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Reform Judaism - An Agonizing Reappraisal, 1966.

REFORM JUDAISM - AN AGONIZING RE-APPRAISAL

RABBI DANIEL JEREMY SILVER

JANUARY 16, 1966

Moses, my dear friends, lived in the thirteenth century before The Common Era. Amos lived in the seventh pre-Christian century. Akiba in the last part of the first century of this era, in the first part of the second century. Moses Maimonides was born in 1135, dies in 1204. If any of these classic teachers of our faith were to return among us, they would be surprised and bemused by many of our rites and even by some of our religious institutions which we assume to be quintessentially Jewish. Moses never entered a synagogue. Amos never met a rabbi. Akiba never heard the wonderful, melodious chant of a chazan. Maimonides never participated in a Bar-Mitzvah. The forms of our religious life have been reformed in each age and by each generation. Judaism has always re-designed its rituals to fit the cultural level of the day. It has always invested the particular kinds of religious leaders it required for teaching and for inspiration. It has always sculpted the institutions which would give viability and substance to the Jewish community.

, to each day the Jewish way of life appropriate to it. Change, reform is of the very essence of our history. Our Reform movement differs only in its rather dramatic and abrupt pattern of reform. The times and the tastes had changed so radically and so quickly that Judaism had to make a dramatic response. Change is elemental and ever present in our history. Why then did so many have such difficulty accepting the legitimacy of Reform? And why do some still have difficulty in accepting it? The answer of course lies

in human nature. None of us likes to give up custom and habits of presumed sanctity. Look at the difficulty many are having giving up the ugly habits and the outrageous sanctities of racial ostracism. The long medieval cultural pattern lasted for many of our people until they embarked for America or Israel. Then, too, the lack of a critical historical tradition within the culture had convinced many that Judaism had always been precisely what they knew it to be. They believed, if I were to simplify it, that Moses had studied Talmud in a Yeshivah, worshipped three times a day in shul, and worn the koftan and the beard familiar in Eastern Europe. But no religious movement can deny the surge, the sweeping tides of history. Reform and Conservative Judaism and yes, even today's Orthodoxy are responses to the tides of history. If you doubt that even Orthodoxy represents the principles of change, I ask you only to compare the curriculum of a modern Orthodox all-day parochial school with classes of philosophy and physics, chemistry and calculus and Talmud - to the curriculum of a Polish Yeshiva with its classes in Talmud and its prohibition of secular learning. There is no miracle, really, implicit in survival. Jews have survived because in each age there have been great men and grand congregations which have attempted to see beyond contemporary customs to the founding Covenant and who insisted that Jewish life must be vital and responsive, and that Jewish life must represent clearly and realistically the core truths, and who fought their way and sought a way to make their congregations and their schools responsive to the whole dramatic sweep of our tradition. And that is why the believer and the reformer are one and the same. To believe is to reform. To believe is to affirm; to affirm is to insist upon relevance. To reform is to believe. We do not

ask and seek after the good ways. Walk there -
in and the light of your soul. Let me be clear

bother reforming, changing and renewing that in which we have no interest. That is why believer and reformer have always sought to find out how they and their children and their communities can touch the spiritual reality of the faith and how they can come alive to the living presence of God. And that is why the believer and reformer - for they are one and the same - have always sought to understand the specific implications of the moral commandments, of human decency, of human dignity and social justice; how it can relate, how it does relate to the complicated, intricate economic and political situation of their day. That is why the believer and the reformer, for they are one and the same, have always sought to create a viable pattern of Jewish survival. They did not love the tradition less; they loved Judaism more. 'Return O Israel unto the Lord thy God' - the principle of the Reform - return, renewal, a tracing back to God and to the ultimate fundamentals of the faith, implicit in all that has happened in our history. Oh yes, we changed the ritual, but we found words and symbols which inspired this generation. We changed institutions, the Temple into the Synagogue, in order to create forms and the institutions which are meaningful within our social context. But our purpose is that which has been the purpose of Judaism from the very beginning, to sanctify God and to establish justice in this world.

The prophets, the grand and glorious prophets of Israel, were the first reformers. Contrary to popular belief, the prophets were not religious innovators. The prophets did not come to teach a new dogma, to preach some new doctrine. They were not religious revolutionaries at all. 'Return O Israel unto the Lord thy God.' 'Thus saith the Lord,' says Jeremiah. 'Stand ye in the ways and ask and seek after the old ways which are the good ways. Walk therein and therein shalt thou find rest for your soul.' Let me be clear

on this. There were men in the days of prophets who were interested in changing Judaism. There were men in the days of prophets who worshipped at the shrine of recency - who insisted that Judaism must take unto itself the colorful mysteries of Mesopotamia and the dark philosophies of Egypt or the stoic and passive values of the intellectual classes of the Middle East. The prophets condemned these men and vigorously opposed them. 'Stand ye in the ways and ask and seek after the old ways which are the good ways. Walk therein and therein shalt thou find peace of mind.' Not some new doctrine, not some new teachings. Judaism is not to be a mirror reflecting the mood of the moment. "It has already been told the old man what is good and what the Lord doth require of thee." Not some new practice - not some new ritual, not bird offerings or sacrifices or rivers of oil but "to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God." And as it was for the prophets, so it was for the more thoughtful of the early reformers. Reform Judaism did not set about to bring the twentieth century into Judaism but to bring Judaism into the twentieth century. Rabbi David Einhorn, scholar and teacher, perhaps the most eloquent exponent of Reform Judaism a century ago, was known in his day as a radical. He had little patience with many of the inherited customs. He believed that these stood in the way and blinded people to the essential truths. And yet, the guiding principle of his religious life was that Judaism was simply Judaism and must remain thoroughly Jewish. Isaac Mayer Wise, who has become among us something of a founding father largely because of his institutional genius, insisted on the same point. And being very much the man of his times and the man of his people, he spoke what the more thoughtful of Reformers have always said, and I quote, "Reform

significant that lies at the very basis as the Covenant of our

is distinguished from innovation in that the former has purpose and limits - the latter has none. Reform must move within the sphere of Judaism. To extinguish a system signifies not to reform it." This latter term can only mean to expose and abolish errors, misconceptions or mal-practices, but always remaining in the main within the given limits of the system. Therefore, Reform has its limits of which the reformer must be conscious."

Reform did not set out to make over Judaism into a pale echo-image of humanism or ethical culture. Reform set out to polish and to make clear to this generation some very old and, we believe, significant and very fundamental enduring truths. But, unfortunately, there have always been among us, and there are increasingly among us today, men and women whose emphasis is on being Reform and not on being Jewish, who take their values here, there, and everywhere, but from tradition. Men and women who would bring into Judaism all that eddies about in this cultural maelstrom which swirls all about us. Some cult of psychology, some philosopher who has gathered a bit of popularity, it matters not as long as it seems to be in tune with the times - contemporary. They wish us to take it in unto ourselves, to sanctify it and to give it a certificate of religious credibility. They say to us, 'Stand ye in the ways and ask and seek after the new ways and walk therein,' and presumably thereby we shall find peace of mind. Now you know I do not come before you and I have never come before you to preach obscuritism. All that is significant and worthwhile in modern thought is precious to me. As much of it as I understand has become deeply etched into my belief. I do not cry for a burning of the books nor a turning of a deaf ear. I cry out rather for an understanding of that vision splendid, that vision significant that lies at the very basis as the Covenant of ours.

Covenantal Judaism is not a blueprint complete with working drawing, it is not a fixed and unchangeable schedule. It is a hope, an aspiration, a duty, a vision; a vision sufficient, I believe, for every day.

Progress does not operate in the world of the human soul as it does in the world of science. Man has always been essentially a creature of fears and hopes, a fragile mortal who yet senses something divine within him. And the tongue of the poet, the tongue of the prophet, the tongue of the philosopher has given expression that which is universal in the human soul and that expression does not gain credibility simply when it is expressed by those who are nearest to us in time.. Somehow, in some mysterious way, the great seers of old were able to compress and to capture, if you will, some grand shimmering reflection of universal truth. They planted within us this religious tradition which became ours. We can draw on it, weave it into our lives. This religious tradition and ancient values, as often as not, differ radically from the values of the moment and that which passes for philosophy and for thought in the public eye. So, it is well to return, to renew, to reflect, to review. It is well to remember that Judaism must challenge current pop culture in the name of some old and enduring truths.

Shortly after the High Holidays, a young student who had worshipped with us came to me and said, "Rabbi, when I left my home and my Temple, I had pretty much decided that Judaism - Reform Judaism - could best be imaged as a sponge - shapeless, spineless - a religious body which takes unto itself whatever water lies about, whether it is clear or muddy, it matters not." He said to me, "Whenever in school I asked for definition, I was answered with equivocation. Our Rabbi was a wise man and he learned much from many men and from many

books, but he somehow never made clear to me that he spoke from a committed point of view, that there was a consistency, a history to the values which he taught - and when, finally, I turned to my parents and I asked them what concrete difference it made to them if they were Jewish - seeking from them, of course, a spiritual philosophy, my father spoke to me of anti-semitism, my mother spoke to me of my grandfather conducting the Seder. I keep remembering, Rabbi, that in my home, the Bible sits on a crowded book shelf, unused, waiting presumably for the wedding of my sister." How many of us have really sought after the elemental core values of Judaism? How many of us can legitimately and clearly explain where Judaism differs from the sentimental humanism that so often passes today as sober philosophy, or why Judaism has an argument with the cult of despair, the nihilism and the pessimism which is etched so deeply in the literature of our day. Judaism is intellectually permissive; you have to weigh and winnow the wheat from the chaff; but it is disciplined in moral things. Judaism has an argument with the rather elastic ethical attitudes of the century.

Have we really immersed ourselves heart and soul in the tradition? Do we really use the judgments of tradition as guidelines? Or are we adrift on a sea, our bark twisting, turning with every eddy of the current? I am afraid that Reform Judaism talks a great deal of things which are essentially superficial. About building a building according to some new design in architecture; about creating religious and ritual objects according to the latest esthetic and artistic style and taste; about the reform of music or changing 'thou' to 'you' in the liturgy. These are valuable changes, yes, but they are superficial. For, unless our people understand the values of

the past, the commitments, the Commandments, the Covenant, Judaism must always remain essentially a trivial thing, a puberty rite, a perfunctory practice of a Sunday morning and little if anything more. There is a place, of course, there is a need, an urgent need for Reform Judaism. These are revolutionary times, and we need revolutionary movements which are willing to experiment, to dare, to make mistakes. There is always reason to pour the old wine into new bottles, but there is never reason, willy-nilly, to sit and carelessly pour all your wine from the old bottle; wine is damaged by movement. What we must do is to ask ourselves and to seek out the founding, the essential, the fundamental, the Commandment. After all, an ancient faith which has over the long centuries sanctified marriage, such a faith cannot suddenly turn around and sanctify the immature cult of freedom which forgets the family and thinks only of taking sex where it can be found. A faith which has over the long centuries insistently taught moderation in life, and modesty, cannot suddenly say and applaud the cults of exhibitionism and the vulgarity which appeals to so many today. A faith which for three thousand years commanded 'pursue justice, proclaim freedom, establish righteousness' cannot suddenly sanctify the cults of pessimism and fear which sap the spirit of man and which causes him to turn away from the social enterprise and withdraw into a private, neurotic world of his own.

Faith, from its very beginning, has commanded man to break all idols, to deny all idolatry and not suddenly turn around and sanctify idols of fame, or fortune, or wealth, or position, or of status, or newness, and the ideologies of political and economic theory which among too many are worshipped as gods. A faith which has throughout

the long centuries affirmed the living God cannot suddenly turn around and say Kaddish over the death of God. Our purpose is not to bury God but to help in the search for Him. We say God is there to be found, to be known, to be adored, not the atheists were right all along. Indeed, our science has given us a far clearer indication of the Presence of God than that which came before it. Our world is now an expanding infinity; and etched and imprinted into the very organisms which are the substance of our world is the principle of becoming - of a being which moves from inorganic to the organic, from the unconscious to the conscious, and from the simple to the more complex. There seems to be a purpose etched deep into the very substance of matter itself. It's a tragic thing, is it not, that some of the best young minds among us have come to feel that Reform Judaism is a sponge, a faith so eager for acceptance that it absorbs and draws into itself willy-nilly the valuable and the rancid, the useful and the ugly, the beautiful and the deformed. Would you have a symbol for Reform Judaism? Let it be the symbol which has always stood for Judaism, the cold, hard, unbreakable stone of the Commandments on which there is etched, legibly etched, a Law, a duty, a devotion, a discipline, a doctrine, a definition, a duty, mind you, the way that we must go. Like it or not, Judaism makes great demands of us, and its first demand is to turn away from the distractions of the moment, to live our lives by the eternal teachings. And, if we are confused as to principle, then to give to the past at least the attention we give to the faddish, to search it out and to understand, and to see whether Judaism's vision splendid may not yet be the vision sufficient. 'Stand ye in the ways, seek and ask after the old ways, for these are the good ways, and walk

therein and therein thou shalt find peace of mind, rest for your soul, and therein thou shalt find direction and purpose and glory for your life.' And therein we shall all find happiness, achievement, hopefully peace for our world. Amen...



FLORANCE W. GOLDMAN
ANN BUKSTEIN OPPENHEIMER
FREIDA BENK
RALPH L. BASS
FLORENCE BROWN WIESENBERGER
STELLA MOSKOWITZ KOHN
WALTER L. BENJAMIN
RABBI MOSES SILVER
ISAAC KLEIN
MARY WEITZ
JAY B. GOODMAN
ROSA SCHARFENBERG
NATHAN M. GARD
JIM

EDITH M. SEPTON
JACK LAMPE, SR.
JOSEPH H. FIDAT
EVA DAVIS WATSON
ARON L. WATSON
SAMUEL W. FIDAT

Kaddish

Friday

Jan 14 1966

Sunday

Jan 16 1966

Those who passed away this week

LOUISE BERNSTEIN

MAX A. FELDMAN

Vahrzeits

FLORENCE M. GOLDMAN

ANN BUKSTEIN OPPENHEIMER

FREIDA BERK

RALPH I. BASS

FLORENCE BROWN WIESENBERGER

STELLA MOSKOWITZ KOHN

WALTER L. BENJAMIN

RABBI MOSES SILVER

ISAAC KLEIN

EDITH W. LEFTON

JACK LAMPL SR.

JOSEPH H. KITAY

EVA DAVIS WAYNE

ARCHIE A. WEISS

SARANE MEISEL COHN

READ ON SUN JAN 9.
MOSES J. GARSON

MARY WEITZ

JAY B. GOODMAN

ROSA SCHARTENBERG

NATHAN M. CARL

~~MAX~~

"Reform is distinguished from innovation, in that the former hath purpose and limits, the latter has none....Reform must move within the sphere of Judaism....To extinguish a system signifies not to reform it. This latter term can only mean to expose and abolish errors, misconceptions or malpractices, but always remaining in the main within the given limits of the system...Successful attempts may be made to reconcile religion and philosophy, as Maimonides did with Judaism and the peripatetic philosophy; but then as to the reformer of philosophy, philosophy is the basis, so Judaism must be the basis to the reformer of Judaism. Therefore reform has its limits, of which the reformer must be conscious."

"The pioneer reformers and their disciples after them were good and loyal Jews, but they were too zealous to "modernize" Judaism, and too self-conscious about modernity. There was too much emphasis in their thought and speech upon "reform", "change", "progress", too little upon "rebirth", "return", "tracing back to God." Nothing is so shallow and ephemeral as modernity. The very word suggests a mode, a fashion, an improvised and passing version which has its practical utility, to be sure, but which must not be confused with that which is of the essence and of the eternal. They were too eager to accommodate, to facilitate, and, strange as it may seem, to conform-not to tradition, of course, but to the most recent thought and practice of their day-the tradition of recency. They were sufficiently intellectual in their critique, but religious reformation is achieved only by mystics who are concerned not with the recency of their doctrines but with the immediacy of their religious experience."

I have not been able to find any more of the same kind
 and the same kind of substance is not found in the same place

Amelanchier canadensis

a good deal of freedom within the community
not in political matters. The example which is
entirely free - the variety of all the

a few more notes before we can get any Killed on the
ground yet but must believe that soon

~~These are the same~~

~~Handwritten text, mostly illegible due to blurring and crossing out.~~

[illegible]

could be a few more

the society - your ability - experience - past paragraphs

a b c - d - e

I have not ~~the~~ the very the and very very very

Dear & you + loved and no your. said!