

THE PRINCIPLES OF LIBERAL (REFORM) JUDAISM

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1. WHAT ARE THE PRINCIPLES OF JUDAISM?

A) The Babylonian Belief

Before we can talk about the principles of Liberal Judaism we must understand the fundamental principles of the Jewish religion as its founders understood it. Judaism began as a revolt against the Babylonian way of life. The Babylonians believed that 1) There were many gods; 2) Who competed with each other for power on earth; 3) Who sought to satisfy their human-like appetites by working men as slaves. This system of belief had certain definite consequences: 1) Since there were many gods with divided powers, and since there was a hierarchy of gods, the individual man did not know to whom to pray; 2) Since the gods were not basically moral or just, the individual man did not know how to satisfy the gods and resorted to magic; 3) Since the purpose of man was to provide food for the gods, the mass of men were exploited by self-appointed "stewards" of the gods, their representatives on earth.

B) The Hebrew Belief

Abraham's revolt against the Babylonians was an economic, political, and religious revolt combined. He contended: 1) That there was only one God, whose power was not limited to one city. 2) That this God was impartially just, and holy. 3) That this God did not have human-like appetites; therefore the purpose of man was to grow in terms of personality and spirit. 4) That there were no intermediaries between an individual and the highest God. God was near and would hear the least of men.

All of these aspects of the early Jewish belief took shape in an optimistic attitude toward life which briefly stated was: IF MEN WILL BUT OBEY THE KNOWN LAWS OF GOD, THEN THE OBEDIENT WILL BE REWARDED, THE DISOBEDIENT (UNJUST) PUNISHED, AND EACH MAN WILL ENJOY THE FRUITS OF HIS OWN LABOR IN THIS WORLD.

Practically, the Jewish hypothesis of life worked out so as to make life reasonably secure and events reasonably foreseeable. All life was governed by the "BRIS" between God and man. The universe was considered bound by LAW, which was KNOWN to man, and God was the guarantee that this law would be ENFORCED. Man, as the agency of God, helped in enforcing the law.

C) The Changes of Time

Time brought many changes to this simple and elemental faith of the Patriarchs. The early Jewish religion was designed for a nomadic people. When Israel grew larger and a city life developed under the kings, the needs of the people changed and the law became more complicated. As property and power inequities grew, it became more and more difficult for the individuals and their tribes to enforce the ancient law. Kings and priests, seeking to preserve their own hold on the people, added more and more ceremonial laws to the holy code. Finally, the Prophets revolted against the trend to formalism and again upheld the simple laws of the Patriarchs.

D) The Exile

When the Jews were taken into captivity, the course of development of the people changed drastically. In Israel, and for a long while in Babylonia, the Jews were able to make their impress upon their environment, to change it somewhat to meet their needs. The Talmud is an instrument of social change, introducing new laws designed to meet new conditions of living.

Later generations of Jews, however, not only ceased to create new Jewish law, but almost saw in the law an object of worship itself. In Eastern Europe, where the Jews were unable to mould their environment, changes in the law were discouraged for fear of the disintegration of the Jewish community. The "Orthodoxy" of Eastern Europe was not typical of the spirit and development of Judaism through the ages which was essentially liberal, changing to meet the needs of the environment while ever asserting the fundamental doctrines of Abraham.

E) Liberal (Reform) Judaism

The spirit of defeatism which characterized the Europe of the Dark Ages permeated the Orthodox Jewish communities. Man lost faith in himself; he refused to exercise the right of choice which God had granted him. With the period of the Enlightenment came a new faith in man, and the questioning of all existing institutions, political as well as religious. Europeans fled authoritarian governments to create a great democracy. Christians fled Catholicism to create Protestantism. Jews fled Orthodoxy to create Liberal Judaism.

Europe of the post-Middle Ages was in revolt against form and in search of ESSENCE. Jews sought to seek the simple tenets of their faith and to glorify them. Obedience to ceremonies was considered optional or of questionable value. The Liberal Jews who came to America saw in this country the "Zion" of the Messianic Age, and they saw an enlightened people of many faiths as the "Messiah". Liberal Judaism in America, radical as American politics, set up these principles:

1. Judaism is divided into moral and ceremonial law. The former must be obeyed. The latter need not be.
2. Jews do not look forward to the re-establishment of Israel as the Messianic State. They consider themselves as a religious group, Americans amongst Americans of other faiths.
3. Jews must emphasize the ethics of their religion and must labor to express these ethics in politics and in their everyday living.
4. The Jews have a mission to bring the simple faith of Abraham and the Prophets to all mankind. To the extent that they aid in this task, Christianity and Islam are sister-religions.

F) Changes in Liberal Judaism

The early leaders of Liberal Judaism accomplished much for Judaism. They reminded their fellow Jews that, after all, it is the ethics of any religion which make it important. It is thought by many Liberal Jews today, however, that Liberal Jews have cast off too many ceremonies willy-nilly, that some of them can be beautiful, instructive, and inducive to religious activity. Accordingly, Liberal Judaism is in the process

today of introducing some old ceremonies, some new ones for suggested observance. NO CEREMONY IS PRESENTED FOR COMPULSORY OBSERVANCE, and Liberal Jews are still free to choose whether or not they will observe a particular ceremony. Further, the authority for the observance is not the Shulchan Aruch but the knowledge gained from experience that certain types of ceremony can be helpful in binding a people together and making its members more conscious of their group identity.

Rabbi Freehof has said that Liberal Jews today are concerned not only with Judaism, but also with "Jewishness". In other words, there is a return to the consciousness that we Jews constitute something more than a religious group. Many Liberal rabbis, notably Stephen S. Wise and Abba H. Silver have been leaders in the struggle to realize a Jewish state in Israel. Liberal Jews today, by and large, share a warm feeling with the rest of their Jewish brethren towards Israel, and affirm a cultural and religious allegiance with the Jews of Israel.

In spite of certain changes within Liberal Judaism, it retains its dynamic outlook; affirming its faith in the ability of man, under God, to achieve the Messianic Day; insisting upon the right to change the ceremonial law, when necessary; and stressing the need for ethical action by the Jew in every aspect of human endeavor.