

The Enduring Contributions of Reform Judaism
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Abstract: "But there were other Jews who also ran out of the ghetto and wanted to remain good and loyal Jews. They wanted not to assimilate but to acculturate, to live in two worlds. They wanted to remain loyal to their Jewish heritage, while simultaneously partaking of all that the non-Jewish world had to offer. But in order to live in both worlds, the Jewish religion had to change. Traditional Judaism of the Middle Ages kept Jews apart and separate and different from everyone else. The acculturating Jews needed a new Judaism that would help them integrate into western civilization. Thus was Reform Judaism born, a direct result of the emancipation of the Jews in 1791. And far from contributing to the dilution of Judaism, Reform Judaism actually stemmed the tide of Jewish disaffection."

The focus of my teaching tonight is: The enduring contributions to Judaism of Reform Judaism. In order to understand and to appreciate those contributions, we need a context.

In the mid-18th century, as a direct result of the French Revolution, Jews were emancipated in Europe. That is to say, Jews were permitted to come out of the ghettos of the Middle Ages and to receive equal rights as citizens of France.

Jews don't often think of themselves as being in need of emancipation just a little more than 200 years ago. But prior to emancipation, Jewish life was characterized by severe restrictions and onerous special taxes, by freedoms denied and opportunities barred. And to be sure, many in Europe were opposed to equal rights for Jews. Despite the French Revolution, European society was not at all sure the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity applied to the Jews. And the debate over whether or not they did apply was famously known at that time as "the Jewish Question." Such was the anti-semitism and general climate of intolerance in Europe in the mid 18th century.

The emancipation and its promise of an end to Jewish isolation had a profound impact on the Jewish communities of France, Germany, and central Europe. Emancipation stimulated 3 Jewish responses. The smallest response was that of rejection. Perceiving the emancipation as a threat to Jewish survival, some Jews chose to enforce a self-imposed isolation and separateness from the non-Jewish world. They chose to remain traditional in belief and practice. In a sense, they chose to stay within the ghetto.

But the majority of Jews did not just walk out of the ghetto, they ran! Many of those converted to Christianity, abandoning Judaism and Jewish life altogether. Believing that you can't legislate away anti-semitism, these Jews concluded that total assimilation was the only real way to find acceptance and advancement. But there were other Jews who also ran out of the ghetto but wanted to remain good and loyal Jews. They wanted not to assimilate but to acculturate, to live in two worlds. They wanted to remain loyal to their Jewish heritage while simultaneously partaking of all that the non-Jewish world had to offer.

But in order to live in these two worlds, the Jewish religion had to change. The traditional Judaism of the Middle Ages kept Jews apart and separated and different from everyone else. They needed a new Judaism that would help them to acculturate into Western civilization.

Thus was Reform Judaism born, a direct result of the emancipation of the Jews in 1791. And far from contributing to the dilution of Judaism, Reform Judaism stemmed the tide of Jewish disaffection.

And so the founders of Reform Judaism -- none of whom were rabbis -- began to make changes in Jewish worship and Jewish ritual practices.

In the early 1800's -- interestingly enough, not in France but in Germany -- and not in the rural areas but in the urban cities -- Reform Judaism began to catch on.

We begin to see, between 1801 and 1810, the emergence of the worship changes most associated with Reform:

- Instead of Hebrew prayers -- prayers in the vernacular
- Instead of no music -- organ and choir
- Instead of separate seating -- mixed seating
- Instead of *D'var Torah* -- sermon
- Instead of *tallit* and *kipah* -- robes
- Instead of "davening" -- unison prayer
- Instead of "shuckling" -- decorum

And the early Reformers began to make changes in the liturgy as well. They did away with Kol Nidrei and with the custom of bar mitzvah. They excised from the prayer book the traditional prayers for the return of the Jewish people to Israel, and the prayers for the coming of a personal messiah, and the prayers for the resurrection of the dead. They promulgated the view that the ethical commandments of Judaism are important; the ritual commandments are not. They put forth the view that traditional Jewish law is obsolete; Jews must have complete autonomy in matters of religious belief and practice

Why did the founders of Reform make these changes? No doubt, the founders of Reform believed that the religious modernization and reform of Judaism, by removing elements of Judaism's distinctiveness and by modeling the outward forms of modern Judaism on the German Protestant church, would lead to further political modernization and reform for Jews. We can see in their choices what great pressure they must have felt to fit in and to lie low in this new world.

By the same token, the early Reformers thought they were modernizing an ancient faith, making a dying faith live again. They believed they had rediscovered Judaism's capacity for change that had lain dormant during the Middle Ages. They believed they were saving Judaism for the future.

The emancipation came with a price. In order to belong to the 19th century European nation-state, Jews had to relinquish their sense of Jewish peoplehood, to diminish Jewish distinctiveness, to terminate the rule of Jewish law.

The ticket to admission to European society meant a redefinition of Jewish identity: Judaism was no longer a civilization, but a religion, a church. By nationality, Jews were now French or German or British. Jews were now Jewish solely by religion, by faith, by creed alone.

Of course, between 1810-and 2006, much has changed. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the pendulum began to swing in the other direction. We see this in Reform's renewed interest in Israel and Zionism and Hebrew, in the reappropriation of traditional rituals and other customs, in the acceptance of an ethnic Jewishness.

So what are the enduring contributions of Reform Judaism to the history of Judaism? Permit me to share 5 key contributions.

First and foremost, Reform Judaism insists upon the primacy of ethics in religious life. In contrast to being a ritually meticulous human being, Reform Judaism teaches a Jew must be a moral and upstanding human being.

In this vein, Reform Judaism has emphasized the voice of prophetic Judaism – the great Israelite prophets – as our most precious inheritance. Reform Judaism deems it a religious obligation to speak out for social justice and to make a better world for all.

Thirdly, Reform Judaism is responsible for the establishment of democratic values within Judaism. Every Jew possesses individual freedom and autonomy in matters of religious observance and belief

Fourth, Reform Judaism accepts Judaism as an historical phenomenon. Judaism has always undergone change and development. This is why Reform Judaism was the first movement in Judaism to accord women full equality and to accept the principle of patrilineal descent.

Fifth and finally, Reform Judaism has always upheld a commitment to intellectual honesty and a critical analysis of Jewish belief and practice. In this era of growing fundamentalisms, that is no small contribution.

This is Reform Judaism of the past and the present. Together, we shall make the Reform Judaism of the future.