

"REFORM JUDAISM IN AMERICA"

Notes on the Development of Reform prepared by Rabbi Herbert M. Baumgard, Director of the South Florida Council, Union of American Hebrew Congregation, for the course in Reform Orientation given in the Fall of 1957 as part of the curriculum within the Reform Department within the College of Jewish Studies sponsored by the Bureau of Jewish Education, Miami, Fla. These notes made available by the Bureau.

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In the period known as the "Emancipation", Europe was in search of essence and in revolt against form. Many Christians revolted against a Catholicism stressing ritual in favor of a Protestantism emphasizing simple ethics. The parallel movement among Jews was away from traditional Judaism based on the Shulchan Aruch towards a simplified Judaism. The reformers in the Jewish community sought to discover the essence of Judaism through scientific study and to hold it high in its pristine purity so that it might capture the allegiance of the emancipated Jew and the respect of enlightened men everywhere. One group of reformers, led by Abraham Geiger, developed the distinction between Moral Law and Ceremonial Law. The Moral Law, they contended, demanded unswerving obedience. The Ceremonial Law need not necessarily be obeyed; in fact, some of it was to be consciously discarded as a chain upon Judaism. (1)

The final goal of all the searching and re-moulding was to be an invigorated Judaism which could aid men in coping with the problems of a revolutionary world. In an age when grand ideas were competing for the minds of men, it is doubtful if Judaism would have retained the allegiance of the emancipated Jews if it had not also been presented as a grand idea of the ages, and if its supporters had not numbered among them men of daring, men who were "pruners of trees."

The framework of the older institutions in Europe was so strong, however, that the trend towards new political and religious ideas did not find the fullest expression in Europe. With respect to its religion, the Jewish community proved to be more conservative than the Christian community. With the Breslau Conference in 1846, the movement towards reform was halted by those who sided with Frankel in opposing planned and directed change of wide scope.

It was in America, a virgin land, that the new political and religious ideas being germinated in Europe found their fruit and flower. The political and religious revolution which began in Europe was completed in America. The American Jew who participated in the radical thinking of early America came to the conclusion that the norms of the past were melting away in a world that was surely marching towards an era of universal peace and justice. Samuel Adler, Rabbi of New York's Temple Emanuel in the third-quarter of the nineteenth century, was impelled to say, "The spirit in-dwelling here in the West, the spirit of freedom, is the newly-born Messiah." (2) So vast were the opportunities for creating and building a just society that few Americans looked back to the past nostalgically. The American Jew of the nineteenth century did not look back to Zion for glory, he looked forward to America as the best of all possible countries, to the Americans as the best of all possible peoples. As a free man among free men, as an American among Americans, as the co-founder of a new nation, the American Jew ceased to think in terms of the people-hood of Israel. No wonder, then, that the Pittsburgh Conference of American Jews in 1885 should declare, we constitute, "a religious community and not a nation." Early America was the universal solvent in which most particularistic heritages from the Old World were dissolved. The concept of the nation-hood of Israel was merely one of the countless old loyalties which the great mother America swept away with her warm smile and friendly embrace.

The Jew in early America found not only a new environment in terms of ideas. He found himself disassociated from a large Jewish community. Jews were scattered throughout America, a few to each village or town. Rabbis and shoetims were difficult to find. It not only became increasingly difficult to maintain traditional observance, the elementary matter of Jewish learning became a great problem. To meet this situation, the American Jewish community organized the Union of American Hebrew Congregations which purported to include all types of Jewish synagogues. In 1875 the Union founded the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati as a seminary to train Rabbis of all persuasions. The guiding hand in most of these procedures was Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise. The more conservative elements soon withdrew from the Union, however, and the larger group which remained identified itself more and more with the universalistic tempo of America.

In 1885 the Pittsburgh Conference was called which set forth certain guiding principles for the Union and its congregations. These principles, in condensed form, were as follows:

1. Judaism presents the highest conception of the God-idea. This God-idea is the central religious truth for the human race.
2. The Bible is the most potent instrument of religious and moral instruction. The Bible is not a scientific document and reveals its moral truths in the scientific language of its own age.
3. We accept as binding only the moral laws of Mosaic legislation, and we maintain only such ceremonies as elevate and sanctify our lives.
4. All Mosaic and rabbinical laws regulating diet, priestly purity, and dress are not binding in our day.
5. We recognize, in the modern era of universal culture of heart and intellect, the approaching of the realization of Israel's great Messianic hope, for the establishment of the kingdom of truth, justice, and peace among all men. We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community.
6. We recognize in Judaism a progressive religion, ever striving to be in accord with the postulates of reason.
7. We reassert the doctrine of Judaism that the soul is immortal. We reject as ideas not rooted in Judaism, the beliefs in bodily resurrection and in Gehenna and Eden.
8. We deem it our duty to participate in the great task of modern times, to solve, on the basis of justice and righteousness the problems presented by the contrasts and evils of the present organization of society.

In 1889 the Central Conference of American Rabbis was formed, and shortly thereafter the Union Prayer-Book appeared. The Prayer-Book contains both Hebrew Prayers and their translation in English. References in the traditional prayers to the resurrection of the body, the restitution of the Temple or the sacrificial system, and the material reward for obedience to the commandments are largely omitted.

The chief liturgical and ritual reforms which Reform Judaism instituted in America were the reading of prayers in English as well as Hebrew, the abolition of the women's gallery, the worship with uncovered heads, the use of an organ and a choir with mixed voices, the confirmation ceremony at the age of sixteen for girls as well as boys, in place of (or in addition to) the Bar Mitzvah for boys alone, and the abolition of the second day of holidays in accordance with Biblical edict.

This, then, is the general character of the Jewish movement in America which has come to be called "Reform." Not even the influx of hundreds of thousands of East European Jews who knew not Emancipation, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, has retarded the growth of this movement. (3) To be sure, alongside Reform Judaism, the new immigrants set up strong Conservative and Orthodox movements which have established their own seminaries and left their strong imprint upon American Jewish life.

It is perhaps fair to say that Orthodoxy in America has refused to make any major adjustments to the modern world. Consequently, it has lost its hold upon even the Jews who prefer to be called "Orthodox." It is certainly true that the vast majority of American Jews, including large segments of the "Orthodox," do not consider The Shulchan Aruch as the authority governing their daily lives. Except for a few densely populated Jewish communities in America's large cities, the rituals of Rabbinic Judaism are honored in the breach rather than in the observance. Since the trend in America is towards suburban living and towards the breaking up of the concentrated communities in the large cities, it is possible that Orthodoxy, as our fathers knew it, will cease to exist in America with the passing of another generation.

To meet the growing disinterest in Orthodox ranks, the more westernized and younger Orthodox Rabbis are beginning to take certain steps which Reform Judaism took in the early days of the Emancipation. In addition to the Hebrew prayers, some prayers are read in the English at many Orthodox Services; in addition to an early Friday Evening Service, a late Friday Service is frequently held; the sermon is usually given in the vernacular; women are permitted to sit in increasingly close proximity to the men. This is particularly true of newly organized Orthodox Congregations in the suburbs of large cities or in the small towns of the American South or West. It has become necessary for a group of Modern-Orthodox Rabbis to assert the progressive nature of Orthodoxy and to call for needed changes. (4)

The great mass of Conservative Rabbis and congregations in America still follow the teachings of Frankel and Schechter, recognizing the need for changes in Jewish law, but hesitant to plan any significant changes for fear of encouraging widespread deviation from traditional practice. Within the Conservative Movement, however, there are two deviationist groups. There are a number of Conservative "Rightists" who feel that change in Jewish life must come, but that it can come only through changes in the law according to traditional methods. This group is closely allied with the Modern-Orthodox Rabbis. Unfortunately, they have not yet been able to agree upon techniques for introducing needed changes.

There is a significant "Leftist" group within the Conservative Movement. Prominent leaders of this group are Dr. Mordecai Kaplan, Professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary (Conservative) and Rabbi Ira Eisenstein, Past President of the Rabbinical Assembly of America (Conservative). Rabbi Eisenstein's impatience with the bulk of his conservative colleagues is reflected by his address as part of a symposium before the 1951 convention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (Reform). Said Rabbi Eisenstein, "At our convention last week, we took up the problem of the 'agunah'. We left her where we had found her twenty years ago!" Rabbi Eisenstein and Dr. Kaplan are the leaders of the Reconstructionist Party (5) which originated within the Conservative Movement, but which contains many Reform Rabbis as well who find the objectives of the party consistent with Reform objectives. Actually, the advocates of this relatively new program claim it is not a distinct movement. The Reconstructionist philosophy shows the influence of the Reform philosophy in that it asserts: (1) The need for Jews to participate in attempts to solve the social problems of the world at large; (2) The need for Jews to proclaim new moral truths. (Revolution did not cease at Sinai); (3) Salvation for the Jew will come not through a personal Messiah, but through the efforts of all Jews and all men everywhere. (Reform speaks of a Messianic Day); (4) The need for sifting the ceremonial law to determine which ceremonies are meaningful for our own day.

There are important differences of emphasis between the Reconstructionist and Reform programs. Reform, in the past, has accented the significance of Jewry as bearers of the world's great religion, while Reconstructionism has spoken of the significance of Zion, the Hebrew language, and traditional folkways as pillars of the Hebrew "Religious Civilization." There are important differences between Reconstructionist and Reform theology also, but the differences here and between other doctrines are less important than the likeness of the mental climate which dominates both groups. Both programs insist that the Jew must expose his religion to the microscope of reason and follow a planned program of reconstructing his heritage. Both programs are activist. It is not strange that there is much goodwill between the two movements, and that many Reform Rabbis find it possible to be Reconstructionists.

The insistence upon planned change which men like Dr. Kaplan and Rabbi Eisenstein are bringing to the Conservative Movement was evidenced in the Reform Movement long years ago. Many critics of Reform claimed within recent years that it had abandoned its progressive nature and had developed an orthodoxy of its own. They claimed Reform had become a "reformed" Judaism, wary of making any alterations in the reforms it had managed to institute. This criticism is certainly not valid today. So profound are the changes within Reform today towards a planned ritualism that some observers have held that Reform is returning to the traditionalism of the past. It would indeed be odd if at the moment in American Jewish history when Orthodoxy and Conservatism are revealing the influence of Reform patterns, this Reform should turn its back upon its own doctrines to follow its sister movements.

What is nearer to the truth is that a new pattern for American Jewry seems to be evolving. The shift of Orthodox and Conservative thinking, in some measure, to the left, while Reform shifts to the right are each indications of the new pattern. The shift is most manifest within the Reform Movement because it is a liberal movement which allows its congregations the greatest area for free experimentation and creative programming. (6) Those who held that the license within the Reform Movement had led to complete non-observance of Jewish ceremonies are slowly being forced to eat their words. For voluntarily, and on the basis of critical thought and experimentation, Reform is re-introducing varied customs, if somewhat modified, into its observance.

Operating under the Commission on Synagogue Activities of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, a Committee on Ceremonies is actively at work gleaning the results of many congregational experiments and suggesting techniques of observance to the congregations. At the 1950 meeting of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, Rabbi Solomon Freehof declared, "The place which the Commission on Social Justice occupied in the center of Conference interest is now occupied by the Committee on Ceremonies, and there are yearnings for new Shulchan Aruchs, codes of religious observances. (7) Rabbi Maurice Eisendrath, President of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, stated at the Biennial General Assembly in 1948, "Only such a movement, it seems to me, as hews to at least a minimum code of practice, which demands at least a modicum of observance, in ceremonial as well as in social and moral conduct, will possess that authority and effectiveness necessary to withstand the spiritual chaos of our time." (8)

It is important to note that there is a new spirit behind the demand for a minimum code or guide to observance. The sanction which is enlisted in support of observance is not the God of Israel, nor the Talmud. The new sanction behind observance is reason and the results of experience, the considered conclusion that some observance is necessary for group identification, group survival, and as a stimulant to ethical living. It must be understood that the need is not necessarily for the

"ceremonies of our fathers." For example, there is no sign of a growing interest in Kashruth or in the wearing of Tophillin. There is much of selectiveness and creativeness in the search within the Reform Movement for vital and meaningful Jewish ceremonies.

Without surrendering any of its insistence that Jews of today have the right to cast-off meaningless ceremony or to re-evaluate their religion in modern terms, Reform congregations in America, are, nevertheless, introducing much of the tradition to their Temples and to their homes. They are turning to the use of more Hebrew in the Religious Service which had become predominately English. (9) The congregations are using less of Bach and Brahms and more of traditional Jewish melodies. The Union of American Hebrew Congregations has established the outstanding cantorial school in America. Here men are trained by the finest teachers in the field to master traditional hazanuth freed of its perversions and commercializations. Reform congregations are offering posts to the graduates of this school who are also free to serve Conservative and Orthodox congregations if they so choose. Reform religious schools are intensifying the teaching of ceremonies and the Hebrew language. Reform Jews are seriously cultivating Shabbat and Festival observances in their homes, including Hebrew songs and specialized Jewish dishes. The singing of Kol Nidre, which had been withdrawn from many Reform congregations, is now almost universal. The Shofar is once again in extensive use. The Sunday morning religious service is practically extinct. Zionism has as much a place in the curriculum of the Reform school as it has in any other school. It is becoming increasingly possible for the traditional Jew to feel a kinship with the Reform environment.

Just as some Conservative and Orthodox Rabbis are permitting the modified observance of some traditional ceremonies, so many Reform Rabbis are softening their attitude towards certain rituals which were previously anathema to them. Some reform Rabbis used to view the yanulka as sign of dead Judaism. They refused to include the custom of the broken glass in the marriage ceremony. (10) This type of attitude is becoming increasingly rare today. The hat has ceased to be a fighting issue to most Reform Rabbis, many of whom now wear a hat of some sort during the Religious Service. Many other customs, such as the broken glass, have been re-interpreted and are being included by some Reform Rabbis in their observance.

Hebrew, for a brief interval, was not considered an essential part of the vocabulary of the Reform Rabbi. (11) Today, the Reform Rabbi is intensively trained, not only in Biblical Hebrew, but in Modern Hebrew as well. It is worth noting that Dr. Nelson Glueck, new President of the combined Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, delivered his address to the 1952 graduating class in New York in Hebrew. Dr. Glueck spoke, among other things, of the need for cultural and spiritual allegiance with "Eretz Yisroel." When Dr. Simon Halkin, now at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, taught this student at the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion short years ago, he addressed his class only in Hebrew. There are few more ardent hasidim of modern Hebrew culture than the younger Reform Rabbis.

When the Hebrew Union College was founded in 1875, it reflected the radical universalism of early America. The second major reform seminary, the Jewish Institute of Religion in New York City, reflects the newer spirit of the Reform Jewish Community in 1922 when the Institute was founded. From its beginnings, the Institute was Zionistically oriented. In Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, founder and president of the school, were combined the qualities of a Jew unafraid to re-mould his Jewish environment, and yet, anxious to assert the people-hood of Israel. Time and again the lionine voice of Dr. Wise was heard raised in protest against the violations of a human right on the American social scene, and in the next breath he would be insisting upon the founding of a Jewish national home. Belittling the accusations of dual loyalty hurled at Zionists, Dr. Wise once declared, "AS a citizen I belong wholly to America.

The memories, the traditions, the hopes, the dreams, the sufferings, the sorrows of four thousand years have not sundered me from the blood and the race of the people of Israel, I am one of them." (12) It is, perhaps, in the beliefs and labors of Dr. Wise that we have the best description of the emerging Reform Jew. Before his death, Dr. Wise handed over the reins of the Institute he founded to Dr. Nelson Glueck, President of the Hebrew Union College. In the union of the two schools, one representing the older Reform position in America, and the other, the newer attitude, we can see a symbol of the emerging Reform philosophy. Shortly before his death Dr. Wise was heard to say, "If I could live my life over again, I would be vigorously Reform in philosophy, and more traditional in observance."

The new Reform concern for ritual, the increased ties to the Hebrew language, are all part of a more fundamental change in Reform Jewish thinking. As Dr. Freehof has stated, the Reform Jew has begun to be interested "not only in Judaism, but also in Jewishness." There are many reasons today why the Reform Jew is more conscious of his ties with the Jewish people and with Zion. The sufferings of the Jews of Europe under Hitler, the gallant struggle of all Jews everywhere to establish the State of Israel (in which Reform Jews participated with as much zeal as any group of Jews) (13), the re-birth of the Hebrew language, the disillusionment with the aims of secular government following World War Two - all of these reasons, and others, contributed towards a growing awareness among Jews that their fate is a common one. The Reform Jew has not ceased to strike out in an effort to mould his environment as a man among men, but he has also turned his efforts inward to participate in the folkways and in the aspirations of the Jewish people as such. The Reform Jew has not lessened his emphasis upon the universalistic aspects of Judaism, but he has learned that he must also work through his own people as a continuing group, in order that there might be such a thing as bearers of the Jewish faith *בְּיָדֵינוּ יִשְׁרָאֵל*

If Reform Judaism in America has been guilty in the past of forgetting Jerusalem, it has to the last three decades made positive contributions towards the re-building of Israel. On the other hand, it must be credited with the enlargement of the perspective of the Jewish community. Reform has gone back to Jewish origins to stress once again, the simple truths upon which Judaism has been built. Through its critical attitude towards ceremony, it has set in motion a process of re-evaluating Jewish custom and ceremony so that Jewish observance might have more validity and appeal in modern times.

The founders of Reform Judaism (14) sought to impress upon the Jewish people the necessity of meeting a changing world situation with internal changes in Judaism. This truth is only now being recognized by some of the Rabbis within the Conservative and Orthodox movements. Reform has sought to bring to Jewry a recognition of the need to operate upon the great social issues of our time. The Conservative Movement is now so fully in accord with this view that it is possible for the Social Action Committee of the Rabbinical Assembly (Conservative) and the Central Conference of American Rabbis (Reform) to work together on many issues. Reform, along with Conservative Judaism, has emphasized the necessity of analyzing Judaism and its culture from the scientific viewpoint which governs our modern world. Judaism has become stronger, not weaker, because of the scholarship and the studies which the scientific movement in Judaism has sponsored.

The emphasis which Reform placed upon the freedom of conscience of the individual has not brought about the wholesale flight from Judaism which traditionalists feared. Instead, we are witnessing today the voluntary return of Reform Jews to the observance of many ceremonies in the absence of any form of communal coercion. (15) This phenomenon may make some of the intensely traditional Jews less anxious about making some adjustment to the 20th century environment.

The development of deviationist groups within the hitherto passive Conservative and Orthodox ranks would indicate that "the principle of adaptation to changing needs and circumstances" (16) which has been characteristic of the Reform Movement, is being recognized and advocated to a greater extent throughout American Jewry. The development of Reconstructionism within recent years and the gradual trend within Reform towards "Jewishness as well as Judaism" would indicate that there is a large area of rapprochement between Reform, and, at least, one influential wing of Conservative Judaism. It may well be that more and more segments of the American Jewish community will mesh together as the community matures. Perhaps, in time, we shall have only a Traditional and a Reform Judaism in America.

"There is a time to break down and a time to build."

There is a time to break down", said Koheleth, "and a time to build." Reform Judaism in America has passed through the state of rooting out, and is now planting seeds which hold great promise for a Judaism of tomorrow which combines the richness of the tradition with the spice of creative evolution.

FOOTNOTES FOR THE VARIOUS PAGES:

1. For a treatment of the early development of dissident movements in Judaism in the Europe of this period see David Philipson, "The Reform Movement in Judaism," New York 1931.
2. Quoted by David Philipson, "The Reform Movement in Judaism," New York, 1931, page 349.
3. American Jewry is probably split rather evenly at the present time. (One-third Orthodox, one-third Conservative, one-third Reform)
4. See Rabbi Emanuel Rackman's article in the June, 1952, "Commentary," entitled "Orthodox Judaism Moves with the Times."
5. For a full discussion of the Reconstructionist Program see "Creative Judaism," Ira Eisenstein, New York, 1941; "A Partisan Guide to the Jewish Problem," Milton Steinberg, New York, 1945, pp. 174ff; "The Future of the American Jew," Mordecai Kaplan, New York, 1948.
6. "...two hundred and forty-odd congregations out of the total of two hundred and forty-five which responded (to the survey) have moved towards increased ritualism"..., Report of the Committee on Reform Practice, November 13, 1950. A more recent report 1953, shows this trend is growing.
7. Quoted in the Report of the Committee on Reform Practice, 1950. There is a little of rhetoric in the statement.
8. Rabbi Eisendrath again made this point at the Assembly of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1953, in his "State of the Union" address.
9. For details on all these observances and others, see The Report on Reform Jewish Practice, 1950 and 1953.
10. Presumably, because of its association with the re-building of the Temple in Jerusalem or with one breaking of the hymen.
11. Isaac Mayer Wise, revered leader of early American Reform, emphasized the significance of the Hebrew language as an aid to scholarship and as a bond among Jewry. He wrote in the "American Israelite," "The individual must pray in the language he knows best, but these services must be conducted in Hebrew not merely to maintain the union of Israel in the synagogue, but to maintain the language of the Bible in the mouth of Israel .. the main portion of the divine service must remain in Hebrew." Many Reform Rabbis were and are outstanding Hebrew scholars.
12. "Challenging Years," Stephen Wise, New York, 1949, page 140. This autobiography of the revered Reform leader shows dramatically the union of both universalistic and particularistic tendencies within Judaism.

13. Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver, a graduate of the Hebrew Union College, and other Cincinnati trained rabbis and Reform lay leaders took especially active parts in the drive for the Jewish state. The student body at the College has long been pro-Zionist. On the other hand, the official policy at America's conservative seminary has always been cool towards the political fight for the Jewish state until recent years. The students here also were pro-Zionist.
14. Abraham Geiger, among others in Europe; Isaac M. Wise, David Einhorn, among others in America. For a full discussion of early Reform in America see Sylvan Schwartzman, "Reform Judaism in the Making."
15. David Philipson's phrase.
16. Rabbi Jacob Weinstein writing in the CCAR Journal, October, 1957, page 6, writes "The important consideration is that these changes have not been introduced from above. They have sprung up from beneath, a grass roots return to religious sources, an unconscious, unled but nonetheless effective repudiation of the early Reform leadership which had so radically stripped Judaism of its rituals and folkways."