American Pragmatism and Post-Holocaust Jewish Theology: The Case of Irving Greenberg

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Abstract

Irving Greenberg (b. 1933), among the most influential American Jewish theologians responding to the Holocaust, consistently describes his theological approach as "postmodern"—emphasising the breakdown of absolutes, fragmentation, and the failure of modern certainties. This article argues that the label is misleading. Through a reading of Greenberg's foundational concepts—the voluntary covenant, *tzelem Elokim*, the assumption of power, and *tikkun olam*—set against the conceptual apparatus of continental postmodernism and classical American pragmatism, we will show that Greenberg's theological method and normative conclusions align far more closely with the pragmatist tradition of Peirce, James, and Dewey. Where continental postmodernism tends toward deconstruction and the dissolution of normative claims, Greenberg's thought exhibits characteristic pragmatist motifs: fallibilism without nihilism, pluralism without relativism, and a robust meliorism oriented toward world repair. His dictum that "pluralism is an absolutism that knows its limits" echoes William James's pluralism rather than Derridean deconstruction, and his post-Holocaust ethic of power directly resists postmodern suspicion of agency. Reading Greenberg through the lens of American pragmatism offers a new perspective on post-Holocaust Jewish theology and clarifies how distinct intellectual traditions shape theological responses to catastrophe.

Keywords: philosophy and Judaism; Irving Greenberg; Holocaust; Jews and modernity; American pragmatism; postmodernism; voluntary covenant; *tikkun olam*; religious pluralism; modern Jewish thought

1. Introduction

Irving Greenberg (b. 1933) stands among the most distinctive American Jewish theologians of his generation. Trained in American intellectual history at Brandeis and Harvard, ordained as an Orthodox rabbi, and shaped by the encounter with the Holocaust as a personal and theological problem, Greenberg has spent six decades constructing a theology that takes the rupture of Auschwitz seriously without abandoning the covenantal framework of traditional Judaism.[1] His central theological concepts—moment faith, the voluntary covenant, the centrality of *tzelem Elokim*, the assumption of power as a post-Holocaust imperative, and the orientation of Jewish life toward *tikkun olam*—emerge from the question of how Jewish theism can be sustained after catastrophic rupture. As an Orthodox thinker who refuses both the theodic frameworks of classical Orthodox responses to suffering and the radical theology of thinkers such as Richard Rubenstein, he occupies an avant-garde position.[2] The voluntary covenant, articulated in his 1982 essay of that title, is his signature theological structure: an attempt to reconfigure the covenantal relationship in light of the Holocaust without dissolving it.

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Greenberg has long described his theology as postmodern. The term appears in his early Holocaust essays, in his interfaith writings and in his magnum opus, *The Triumph of Life.* He uses it without hesitation or qualification, as though it were the obvious philosophical home for a theology that takes the breakdown of absolutes and the necessity of religious pluralism as central commitments. A reader encountering Greenberg through this self-description arrives expecting a particular kind of theology—fragmented, deconstructive, suspicious of foundational absolutes and grand narratives. Greenberg's vocabulary in his early writings supports this expectation.

The opening paragraphs of "Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire" and "The Voluntary Covenant" speak of shattering, rupture, and broken covenant.[3] The lexicon of continental postmodernism is real and operative in this early work. But the reader who follows him beyond his early post-Holocaust rupture into the substantive theological project that proceeds from it, encounters a different theological orientation: one that constructs a transformed framework for human–divine partnership, that insists on the assumption of power, and that orients itself toward the redemptive work of *tikkun olam*.

Greenberg does offer an explicit account of what he means by postmodernism which reveals much about his understanding of the term. In a retrospective essay, he acknowledges that many identify postmodernity with "the denial of the existence of objective facts and truth" and the insistence that "all truth claims are specious fronts for subjective, agenda driven narratives." But he dismisses this as an "illicitly overextended, distortedly crystallized version of the true insights of post modernity."[4] What he calls "true" postmodernity is something different: the recognition that "all truths are inescapably articulated and understood in a social and historical context" and that "absolute certitude is not possible." The wrong conclusion to be drawn from this, he insists, is "a worldview of relativism or nihilism. The right response is to acknowledge the subjectivity, seek to offset and filter it with a hermeneutic of suspicion and with cross-cultural comparisons and insights."[5]

Similarly, in *The Triumph of Life*, he distinguishes between postmodernism's "pluralistic core value" and its "dark side"—the relativism that denies "the existence of any transcending truths." That dark side, he writes, "must be taken in hand and neutralized."[6] What remains after this neutralisation is a chastened pluralism that sets limits on truth-claims without dissolving them.

Hence Greenberg's "true" postmodernity—fallibilism without nihilism, pluralism without relativism, acknowledgment of limits while retaining substantive commitments—is precisely what this article identifies as the defining features of classical American pragmatism. His self-identification as postmodern rests on a selective appropriation of the term that adopts its anti-foundationalist critique of modernity while refusing its relativistic conclusions. Indeed, even in his early writings it is clear that Greenberg treats postmodernism and pluralism as virtually synonymous seen specifically in places where he defines himself as a religious pluralist, and therefore as a postmodernist.[7] Notably, however, in his earliest post-Holocaust essays—"Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire" (Greenberg 1977) and "The Voluntary Covenant" (Greenberg 1982)—the operative term is pluralism, not postmodernism and is framed as an imperative that emerges directly from the Holocaust as a corrective to the absolutism that made genocide possible. "Postmodernism" is a term Greenberg adopts later, retrofitted onto a pluralist framework already in place.[8] The trajectory suggests that for Greenberg, postmodernism names what he had already been calling pluralism—which is to say, it is less a philosophical definition than a borrowed label for an existing position.

This article makes this case. As his theology develops from immediate post-Holocaust response into mature constructive Jewish theology, its pragmatist substructure surfaces more clearly and his thought aligns more closely with classical American pragmatism—the tradition of Peirce, James, and Dewey—than with the continental postmodernism with

which he identifies. The article documents the influence of pragmatism across both phases of his thought and shows where it diverges sharply from postmodernism's deconstructive and anti-absolutist tendencies.

Read as postmodern, Greenberg's theology appears as an uneasy compromise between Orthodox tradition and the deconstructive demands of post-Holocaust thought; read through pragmatist categories, it becomes legible as a coherent constructive project in which rupture, pluralism, and covenantal substance operate within a single philosophical framework. The reclassification also opens a broader claim about how intellectual traditions shape theological responses to catastrophe. Greenberg's case illustrates what becomes possible when an American pragmatist apparatus encounters the rupture of the Holocaust: a theology that neither denies the rupture nor accepts the dissolution of theological substance, but reconstructs covenantal commitment through pragmatist categories of fallibilism, pluralism, and meliorism.

The article proceeds in six sections. Section 2 defines the terms and locates the decisive divergence between them in the kinds of pluralism each develops. Section 3 develops the pluralism argument, showing that Greenberg's engaged fallibilistic pluralism, drawing on William James and Richard Bernstein, retains substantive theological commitments that a relativist postmodern pluralism cannot. Section 4 develops the meliorism argument and frames the historical–cultural context, contrasting continental postmodernism's emergence from the catastrophe of World War II with the American Jewish delay in confronting the Holocaust, and reflects on the biographical component in 1961 in Israel, after his American intellectual formation was complete. Section 5 examines an implication of the pragmatist reading: Greenberg's ethics of power. A post-Holocaust world, demands the responsible, limited, but necessary assumption of Jewish power, primarily through the state, as the only durable safeguard against recurrence. Where continental postmodernism treats power, especially state power, with deep suspicion, Greenberg treats its exercise as an ethical obligation, since after Auschwitz Jewish powerlessness became morally untenable. The move is characteristically pragmatist, not postmodern. Section 6 engages with Tamar Ross's critique that Greenberg fails to commit fully to a postmodern epistemology, showing that the objection, properly understood, supports rather than undermines this article's central claim: that Greenberg's theology aligns more closely with pragmatist motifs than postmodern ones. The conclusion considers broader implications for the study of post-Holocaust theology and American Jewish thought.

2. Defining the Terms: Postmodernism and Pragmatism

Postmodernism and pragmatism are both internally diverse, contested terms; any single definition of either risks misrepresenting the breadth of thought it covers. Richard Bernstein observes that "the terms 'modernity' and 'postmodernity' are slippery, vague, and ambiguous," with "no consensus or agreement about the multiple meanings of these treacherous terms" (Bernstein 1992, p. 11). The same caveat applies to pragmatism, which spans the classical tradition of Peirce, James, and Dewey, the mid-century reformulations of Quine and Sellars, and the neo-pragmatist revival associated with Rorty and Bernstein himself. The present argument requires a more specific framing of both terms. By postmodernism, the article means the continental post-structuralist line of thought associated primarily with Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault, and developed in the post-Holocaust philosophical climate by figures including Bauman and Adorno. By pragmatism, the article means the classical American tradition of Peirce, James, and Dewey rather than its later neo-pragmatist developments.

The defining features of postmodernism as we are using the term include the deconstruction of foundational claims, suspicion of grand narratives, the breakdown of absolutes,

fragmentation of the unified self, and a radical pluralism that, in its strongest forms, tends toward relativism. These principles are born out of Lyotard's articulation of the postmodern condition as "incredulity toward metanarratives," which refuses any overarching framework that would legitimate truth-claims (Lyotard 1984, p. xxiv). Bauman contends that modernity itself is the precursor to the Holocaust. In *Modernity and the Holocaust*, he argues that industrialized genocide was not an aberration from modernity but its product, made possible by modernity's drive toward rational order and bureaucratic instrumentalism (Bauman 1989). If modernity is implicated in the Holocaust, the Enlightenment's confidence in reason and progress cannot survive Auschwitz intact, and the deconstructive impulse follows. Adorno's now-canonical insistence that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" stands as the defining post-Auschwitz philosophical reminder of what the philosophical task has become (Adorno [1967] 1981, p. 34). Postmodernism's critique of absolutes is a response to the failure of the Western metaphysical tradition which Greenberg articulates in precisely these terms:

> Considering that cultural hegemony and moral centralization are potential threats to liberty and dignity, it is no accident that postmodernism has been one of the strongest cultural trends in the post-Holocaust period. Postmodernism rejects the certainty of modernism's universal claims and grand ideologies; it tries to overthrow unitary canons in literature and philosophy. Essentially it is disillusioned by the failure of modernity's pure, abstract reason to deliver on its methodological and utopian claims[. . .] But the Enlightenment's great promise was undone when it met the real world of the twentieth century. (Greenberg 2024, p. 251)

Classical American pragmatism develops in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century through the work of Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey. Bernstein describes it as "one of the richest traditions that has shaped philosophy in America" (Bernstein 1992, p. 324), distinguished from logical positivism by its insistence that ideas and beliefs are evaluated by their consequences in the world rather than by correspondence to a higher metaphysical order.

Three principles characterize the tradition. The first is anti-foundationalism: the rejection of fixed *a priori* truths in favor of inquiry-based knowledge that remains open to revision. The second is fallibilism: the principle that absolute knowledge about anything is impossible and that any belief or truth may be mistaken—that constant inquiry, the foundation for all human activity, must be premised on limited epistemological grounds.[9] As Bernstein notes, "Philosophy is interpretive, tentative, always subject to change," and what saves pragmatism from collapsing into the relativism that critics have charged it with is precisely this fallibilistic principle: an acceptance of finitude does not necessitate relativism or subjectivism (Bernstein 1992, p. 9). The third is meliorism, which holds that the world is improvable through human action. James's formulation became canonical: meliorism "treats salvation as neither inevitable nor impossible. It treats it as a possibility, which becomes more and more of a probability the more numerous the actual conditions of salvation become" (James 1897, p. 196). Together, these principles produce a tradition that is anti-foundationalist without being deconstructive.

The two traditions share certain similarities: both reject foundationalism, both are suspicious of grand narratives, and both take historical contingency seriously. Where they diverge is in their normative conclusions. Continental postmodernism's critique of absolutes flows from the recognition that the Western metaphysical tradition cannot be repaired but must be deconstructed. Classical pragmatism's anti-foundationalism is, by contrast, constructive, claiming that the absence of fixed *a priori* truth opens the world to inquiry rather than closing it to truth-claims. Meliorism extends this construction into a

normative orientation that is action-guiding. The two traditions begin from shared starting points but end in different places.

Pluralism provides the clearest example of this. Continental postmodernism, in its strongest forms, produces a relativist pluralism that dissolves normative truth-claims. Classical pragmatism develops what Bernstein, drawing on James, terms "engaged fallibilistic pluralism"[10] that remains open to genuine hearing of the other and holds her view as workably true—that is, true enough to act on and make normative claims from.

Greenberg's pluralism is fallibilist, not relativist, since it acknowledges its limits without surrendering its truth-claims. His theology preserves substantive commitments—to *tzelem Elokim*, to the ongoing covenant between God and the Jewish people, to the sanctity of life — which function as the meta-principles within which his openness to other traditions operates. A postmodern pluralism committed to relativism could not retain such claims.

3. Pluralism Without Relativism

The traditional grounding of Jewish self-understanding—the chosenness of Israel, the singular revelation at Sinai, the particular relationship between God and the Jewish people—has historically resisted pluralist theological conclusions. The few Orthodox thinkers who have attempted serious pluralist theology—figures such as David Hartman, Jonathan Sacks[11], and Greenberg himself—have done so against the grain of their own tradition, drawing significant criticism from within Orthodoxy for what is perceived as theological compromise.[12] Greenberg has occupied an avant-garde position even within Modern Orthodoxy, and his pluralist commitments have frequently led to his being pushed to the periphery of Orthodox institutional spaces.

Greenberg's most explicit pluralist statement emerges from the post-Holocaust predicament. In "The Voluntary Covenant" and the essays that followed, he argues that the Holocaust requires not only a reconfiguration of Jewish covenantal commitment but also a religious commitment to pluralism as a corrective to the absolutism that made industrialized genocide possible. The commitment to "never again" requires the dispersal of concentrated power—which absolutist ideologies, including religious ones, enable. Pluralism —"the setting of healthy limits on absolutes, valid or otherwise"—is the necessary corollary of post-Holocaust ethical authenticity. (Greenberg 2004, p. 225) The nature of the argument is pragmatist since pluralism is justified instrumentally, by what it prevents and enables, rather than metaphysically. But it also has some substantive theological consequences. For example, the voluntary covenant recognises other faith traditions as equally voluntary participants in their own covenantal relationships with God rather than adherents of inferior or wrong religions. Christianity is not merely tolerated but recognized as a genuine "channel to connect humans to partner with God." Yet notwithstanding these ostensibly pluralist sentiments, there are certain absolutes that remain non-negotiable in Greenberg's thinking as illustrated in statements such as this: "In pluralism we do not filter out the differences or turn everything gray. We encounter the full intensity of distinctive positions, witnessing in our uniqueness without distorting in our passion. **By this token, pluralism is not relativism**, for we hold on to our absolutes, however we make room for others as well" (Greenberg 2004, p. 196, emphasis added).

Those absolutes—*tzelem Elokim*, the divine image present in every person, and the ongoing covenantal relationship between God and the Jewish people—function as meta-principles from which Greenberg's pluralism operates. By recognising Christianity as a valid path to God one need not abandon particular Jewish claims, only moderate them: "Judgments of right and wrong can (and must) still be made. However, the pluralist acknowledges the limits of his/her absolutism. Her truth/faith may not cover all people,

all circumstances, all times. . . pluralism is an absolutism that knows its limits." (Greenberg 2004, p. 318). The pluralist holds her theological convictions seriously, under conditions of acknowledged fallibility, openness, and willingness to revise them.

It is instructive to notice the parallel between Greenberg's pluralism and the pluralism William James develops in *Pragmatism* and *A Pluralistic Universe*. James, working through the philosophical problem of monism and pluralism, arrives at a position that resists the binary:

> "Pragmatism, pending the final empirical ascertainment of just what the balance of union and disunion among things may be, must obviously range herself upon the pluralistic side. . . [yet] some day, she admits, even total union, with one knower, one origin, and a universe consolidated in every conceivable way, may turn out to be the most acceptable of all hypotheses". (James 1907, p. 112)

The pragmatist commits to plurality as the working hypothesis without foreclosing the possibility of eventual unity. He puts the same point more concretely elsewhere: "Common sense is BETTER for one sphere of life, science for another, philosophic criticism for a third; but whether either be TRUER absolutely, Heaven only knows" (James 1907, p. 131). This is similar to what Greenberg articulates in his mature theological writings:

> "All truths are inescapably articulated and understood in a social and historical context. Therefore, absolute certitude is not possible. The wrong conclusion to be drawn from this is a worldview of relativism or nihilism. The right response is to acknowledge the subjectivity, seek to offset and filter it with a hermeneutic of suspicion and with cross-cultural comparisons and insights". (Greenberg 2019, p. 42)

Both thinkers refuse the binary between absolutism and relativism, commit to pluralism as the working position while preserving the possibility of substantive truth-claims and treat fallibility as the condition of genuine engagement and dialogue.

The parallel extends into the question of how truth is conceived. James rejects correspondence theories of truth, favoring constructed truth, generated through inquiry and growing in spots: "The spots may be large or small, but the knowledge never grows all over: some old knowledge always remains what it was. New truths thus are resultants of new experiences and of old truths combined and mutually modifying one another" (James 1907, pp. 115, 117). On this account, truth is incremental and the "regulative notion of a potential better truth to be established later" is what governs all inquiry (James 1907, p. 137). Platonic truth descends from a fixed source whereas pragmatist truth grows from the ground. William Barrett describes pragmatism as follows:

The genial inspiration that lies behind his whole rather gangling and loose-jointed philosophy is the belief that in all departments of human experience things do not fall from heaven but grow up out of the earth (Barrett 1961, p. 17).

A strikingly congruent picture of truth appears in classical rabbinic literature. The midrash in *Genesis Rabbah* 8:5 narrates the creation of the human being as a debate among the divine attributes:

When the Holy One came to create Adam, the ministering angels formed themselves into groups and parties, some saying "Let him be created" and others "Let him not be created." Lovingkindness said: "Let him be created, because he will dispense acts of lovingkindness." Truth said: "Let him not be created, because he is full of lies." Justice said: "Let him be created, because he will perform acts of justice." Peace said: "Let him not be created, because he is full of strife." What did the Holy One do? God took Truth and cast it to the ground, as it is written, "and truth will be sent to the earth." The ministering angels said: "Sovereign of the Universe, why do you despise Your seal? Let truth arise from the earth," as it is written, "Let truth spring up from the earth."[13]

Abstract, pure truth could not co-exist in a world of humans that depend on partial truths and contingent commitments. The divine response is to cast truth down to the ground—from heaven to earth, from a transcendent Platonic ideal to a fragmented pragmatic entity that grows from the soil. The verb in the prooftext from Psalm 85—*titzmach*, "will spring up"—is the verb used elsewhere in scripture for vegetation, suggesting truth as organic, emerging from the ground, developing over time, and requiring human cultivation. In parallel with James's "knowledge grows in spots" the Midrash appears to locate truth in a temporal and developmental field of human inquiry rather than in a fixed metaphysical realm.

Jonathan Sacks draws on the same midrash in *The Dignity of Difference* and reads it as articulating a pre-modern Jewish epistemology of pluralism that survives the dogmatic turn of nineteenth-century Orthodoxy. His formulation stands as the rabbinic theological counterpart to James:

Truth on earth is not, nor can it aspire to be, the whole truth. It is limited, not comprehensive, particular, not universal. When two propositions contradict, it is not necessarily because one is true and the other false. It may be, and often is, that each represents a different perspective in reality . . . in heaven there is truth; on earth there are truths (Sacks 2002, pp. 64–65).[14]

Sacks seems to suggest that the refusal of "absolute certitude" and the view of truth as articulated through historical and social context do not represent the importation of a foreign philosophical apparatus into Jewish theology but is rather the articulation of an epistemology that classical rabbinic thought already developed. Greenberg's pluralism, as illustrated earlier, is continuous with this rabbinic strand whose closest philosophical analogue is classical American pragmatism.

4. Meliorism and the American Context

Meliorism, the third of the principles distinguishing classical American pragmatism from continental postmodernism, is articulated by William James in the following extract:

Meliorism treats salvation as neither inevitable nor impossible. It treats it as a possibility, which becomes more and more of a probability the more numerous the actual conditions of salvation become. It is clear that pragmatism must incline toward meliorism (James 1897, p. 196).

Meliorism grounds redemption in human action within a contingent but improvable world, rather than in metaphysical guarantee.

Louis Menand's *The Metaphysical Club* traces the emergence of classical pragmatism and its melioristic orientation to the philosophical aftermath of the American Civil War (Menand 2001). Peirce, James, Holmes, and Wright shared two formative experiences: the war they witnessed or fought in, and the Cambridge club where they developed pragmatism as a viable philosophical position. Menand's argument is that the war "discredited the beliefs and assumptions of the era that preceded it"—particularly the foundationalist certainties on whose premise the war was waged" (Menand 2001, p. x). The pragmatists came to share the conviction that "certainty leads to war." Their suspicion of foundationalism was born of both philosophical and political considerations (Menand 2001, p. 61).

A generation later in post-war Europe, continental postmodernism expressed similar sentiments. Industrialised genocide, they argued, was made possible by the rational–bureaucratic instrumentalism characteristic of modern confidence in progress (Bauman 1989).

Yet unlike continental postmodernism's deconstructive conclusions, the American pragmatists armed with the melioristic tendencies of their pragmatist predecessors, championed a philosophy of reconstruction rather than deconstruction. Krijnen identifies core characteristics of the American cultural landscape: narratives of progress, individual

possibility, and "Utopia Achieved"—a culture in which historical consciousness is "less interested in the past per se than in individuals' possibilities in the future" (Krijnen 2016, pp. 41–42). Susan Neiman puts the point more directly: "Americans prefer narratives of progress. Call them happy endings" (Neiman 2019, p. 35).

This was the crucible in which the American Jewish encounter with the Holocaust was formed. American Jewry had achieved something close to civic equality by mid-century, and this "American exceptionalism" fed the conviction that American conditions had broken with the cycle of European Jewish suffering.[15] It is this context that accounts for the delay in integrating the Shoah. Peter Novick writing about the immediate post-war years, expresses this claim explicitly when he writes, American Jews "more than others wanted to be part of the prevailing optimistic cultural climate," and Holocaust memory resisted the accepted redemptive arc. (Novick 1999, pp. 112–23) Thus its integration into American Jewish consciousness was deferred until two later events supplied the missing melioristic frame: the Eichmann trial of 1961, in which the perpetrator was tried by his victims in an Israeli court, and the Six-Day War of 1967, in which the State of Israel survived what was widely received as a near second Holocaust. By then, conditions were ripe for the smooth integration of catastrophe into a redemptive arc.

Greenberg's intellectual formation took place from the early 1950s through the early 1960s, within the melioristic American disposition just described and prior to any sustained theological reckoning with the Holocaust. He completed rabbinic ordination at Beth Joseph and pursued doctoral studies in American intellectual history at Harvard, focusing on Theodore Roosevelt and the progressive tradition.[16] There he encountered classical pragmatism in the academic study of American thought and absorbed the melioristic–progressive orientation of his subject. The Holocaust was not absent from his consciousness—he had family who perished, dim memories of his mother weeping privately after the war—but it was not the center of his attention and the American purview offered no available frame to process the shattering motifs of the event.

His encounter with that shattering took shape outside America in 1961, in Israel, during a Fulbright fellowship to teach at Tel Aviv University. During that time, he describes spending every available hour at Yad Vashem reading the documentary records of the Holocaust:

> It was an overwhelming and devastating experience for which I was wholly unprepared. It was shattering. . . there was no way I could reconcile what I was reading at Yad Vashem with my traditional outlook and with what I thought was God's role in the world. . .. There was an unbelievable contrast between drowning in death all day and being flooded with life at night. (Greenberg 2019, p. 15)

Greenberg's encounter with the Holocaust occurred *after* his American intellectual formation, and it would therefore be through these categories that he would process the theological rupture. He arrived at Yad Vashem with a working pragmatist apparatus intact, and he left it shattered as a religious Jew but not philosophically dispossessed.

The mature theology that follows has a distinctly meliorist quality as it mandates human beings, created in the Divine image, to mend the world:

> Every human being—regardless of gender, race, skin color, nationality, or religion—is created in the image of God, and endowed accordingly with three fundamental dignities: infinite value, equality, and uniqueness. Each shares remarkable, Godlike capacities—consciousness, capacity for love, the ability to create and harness power, free will. Judaism seeks to persuade humans to develop and use these capacities for world repair. (Greenberg 2024, p. 5)

The position is meliorist in James's exact sense of being neither inevitable nor impossible, but a probability arising from human choice and agency. The covenantal method that occupies the central chapters of *The Triumph of Life* is the practical instantiation of this meliorism in religious form. And like classic pragmatism, its logic is incremental rather than revolutionary:

> The essence of the covenantal approach is to do the best possible, since in many cases the ideal behavior is not doable right now. . ..Doing the best possible acknowledges that the world is imperfect and the covenant is not yet realized, but it is still operating. There is room for growth and future improvement, but that change builds on the present. (Greenberg 2024, p. 116)

Salvation is not foreclosed by the world's imperfection, nor guaranteed by any metaphysical assurance but instead becomes more probable the more work humanity does in working towards redemption which is a divine mandate inherent to covenant. The covenantal process, which sees the incremental development of humankind to senior partner in the covenant, means that divine *tzimtzum* becomes greater inviting the growth of human responsibility.[17] His most striking formulation reads the divine silence at Auschwitz as itself a communication: "In effect, God was saying to humans: You stop the Holocaust. You bring the redemption. You act to assure that it will never again occur" (Greenberg 1982, p. 36). The actual conditions of salvation that James identifies as the variable on which probability depends are, in Greenberg's idiom, the conditions of the human mandate to responsibility.

5. An Implication: The Ethics of Power

The parallel between Greenberg and Pragmatist thought has been illustrated through the three motifs developed in Sections 3 and 4, fallibilism, pluralism and meliorism. A further implication of this pragmatist reading emerges in Greenberg's ethics of power. Where continental postmodernism treats power—especially state power—with deep suspicion, Greenberg's pragmatist apparatus permits a different conclusion. From his earliest post-Holocaust writing, Greenberg has insisted that the central moral imperative arising from the Holocaust is the redistribution of power. He argues that powerlessness invites evil, that survival depends on the assumption of agency, and that Jewish life after Auschwitz must be organized around the discipline of holding and using power well.

Continental postmodernism's relation to power is, in its dominant form, deconstructive. Foucault treats power as dispersed and capillary, a phenomenon to be exposed and resisted.[18] For the Frankfurt School and Bauman, rational organization of power is precisely what produced Auschwitz, and the post-Holocaust task is to disable rather than to redistribute it.[19] To speak of "assuming power" or of "an ethic of power" within this tradition is to court the modernist conditions that made Nazism possible.

Greenberg, however, is surprisingly unapologetic in his articulation of the imperative to power for the Jewish people. The earliest formulation appears in his 1974 lecture "Interpreting the Holocaust for Future Generations," where the redistribution of power is named as the central moral task of post-Holocaust religious life:

> Moral equilibrium demands a new balance of power between potential victims and potential aggressor. The central moral task, then, is the redistribution of power. And religion's pedagogy must shift from glorification of passivity to education for the task of redistributing power—so that never again would any group be so weak as not to be able to protect itself. From this flows a religious demand for the State of Israel's existence and the obligation to create a religious

> and cultural response that supports the strength of the State. (Greenberg 1974, p. 26)

Much like in the pragmatist tradition, the imperative is normative ("the central moral task") but its grounding is primarily instrumental. The argument goes: Jewish powerlessness was a condition that led to the Holocaust, so the prevention of another Holocaust requires the dissolution of that condition. The State of Israel is ethically necessary not by religious–metaphysical entitlement but by the ethical commitment to "never again." Greenberg's later writings deepen this position. The 1996 book *Living in the Image of God*, published after the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, articulates the same imperative more pointedly:

> Fifty years ago, the Jewish people decided that there is no moral alternative to assuming power. It takes power to establish a just society—as a step toward tikkun olam and the triumph of life. Powerlessness makes greater evils unavoidable. Therefore, our historic task is to create, all together, an ethic of Jewish power that works in the real world, the world of power which we now inhabit. (Greenberg 1995, p. 2)

Greenberg's claim is not that power is inherently good, but that Jewish powerlessness is morally untenable—and that the task is therefore to build an ethic of its careful exercise, what he calls "the 'pragmatic' principle of power as a series of judgments rather than an absolute one".[20]

Thus, the instances of applying power should be evaluated instrumentally rather than ideologically. His acknowledgement that "taking on power means taking on guilt" is itself a meliorist claim: the world is improvable through human action, but due to human fallibility, the action will at times incur costs that cannot be eliminated, only managed.

In his mature theology, the principle of power becomes not just one imperative among many, but central to Jewish self-definition in what he terms the third era of Jewish history. He articulates this position most directly in *The Triumph of Life*, when he divides Jewish history into three eras: Biblical, Rabbinic, and Modern. Each era represents a stage in the covenantal arc of Jewish history.

In the Biblical era, divine intervention was overt, expressed through the Temple and the prophets, with God as senior partner. The Rabbinic era, precipitated by the Temple's destruction and geographic dispersion, saw God's presence become less manifest and the human role rise, though still rooted in study rather than political force. In the current—third—era, the Holocaust and the modern State of Israel serve as the divine sign that humanity must become the covenant's managing partner.[21]

Appropriating the Lurianic idea of *tzimtzum* (God contracting his presence to provide space for the temporality and materiality of existence), Greenberg understands God's lessening presence as a sign to humans that they must play a greater role and ultimately take full responsibility for *tikkun olam*: "The Divine message of modernity to humanity would be: 'I (the Lord) am contracting in order to call you to a higher level of covenantal activity. It is time for humans to take full responsibility for their fate, by taking power'" (Greenberg 2024, p. 185).

Notwithstanding this imperative, there are other instances in which Greenberg's statements suggest a sustained ambivalence vis-à-vis power:

> In general, power corrupts. Absolute power—even when well intentioned—is guaranteed to turn pathological. Therefore, since power is needed to operate any society or system, checks and curbs are crucial. In particular, political, legal, economic, and societal pluralism becomes essential. Only decentralized, multiple power centres can generate sufficient balance and offsetting checks to prevent

> strong forces from spiralling out of control. In Nazi Germany, the overwhelming imbalance of power between the perpetrators and the victims sealed the outcome. The most important foundation for preventing future Holocausts is to break up all excessive concentrations of power. (Greenberg 2024, pp. 248–49)

Perhaps this tension between the danger of and imperative to power verifies Greenberg's pragmatist tendencies which hold substantive principles under fallibilist conditions. For Greenberg that would be the necessity of Jewish power, under the fallibilist condition of its inherent dangers. Holding both does not suggest a contradiction but instead the workings of a pragmatist philosophy.[22]

6. Critical Engagement

Greenberg's theology has attracted critical engagement over the decades, with critics such as Michael Morgan (See (Morgan 2001a) and (Morgan 2001b)) and Steven Katz[23] identifying various philosophical tensions in his work. For the purposes of this article, however, the most relevant critique is that of Tamar Ross, whose objection—that Greenberg fails to meet a postmodern standard—speaks directly to this paper's central claim.

Ross, an Orthodox theologian whose thinking is often categorized as religious postmodernism (See Feldman Kaye (2019)), argues in an essay entitled "Divine Hiddenness and Human Input: The Potential Contribution of a Postmodern View of Revelation to Yitz Greenberg's Holocaust Theology," that despite Greenberg's avowedly postmodern theology, he fails to adequately meet postmodern criteria.

Her analysis appropriates Rav Kook in a critique of the maximalist position on revelation.[24] Ross claims that according to Rav Kook, the authority of revelation is not derived from its historical facticity but rather from what he terms *kabbalat ha-umma*, "which means the willingness of the Jewish people to accept it as such, and the obvious spiritual benefits of this acceptance"—the pragmatic benefit it evinces—or, as Ross, drawing on Kook, terms it, a "necessary truth" (Ross 2019, p. 115). 'Necessary truth,' Ross argues, is the prism through which Greenberg should frame his Voluntary Covenant and postmodern theology in order to render it logically consistent. In a similar vein she points to their shared theological appropriation of the mystical concept of *tzimtzum* but argues that Greenberg's understanding has a more literal quality while hers is squarely metaphorical. On Ross's reading, Greenberg remains tied to metaphysical commitments which he ought, as a true postmodernist, to have suspended. She urges Greenberg to recast voluntary covenantal obligation as an "as if" commitment. His thinking should frame the practise of religion without metaphysical claims, rather than appropriating the evasive language of "epistemological modesty". She concludes that despite his pluralist and postmodern self-description, residual truth-claims continue to function as the foundation of his thought and hence, in her reading, weaken his theology.

Ross's assessment supports this paper's contention that reads Greenberg as pragmatist rather than postmodern. Ross suggests that for Greenberg's theology to achieve consistency and plausibility he must abandon his commitment to a literalist interpretation of Divine workings: "Is there no place to attribute the difference between biblical and modern renditions of reality simply to the eyes of the beholders, and their differing views, regarding the nature of the possible?" (Ross 2019, p. 125). God's diminished presence in history would act as a subjective interpretive matrix for understanding God and our role. The conclusion for Ross is simple. If we want to appropriate some measure of postmodern mysticism, we must do so fully, or it will leave gaps that cannot be reconciled adequately. Thus, "meaning and significance of the belief in revelation, divine accommodation, and all religious doctrine making metaphysical claims, is **best understood in light of its function in the life of the believer".** (Ross 2019, p. 127, emphasis added). Greenberg straddles the

fence of religious postmodernism, but in Ross's view never jumps over it. Ross reads this as a deficiency, this paper instead understands them as meta-principles used to organize a fallibilist pluralism of the kind James and Bernstein describe.

Ross's critique presupposes that postmodernism is the appropriate standard against which to measure Greenberg's theology. But if, as this article argues, Greenberg's philosophical apparatus is pragmatist rather than postmodern, the objection loses its force. What Ross identifies as a failure to commit fully to postmodern epistemology is better understood as a commitment to a different epistemology altogether—one that permits substantive truth-claims under fallibilist conditions. Classical pragmatism—particularly in James's and Bernstein's articulation—holds that fallibilism and substantive commitment are not only compatible but mutually reinforcing. One can hold *tzelem Elokim* as a working truth, revisable in principle but normatively binding in practice, while remaining genuinely open to other traditions. This is precisely what Greenberg does.

However, Ross's critique does point to a fundamental weakness in Greenberg's theology. His use of "postmodernism" is philosophically imprecise, inviting critiques that measure him against a standard he never carefully defined. More substantively, his central formula—"pluralism is an absolutism that knows its limits"—is evocative but undertheorised: which absolutes are retained, and on what grounds? How do we determine when a limit has been reached? Similarly, his ethics of power names the tension between the post-Holocaust imperative to assume power and the recognition that power corrupts, but the proposed solutions—"checks and curbs," "covenantal standards"—remain gestural. These are not fatal objections but invitations for further development, perhaps by thinkers willing to take seriously the pragmatist categories this article has proposed.

7. Conclusions

The argument of this article has been that Greenberg's theology, in its substance, bears the imprint of American pragmatism rather than continental postmodernism. His fallibilist pluralism, his tempered meliorism of *tikkun olam*, and his ethics of power all position his thought within the tradition of classical pragmatism that James, Dewey, and Bernstein had been articulating for nearly a century before Greenberg encountered the Holocaust at Yad Vashem in 1961.

A further observation strengthens the argument. Pragmatism, despite chronologically preceding postmodernism, functions in many respects as its corrective: it shares postmodernism's diagnosis of foundationalism's collapse but refuses its despairing conclusions. Greenberg's theology is a religious instance of this corrective movement. His early diet of American pragmatist philosophy and traditional Orthodoxy provides, as it were, an inoculation against the more nihilistic conclusions of the postmodern motifs his Holocaust encounter introduced. What emerges in Greenberg is not deconstruction but correction, not an uprooting of tradition but a critical realignment of its absolutes.

The Holocaust has admitted of different theological articulations depending on the cultural–intellectual formation of the thinkers responding to it. Continental postmodernism emerged from a continental reckoning with the rupture of mid-century Europe; American pragmatism had already been doing the work of theorising fallibilism, pluralism, and meliorism for half a century before American Jewry confronted the Shoah in earnest. Greenberg's theology thus becomes a case study of American pragmatist apparatus meeting the theological rupture generated by the Holocaust. The result is a theology that articulates the rupture without dissolving pre-existing assumptions and absolutes and as such manages to hold together absolute principles such as *tzelem Elokim* and covenantal commitment together with pluralist openness, and melioristic agency in a single framework.

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This reframing invites a broader question: might other post-Holocaust Jewish thinkers exhibit similar pragmatist motifs? The question exceeds the scope of this article, but preliminary observations suggest it merits further investigation. Emil Fackenheim's insistence on the Jewish "return into history" and his 614th commandment—that Jews are forbidden to grant Hitler posthumous victories—grounds post-Holocaust obligation in historical action rather than metaphysical derivation.[25] Joseph Soloveitchik's *Kol Dodi Dofek* distinguishes between a "covenant of fate" and a "covenant of destiny," calling Jews to transform passive suffering into active, purposive response (Soloveitchik [1956] 2006).[26] Eliezer Berkovits's *Faith After the Holocaust* defends divine hiddenness while insisting on human moral agency in history (Berkovits 1973).[27] Each of these thinkers, in different ways, exhibits the melioristic, action-oriented, and fallibilist sensibilities that characterise the pragmatist tradition. Whether post-Holocaust Jewish theology as a whole is better understood through pragmatist rather than postmodern categories remains an open question—but one that the case of Greenberg presses upon us.

We might argue that when a thinker's self-description and substantive philosophical apparatus diverge, the apparatus is the more reliable guide. Greenberg called himself postmodern; this may be a result of what his critics note as an untutored understanding of philosophical terminology. But the more accurate label, if a label must be applied, would be *religious pragmatism*, or, if one wishes to honor the postmodern entry point, *ethical postmodernism.* The reading proposed here is not a correction of Greenberg's self-understanding so much as an invitation to read his theology through the categories that do justice to the novelty and scope of his work. The voluntary covenant, *tzelem Elokim*, assumption of power, and *tikkun olam* are the substance of a pragmatist theology that knew, even at the moment of rupture, that the world was still genuinely improvable.

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Notes

1 For Greenberg's intellectual biography, see the introduction in (Freedman 1998) and the autobiographical reflections in (Greenberg 2004, pp. 11–39).

2 For Rubenstein's radical theology, see (Rubenstein 1966). Greenberg's response to Rubenstein appears across his early Holocaust writings, most directly in (Greenberg 1977, pp. 23–30).

3 "Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire" opens by confronting the question of whether Jewish and Christian theology can continue "as if nothing has happened" after Auschwitz, with extended descriptions of the burning of children and the failure of theological responses to register the rupture (Greenberg 1977, pp. 7–11). "The Voluntary Covenant" returns to this rupture more explicitly, asking whether the covenant has been shattered by the Holocaust (Greenberg 1982, pp. 31–34).

4 (Greenberg 2019, p. 42). This essay, originally delivered as a lecture at Oxford, represents Greenberg's most sustained retrospective reflection on his theological development and its relationship to Modern Orthodoxy.

5 (Greenberg 2019, p. 42). The phrase "hermeneutic of suspicion" notably echoes Paul Ricoeur's terminology, though Greenberg does not cite him directly.

6 (Greenberg 2024, pp. 251–52). Greenberg's language here—"neutralized," "taken in hand"—suggests a therapeutic or corrective relationship to postmodernism rather than a wholesale adoption of it.

[7] This conflation is evident throughout *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth*, where Greenberg's arguments for religious pluralism are framed as postmodern commitments. The slippage between the two terms suggests that for Greenberg, "postmodern" functions less as a precise philosophical designation than as shorthand for anti-absolutism and openness to other traditions.

[8] A search of Greenberg's early essays confirms this pattern. "Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire" and "The Voluntary Covenant" develop the pluralist imperative at length but do not use the term "postmodern." The terminology appears more prominently in his later interfaith writings and reaches full articulation in *The Triumph of Life*.

[9] On Peirce's foundational articulation of fallibilism, see (Mounce 1992, p. 19).

[10] The phrase "engaged fallibilistic pluralism" appears in (Bernstein 1992, p. 339).

[11] Sacks's classification as a pluralist is contested. The first edition of *The Dignity of Difference* (2002) provoked criticism from senior Orthodox authorities for passages implying the theological validity of other faiths; Sacks issued a revised edition (Sacks 2003) though he maintained that his theological position remained unchanged and that the revisions concerned only the formulation. Scholars remain divided on the question of Sacks' pluralism. Tirosh-Samuelson and Hughes (2013) treat Sacks as developing a distinctive form of religious pluralism that holds particularism and universalism together. Lebens (2022, pp. 74–100), by contrast, argues that Sacks is better understood as a thinker who recognizes the dignity of difference without endorsing pluralism in the substantive sense. For the present argument, what matters is that Sacks is widely received as a pluralist and, like Greenberg, faced institutional pushback within Orthodoxy.

[12] Greenberg's pluralism drew both intellectual and institutional criticism within Orthodoxy. Kellner and Kellner (2012, p. 133) charge that he "seeks to have his cake and eat it too" by affirming both substantive religious truth and the validity of other traditions. Institutionally, his 1966 exchange with Aharon Lichtenstein in *The Commentator* became a prominent flashpoint within Modern Orthodox circles. He was subsequently brought before the RCA's Vaad HaKavod on charges of "conduct unbecoming of an Orthodox rabbi" (later dropped), and his founding of CLAL in 1973 generated sustained controversy. For analysis, see Ferziger (2019, pp. 193–210).

[13] *Genesis Rabbah* 8:5, citing Psalm 85:11–12. English translation from Sefaria (www.sefaria.org).

[14] See Sacks (2002), pp. 64–65. Page reference is to the first edition; the passage was among those revised in the second edition Sacks (2003) following sustained criticism from Orthodox authorities. For analysis of the controversy, see Shapiro (2003).

[15] For the formulation of "American exceptionalism" in relation to American Jewry, see Halpern (1983) and Michels (2010, pp. 201–24).

[16] For Greenberg's biographical formation, see (Ferziger 2019, p. 16). The autobiographical reflections appear most extensively in Greenberg (2004), pp. 11–39.

[17] For Greenberg's articulation of senior partnership, see Greenberg (1982, pp. 30–37; 2024, chs. 6–8).

[18] For Foucault's most influential articulation of power as dispersed and productive of subjects rather than wielded by them, see Foucault (1990, pp. 92–102; 1995).

[19] For the Frankfurt School's reading of instrumental rationality as the philosophical condition of Auschwitz, see Adorno and Horkheimer (2002), esp. ch. 1. Bauman extends the position: industrialized genocide was made possible by modern bureaucratic rationality, and any post-Holocaust ethics that uncritically embraces power risks reproducing the conditions it claims to repair. (Bauman 1989, esp. chs. 1–3).

[20] See Greenberg (1998). The four principles paraphrased here are listed in the original; the explicit attribution of the term "pragmatic" to the principle of power-as-judgment is Greenberg's own.

[21] Greenberg refers to this idea throughout his writings. One example: "I believe that Israel's rebirth constitutes a Divine sign of presence and redemption", Greenberg (1998), p. 261.

[22] Arendt distinguishes two modes ordinarily conflated as "power": domination (coercive imposition, escalating in its limit form to totalitarian atomisation) and power proper (the human capacity to act together). Continental postmodernism, Foucault most influentially collapses the distinction, treating power as such under the sign of domination. Greenberg holds the distinction: he treats power in Arendt's second sense as the content of post-Holocaust Jewish responsibility while accepting that its exercise demands covenantal discipline. See Arendt (1958, pp. 199–207; 1970, pp. 35–56).

[23] Katz has been one of Greenberg's most sustained admirers and critics. See for example Katz (1983; 2019, pp. 55–66).

[24] The maximalist position holds that the entirety of the Torah, including the Oral Law, was transmitted verbatim at Sinai and is therefore literally and historically true in all its details. Ross challenges this position by arguing, with Kook, that the authority of revelation rests not on its historical facticity but on its acceptance and spiritual function within the life of the Jewish people.

[25] See Fackenheim's *To Mend the World: Foundations of Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought* (Fackenheim 1982), in which the imperative to resist despair and rebuild is framed as a religious obligation arising from historical catastrophe.

[26] In an unprecedented move for an Orthodox leader, Soloveitchik rejects traditional retributive theodicy as a response to the Holocaust. In its place he offers something more therapeutic—dare one say, pragmatic: the transformation of brute fate (*brit goral*) into covenantal purpose (*brit ye'ud*) through human agency.

[27] On Berkovits as exhibiting pragmatist tendencies, see Shifman (2019). Shifman argues that Berkovits's emphasis on halakhic fallibilism and human moral agency aligns his thought with classical American pragmatism.

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