

Reform Judaism – Reforming Tradition

“Reform is a verb – continually examining the teachings of Judaism to make it relevant through either evolutionary or revolutionary means” – Rabbi Bernard Zlotowitz¹

Introduction

Reform Judaism is a genuine and authentic practice of Judaism. It is the living embodiment of a historical fact that is not always recognized in traditional circles. Judaism has never been static and is continually changing, and Reform Judaism is the modern epitome of this eternal model. This paper is meant to be a way of putting the past 200 years of Reform Judaism into perspective. If we look at the intentions of the original reformers and compare their ideals to Reform Judaism today, we find one thing has always remained consistent: Reform Judaism is purposefully a dynamic movement created to suit the religious sensibilities of each generation. This is the essence of Reform Judaism.

Reversing the Historical Rubric

The early reformers were concerned with reconciling Judaism with modernity. Whether in nineteenth century Germany or America, these were Jews looking to become accepted as Germans and Americans. They were modern educated people who saw the progress of science, human thought, and social norms as part of God’s constant revelation of Torah. Each successive generation knew more and was better suited to take humanity to a higher level. The early reformers saw that each generation stood on the shoulders of the next not because they were innately smarter but because each generation brought progress and therefore had more knowledge at their disposal. This is the exact opposite of

¹ Transcript of lecture given by Rabbi Zlotowitz at the Academy of Jewish Religion, January 29th, 2007 on Monday 2/19/07.

the traditional Jewish practice that values the knowledge of the earliest of generations over their predecessors because they were closer to the revelation at Sinai.

A New Mission

Early reformers took historical and scientific looks at Judaism in order to find Judaism's place in their time. They believed that Jews had specific moments in history when God had a certain mission for this people and put it in effect. Judaism started as Israelite tribes, progressed to a nation with religious sacrificial practices, and then once in exile from their land, became a religion. These changes required huge changes in belief and practice. Jews left Egypt as a tribe, developed the beginnings of a national religious practice based on events at Mount Sinai in the desert, and put them into effect as they became a nation in the Land of Israel. The destruction of the Second Temple nearly two thousand years ago drove the Jews into exile. Without the Temple major changes were instituted into Jewish religious practice. A prevailing theme of Diaspora Judaism was that the Jewish people were driven from their land because of their sins and the mission of Israel was to return to the land and rebuild the Temple.

The early reformers looked at these critical moments in Jewish history and saw “that generations in different time periods fashioned a Judaism that suited their contemporary religious sensibilities”.² They believed that they too were at a critical moment in history. The emancipation of much of European Jewry had given new hope for many Jews to experience their national countries as equals to its other citizens. I resist using the words host countries because that was the concept that many of these Jews were trying to resist. Jews in Europe had long been thought of as a national group whose first

² Kaplan, Dana Evan, American Reform Judaism: An Introduction. (New Brunswick, N.J. : Rutgers University Press, 2003), p36

allegiance was to the restoration of Israel, so it was thought that their allegiance to their country of residence was secondary. This of course is untrue since Jews long operated under the Talmudic law of Dina d'Malchuta, Dina³, the law of the land (in which they reside) is the law, and therefore were mandated to be true to local laws. Yet from Napoleon's Assembly of Jewish Notables in 1806 where Jews declared that France was their Country and all Frenchmen were their brethren"⁴ to the reforms by Czar Alexander II for Jews to live beyond the "Pale of Settlement" (where many Jews actually stayed to become Russians rather than flee a region that had been the scene of such poverty and sorrow), Jews of the nineteenth century, were trying desperately to prove that they were equal and true nationals of their countries of residence.

With this as a backdrop the leaders of Reform Judaism re-formed the mission of Israel. It was important to them to declare their loyalty to the land of their birth and citizenship. Through the language of the prophets they declared that Israel had a special mission to be "a light unto the nations".⁵ Therefore God intended the Jews to be a diaspora people for just this purpose. They saw ethical monotheism as Judaism's mission, "to make God's unity known to people throughout the world, a teaching that would lead Jews and eventually all others to make society a better place for all."⁶ This in turn changed Israel's messianic aim. No longer was there a need to return to the Land of Israel to rebuild the Temple. This re-formation of Israel's mission and the messianic ideal away from traditional historic national hopes affected their opinions on Zionism, which at the time of the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform was still in its infancy.

³ BT Nedarim 28a, Gittin 10b, Bava Kama 113a, Bava Batra 54b, 55a

⁴ The Assembly of Jewish Notables, Answers to Napoleon, Mendes-Flohr, p.130

⁵ Isaiah 42:6, 49:6

⁶ Kaplan, American Reform Judaism, p33.

Re-forming Judaism

It was these sociological events and thoughts of the generation which led to the Classical Reform Judaism in America, crystallized by the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform. The radical re-forming of Israel's mission, the acceptance of diaspora as an instrument for good and not a Divine punishment, was the justification for re-forming Judaism. In the process other radical reforms were created. Jewish law, halacha, was no longer seen as binding, but rather only the moral laws of the Torah were to be observed. As for ritual, it was decided to "maintain only the ceremonies that elevate and sanctify our lives, but reject all such that are not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization"⁷. Rationalism and universalism replaced Divine revelation and particularism.

Reform Judaism Today

Yet today we see a discernable move in Reform Judaism directed towards tradition. This is sometimes misinterpreted as 'Reform is going Orthodox', since the many ceremonies and rituals once taboo for the early reformers are now being embraced. But this is a misconception. Yes, Reform Judaism is embracing more traditional rituals and ceremonies, not because they are returning to the strict halachic codes of traditional Judaism, but because they are following the words of their Reform predecessors who declared that they would maintain only the "ceremonies that elevate and sanctify our lives." To a new generation, new meaning is being found to suit the needs of this generation, a generation that lives in appreciably different times. Today's liberal Jews tend to be Americans looking to find their Judaism, which is the opposite of the goals of Jews in the nineteenth century who were looking to find their place in America while retaining their Judaism. The process that Reform Jews today use to find meaning in these

⁷ 1885 Pittsburgh Platform, principle #3.

ceremonies and rituals is the same process the early Reformers used in their ideas. It is the re-invention or more accurately the re-forming of the ideas found in tradition to fashion a Judaism that is in accordance with “the views and habits of modern civilization”⁸

This paper is intended to be a comparative study of two generations of reform, to show that Reform Judaism has not deviated from its basic principles but have maintained them vigilantly for over one hundred years. There have been four major platforms in Reform Judaism over the past 120 years. The first was the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform which not only represented a generation in it’s time but in many ways remains the banner platform for today’s Reform Judaism. The fourth was “A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism adopted in Pittsburgh – 1999”, which not only builds on ethical resolutions but encourages Jewish study and observance of ritual mitzvot as a way to strengthen ties to Judaism and the Land of Israel. While on paper the conflicting views may seem disparate, I believe they are similar in spirit in that they conform to the needs of their time. In 1885 there was a generation of idealists, rationalists and optimists who believed humanity was on the doorstep of a new civilization. By the end of the twentieth century, many Reform Jews were spiritual seekers looking for ways to reconcile rationalism and spirituality, to find a way to believe in a Divine presence they could not totally fathom, while seeking hope and connection to God in what one might call a globally more dangerous time. This paper is not intended to be a comprehensive history of American Reform Judaism, but rather an inside look at the ideas and needs of these two generations a hundred years apart.

⁸ *ibid.*

Part I - Judaism is Constantly Changing

Judaism has always been able to change to meet the needs of different generations. The idea that Reform Judaism, by creating a norm that deviated so far from what was thought to be “true” Judaism, has either divided Judaism or created an in-authentic Judaism is false. The falsehood lies in the idea that Jewish ideas can’t be changed to suit the times and that there has always been unanimity among Jews. This division of thought can be traced as far back as the Bible. Exodus 34:7 states: “[God] visits the iniquity of parents upon children and children’s children, upon the third and fourth generations”. This worked for the generation of Moses. Yet the book of Ezekiel representing a generation six hundred years later, reverses this idea, maintaining that the idea of visiting punishment on four generations is no longer valid and “the person who sins, only he will die”⁹. The book of Isaiah wistfully prophesizes “They shall beat their swords into plowshares,”¹⁰ while the book of Joel in a time of national need cries: “Beat your plowshares into swords.”¹¹ Jewish history is filled with groups who have lived among other Jewish groups who have differing views and practices of Judaism. There have been Sadducees and Pharisees, Ashkenazim and Sephardim, Misnagdim and Hasidim, Orthodoxy and Reform, and yes even Classical Reformers and neo- Reformers.

Reform Philosophy, Historical Reality, and Readiness to Act

Reform Judaism is not and never has been “Judaism Lite”. Reform Judaism, in particular Classical Reform Judaism of the nineteenth century was a philosophical movement that was radical to traditional Judaism. It was firmly rooted in rationalism, and did not believe in any miraculous or magical ideas that could be expressed in religion. It

⁹ See Ezekiel 18:3-9.

¹⁰ Isaiah 2:4

¹¹ Joel 4:10

put its major emphasis in its ethical monotheism and stressed the moral aspects of Judaism. Classical Reformers believed that Judaism and for that matter all religions evolved throughout their history and thus change would be inevitable. Therefore after nearly two thousand years in the Diaspora, Judaism was no longer a nation and its new Divine mission was to spread the ideal of Isaianic universalism. I intend to spend the next section of this paper exploring these ideals through the men who brought them to the fore. It was the combination of philosophy, historical reality, and a readiness to act that would eventually lead to the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform which was the expression and culmination of over one hundred years of Reform thought.

Roots of Reform Judaism

The roots of Reform Judaism can be found in the gradual penetration of European culture into Jewish life in Central and Western Europe. With the European enlightenment came a Jewish enlightenment called the Haskalah. It started in the 1770's and lasted just over one hundred years. The early maskilim's main goals were emancipation and the ability to enter other occupational areas besides ones to which they were restricted. These steps towards integration into general society required Jews to make adjustments in their dress and to study secular subjects. The Haskalah like the European enlightenment was based in rationalism where reason was seen as the truth of all things. Rationalism would have a great impact on the thought of the early reformers. It is said the one thing that eventually united the Hasidim and the Misnagedim was their common enemy, the Haskalah. But that would be in the 19th Century. Moses Mendelssohn is thought to be the father of the Haskalah, even though there were successful attempts before him to engage Jews in secular studies. But in the late 18th century, traditional Judaism wasn't as

threatened by the Haskalah because many of the early maskilim like Mendelssohn were practicing traditional Judaism. Mendelssohn himself believed in the Torah as Divine legislation. The Haskalah's rationalism and need to integrate into general European society would be one of the foundations of Reform Judaism.

The Birth of Reform Judaism

Reform Judaism began at the beginning of the nineteenth century in Germany. Before Reform Judaism, the only other choice Jews had to the strict halachic legislation of traditional Judaism was to convert to Christianity. With the onset of the Haskalah, as some Jews became less traditional in their practice, there arose a need for some middle ground, a place where Jews could remain Jewish, but observe a Judaism that better coincided with the modernity in which they lived. Early reforms consisted of elements previously unthinkable in Judaism. The liturgy was abbreviated and often written in German. There was a mixed choir with an organ and the rabbi was expected to give a sermon. To the traditional Jew, these minor reforms seemed to resemble a church service, and in fact that was exactly what they were meant to do. Ever conscious of what their neighbors thought, the early reformers in Germany were looking to move away from the cacophony of davening to the synchronicity of worship found in church services where everyone prays together. It was their attempt to find a way to worship in a respectful manner that mirrored their Christian neighbors while still keeping their Jewish identity.

Wissenschaft des Judentums and Abraham Geiger

Several nineteenth century German reformers and their ideas would make a tremendous impact on those who would eventually lead Reform Judaism in America. Wissenschaft des Judentums, or the scientific study of Judaism, was a way in which Jews hoped to

correct misinformation about their religion by subjecting it to criticism and modern methods of research. Started in the early nineteenth century by Jewish intellectuals, its goal was to “restore the acculturated Jews self respect and pride undermined by regnant misinformation and anti-Semitic accusation.... It was their hope that Wissenschaft des Judentums would facilitate Jewry’s integration and honorable assimilation into Europe.”¹² Men like Zacharias Frankel, Leopold Zunz, Abraham Geiger, Marcus Jost, and Heinrich Graetz introduced modern research into various fields of Jewish study and provided a critical examination, evaluation of material from primary and secondary sources that were subjected to scholarly criteria. Reform pioneer Abraham Geiger gave Reform Judaism a more focused direction with his scientific studies. He concluded that “all Jewish concepts, injunctions and customs, with exception of several general rational truths, were the fruit of historical development (and therefore demanded) that they be exchanged for religious legislation that was suited to the spirit of the times.”¹³

Hermann Cohen – Kantian Rationalist

Hermann Cohen (1842-1918) was born into a traditional Jewish family in the small German town of Coswig. He entered the Jewish Theological Seminary in Breslau at the age of 15 and came under the influences of a broad spectrum of many of the great German Jewish thinkers of the time, such as those mentioned above. But ironically his greatest influence would be a non-Jew, Immanuel Kant. He was so influenced by Kant that he became the founder of a neo-Kantian school of Philosophy at Marburg University where he taught from 1876-1912.

¹² The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History, compiled and edited by Paul Mendes-Flohr, Jehuda Reinharz New York : Oxford University Press, 1995., p. 209.

¹³ A History of the Jewish People edited by H. H. Ben-Sasson ; [translated from the Hebrew]. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976. p 838.

Cohen and other advocates of liberal Judaism found in Kant a philosophical formulation of religion which expressed their own conceptions of Judaism. A prevailing thought among nineteenth century rationalists was the idea that human beings possess an autonomous sense of ethics. Immanuel Kant had stated that individuals can find happiness by using their autonomous will to choose the ethical option. “Kant argued that the full exercise of human reason could free enlightened people from the shackles of external authority. People therefore can derive these principles through the use of reason and need no externally imposed set of laws, no halacha.”¹⁴ Therefore more powerful than law were ethics. In Cohen’s world mythology was irrational, law was based in morality, and ethics were rational and eternal. “God” he wrote “is the archetype of morality, as revealed to historical man. And by this is meant not a model man, much less an image of man, but rather the archetypal law of morality. For our concept of man can be fully realized only by a united mankind with all nations and states as vehicles for man’s advance towards this goal.”¹⁵ This not only reveals Cohen’s philosophy but also his universal messianic vision for Judaism and all of humanity. “The messianic idea offers man the consolation, confidence and guarantee that not merely the chosen people but all nations will; at some future time exist in harmony, as nature does today”¹⁶

¹⁴ Kaplan, p. 36

¹⁵ Cohen, Hermann, Reason and Hope; Selections from the Jewish Writings of Hermann Cohen. Translated by Eva Jospe. New York: Norton 1971, p. 60.

¹⁶ Cohen, p. 126

Judaism in America in the Nineteenth Century

For the Jews of Europe, reform was an uphill battle where on one side they faced the wrath of their traditional Jewish brethren and the other side they faced the long history of European anti-Semitism. For many true freedom could only be found in a new land where both history and Orthodoxy didn't stand in their way. Jerome Chanes in his essay entitled "*America is Different*" describes four major ways in which America differed from Germany for Jews.

*"The separation of church and state tautologically meant that Jews were not living in a Christian society-or any kind of religious society...American Society was a post-Emancipation (and therefore had no historical baggage)...The United States was a frontier Society made up of people of diverse backgrounds, without insiders and outsiders...The United States as a nation of immigrants was inherently pluralistic."*¹⁷

According to historian Jonathan Sarna, fear for the survival of Judaism in the United States served as a catalyst for change in the nineteenth century. He lists three competing strategies that were employed by leaders of the Jewish community. The first is what Sarna describes as regeneration. That is, through education and making Jewish texts available in the vernacular Jews would return to their faith.¹⁸ The chief proponent of regeneration was traditionalist leader Isaac Leeser (1806-1868). "He borrowed selectively from a wide range of sources, Jewish and Christian, in an effort to educate and reinvigorate his community, but he carefully reshaped and adapted his innovations as to

¹⁷ Chanes, Jerome "America is Different", in *Prayerbooks and Platforms*, Theological and Liturgical Perspectives on Reform Judaism. Edited by Dana Evan Kaplan. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002. pg 42-43 (Chanes teaches at AJR)

¹⁸ Is the concept of transforming the synagogue into a learning community as in the UAHC Press's book *A Congregation of Learners* a modern attempt at regeneration?

keep within the parameters of traditional Jewish practice and law.”¹⁹ Although traditional, Leeser believed in the Americanization of Judaism. His innovations included the regular use of a sermon in the vernacular, the translation of the Sephardic prayer book into English, and as his crowning achievement, the first Jewish American translation of the Bible which would remain the standard for over seventy years.

A second strategy employed the ties of peoplehood. This was aimed at Jews who rejected the synagogue altogether but were still looking for ties to unify them to Judaism. In his book American Judaism, Sarna uses the mid-nineteenth century creation of B’nai Brith (Sons of the Covenant) as a primary example of organized peoplehood. “While synagogues divided Jews and alienated some of them altogether, B’nai Brith argued that fraternal ties – the covenant (brith) that bound Jews together regardless of religious ideology – could bring about union and harmony.”²⁰ The third strategy was that of reform.

*“Influenced by Protestant theology, by tenants of freemasonry and in many cases by the currents of reform in Europe, they (the reformers) urged Jews to abandon rituals that seemed incompatible with modernity and to adopt innovations that promised to make Judaism more appealing and spiritually up lifting”.*²¹

There was also the undercurrent that ancient Jewish rituals would look absurd and outdated to their Christian neighbors. It is interesting to note that until 1840, authority was held by lay leadership as no ordained rabbi “graced the pulpit” of an American Synagogue. Sarna says it was the arrival of the first German trained rabbis in the early 1840’s that charged the American Jewish scene with idealism and passion.

¹⁹ Sarna, Jonathan D. American Judaism: A History. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004. p. 78.

²⁰ Sarna, p. 90.

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 82-83.

Isaac Meyer Wise – Organizer and Unifier

Isaac Meyer Wise (1819-1900) is said to be the architect of American Reform Judaism. Born in Bavaria in 1819, Wise came to the United States in 1846 where he first served as a rabbi of a congregation in Albany, NY, later moving to Cincinnati. During his time there he introduced many of the reforms that had already been introduced into the German services. He also introduced mixed seating, a practice not followed in Germany, even by the reformers. But Wise's strength lay in his greater vision for Reform in Judaism. He saw that strength was in numbers and looked to form a union of American congregations. In 1855 he created a synod in Cleveland, an assembly of delegates, whose convocation was for the purpose of creating a united guiding authority for American Judaism. His vision of a united Jewish America was reflected in the title of the prayer book he published a year later called Minhag America. It was his dream that there should be of a union of congregations, a common prayer book, and a college to train American rabbis. But due mostly to the diversity of Judaism and the appearance of other radical reformers, Wise's dream was not to become a reality for the totality of American Judaism.

Yet it was through his vision, hard work and perseverance that unity was to come to Reform Judaism within the next thirty years. It was his dream that helped to create the Union of American Hebrew Congregations in 1873. Two years later became the president of Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, a rabbinical seminary that trained Reform Rabbis. History now sees Wise as the great organizer. Along the way in trying to unite all of Americas Jews he made compromises that angered his fellow reformers. His proposal

to the Orthodox that the 1855 Cleveland Conference agree on the divinity of the bible and the authority of the Talmud went against the more radical reformers and was seen as “an unconscionable step backwards.”²²

Wise sometimes wavered in his religious stances because he saw Judaism from not as much a Reform perspective as an historical prospective, a world of pluralism where all forms of Judaism would come together and relish in their riches. After the opening of Hebrew Union College, Wise described it as a place where a competent and distinguished faculty would “open the treasures of Israel’s literature to...reformer and orthodox in justice to all and offense to none...The Hebrew Union College (intends to offer) an enlightened religious and moral training in temples grand and gorgeous as well as in the orthodox synagogue to see Judaism in it’s glory and hear it expounded intelligently.”²³ He continued in his efforts to reassure traditionalists that Hebrew Union College could provide rabbis for all communities by saying that historical Judaism is “the rock upon which the Temple of Israel proudly stands and has stood for three thousand years...There is no Judaism without Torah and revelation. The college was established to teach the literature of Israel; to train, educate and license rabbis for real Judaism.”²⁴

David Einhorn – Radical and Universalist

David Einhorn (1809-1879) was a German rabbi who immigrated to the United States in 1855. Einhorn was by his own admission a radical. “He saw no value in compromising for the sake of Jewish unity, and he emphasized instead the centrality of

²² Meyer, Michael A. Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism. New York : Oxford University Press, 1988. p. 244

²³ *American Israelite*, 9/3/1875, p4. found in: Ellenson, David Harry, After Emancipation : Jewish Religious Responses to Modernity. Cincinnati : Hebrew Union College Press, 2004. p. 285.

²⁴ Wise, Isaac Mayer. Selected Writings of Isaac Mayer Wise. [Edited by] David Philipson and Louis Grossman. New York: Arno Press, 1969. p. 395

principle. This immediately set him apart from Isaac Meyer Wise, whose priorities were precisely the reverse.”²⁵ Einhorn believed it was more important to create a Reform Judaism that stuck with its principles even if it meant Reform would be a separate, separated Judaism. To this end he and Isaac Meyer Wise would become rivals.

Einhorn was influenced by the teachings of philosopher Fredrich Schelling and saw universalism as the essence of Judaism. Einhorn saw Divine revelation as part of the human experience from the beginning of time and Sinai as the Jewish recording of its personal encounter with it. Einhorn declared:

*“Judaism in its essence is older than the Israelites...it is as old as the human race. The origin and the development of the human spirit are also its own origin and development. It is rooted in Adam and culminates in a messianically perfected humanity. It is not a religion but a religious people, that was newly created at Sinai; a priest people called upon first of all to impress the ancient Divine teaching more deeply upon itself and then to bring it to universal dominion.”*²⁶

These words of David Einhorn described the basis of what would be known as Classical Reform Judaism. The Divine message transcends Judaism for it is universal and its message is to perfect humanity. Israel’s mission was to hear this message understand it, live it and help others to do the same. This is ethical monotheism, to bear witness to the reality of God and spread God’s moral teachings to all humanity.

An Assembly of Like Minded Men

As the century progressed it became apparent that there was no way to unite all Judaism in America under a single organized umbrella. In 1869, the radical reformers led

²⁵ Sarna, p. 99

²⁶ Meyer, p. 246

by David Einhorn decided to hold an assembly of like minded progressive reformers at the home of Rabbi Samuel Hirsch, the European reformer and the former chief rabbi of Luxembourg, who now lived in Philadelphia. It was here that seven principles were laid down that would be the foundation for the 1885 Pittsburgh platform and the cornerstones for Classical Reform Judaism:

- 1) The messianic goal was not restoration of Israel but the union of all humanity
- 2) The fall of the second Jewish Commonwealth was not Divine punishment but rather the beginning a new priestly mission for Israel;
- 3) Inner devotion and sanctification was desired not sacrificial cult
- 4) Distinctions between Kohanim, Levites and Israelites once important were no longer valid
- 5) Israel's chosenness should receive emphasis but equal stress should be placed on universalism
- 6) There will be no bodily resurrection just spiritual immortality.
- 7) Hebrew is a sacred obligation, but it must make way for the vernacular, the language of the people.²⁷

Towards the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform

By 1885, several changes had taken place that both isolated and united Reform Judaism. The establishment of Hebrew Union College in 1875 had given the movement its own seminary in which to train its own rabbis. Yet the first ordination in 1883 was marred by the treifa banquet. In an attempt to gain universal acceptance of the new school in Cincinnati, Jewish dignitaries from traditional to Reform were invited to the ordination of the first class. Unfortunately the menu for the banquet contained several items

²⁷ See Meyer, pg. 256.

forbidden to traditional Jews, including oysters, frog legs and mixing meat and dairy together. Many took it as a personal affront to their Judaism and walked out. News soon spread throughout the Jewish communities of America and the gap between Reform and others widened.

Helping the Reform movement was Wise's formation of a confederation of synagogues called the Union of American Hebrew Congregations in 1873, which became the backbone of the movement. An additional forum for debate and exchanging thought and policy came with the formation of the Central Conference of American Rabbis in 1889. Up until 1881, Jewish immigration to America had mainly been from Central and Western Europe. With the implementation of new restrictions on the Jews of Eastern Europe came the crush of immigration that would see some two million Jews to come to America from 1881-1914.²⁸ This changed the demographic of American Jewry. Many Eastern European Jews were without secular education, as a group they were decidedly poorer than their European brethren, and had lived in marginalized conditions longer. Yet as David Ellenson writes, "it is a romantic notion misconception to claim that Eastern European Jews did not possess the same desire for acculturation that had characterized the German Jews. Indeed the desire to participate in the larger society has been the most characteristic element of the Jewish response to the nation."²⁹ Ironically it would not necessarily be their piety or their difficulty adjusting to a new land that would keep many Eastern European Jews out of the Reform movement; rather they were purposefully excluded from the Reform community most likely because they didn't represent the "ideal" new Reform Jew in dress and culture.

²⁸ Sarna, p. 151

²⁹ Ellenson, p. 33

In 1885, Reform Judaism was not only being attacked on the right by the Orthodox and on the left by Felix Adler and the Ethical Culturists, but on the near right by those who eventually went on to form the Conservative movement. Rabbi Alexander Kohut, newly immigrated from Hungary, had his own modernization of Judaism that was still firmly rooted in tradition and Mosaic law. He made a series of scathing attacks on the reformers stating: “Such reform which seeks to progress without Mosaic-rabbinical tradition, such a reform is deformity; is a skeleton of Judaism without flesh and sinew, without spirit and heart.”³⁰ Kohut played a major role in the establishment of the Jewish Theological Seminary.

1885 Pittsburgh Platform

It was under these circumstances that it became clear to Rabbi Kaufman Kohler (1843-1923) that there needed to be a statement of positive self-definition. There was a clear cut need to show how Reform Judaism differed from Orthodoxy, and how Reform Judaism was in step with modernity. It was important to him to show that reformers were not rebels but rather Jews who were working within the framework of Judaism and not agnostic. A group of like minded rabbis who advocated reform and progress met in Pittsburgh in 1885. Together they created what Isaac Meyer Wise called “a declaration of independence”, crystallizing the ideas of the Reform Movement into eight principles. It was the culmination of over one hundred years of thought. Though Wise was figuratively the leader of the movement it was Kohler who was the architect and composer of the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform.

The first principle places the importance on the unity of God for all humanity and affirms God's moral laws, shifting the emphasis away from both biblical and rabbinic law.

³⁰ Meyer, p. 267, Taken from Kohut, Alexander “Ethics of the Fathers” 1885

The second recognizes the Bible as an instrument of moral instruction that does not contradict modern moral and religious teachings. But it negates the miracles found in the Bible as representing an old historical notion of Divine rule that was good for the ancients but not for the modern man. The third recognizes the historical value of Mosiac law in the settling of the Land of Israel, but proclaims that in this day only the moral laws are still binding as Jewish circumstances have changed as has the mission of Israel. It also states that Reform Judaism will only invest itself in the ceremonies that elevate and sanctify and reject those that don't conform with modernity. The fourth negates the laws of kashrut and the priestly laws of Israel because they are foreign to modern times and do not elevate the modern Jew spiritually and the fifth states that the Jewish people are no longer a nation and has no desire to return to the sacrificial cult or the land of Israel. Rather Judaism is a religion that is based in universalism and dedicated to Israel's new messianic hope of truth, justice and peace among all men. The sixth discusses spreading the monotheistic truth of God and offers a hand of fellowship to sister religions Christianity and Islam, while the seventh rejects bodily resurrection and the idea of a God who deals out Divine reward and punishment. Finally, the eighth principle deals with the responsibility of all to work for social justice by means of social action that it is an idea that is in accordance with Mosiac law.

Although Isaac Meyer Wise was symbolically the head of the conference, this platform was primarily the work of Kaufman Kohler. His brother in law, Rabbi Emil Hirsch helped to write the last principle for social justice and social action. Both men were the sons in law of Rabbi David Einhorn and both are the two who best represent the generation of 1885 in thought and action.

Rabbi Emil Hirsch - Social Activist

Rabbi Emil Hirsch (1851-1923) was a new breed of Reform Jew who was born into the Reform movement, his father being European reformer Samuel Hirsch. He moved to the United States with his father when he was fifteen. He was Americanized and spent the majority of his working life at the radical Classical Reform synagogue, Temple Sinai of Chicago. Although Michael Meyer does not credit him as being an original thinker, he was most certainly the embodiment of a radical classical reformer with a forte, he was a social activist.

He did not believe in the efficacy of prayer as a way to dialogue with the divine. “It is not a service to God so much as it is a service to our ourselves that we seek in reading old prayers...it is the Jewish consciousness, the sense of Jewish community, of Jewish togetherness...that leaps to word and sound in Jewish prayer.”³¹ Prayer was a way to form and be in a community, prayer was for people’s sake, and not for God. “We pray and we have ritual to remind us of our dignity and worth as men, of the fact that one man must live with others and through others. We are reminded here much more of man than God.”³²

Hirsch like Einhorn had no desire to placate or return to any forms of orthodoxy. If it meant that Reform Judaism was a new form of Judaism separate and alone, so be it. In light of the Classical reformers’ view of the mission of Israel and its universal messianic vision, both of which belong in the Diaspora, Zionism could never be a real option, for it went against both. Hirsch expressed the view of most radical reformers when

³¹ Hirsch, Emil Gustav. My Religion. compilation and biographical introduction by Gerson B. Levi
New York : Macmillan, 1925. p. 125.

³² Hirsch, 129

he said: “We don’t not belong in the East and we will not go back to the East. We are not Palestinians, we are Americans.”³³

Hirsch believed that biblical criticism, the scientific and historical analysis of biblical texts that assigns authorship and time periods to biblical writings, was the ultimate proof-text against Orthodoxy. “Modern Scholarship has spoken and its voice cannot be hushed. It has shown that Moses is not the author of the Pentateuch; that Sinai is not the cradle of what is highest and best in Biblical Judaism.”³⁴ He also railed against the priestly institutions, circumcision, and Jewish Dietary law as not being original to the Israelites for scholarship had shown they were borrowed from other neighboring cultures.

Hirsch lived during a time in America that was ripe with immigrant poverty and exploitation of the workers. He strove for social justice, declaring that every man has worth. Social justice was the vehicle to moral expression. “The Jew lived his moral theism preeminently by works in the world. Social Justice was for Hirsch of the essence.”³⁵ It would be no accident that Hirsch’s primary contribution to the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform was the eighth principle dealing with social justice. Yet it would take another two decades on industrial abuse before social justice assumed a position of importance on the Reform agenda.

Kaufman Kohler – The Need for Rituals and Ceremonies in Judaism

Rabbi Kaufman Kohler was born into a strictly orthodox family in Germany he became instilled with reform theology and became too radical for the German Jewish community. Upon coming to America he served in large congregations in Detroit, Chicago and eventually New York. In the last two decades of the nineteenth century,

³³ Hirsch, p. 127.

³⁴ Meyer, p. 273.

³⁵ Meyer, p. 275.

Kaufman Kohler was the spokesman for American Reform Judaism. His series of rebuttals to Alexander Kohut's attacks on Reform Judaism entitled Backwards or Forwards³⁶ helped to put him in a position to lead the 1885 conference. Although a progressive, Kohler was not as radical as his brother-in-law Emil Hirsch. He seemed to be able to balance both modern sciences and the emotional aspects of religion. He understood that even with rational thought and reason there was a need for symbol and ceremony in religion. Kohler stressed the need to sift through old customs, where necessary to create new ones, and put an emphasis on ceremonies in the home, particularly for Shabbat. Kohler felt that modern ceremonies should be refashioned to appeal to modern man's lofty aims and noble actions and in doing so would become vehicles for the sanctification of life and the consecration of duty.

In his 1907 essay entitled "The Origins and Functions of Ceremonies in Judaism,"³⁷ he argued that rationalism and the irrationalism of ritual ceremonies were not mutually exclusive since ceremony speaks to the collective memories of the Jewish people. Yet he emphasized that since Judaism was a system of ethical truths, ceremonies should be observed as a means towards higher ends. He called Jewish observances indispensable forms of expressing religious feelings. "As we advance in culture and enlightenment and refinement," he wrote, "these various ceremonies may appear to us as empty shells void of meaning, but we must never forget that nothing grows on the tree or in the soil without the shielding leaf or husk. Abstract truth and ethical practice fail to

³⁶ Kohler, Kaufman. Backwards or Forwards: A Series of Discourses on Reform Judaism. New York: Press of Stettiner, Lambert & Co., 1885.

³⁷ From CCAR Yearbook 1907, reprinted in full in the anthology entitled Reform Judaism a Historical Perspective: Essays from the Yearbook of the Central Conference of American Rabbis. Selected, edited, and with an introd. by Joseph L. Blau. New York: Ktav Pub. House, 1973.

satisfy the religious craving of man. He needs ceremonies to impress him with the nearness of the Divine.”³⁸

Still, many of the ancient ceremonial practices did not impress Kohler, such as talit, tefilin, kapporot, dietary laws and the laws of purity. He hated the rote by which many ceremonies were practiced.

“In order to have a positive religious value and significance,” he insisted “ceremonies must either directly or symbolically express thoughts and feelings that appeal to us while elevating, hallowing and enriching our lives. Romanticism which loves ancient practice because they are picturesque representations of a dead past, is not religion, which above all be the voice of a living truth, a living God.”³⁹

Kohler believed in Darwinian, spiritual, and historical evolution. He believed that Jewish assimilation into society was part of the Jewish process and not the death knell of Judaism. “We believe in the ever working laws of historic evolution and see in assimilation the force ever at work in Judaism’s progress”⁴⁰. In answering critics who said that Classical Reform Judaism’s emphasis on ethical monotheism would cause it to lose it’s “Jewishness”, Kohler said that it is delusional to think that Jews past and present don’t fashion their lives around the societies in which they live, and were they to remain sequestered from that society that they would miss out on Judaism’s highest aims which is to be a “Light unto the nations” and a “blessing to all families of the earth.”

³⁸Reform Judaism: A Historical Perspective. P. 219

³⁹ibid. p. 220

⁴⁰ Kohler, Kaufmann, Jewish Theology: Systematically and Historically Considered. Introduction by Joseph L. Blau. New York: KTAV, 1968. p. 210.

Classical Reform Judaism and the Re-formation of Traditional Ideas

The Classical Reform Judaism exemplified by the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform was the culmination of over one hundred years of thought. It took from both Judaic and secular thinking to fashion a Judaism that could be consistent with the modernity that the reformers lived with. Its chief tool was the ability to re-fashion and shift old and seemingly obsolete ideas into ones that conformed to their ideas of rationalism, morality and universalism. True, the 1885 Platform does render obsolete many time honored elements of Judaism such Divine revelation and certain elements of halacha including the dietary laws. But it's most creative elements were expressions of it's past century, the re-forming of Israel's mission to that of a Diaspora people (now a religion alone not a nation with national aspirations), and the universality of the messianic idea into a culture of heart and intellect that would be a union of all humanity.

The 1885 Pittsburgh Platform wasn't Reform Judaism's zenith, but rather a moment in time that marked the culmination of its nineteenth century thought. Debate and change marked the movement even as the convocation broke up, for this is the hallmark of Reform Judaism. In that moment there was great optimism. "Science and reason pointed man to salvation and prosperity, and no roadblocks or detours were anticipated."⁴¹

Yet there were to be many obstacles that lay ahead, that could not be foreseen in 1885. Therefore it would be necessary to alter ideas found in the 1885 Platform to conform to a changing world. A classic example of modifying ideas to meet the times can be seen in the Reform approach to Zionism. Almost unthinkable in 1885, attitudes

⁴¹ Blau, Joseph L. in introduction to: Jewish Theology: Systematically and Historically Considered, p. xii

towards Zionism and nationalism changed over the next 52 years leading to the movement's second major platform in Columbus in 1937. The optimism of a united humanity had been crushed by a devastating war in Europe and with the rise of the National Socialist party in Germany during the 1930's which signaled a clear and present danger to European Jewry. Zionism, a movement in yet unofficially started in the 1880's was now a force in the settlement of the Land of Israel. The image of a strong secular Jew as seen in the brave settlers of the Yishuv was appealing to those who saw that once again the world was not a safe place for Jews. But for American Jews, Zionism was thought of not so much as a universal national desire for all Jews, but as a place of refuge for Jews who were in trouble. Not that life in pre-World War II Palestine was a better place, but at least it brought hope for the future. Principle Five of the 1937 Columbus Platform states: "In the rehabilitation of Palestine, the land hallowed by memory and hopes, we behold the promise of life renewed for many of our brethren. We affirm the obligation of all Jewry to aid in its up building as a Jewish homeland by endeavoring to make it not only a haven for the oppressed but also a center of Jewish culture and spiritual life."⁴²

And it wasn't just the events of history that shook the ideals of Classical Reform Jewish thinking; there were changes in thought as well. Joseph Blau in his introduction to Kaufman Kohler's Jewish Theology writes:

"This science oriented optimistic attitude broke down under a series of shocks. As man came to understand the Darwinian theory of evolution, it became clear that evolution and progress were not synonymous terms. Evolution did not imply the betterment of man and man's institutions, but only increased their ability to

⁴² The Columbus Platform: Guiding Principle of Reform Judaism - 1937

survive. Sigmund Freud developed a rational system that effectively demonstrated the inevitability of man being dominated by irrational factors in his personality”⁴³. Advances in 20th century science destroyed the secure physical universe of nineteenth century science. It seems the world wasn’t quite ready for Kant’s utopian vision.

Part II

A Call to a Greater Adherence to Tradition

In the first half of the twentieth century, Jews were looking to make inroads towards being accepted by their fellow Americans. David Ellenson, President of what is now Hebrew Union College – Jewish institute of religion, says universalism meant entrance into American society. “Individuals could participate in the larger life of the American polity only if they were willing to divest themselves of particular ethnic traits and group loyalties. Adherence to ‘universalism’ – in effect, Protestant mores and manners – was the price demanded for admission to full participation in American Society.”⁴⁴ Yet also arising during this time were several voices who felt that Judaism had strayed from its center in the idealism of the previous century. Many sensed certain emptiness in universal utterances and looked for ways to retain elements in their lives that were distinctly Jewish.

German rabbi and religious thinker Leo Baeck (1873-1956) was one of the first to realize that the rational and universal goals of Judaism had to be balanced with the numinous aspects of God. Baeck believed that religion was also “forced to grasp the

⁴³ Blau, Joseph L. in introduction to: Jewish Theology: Systematically and Historically Considered, p.xii

⁴⁴ Ellenson, David Harry, After Emancipation : Jewish Religious Responses to Modernity . Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2004. pg. 32.

unfathomability of the Divine, to appreciate what reason could not fully grasp”⁴⁵ Baeck saw that Judaism and Jewish creativity existed in the tension between these two polar forces. He talked of the paradox of man being both the creation and a creator. “Though man may experience the meaning of the world through faith, he gives meaning to the world through his action. He has received life, but he also has to fulfill it.”⁴⁶

Rabbi William Braude was a new breed of radical reform rabbi; he was a neo-traditionalist. He declared before the CCAR convention in 1942 that “Liberal Judaism is at the end of a cycle. Its religious course is now being redirected.”⁴⁷ He felt that Reform Judaism was relying on too many external sources to define Judaism, such as universalism and social justice. He suggested that rabbis take the lead and form, not a “Fence around the Torah”, the means by which traditional Jews go to extraordinary measures to adhere to Jewish law, but to create a “Fence around Holiness”, and thus go to extraordinary measures to find it. He suggested Torah and Talmud study as a way to achieve this as well as bringing back other ritual observances like a modified kashrut, Sabbath observance and fasting on Tisha B’Av that were long since abandoned.

Rabbi David Polish (1910-1995) claimed that he saw the “beginnings of a new direction in the Reform Rabbinate [towards] a conscious effort to uncover traditional elements [in]...about 1928.”⁴⁸ His 1957 A Guide for Reform Jews was aimed at the post-World War II generation of parents [parents of baby boomers] who joined Reform synagogues in droves after the war. In many cases these young parents were descendents

⁴⁵ Meyer, p. 208

⁴⁶ Baeck, Leo, “Mystery Joined to Commandment” (1926) in A Reform Judaism reader: North American Documents. [compiled by] Michael A. Meyer & W. Gunther Plaut. New York: UAHC Press, 2000. p17-18

⁴⁷ Reform Judaism: A Historical Perspective, p. 125

⁴⁸ Raphael, Marc Lee, “The Emergence and Development of Tradition in Reform Jewish Worship”, Jewish History 15: 119-130, 2001. pg. 124.

of Eastern European Jewry, as opposed to the staunch German Jews with ties to earlier generations of Reform Jewry. The make up of Reform Jewry no longer had the German stamp of pre-WWII years. “In the past generation most Reform Jews have come to recognize that that a religious movement cannot live on ideology alone, that ideals must be supplemented with practice. In Jewish theology it is emphasized once more that in Judaism – as distinguished from many another world religion – the ‘deed’ leads to the ‘creed’, that the way of ‘doing’ brings one to the way of believing.”⁴⁹ Polish went on to say that this would not lead to Orthodox observance for it arose from a Reform point of view which didn’t adhere to traditional halacha. He also established that a ‘guide’ written in his time had to be updated in order to not become obsolete. He maintained that the Reform movement has the right to change when necessary or desirable, and to discontinue practices when no longer meaningful. Polish claimed this was the nature of Reform Judaism, that individual choice is not pick and chose Judaism but rather an organic order that changes with each generation. Polish said:

*“This is precisely what individual freedom involves; not to turn order into chaos, but rather to go from one form of order to another form of order. Naturally if a guide is permitted to remain static and to become fixed, it will be the Orthodoxy of tomorrow; but if revised from time to time to meet changing conditions and rising needs, it will be an expression of Reform Judaism, renewing itself in every age.”*⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Polish, Daniel, A Guide for Reform Jews , by Frederic A. Doppelt and David Polish. New York: Bloch, 1957. pg. 5.

⁵⁰ Polish, p. 9-10.

Post World War Two Sociological and Demographic changes

After World War II there were three major events that help shaped Reform Judaism to become what it evolved into by the end of the century.

- 1) A move of the Jewish population in urban areas into the suburbs
- 2) Hebrew Union College required rabbinical students to spend their first year of study in Israel
- 3) Women became more engaged in the mainstream of synagogue leadership and life. Starting in 1972, women were finally ordained as rabbis and cantors.

A Move to the Suburbs

Studies show that “between 1945 and 1965 about one third of all American Jews left big cities and established themselves in the suburbs.”⁵¹ Once in the suburbs Jewish people were no longer living in the sub-culture of an urban Jewish neighborhood. In the suburbs families were more spread out. For many Jews it was no longer walking distance to synagogue or harder to find a kosher butcher. Living among non Jewish neighbors, the benefits of the insular Jewish neighborhood were given up for the sake of the freedom of vertical mobility. This affected synagogue affiliation and the membership in Reform synagogues grew often with many young couples who were only one generation removed from Orthodoxy.

But it was the Conservative synagogues that grew the fastest as they represented a group no longer comfortable with traditional Judaism while not quite ready for Reform radicalism. Yet Reform synagogues grew as well, “more than doubling it’s memberships between the years 1943 and 1965 and more than tripling its family memberships.”⁵²

⁵¹ Sarna, p. 282

⁵² *ibid.*

Many of these families were looking for Jewish fellowship and a place to educate their children and the Reform Synagogue fit the bill. Many of these new members joined Reform synagogues not because they were steeply imbued in the principles of the movement but because they were convenient. This would help dilute the pool of membership that was there because of Reform ideals and allowed for the possibility of changes that could be brought from the pulpit.

Contradictory Impulses

Jack Wertheimer notes that in the last forty years Reform Judaism has been paradoxically seized with two seemingly contradictory impulses. One is to test the limits of Judaism by going where traditional Judaism has never gone before. These include rights for women and homosexuals and issues such as patrilineal descent. On the other hand “the Reform movement has reintroduced or signaled its willingness to tolerate customs that have been rejected in the past: in many temples men don yarmulkes and prayer shawls, kosher meals are prepared and Hebrew usages have been reinstated.”⁵³

A New Rabbi for a New Era

Several authors trace the return of traditional Jewish rituals to the early 1970’s and to Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion. Marc Raphael explains that it was a combination of the sociological phenomena of experimentation of the 1960’s and a decree by HUC-JIR that required rabbinical students to spend a mandatory year studying in Israel.

“These rabbinic students of the early 1970’s became rabbis in the mid 1970’s, and models of increased levels of personal ritual within the congregations that the

⁵³ Wertheimer, Jack. A People Divided: Judaism in Contemporary America. New York: Basic Books, 1993. p. 96-97

*served. And subsequent rabbinic classes...have adopted more and more customs, ceremonies and rituals; so much so that the quandary of Reform congregants (who bemoan what they call “Reform Orthodoxy” and represent the last vestige of Classical Reform) is how to retain a sense of being an authentic Reform Jew if they do not wear a kippah or a tallit, or bow and bend their head or bend their knee at this point or that point in the liturgy”.*⁵⁴

Many of these rabbis were born in the baby-boom, and grew up in the suburbs. They were Americans searching for new ‘authentic’ Reform religious practices as a way of expressing their Judaism. This led these “neo-traditionalist” (referred to above as Reform Orthodox) rabbinical students to re-evaluate many of the traditional mitzvot that were previously left out of Reform practices. In turn they were able to bring many traditional rituals such as prayer movement and festival celebrations back into their congregations.

Women

There is no doubt that women and men bring a different dimensions to religious practices. In the nineteenth century, German Orthodox Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) commented that women were naturally more spiritually inclined than men.⁵⁵ While no women were ordained as rabbis until 1972, there were women who served in this capacity without ordination. Lily Montagu (1873-1963) was an early pioneer of Liberal Judaism in Great Britain and served as the lay rabbi of West Central Liberal Jewish Congregation in London. She felt that women had a different approach to spirituality. In several sermons she maintained that “Men tried to explain religious beliefs

⁵⁴ Raphael, p. 122.

⁵⁵ See Hirsch, Samson Raphael, 1808-1888. Horeb. A Philosophy of Jewish Laws and Observations. Translated from the German original with introd. and annotations by I. Grunfeld. London : Soncino Press [1962], Ch. 75, 493, pg 371

to their children while women taught by example.”⁵⁶ While men analyze sift and reason in their attempt to explain spiritual matters, women were more spontaneous in their explanations, for their primary goal was the awakening of inner devotion. Unlike Samson Raphael Hirsch she felt that neither men nor women were more spiritual than the other, but rather she recognized “that the kind of spirituality that women possessed was of special value to humanity”⁵⁷ and therefore women’s religious influence should not end in the home. As society changed in the second half of the twentieth century, women were able to bring this influence more to the forefront, particularly in liberal Judaism.

The 1960’s and 1970’s did much to change ideas of what place a woman could/should take in society and which roles of leadership she might hold. One of those places was as a religious leader. At the same time that UC-JIR required students to study in Israel, it also ordained its first woman rabbi, Sally Priesand. This was a milestone that was a long time in the making. It is interesting that a movement that early on examined women’s religious status, took almost one hundred years to ordain its first female rabbi. Was it the fear of the type of leadership a woman might bring to this position, or was it the fear that congregations as a whole wouldn’t accept a woman as its leader?

Classical reformers I.M. Wise and Kaufman Kohler, who engaged favorably in questions of women’s status could never accept them as leaders because of the way society saw a woman’s position in those times. In the 1920’s debate was sparked when Martha Neumark who was attending classes at Hebrew Union College requested a High Holy Day pulpit. The 1922 CCAR conference decided that a woman couldn’t be denied ordination, but the HUC board of governors overturned this decision. At the same time

⁵⁶ Umansky, Ellen M., Lily Montagu: Sermons Addresses, Letters and Prayers. New York: E. Mellen Press, c1985. p. 155.

⁵⁷ Umansky, p. 156

the Jewish Institute of Religion (who would merge with HUC in 1950) accepted a woman student, Irma Levy Lindheim, but she withdrew before an ordination could be conferred. Later in 1939, Helen Levinthal completed her rabbinic studies at JIR but was only issued a Master of Hebrew Letters degree and was not ordained. It has taken the thirty five years since Rabbi Priesand's ordination for women to be fully accepted as pulpit leaders in liberal Judaism, a position they still cannot attain in traditional Judaism. For many women who were not willing to fit in the traditional role of women in Orthodox Judaism, the egalitarianism of Liberal Judaism became a viable option. With more women becoming ordained and taking prominent synagogue leadership roles, more scrutiny was placed on the male-centric liturgy and biblical texts, which often don't reflect a modern inclusive sensibility. Eventually the Reform movement made changes to some elements of the liturgy to be either inclusive or gender neutral.⁵⁸

As the ranks of women rabbis grew, many struggled with their absence in the texts that make up Jewish tradition. Others noticed that congregants did not respond to them in the same way they did to male rabbis. In an article in The CCAR Journal in the summer of 1991 Rabbi Janet Marder argued that “women share a commitment to three fundamental values that are central to their rabbinate: Balance, intimacy, and empowerment.”⁵⁹ This networking model shows a desire to connect to people rather than principles, and perhaps may highlight differences in leadership style between men and women. Men have often been accused of working out of a hierarchical role where moving up is the prime concern. Nevertheless the inclusion of women as they struggled

⁵⁸ A new gender sensitive edition of Gates of Prayer was issued in 1994. See: Siddur. Gates of Prayer for Shabbat and Weekdays: A Gender sensitive Prayerbook. Chaim Stern, editor New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1994

⁵⁹ CCAR Journal. Summer 1991, p.

to find their voice in study and leadership brought a new dimension to synagogue life and spirituality previously not experienced in Judaism, and served to enrich the Reform landscape and quest for Jewish identity.

The move to the suburbs and the growth of the American Jewish population, the make up of Reform rabbinic leadership and the inclusion of women are some of the major differences of the Reform Judaism in the late nineteenth as compared to the late twentieth Centuries.

Accepting Other Changes in Social Norms

As the twentieth century closed, not all changes in the Reform movement were back towards tradition, there were many were radical changes that tested new limits of Judaism. Once in the suburbs, the rate of Jewish intermarriage increased, and this brought on a new wave of intermarriages (where one spouse did not convert to Judaism), some that were being officiated by Reform Rabbis.

With more intermarriage, the issue of patrilineal descent was brought to the fore. Matrilineal decent had long been the method of confirming Jewish identity in a child in cases of mixed marriage. This was now tested in a 1983 Reform responsa which stated that “the child of one Jewish parent is under the presumption of Jewish descent. This presumption of the Jewish status of the offspring of any mixed marriage is to be established through appropriate and timely public and formal acts of identification with the Jewish faith and people.”⁶⁰ The CCAR gave four reasons to move towards acknowledging children of mixed marriages where the mother was Jewish as Jews. The first was they did not view birth as a determining factor in the religious identification of

⁶⁰ Contemporary Reform Responsa, #38. Patrilineal Descent, <http://data.ccarnet.org/cgi-bin/respdisp.pl?file=38&year=carr>

children of a mixed marriage. Second they distinguished between descent and identification. Third they understood that the social landscape had changed in America and ties like the influence of the extended family upon such a child had diminished and for many this bond does not exist for this generation. The finally they stated that not every Jew could be presumed to have a minimal Jewish education. Therefore ones' status as a Jew in this situation was not determined by his or her mother's religious status but by commitment to the Jewish people in their actions. Therefore a child who had a non-Jewish mother and a Jewish father was to be identified as Jewish by through the action of performing those mitzvot that would lead toward a positive and exclusive Jewish identity. Examples could include entry into the covenant, acquisition of a Hebrew name, *Torah* study, *Bar/Bat Mitzvah*, and *Kabbalat Torah* (Confirmation). "For those beyond childhood claiming Jewish identity, other public acts or declarations may be added or substituted after consultation with their rabbi."⁶¹ This liberal approach sent shockwaves through the traditional Jewish communities who relied on matrilineal decent as the proof of a child being authentically (halachacly) Jewish.

A third area was homosexual relations, which is deemed a 'toevah', an abomination by the Torah and is thus forbidden in traditional Judaism. Through several steps in the late twentieth century, Reform Judaism moved towards the acceptance of gays and lesbians. First gay congregations were welcomed into the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, followed by resolutions which encouraged the inclusion of homosexuals in all congregational life, and followed by the ordination of gay and lesbian rabbis and cantors by the Hebrew Union College.

⁶¹ ibid

Intermarriage, patrilineal descent and homosexuality reflect changes in social (societal) norms not only for Jews but for all of American society in the second half of the twentieth century. Reform Judaism subsequently made adjustments in its norms to reflect these changes.

Finding New Meaning in Mitzvot

In the last part of the twentieth century, Reform Judaism was looking to make connections with traditions and ceremonies long since abandoned, in order to make connections to the Jewish past. The move of many in Reform Judaism towards traditional observances, by neo-traditionalists, or neo reformers, started taking a sure foothold in the Reform movement in the 1970's. Michael Meyer has observed: "As Reform Judaism entered the 1970's there was a general feeling that the movement needed to re-think its directions. The tremendous enthusiasm generated by the rapid expansion of the number of Reform congregations in the 1950's and '60's had passed. The integration of American Jewry into the society had largely been accomplished, but the style of synagogue life that seemed so fresh, a few years previous, in the '70's, seemed somewhat stale and in need of invigoration."⁶² To that end The 1976 San Francisco Centenary Perspective was issued. Mostly authored by Rabbi Eugene Borowitz, it was the Reform Movement's third major statement. The 1976 statement was an attempt to be relevant to its times. Like previous platforms, it reached out to people who were preoccupied with more pressing issues. It was a time when theologians found it difficult to speak confidently about God and were starting to deal with the theological connotations of the Holocaust. It was because of this struggle that the words "the trials of our own time and challenges of modern culture have made steady belief and clear understanding difficult for some" were

⁶² Meyer, Response to Modernity, pg. 369.

added to the statement. On the other hand the 1976 statement attempted positively explain this situation by stating: “we ground our lives personally and communally, on God’s reality and remain open to new experiences and conceptions of the Divine.”

According to Dana Evan Kaplan explains: “The intentional ambiguity was necessary because there was no consensus of God.” Kaplan goes on to say “The statement still was not going to provide theological direction clear enough to build a strengthened religious commitment throughout the movement.”⁶³

Yet it set the movement in a positive direction as it awaited the influx of new leadership and new rabbis with this “strengthened religious commitment”. It is interesting to note that although the Centenary Perspective called upon Reform Jews to “confront the claims of Jewish tradition, however differently perceived, and to exercise their individual autonomy, choosing and creating on the basis of commitment and knowledge”, it was unable to use the word ‘Mitzvah’. This aversion was due to the association of the word with a command and God as commander rather than the idea of a “good deed”. This would change in short order

By the end of the decade, the CCAR had produced a guide to the Jewish life cycle entitled Gates of Mitzvah. This manual included essays, instruction, kavanot, and responsa that revealed how Reform Jews could better connect with many mitzvot. Gates of Mitzvah offered a Reform Jewish meaning of mitzvah that went beyond that of a ‘good deed’.

“Mitzvah” it maintained, “is the key to authentic Jewish existence and to the sanctification of life. No English equivalent can adequately translate the term. Its root meaning is ‘commandment’, but mitzvah has come to have broader

⁶³ Kaplan, Dana Evan, American Reform Judaism. pg 53.

*meanings. It suggests doing something for the sake of others and for the sake of God, and it conveys still more; it speaks of living Jewishly, of meeting life's challenges and opportunities in particular ways. All this is mitzvah. Doing a mitzvah says our tradition will do another and another.”*⁶⁴

Gates of Mitzvah also speculated that an additional reward would be an increase in Jewish observance and commitment.

Rabbi Roland Gittelsohn in his essay “Mitzvah without Miracles”, in Gates of Mitzvah described how ritual observance might relate to a more rational cosmic reality.

*“Human nature” He wrote, “is such that we express our emotions and ideas with our whole bodies, not just our tongues. We need to be visually and kinetically reminded of our noblest values and stimulated to pursue them. As otherwise lonely and frightened individuals we need common practices and observances which bind us into meaningful and supportive groups. All of which adds up to the fact that we need ritual as something more than a social luxury or convenience. For us as Reform Jews, a particular ritual may be mitzvah. But the need for a pattern of such rituals, this - because it grows out of and satisfies our basic nature as human beings - is mitzvah. And this we desperately need”*⁶⁵

The Battle of 1999

The growing battle over the direction of Reform Judaism came to a head in 1999 at the 110th annual Central Conference of American Rabbi's convention in Pittsburgh. The fourth major platform was passed after a bitter eighteen months of debate. This battle highlighted the schism between the Classical Reformers and the neo-traditionalists. The

⁶⁴ Gates of Mitzvah : Shaarei Mitzvah, A Guide to the Jewish Life Cycle, edited by Simeon J. Maslin. New York : Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1979, pg. 3.

⁶⁵ Gittelsohn, Roland, Gates of Mitzvah, pgs. 109-110.

Classical Reformers objected to the neo-Reformers' return to many traditional practices that their predecessors found so abhorrent. The neo-Reformers were looking to add authentic traditional Jewish practices to replace the classical style of worship which they viewed as both a relic of a bygone age and lifeless. Dana Evan Kaplan writes: "The proposal of a new statement of principles raised the hope that Reform Judaism could stir the passions buried in the hearts of what appeared to be a largely apathetic congregational body...Instead the proposal became an ugly fight over who controlled the movement. The debate focused on the overriding meaning of innovations over the past two decades and on the idea that Reform Jews should try out a wide variety of traditional rituals."⁶⁶

At the center of this debate was C.C.A.R President Rabbi Richard Levy who was charged with drafting the new platform. The controversy reached its pinnacle when an interview with him was published in the Winter 1998 edition of Reform Judaism, a magazine that is sent to every dues paying Reform synagogue member. On the cover of the magazine was a picture of him on the cover wearing a kippah and talit in a prayerful pose with the headline "Is it Time to Chart a New Course in Reform Judaism?" Also published for the first time in this issue was his third draft of what was to become the "Ten Principles for Reform Judaism." He shocked many in the Reform world with several suggestions on why they should return to a greater observance of mitzvot.

"As we strive to admit a greater degree of holiness into our own lives and those of our communities, we commit ourselves to some mitzvot that have long been hallmarks of Reform Judaism, and, in the spirit of standing at Sinai with all other Jews, we know we may feel called to other mitzvot new to Reform Jewish

⁶⁶ Kaplan, American Reform Judaism, pgs. 233-234

*observance. We also respect the Jewish beliefs of the past, and are open to explore how they may be applied to each new generation's search. As part of Reform Judaism's classic belief in ongoing revelation, we know that what may seem outdated in one age may be redemptive in another...Some of us may discover rituals now unknown which in the spirit of Jewish tradition and Reform creativity will bring us closer to God, to Torah, and to our people.”*⁶⁷

Many were uncomfortable by this call to mitzvot especially with those that were in the past were not practiced by Reform Jews. Others undoubtedly were put off by some of the Hebrew phrases he used elsewhere in the “Ten Principles” that for some, portended Orthodoxy. Such phrases as *Ribono shel Olam* (Master of the Universe) or *mey-eyn olam ha-ba*, (a foretaste of the world to come) seemed like Orthodox speak more than Reform.

Rabbi Levy reminded readers that the Reform movement was dynamic and that reversals in previously held positions had been done before. “To restore some of the things that our forebears rejected is perfectly legitimate,” he insisted. “As Reform Jews, we believe in ongoing revelation -- the idea that changing times reveal new, previously hidden, aspects of the Torah God gave us at Sinai. Part of that revelation is addressing the needs of the Jewish people right now.”⁶⁸ The problem was that the needs of the ‘Jewish people’ were not, nor have they ever been, the same for all Reform Jews. Even respectful scholar, Robert Seltzer, an admitted admirer of Rabbi Levy reacted to what he perceived was a change in command away from individual autonomy. “We must guard against turning Reform Judaism into Conservative Judaism Lite” he noted. By eliminating the greatest contribution of Reform to modern Judaism, namely “a conscious sifting through

⁶⁷ Levy, Richard, “Ten Principles”, Reform Judaism Magazine, Winter 1998.

⁶⁸ Levy, Reform Judaism, Winter 1998.

the tradition, choosing practices that are consistent with the canons of rational thought, the best of modern knowledge, and the hard-won place of Jews and Judaism at the center of modern Western society.”⁶⁹

Part of the Reform Jewish struggle with modernity is how to balance modern rationalism with the mystical qualities of religion. Rabbi Seltzer’s statement assumes rationalism is presently as important a goal for Reform Judaism as it had been a century before. Although spirituality doesn’t have to be devoid of rationality, it also doesn’t require concrete answers. Many see this rush to spirituality and ritual as an attempt to recapture Jewish essence without the concrete assignment of real meaning to their acts. In light of this there are many who perceive that those who are now pursuing additional ritual practice are jumping on a spiritual and emotional bandwagon that doesn’t honor Reform Judaism’s past reforms.

The draft first published in Reform Magazine would be much watered down by the time it was approved. It is ironic that Richard Levy was perceived as a radical by those who upheld values that one hundred years ago were those of the radical classical reformers. And it was Rabbi Levy who made sure to let everyone know that these long standing core beliefs of Reform Judaism were still as valid today as they were in the past.

“We are still seekers of God who look to enrich our lives with Kedusha (holiness) and wish to practice tikkun olam. We still honor in our own way the sanctity of Shabbat and are committed to Jewish learning. We believe in not only helping Jews around the world but still carry our ideals of universalism and caring for all

⁶⁹ Seltzer, Robert, “This is not the Way”, Reform Judaism, Winter 1998.

*the peoples of the world. We believe in the State of Israel and in the importance of the Hebrew language, especially as the primary tongue in interpreting scripture.”*⁷⁰

These ideas represent nine of the ten principals in Rabbi Levy’s draft, and reflect ideas that have been voiced in other principles and statements of the past.⁷¹ But it was the Sixth, *We Are Open to Expanding the Mitzvot of Reform Jewish Practice* that caused the uproar. This was not a return to traditional mitzvot because of Divine commandment, but rather a search for meaning and connections to Judaism, the world and the Divine through personal autonomy by redefining traditional mitzvot and imbuing them with new meaning.

Why Perform Rituals at All?

There are many compelling reasons why Reform Jews are being asked to re-examine mitzvot and perform rituals. But first one must answer the question: why do people perform rituals at all? In ancient cultures, rituals and rites were performed as ways to binding together communities, perpetuating their myths and history, and often as a way of interacting with their gods. One need look no further than the American Indian to see the richness of tribal ideals and how the tribe’s unique reality is expressed through ritual. The first Jewish rituals began when Jews were just a nomadic tribe. In fact circumcision, perhaps the oldest ritual began (according to the biblical text) with Abraham’s family.

⁷⁰ Levy, Reform Judaism, Winter 1998

⁷¹ For a full list of past Reform Platforms see:
<http://ccarnet.org/documentsandpositions/platforms/>

Rituals as a Method to Connect to Life and the Divine

There are many connections and benefits that can be derived from religious rituals. One is that it is a way to transcend the ordinary, and create a sacred dimension in which one can connect to God. In the nineteenth century, early reformers spoke with disdain about the rote practice of rituals done without real purpose or intentionality. But today “ritual is viewed as more than the mere reflection of enactment of beliefs which allegedly exist prior to the practice and independent of it. Increasingly practice is seen as a potent source of meaning in its own right, one which may stimulate the quest for reasons which make sense of it.”⁷²

Lawrence Hoffman also sees ritual as a conveyer of ideas and a drama that matters in which everyone plays a part, “Ritual is our religious means of dramatizing life’s grandest possibilities.” He continues by showing how Ritual uses metaphors (“Next Year in Jerusalem”), music (Kol Nidre or Shema), community solidarity (our prayers are in the plural), “and other dramatic devices to make daring dreams so plausible that they defy easy dismissal. Just how to recapture our ritual so that it speaks the truths that we cannot do without, is a fine art indeed, but an art that can be learned, for those who know enough to use it.”⁷³

Conservative Rabbi Debra Orenstein, in the introduction to her popular book, Lifecycles explains: “Ritual has been popularized and secularized in the past few years...many of those who have been marking their lives idiosyncratically and often

⁷² Cohen, Steven Martin. The Jew Within: Self, Family, and Community in America. Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000. p. 74.

⁷³ Hoffman, Lawrence “Ritual and the Recovery of Hope, Making Reform Judaism Matter Again”, in The Jewish Condition, New York: UAHC Press, 1995. p. 397.

privately have come to want the authentic stamp of something communal and ancient.”⁷⁴

One of the ways this has manifested itself is in the popularity of women’s Rosh Chodesh groups and an increased use of mikvah as a way to mark life passages.

Rituals help form Jewish Identity

Rituals allow present generations of American Liberal Jews to connect to both their Jewish past and their families past. They also give a venue for socialization and a means to acquiring a strong Jewish identity. Many rituals can be found during family holiday celebrations such as Passover or Chanukah. These social and ritual gatherings help to form collective memories that become important moments in the life of a Jew. “Parents and grandparents loom large in the meaning of the holiday...The Holiday conjures up precious memories accessible at no other time, and thus elicits powerful emotions.”⁷⁵

Anthropologist Riv-Ellen Prell, in her essay “Reflections on the Social Science of American Jews and Its Implications for Jewish Education,”⁷⁶ explores social scientists’ findings as to causes of American Jewish identity. She states that the 1990 National Jewish Population Study shows a strong association between Jewish education and Jewish ritual observances. She comments that although Jewish education is a critical component of forming a Jewish identity, the breakdown of traditional family life (two Jewish parents, or even two parents in the home) has caused the need for more socialization in the educational setting to compensate for what children may or may not

⁷⁴ Ornstein, Debra. Lifecycles: Volume 1. edited and with introductions by Debra Orenstein. Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights Pub., c1994-1997. p. xx

⁷⁵ Cohen-Eisen, p.79.

⁷⁶ Prell, Riv Ellen, “Reflections on the Social Science of American Jews and Its Implications for Jewish Education” A Congregation of Learners: Transforming the Synagogue into a Learning Community, edited by Isa Aron, Sara Lee, and Seymour Rossel. New York: UAHC Press, 1995. p.139-153

be getting in their homes and in their secular American communities. In light of this, she brings forth a study by Goldscheider and Zuckerman⁷⁷ that show “the persistence of Jewish identity is unrelated to primordial sentiments that attach people to a series of standard practices and meanings consistently over time.”⁷⁸ Rather Jewish identity is the product of socialization among Jews. She argues: “Cultural content reflects rather than causes American Jewish Continuity.”⁷⁹ It is the overlapping series of Jewish cultural, political, family and educational networks that cause this identity to form.

Finding New Meaning in Old Rituals

Reform Jews have over time dropped many rituals, for reasons of ideology, theology or relevance to modernity. Having fewer and fewer rituals to keep in touch with the “Extraordinary” has made some people feel out of touch with the Holy in their daily lives. Many have found this connection by looking into Jewish tradition, and taking many of the rituals Reform Jews have abandoned and affixing new modern meanings to them in order to reincorporate them into their religious practice.

An example of finding new meaning to Jewish practice can be seen in the observance of *Kashrut*. As the authors of Gates of Mitzvot maintained:

“Many Reform Jews observe certain traditional dietary disciplines as part of their attempt to establish a Jewish home and lifestyle. For some, (keeping) traditional Kashrut will enhance the sanctity of their home and be observed as a mitzvah; for some, a degree of kashrut (e.g. the avoidance of pork products/and or shell fish) may be meaningful; and still others may find nothing of value in kashrut.

⁷⁷ Goldscheider, Calvin, and Zuckerman Alan S. *The Transformation of the Jews*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.

⁷⁸ Prell, *A Congregation of Learners*, pg. 146

⁷⁹ *ibid.*

However the fact that kashrut was an essential feature of Jewish life for so many centuries should motivate the Jewish family to study it and to consider whether or not it may enhance the sanctity of their home”⁸⁰

Connection to a shared history and ritual practice may be one reason Reform Jews may look for meaning in kashrut. In his draft of the 1999 Perspective, Richard Levy provided several new meanings for performance of traditional rituals previously rejected by Reform. Included among them were the expression of a sacred conscience, spirituality and creativity.

“Some of us may observe practices of kashrut,” He wrote, “to extend the sense of kedushah into the acts surrounding food and into a concern for the way food is raised and brought to our tables. Others may wish to utilize the mikvah or other kinds of spiritual immersion not only for conversion but for periodic experiences of purification. Some of us may discover rituals now unknown which in the spirit of Jewish tradition and Reform creativity will bring us closer to God, to Torah, and to our people.”⁸¹

It is within this new framework that kashrut, a Jewish observance that early reformers shed because it made it difficult to integrate into modern society is being used as a suggestion to reunite Reform Jews with Judaism and the Jewish community.

⁸⁰ Gates of Mitzvah, pg. 40.

⁸¹ Levy, Richard, “Ten Principles”, Reform Judaism Magazine, Winter 1998.

Finding New Meaning from Traditional Liturgical Texts

In 1975 Reform Judaism introduced its new prayer book *The Gates of Prayer*. Gone was the majestic English of the old *Union Prayer Book*. Gone too, were some of the old church style hymns such as “The Adoration” and “Open the Gates of Righteousness.” In its stead was a prayer book that offered ten choices of Sabbath evening services, representing ten different ideals and theologies. It allowed for more experimentation in the service. “Bit by bit congregations steadily increased their worship ritual with the new book.”⁸² There was much more Hebrew too. Although the old *Union Prayer Book* did contain Hebrew, much of the service was read in English. The new prayer book contained in many cases the full texts of the Hebrew prayers and many were read now in only in Hebrew. The Adoration was offered first in Hebrew as the Aleinu, and “Open the Gates” was now written in its original Hebrew form, Pitchu Li.

Reform Judaism has a long history of changing liturgy to reflect contemporary sensibilities. The Aleinu was deemed objectionable by Classical Reformers because it has a very particularistic view of the Jews’ place in God’s creation plan, expressing an element of “chosenness”. For that reason it was abbreviated in the *Union Prayer Book* and all particularistic references were removed. It was sung mostly in English with the line about bowing in awe before God retained in the Hebrew. In *Gates of Prayer* there are two versions of the Aleinu, the first which reflects the traditional Aleinu text and an

⁸² Raphael, Marc. p. 124.

accurate translation⁸³, and the second version, the Aleinu as it existed in the Classical Reform Adoration.

And now the Reform Movement is about to introduce its first new prayer book in over thirty years. Mishkan Tefilah contains even more restorations of traditional texts. The most noticeable is the option of reinserting the concept of T'chiat Hameitim, the resurrection of the dead, into the second prayer of the Amida, the "Gevurot". Classical Reformers denounced bodily resurrection in the 1885 Platform. The words "m'chayeh hakol", who gives life to all, replaced the traditional "m'chayeh hameitim", who resurrects the dead. And now with the imminent release of Mishkan Tefilah one can see a prime example of Reform Judaism's contemporary proclivity "to retain traditional texts for emotional reasons while employing contemporary translations to mute or transform ideologically objectionable elements."⁸⁴ Several explanations have been given as to how a concept that was so abhorrent to the movement's founders can be revived in its texts but not in its original spirit.

Rabbi Richard Sarason, in his article "*To Rise from the Dead?- Mishkan T'filah and a Reform Liturgical Conundrum*" asks: "Is it not possible to understand the expression *m'chayeh hameitim* as a metaphor? Can it not, as a metaphor, be a source of comfort to those in mourning and a source of hope to others? Still others ask, "Is there nothing beyond God's ability? In that case, God can reverse death."⁸⁵

⁸³ Gates of Prayer. The New Union Prayerbook. Weekdays, Sabbaths, and Festivals; Services and Prayers for Synagogue and Home. edited by Chaim Stern. New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1975. p. 615

⁸⁴ Ellenson, David in My People's Prayer Book. Volume 4, The Amida. edited and with introductions by Lawrence A. Hoffman. Woodstock, Vt. : Jewish Lights Pub., 1997. p. 77.

⁸⁵ Sarason, Richard. "*To Rise from the Dead?—Mishkan T'filah and a Reform Liturgical Conundrum*" http://urj.org/Articles/index.cfm?id=10565&pge_prg_id=35994&pge_id=4509

Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman adds that modernity gives us the need to find new meaning for eternal life, even if it is through old text: “Our liturgy gives us traditional images, including resurrection. The important thing is to believe that our life has eternal value in one way or another and then live so that we affirm that value daily.”⁸⁶

What many do not realize is the reinsertion of the words *M’chayeh Hameitim* is not a new phenomenon that comes with the publishing of the Mishkan Tefilah. The 1975 Gates of Prayer includes these words in its Amida for Yom Ha’atzmaut, Israel’s Independence Day. David Ellenson in explaining this anomaly writes that the text for the Independence Day Amida was “drawn largely from Geniza fragments, the ancient minhag of Eretz Yisrael, which the editors were loath to alter, especially since resurrection seemed a fitting way to think about the founding of the modern state of Israel.”⁸⁷

Additional examples of the re-establishment of traditional liturgy once considered to be forbidden in Reform liturgy can now be found in Mishkan T’filah. One such example can be found in the first blessing before the Shema (Yotzeir Or) in the Morning Service with the inclusion of the long omitted line *Or Chadash Al Tzion Ta’ir - Shine a new light on Zion* – “Classical Reform Prayer book authors in the Diaspora constantly omitted this line with its mention of Zion from the liturgy because of their objection to Jewish nationalism. With the restoration of this passage in Mishkan T’filah, our movement consciously reaffirms its devotion to the modern State of Israel and signals its recognition of the religious significance of the reborn Jewish commonwealth.”⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Hoffman, Lawrence, in My People's Prayer Book. Volume 4, The Amida, pg. 82.

⁸⁷ Ellenson in in My People's Prayer Book. Volume 4, The Amida, pg 78

⁸⁸ Ellenson, David. commentary in: Mishkan T’filah: a Reform Siddur, edited by Alyse D .Frishman

Mishkan T'filah also includes a change in the English translation of the penultimate benediction of the Amida, the “Hodah”. In both Gates of Prayer and The Union Prayer Book the Hebrew text always contained the word ‘Nifleotecha’ (your miracles), but in the English it was translated into “signs of your presence”⁸⁹. This was in deference to the classical reformer belief that refuted Divine miracles. Now in Mishkan T'filah the English translation is no longer muted, but is unabashedly faithful to the Hebrew.

The desire to find new meaning from traditional texts is not new at all to Reform Liturgy. Isaac Meyer Wise in his Minhag America (1858) included the traditional seasonal insertions for the Land of Israel into the Gevurot (*Mashiv Haruach, Morid HaGashem/Morid Tal*), not to show God’s seasonal power in the land of Israel, but to affirm God’s responsibility for nature everywhere.

Conclusions

American Reform Judaism remains a dynamic movement reflecting the times and social norms of the modern world in which it lives. Although the positions the movement takes may differ greatly today from where it stood one hundred years ago, the one thing that remains consistent is that it continues to examine the teachings of Judaism in order to make them relevant. This license, when seen through a Reform historical perspective has pervaded not only since the advent of Reform Judaism, but rather through the entire history of the Jewish people. The generation responsible for the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform represented the idealism of both Jews and non-Jews as humanity through modernity was seemingly headed towards more enlightened times. But the one hundred and fourteen

URJ Biennial preview edition, November, 2005. New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2006. pg. 60

⁸⁹ Gates of Prayer, (1975) p 138.

years that separated the first and fourth Reform platforms marked significant changes in social norms. American Jews did integrate into the fabric of American society, so much so that assimilation is its biggest threat. New social norms such as equality for women, recognition of homosexuality as innate and not a matter of choice, and high intermarriage rates, where many Jewish families keep their Jewish identities could not have been understood by the sensibilities and social norms of the late nineteenth century. That generation stood tall on its idealism and its desire to be Americans. As we move into the twenty-first century we have a different sense of sensibilities. Many liberal Jews are Americans who are looking to make connections to their Jewish past. In making such connections they are hoping to find their past, present and future. The insistence on reason and rationalism is not needed as much in a new world capable of destroying itself in a matter of minutes. What is needed is continuity with the past that is authentic yet palatable to this modernity. One hundred years ago Darwinism was thought to be the proof-text against an omnipotent God. Now even Darwinism is being questioned. The modern Jew now has to balance the rational with the unexplainable, the transcendent Divine presence with the imminent, the ideas of the past with the new ideas found in the present. And hopefully from this will come forth possibilities for future generations that could never be dreamed of now.

Personal Note

I have been blessed to attend a seminary that holds pluralism as its ideal. I have been exposed to ideas and resources beyond the scope of denominational school. Yet unlike schools like Hebrew Union College –Jewish Institute of Religion and The Jewish Theological Seminary, it is the AJR student who must look deeply into his or her own personal affiliation and figure out where he or she stands in the playing fields of Judaism. For myself there was never a doubt. I have been a Reform Jew my entire life, and this is where I choose to remain. Therefore as with all denominationally affiliated students at AJR, it is incumbent upon us to find out how and where we connect to our denominations on our own. This has been a wonderful exercise for me. Too often in my life I have had to defend Reform Judaism from its detractors. Too often decisions made by the movement have been judged outside of their historical and sociological context. Too often when seen out of context Reform Judaism seems to contradict itself. What I hope to have done here is to shed a little illumination on the past two hundred years. When seen as a whole, when seen in its historical and sociological context, Reform Judaism is not a series of contradictions; rather Reform Judaism has been very true to its ability to grow and change with the needs of society.

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