

Two Hundred Years of Reform Judaism

Over two hundred years ago, in the Westphalian region of Germany, in the small town of Seesen, Rabbi Israel Jacobson built a small chapel intended mainly for the impoverished boys in the vocational school he had founded there. It was unusual in that it contained an organ, its bima was at the front of the sanctuary, and the sermons and hymns in German. Israel Jacobson was not a conscious “reformer” of Judaism; he merely wanted to bring the experience of Jewish worship up to date. Yet that July 1810 dedication ceremony is the formal beginning of Reform Judaism.

Actually, the process that led to Jacobson’s chapel properly begins with Moses Mendelssohn, who died in 1786. He was a brilliant intellect, known as the “hunchback philosopher,” and though he was an observant Jew in his lifestyle, he advocated a radical “rational” approach to religion. Mendelssohn was a leader of the Enlightenment, the “Age of Reason”—*Haskala* in Hebrew. Religion, the Enlightenment declared, should be rational—and if the law of God seems irrational, then we must follow reason. (And as a historical footnote, though Mendelssohn was what we would call “Orthodox”, his children were not at all observant, and within two generations they all had assimilated or converted. Mendelssohn’s grandson, the famous German composer Felix Mendelssohn, was baptized as a child by his assimilated parents.)

Mendelssohn’s Enlightenment rationality set the stage for Israel Jacobson, who would, a generation later, open his school chapel with radical reforms. And Jacobson’s religious philosophy was adopted by the first formally designated “Reform Temple” which opened in Hamburg in 1818 and continued until the Nazis closed the Hamburg Temple after *Kristallnacht*, November 10, 1938. The Hamburg Temple featured very modern and radical reforms: a mixed choir, robes, and an organ; the service was conducted in German with German songs and German prayers in a deliberate attempt to emphasize nationalistic loyalty and identity. The Hamburg Temple proclaimed that Jews were fully part of German culture, that they were in all ways like their German Protestant neighbors. They rejected outward symbols of difference, rejecting circumcision, wearing of *kipot* and *tallit*, and blowing of the shofar—just about anything traditionally Jewish. And they called their synagogues “temples” to underscore that Reform Jews no longer looked to the rebuilding of “The Temple” in Jerusalem.

These “reforms” of 200 years ago seem to us, today, something of an over-compensation to make themselves modern-- throwing the baby out with the bathwater (so to speak). And it is certainly ironic that our Reform Movement in recent generations has become increasingly more traditional in worship and ritual, reversing some of the reforms advanced by our founders. But what connects us to Israel Jacobson and those who followed him is not what they did or did not change, but the principle at the heart of the process.

And though Reform began as a commitment to change the trappings, the outward appearance of Judaism, it quickly became an intellectual and philosophical imperative. Abraham Geiger, the next generational leader of German Reform, born in 1810, wrote that Judaism is by definition a continuing reformation. Our history has always been an evolution. The religion of Abraham was transformed at Sinai, and changed again with the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem, and Rabbinic Judaism differed from Biblical Judaism, and medieval from rabbinic—with each new stage representing moral and religious progress, each an adjustment to the changing values of culture and new conditions of Jewish life. Abraham Geiger argued that the only Jewish constant are the values and truths of righteous moral conduct, that everything else are the behaviors we’ve created to promote and express those values and truths. Reform, and growth and change, he argued, always were, and should remain, at the heart of Jewish tradition. And though the religious philosophy of the early Reformers led them to rather radical reformations, the principles they proclaimed continue to guide us today.

And the truth is that 200 years later, Reform Judaism is just as radical as it was then. Our reformations of complete religious equality for women, for gay, lesbian and transgender Jews; our affirmation of Jewish identity through one’s father; our welcome embrace of non-Jewish parents who are committed to raising their children as Jews— have been just as radically transformational in our day as the elimination of *brit mila* and *tallit* were

then. And, I might add, our reforms are today declared just as dangerous and destructive as those of 200 years ago.

In 1972, during my rabbinical school years, our Movement published a paperback treatise by Leonard Fein called “Reform is a Verb”. It was an important text for me then, and I still think about it today. Its title-- “Reform is a verb” was meant to remind us that Reform Judaism is always in the process of re-forming itself. And Reform is *still* a verb-- a process, a going and growing and changing. We examine continuously the cultural values of the community, weighing them against the ethical values of our tradition. Our Judaism informs us about how we are to live righteously and ethically within society, and society informs us about how Jewish rite and ritual might be meaningfully understood and valued—all the while, affirming that religious faith and secular culture are not mutually exclusive competitors, but mutually beneficial components of a full and enriching life. Those principles guided the German Reformers of 200 years ago, and they direct us today. In celebrating these two hundred years of our Reform Movement, we remind ourselves that we are still changing and growing, as we continue to challenge ourselves and our faith within the values of our culture and community.

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