

# Great Controversies



**The Challenge of  
Modernity – 1800's to  
the present**

**The Reform  
Movement and  
the Western  
European  
Response**

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**Monday  
3/3/14**

## Great Controversies in Jewish History:

### Reform Judaism

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March 3, 2015/1 Adar II, 5774

#### I. Harbingers of Change in Early Modern Europe (17-18<sup>th</sup> c.)

- A. Political
- B. Enlightenment
- C. Religious change

#### II. French Revolution (1789)

- A. Debate in French National Assembly
- B. 1791 – decision to grant Jews full citizenship
- C. Napoleon – Assembly of Jewish Notables (1806)

#### III. Initial reform – focus on synagogue worship

- A. Berlin Temple (1815); Hamburg Temple (1817)
- B. features: lay-led, changes in externals (garb, cantor, choir, sermon), content

#### IV. Reform becomes a Movement: 1830s-1840s

- A. intellectual coherence
- B. Major tenets:
  - 1. Biblical scholarship and criticism
  - 2. Historical consciousness – religion evolved (in direction of progress)
    - post-Emancipation/Enlightenment: new era
      - a. prayer/ideas central; ritual unnecessary
      - b. core of Judaism: ethical monotheism
      - c. chosenness → “light unto the nations”

#### C. Judaism now a *religion*, Jews no longer a nation

- Drop “nationalistic” trappings of Judaism: Hebrew, prayers, ceremonial

laws

D. Major conferences (1844-45)

1. The Question of Patriotism (Brunswick, 1844)
2. Hebrew as the Language of Jewish Prayer (Frankfurt, 1845)
3. The Question of Messianism (Frankfurt, 1845)

V. Responses

A. Hatam Sofer: *chadash assur min ha-Torah* (novelty is prohibited by the Torah)

B. ultra-Orthodoxy: 1870s – strident rejection

C. neo-Orthodoxy (Samson Raphael Hirsch):

1. “religion allied to progress”
2. *Austritt* (secession from the *Gemeinde* or *kehillah*)

D. Zecharias Frankel (Historical School) – need to temper change

VI. Reform in America

A. Pittsburgh Platform (1885)

B. Columbus Platform (1937)

C. Centenary Perspective (1976)

D. Statement of Principles (1999): “Reform in Two Directions”

- embrace of more tradition (Hebrew, ritual)

- patrilineal descent (1983)

From *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Ed. by Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz (New York, Oxford U. Press, 2011)

### **I. The Question of Patriotism** (Brunswick, June 1844)

...The Committee recommended [that the present assembly adopt the following statement]: The Jew considers members of the people with whom he lives his brethren.

A. Adler: He wants it to be said that the Jews consider not only the people with whom they live as brethren, but all mankind. Do not all men, according to the prophets, have but one Father?...

Frankfurter: This is quite right. It is, however, not a question of ethics, but of politics. For Judaism, the principle of human dignity is cosmopolitan, but I would like to put proper emphasis on the love for the particular people [among whom we live] and its individual members. As men, we love all mankind, but as Germans, we love the Germans as the children of our fatherland.

Holdheim: He traces the commandment of recognition and love for fellow countrymen back to the Pentateuch, where the love of the Israelite for the Israelite does not refer to their common religion, but to their common peoplehood. What was once a commandment of the Israelite with regard to his fellow Israelite, must also oblige us with regard to our contemporary compatriots – to the Germans. The doctrine of Judaism is thus, first your compatriots, then you co-religionists.

A. Adler, therefore, suggests the following proposal: *The Jew acknowledges every man as his brother.* But he acknowledges *his fellow countryman to be one with whom he is connected by a particular bond*, a bond forged by the effort to realize common political purposes.

### **II. Hebrew as the Language of Jewish Prayer** (Frankfurt, 1845)

A. Geiger: ...The speaker considers it desirable to pray in the mother tongue, which is the language of the soul. Our deepest emotions and feelings, our most sacred relationships, our most sublime thoughts find their expression in it. He feels compelled to admit that as regards himself- although Hebrew is his first mother tongue which he has learnt before other languages, and a language he knows thoroughly – a German prayer strikes a deeper chord than a Hebrew prayer.

The Hebrew language, he continues, has ceased to be alive for the people...It is obvious, moreover, that even a reading from the Torah tires a large part of the community.

The introduction of the vernacular into the service, it is claimed, effects the disappearance of the Hebrew language and thus undermines the foundations of Judaism. To this objection the speaker replies that anyone who imagines Judaism to be walking on the crutches of a language deeply offends it. By considering Hebrew as being of central importance... one would define it as a national religion, because a separate language is a characteristic element of a separate nation. But no member of this conference...would wish to link Judaism to a particular nation...

### III. The Question of Messianism (Frankfurt, 1845)

Einhorn: The concept of the Messiah is closely linked to the entire ceremonial law. The believer in the Talmud finds his salvation only in the reconstitution of the state, the return of the people, the resumption of sacrifices, etc... But now our concepts have changed. There is no need any more for an extended ceremonial law...Everybody knows the passage: "It hath been told thee, O man, what is good and what the Lord doth require of Thee; only to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God" (Micah 6:8). The decline of Israel's political independence was at one time deplored, but in reality it was not a misfortune, but a mark of progress; not a degradation, but an elevation of our religion, through which Israel has come closer to fulfilling its vocation...From the land of Israel, the word of God had to be carried to the four corners of the earth, and new religions have helped in carrying out the task. Only the Talmud moves in circles; we, however, favor progress...

I vote for the renunciation of all petitions for the restoration of the sacrifices and our political independence. I should prefer our prayers for the Messiah to express a hope for a *spiritual renaissance and the unification of all human beings* in faith and in love...

### IV. Samson Raphael Hirsch, "Religion Allied to Progress" (sermon, 1854)

Now, what about the principle, the much-vaunted, world-redeeming principle of "religion allied to progress"? ...In the expression... progress is evidently intended to qualify religion. Indeed, this is the very essence of the "idea," not religion by itself, but religion only to the extent and in so far as it can co-exist with progress, in so far as one does not have to sacrifice progress to religion. The claim of religion is therefore not absolute but is valid only by permission of "progress." What, then, is the higher authority to which religion is therefore not absolute...? Speaking frankly, therefore, it means religion as long as it does not hinder progress, religion as long as it is not onerous or inconvenient... The subordination of religion to any other factor means the denial of religion: for if the Torah is to you the Law of G-d how dare you place another law above it and go along with G-d and His Law only as long as you thereby "progress" in other respects at the same time? You must admit it: it is only because "religion" does not mean to you the word of G-d, because in your heart you deny Divine Revelation, because you believe not in Revelation *to* man but in Revelation *from* man, that you can give man the right to lay down conditions to religion...

Judaism is not a religion, the synagogue is not a church, and the rabbi is not a priest. Judaism is not a mere adjunct to life: it comprises all of life. To be a Jew is not a mere part, it is the sum total of our task in life. To be a Jew in the synagogue and the kitchen, in the field and the warehouse, in the office and the pulpit ...that is what it means to be a Jew...

It is foolish, therefore, to believe – or to pretend to believe – that it is the wording of a prayer, the notes of a synagogue tune, or the order of a special service, which form the abyss between us...It is the theory – the 'principle' as you call it – which throws Judaism into a corner for use only on Sabbaths and Festivals...

The more the Jew is a Jew, the more universalist will his views and aspirations be...

V. Zecharias Frankel, "On Changes in Judaism" (1845)

Maintaining the integrity of Judaism simultaneously with progress, this is the essential problem of the present...Can we deny the difficulty...?

Judaism is a religion of action, demanding the performance of precepts which either directly aim at ennobling man or, by reminding man of the divine, strengthen his feelings of dependence on G-d...By emphasizing religious activity, Judaism is completely tied to life and becomes the property of every individual Jew. A religion of pure ideas belongs primarily to the theologians; the masses who are not adapted to such conceptions concern themselves little with the particulars of such religions...On the other hand, a religion of action is always present, demanding practice in activity...

Thus we have reached the starting point for the consideration of the current parties of Judaism. The viewpoint of the Orthodox party is clear. It has grown up in pious activity; to it, the performance of precepts is inseparable from faith...

Against this party there has arisen of late another one [Reform] which finds its aim in the opposite direction. This party sees salvation in overcoming the past, in carrying progress to the limit, in rejecting religious forms and returning merely to the simple original idea. In fact, we can hardly call it a party in Judaism, though its adherents still bear the name Jew, and are considered as such in social and political life, and do not belong to another faith. They do not, however, belong wholly to Judaism, for by limiting Judaism to some principles of faith, they place themselves partly outside the limits of Judaism...

VI. Pittsburgh Platform (1885) (<http://ccarnet.org/rabbis-speak/platforms/declaration-principles/>)

1. We recognize in every religion an attempt to grasp the Infinite... We hold that **Judaism presents the highest conception of the God-idea** as taught in our Holy Scriptures and developed and spiritualized by the Jewish teachers, **in accordance with the moral and philosophical progress of their respective ages...**

2. We recognize in the **Bible the record of the consecration of the Jewish people to its mission as the priest of the one God**, and value it as the most potent instrument of religious and moral instruction. We hold that the **modern discoveries of scientific researches in the domain of nature and history are not antagonistic to the doctrines of Judaism, the Bible reflecting the primitive ideas of its own age...**

3. We recognize in the Mosaic legislation a system of training the Jewish people for its mission during its national life in Palestine, and **today we accept as binding only its moral laws, and maintain only such ceremonies as elevate and sanctify our lives, but reject all such as are not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization.**

4. We hold that **all such Mosaic and rabbinical laws as regulate diet, priestly purity, and dress** originated in ages and under the influence of ideas entirely foreign to our present mental and spiritual state. They **fail to impress the modern Jew with a spirit of**

**priestly holiness**; their observance in our days is apt rather to **obstruct than to further modern spiritual elevation**.

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**, and therefore expect neither a return to Palestine, nor a sacrificial worship under the sons of Aaron, nor the restoration of any of the laws concerning the Jewish state....

6. We recognize in Judaism a progressive religion, ever striving to be in accord with the postulates of reason... We acknowledge that the spirit of broad humanity... is our ally in the fulfillment of our mission...

7. We reassert the doctrine... that the soul is immortal, grounding the belief on the divine nature of human spirit, which forever finds bliss in righteousness and misery in wickedness. We reject as ideas not rooted in Judaism the beliefs both in bodily resurrection and in Gehenna and Eden...

8. In full accordance with the spirit of the Mosaic legislation, which strives to regulate the relations between rich and poor, 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.

## VII. Columbus Platform (1937) (CCAR website)

1. *Nature of Judaism.* Judaism is the **historical religious experience of the Jewish people**. Though growing out of Jewish life, its message is universal... Reform Judaism recognizes the principle of progressive development in religion and consciously applies this principle to spiritual as well as to cultural and social life... The new discoveries of science... do not conflict with the essential spirit of religion as manifested in the consecration of man's will, heart and mind to the service of God and of humanity.

2. *God.* The heart of Judaism and its chief contribution to religion is the doctrine of the One, living God, who rules the world through law and love. In Him all existence has its creative source and mankind its ideal of conduct.

5. *Israel.* Judaism is the soul of which Israel is the body. Living in all parts of the world, Israel has been held together by the ties of a common history, and above all, by the heritage of faith... In the rehabilitation of Palestine, the land hallowed by memories and hopes, we behold the promise of renewed life for many of our brethren. We affirm the obligation of all Jewry to aid in its upbuilding as a Jewish homeland... to make it not only a haven of refuge... but also a center of Jewish culture and spiritual life.