

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A REFORM JEW?

*Leiman*

A REFORM JEW MUST BE ONE WHO KNOWS THE HISTORY OF JUDAISM SO WELL THAT HE IS ABLE TO SELECT THAT PART OF IT WHICH IS THE MOST MEANINGFUL TO PROJECT INTO THE FUTURE. A REFORM JEW MUST BE ONE WHO HAS SO THOROUGHLY STUDIED JEWISH SOURCES THAT HE IS ABLE TO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN IDEAS OF ETERNAL VALUE AND INCIDENTAL TRAPPINGS THAT ARE NOT ESSENTIAL TO JUDAISM. BEFORE ONE CAN HOPE TO REFORM ANYTHING, HE MUST UNDERSTAND THE CONTENT OF THAT HE WANTS TO REFORM. UNFORTUNATELY, FEW REFORM JEWS QUALIFY FOR THE TITLE OF REFORMER.

FOR EXAMPLE, WHEN A REFORM JEW READS A STORY IN THE BIBLE, HE MUST BE ABLE TO SIFT OUT OF THAT STORY THE MESSAGE WHICH IS MEANINGFUL FOR OUR TIME. LET US RECALL THAT TREMBLING MOMENT WHEN MOSES, ~~HAVING ESCAPED FROM EGYPT AS A YOUNG~~ WAS A MERE SHEPHERD TENDING HIS FATHER\*IN\*AWS SHEEP~~S~~ IN THE LAND OF MIDIAN. . MOSES WAS ABSENT MINDEDLY TENDING THE SHEEP WHEN SUDDENTLY HE SAW A BUSH CATCH FIRE AND BURST INTO FLAME. THE UNUSUAL THING ABOUT THIS BUSH, HOWEVER, WAS THAT THE FIRE DID NOT CONSUME IT. MOSES UNDERSTOOD, SAYS THE BIBLE, THAT THIS BUSH WAS SYMBOLIC OF <sup>the Jewish</sup> GOD, FOR IT CREATED HEAT AND LIGHT IN ENDLESS AMOUNTS, AND THE ~~SOURCE~~ <sup>of</sup> CREATION WAS STILL AS ~~FERTILE AS EVER~~ FULL AS EVER. . IN RECOGNITION OF THE HOLINESS OF THIS GROUND, MOSES TOOK OFF HIS SHOES .

NOW IT IS POSSIBLE TO LOOK AT THIS INCIDENT IN TWO WAYS. WE CAN SAY THAT THE IMPT THING ABOUT THIS EVENT IS THAT MOSES TOOK OFF HIS SHOES TO PRAY, AND THEREAFTER, WE COULD TAKE OFF OUR SHOES WHEN WE PRAY, FOLLOWING THE EX. OF MOSES. OR WE COULD SAY THAT THE IMPT. THING ABOUT THIS DESCRIPTION IS THAT IT TELLS US SOMETHING ABOUT THE NATURE OF GOD. IT TELLS US THAT GOD, SYMBOLIZED IN THE BUSH, IS AN ENDLESS SOURCE OF ENERGY AND LOVE, YET HE HIMSELF IS NOT CONSUMED, HE ALWAYS HAS MORE TO GIVE. A RITUALISTICALLY ORIENTED JEW WOULD BE CONCERNED THAT MOSES TOOK OFF HIS SHOES AND WOULD THEN FOLLOW THAT RITUAL\*PATTERN TO THE END OF HIS DAYS. A REFORM JEW WOULD SAY, " IF GOD IS AN ENDLESS SOURCE OF ENERGY AND LOVE, I SHOULD NEVER DESPAIR, FOR HIS POWER IS ALWAYS AROUND US".

ACTUALLY, THE RITUAL OF TAKING OFF THE SHOES TO PRAY IS THE ORIGINAL JEWISH CUSTOM AT THE TIME OF PRAYER. THIS IS THE MOST ORTHODOX OF PROCEDURES. THE BIBLE NOWHERE TELLS US THAT THE BIBLICAL JEWS PRAYED WITH A HAT ON. IT TELLS US THAT THEY PRAYED WITH THEIR SHOES OFF. ~~BUT CERTAIN REFORM JEWS CAME ALONG AND SAID??~~ MARK YOU, THIS WAS NOT DISTINCTIVELY A JEWISH CUSTOM . FOR ALL THE NOMADS, LIKE ABRAHAM, PRAYED WITH THEIR SHOES OFF, AND TO THIS DAY THE ARABS IN THEIR MOSQUES PRAY WITH THEIR SHOES OFF. IN THIS SENSE, THE ARABS WHO ARE THE ENEMIES OF THE JEWS OF ISRAEL ARE MORE JEWISHLY ORTHODOX IN THEIR PRAYER CUSTOMS, THAN ARE THE JEWS OF ISRAEL WHO HAVE REFORMED THE CUSTOM OF PRAYING WITH THE SHOES OFF.

WHY DID THE JEWS THAT WE KNOW AS ORTHOD<sup>d</sup> MAKE BOLD TO CHANGE THE CUSTOM OF MOSES AND ABRAHAM? THE ANSWER IS SIMPLE. IN THE COUNTRIES TO WHICH THEY WANDERED IN EUROPE, ESPECIALLY IN SOUTHERN EUROPE, THE NATIVES WORSHIPPED NOT BY TAKING THEIR SHOES OFF, BUT BY PUTTING A HAT ON, SO THE LATER JEWS ALTERED THE MOSAIC CUSTOMS. ACTUALLY, THE MATTER OF WEARING A HAT IS NOT RECORDED

RECORDED ~~IN~~ BY A JEWISH SCHOLAR UNTIL RASHI, THE GREAT TRADITIONAL BIBLE SCHOLAR, WROTE IN THE 12th century, that he visited the land of SPAIN AND FOUND THERE SOME JEWS WHO FOLLOWED THE CURIOUS CUSTOM OF WEARING HATS. NOW THE JEWS WHO CHANGED THE PRACTICE FROM TAKING OFF SHOES TO PUTTING ON HATS DID SO BECAUSE THEY UNDERSTOOD THAT THE IMPRT. PART OF THE STORY CONCERNING MOSES AND THE BURNING BUSH WAS NOT THAT HE TOOK OFF HIS SHOES, BUT THAT GOD IS PICTURED AS A SOURCE OF ETERNAL POWER. TO BE SURE, THOSE WHO ADVOCATED THE CUSTOM OF THE NEW LAND WERE REFORMERS. THEY MUST HAVE BEEN REDICULED ~~BY~~ THE ORTHODOX WHO PRECEDED THEM. NO DOUBT THERE WERE JEWS WHOSE FATHERS AND MOTHERS AND GRANDFATHERS HAD TAKEN OFF THEIR SHOES FOR GENERATIONS, AND THESE JEWS EXPERIENCED GREAT PSCYHOLOGICAL CONFLICT IN BEING DENIED THE PRIVILEGE OF TAKING OFF THEIR SHOES .. AFTER ALL, HADN'T THEY BEEN TAUGHT THAT WHEN YOU ENTERED A HOUSE OF GOD YOU HAD TO TAKE OFF YOUR SHOES? NO DOUBT THESE PEOPLE FELT THAT NOT TO TAKE OFF THEIR SHOES AND TO PUT ON A HAT WAS AN ACT OF DISLOYALTY TO THEIR PARENTS, AND THEY WERE FILLED WITH EMOTIONAL CONFLICT, YET SOMEHOW THE NEW CUSTOM WON OUT. IT WON OUT FOR ONE SIMPTE REASON. THE JEWS NOW LIVED AMONG PEOPLES WO WHOM TAKING OFF THE SHOES WAS NOT A SIGN OF RESPECT BUT A SIGN OF DISRESPECT.

WE IN AMERICA FIND OURSELVES IN THE MIDST OF A SIMILAR DILEMNA IN TERMS OF THE RITUAL OF WORSHIP. OUR FATHERS FROM EUROPE TAUGHT US TO WORSHIP WITH HATS, BUT IN AMERICA ~~WEARIN?~~ WHEN YOU ENTER A PUBLIC ROOM TO SHOW YOUR RESPECT YOU TAKE OFF YOUR HAT. AMERICAN JEWRY IS NOW ABOUT EQUALLY DIVIDED IN MAKING AN ADJUSTMENT TO ITS NEW SURROUNDINGS. ABOUT HALF OF AMERICAIS JEWS WEAR H ATS WHEN THEY WORSHIP AND HALF DON'T. WE IN BETH AM, WITH OUR COMPROMISE PRACTICE OF PERMITTING A CHOICE WITH RESPECT TO THE H AT, ARE AN EXCELLENT ILLUSTRATION OF A GRADUAL CHANGE\*OVER WHICH IS TAKING PLACE WITH RESPECT TO THIS RITUAL. AND MANY WHO INTELLECTUALLY RECOGNIZE THAT IN AMERICA ONE TAKES OFF HIS HAT AS A SIGN OF RESPECT , FIND, STILL ~~EMO~~ EMOTIONAL CONFLICTS WHEN THEY THINK ABOUT ~~ABANDONING~~ THE OLDER CUSTOM. THEY FEEL GUILTY IN DOING OTHER THAN MOTHER OR FATHER TAUGHT THEM TO DO. IT ISN'T THE REL. CUSTOM THAT BINDS THEM SO MUCH AS LOYALTY TO PARENTAL TEACHING. WE IN BETH AM HAVE RECOGNIZED THIS EMOTIONAL CONFLICT AND HAVE GIVEN THE INDIVIDUAL HIS CHOICE IN THIS RESPECT, BUT MEANWHILE THE TREND IN AMERICA IS DEFINITELY AWAY FROM THE EUROPEAN PRACTICE OF HAT-WARING. AS ~~REFORM~~ JEWS HOWEVER WE MUST MAKE CERTAIN TO UNDERSTAND THAT THE HAT IS NO MORE SACRED THAN THE TAKING OFF OF THE SHOES, AND WHAT IS IMPORTANT IS THAT A MAN SHOW HIS REVERENCE TO GOD NOT RITUALISTICALLY BUT IN TERMS OF HIS EVERYDAY DEEDS.

~~THREE/KEY/TWO/OTHER/RITUALS//~~ WHILE THE WEARING OF A YAMULKA IS NOT MENTIONED IN THE BIBLE, THE WEARING OF TEPHILLIN AND TZIZZIS ARE. Immediately after the proclamation of the sh8ma in the ~~bidu~~ there is the paragraph, "thou shalt love-etc- Traditional Jews interpret this to mean that they should bind the phylacteries or black leather straps around their hands, and that they should put a box representing the d'varim or laws between their eyes. Reform Jews look at this prayer and say, the important thing here is that we teach the laws, that we act them out with our hands, and that we keep these laws as a pattern for behavior in our mind as frontlets betwen our eyes.

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THE BIBLE ALSO TELLS US THAT PART OF THE RITUAL CUSTOM OF THAT DAY WAS THE PLACING OF FRINGES ON THE CORNER OF ONE'S GARMENTS AS A REMINDER OF THE D'VARIM OR LAWS. LATER ON THE PRACTICE SPREAD TO PLACING THE FRINGES ON THE ENDS OF THE "ABAYAH OR BLANKET THAT IS WORN BY THE NOMADS FOR PROTECTION FROM SUN AND RAIN AND WHICH HAS BLACK STRIPES AT THE ENDS. In other words while tzissis or fringes are described in the Bible, the tallis is not. The bible does not tell us that Abraham or Moses or Jeremian or Daniel prayed with either yamulka or tallis, but it tells us they prayed reverently. The step taken by Jews later to sew the fringes or tzissisz on the abayah or blanket worn for protection from the weater resulted in the creation of the tallis. The Jewish encyclopedia invites us to believe that there are more Arabs today wearing the Abayah than Jews; there are more Arabs wearing the form of the tallis than Jews, altho the Arabs, of course, give to their blanket no ritualistic significance.

So we find ourselves with a curious anomaly as we <sup>examine</sup> ~~example~~ some of our chief rituals. The Arabs, enemies of the Jewish homeland, observe our more ancient customs of taking off the shoes to worship and the wearing of the Abayah, while we, descendents of Moses, for the most part have sharply revised our ritualistic observance. Why have we done so? We have done so for the same reason that the Arabs today observe many other customs of their fathers and we do not. Travelling has cultivated the Jew. Not only his religious understanding, but his cultural, and scientific knowledge has been greatly broadened. The Arab clings to the ritualistic norms of his fathers just as he clings to ancient techniques of agriculture and to primitive medicine. Dr. Mayhugh who addressed us several yrs ago reported to us that when you fly over the Israeli area you can tell exactly where the Arab ~~and~~ ends and the Israeli area begins by the degree of cultivation and reclamation performed by the Hebrews. The modern Jew does not farm like his father and he does not pray like his father. He does not cure pneumonia like his grandfathers and he does not think of God quite like his grandfather did. There is a simple reason for all this, the Jew has travelled and studied, and he has learned many valuable lessons of life. otherwise he would not have survived. ~~Pr~~/

Primarily the Jew has learned the difference between that which is central, that which is most imp., and that which is ephemeral or incidental. To be a Reform Jew means to go in search of that which is central, that which is at the heart of Judaism and of life itself.