

What is Reform Judaism?

What do Reform Jews believe?

What do Reform Jews do?

If anyone were to attempt to answer these two questions authoritatively for all Reform Jews, that person's answers would have to be false. Why? Because **one of the guiding principles of Reform Judaism is the autonomy of the individual**. A Reform Jew has the right to decide whether to subscribe to this particular belief or to that particular practice.

But there is a historic body of beliefs and practices that is recognized as Jewish. We Jews have survived centuries of exile and persecution as well as centuries of unparalleled spiritual and intellectual creativity because we have always thought of ourselves as a people created "**in the image of God,**" dedicated to **tikkun olam—the improvement of the world**. And the particular beliefs and practices that have traditionally identified us as Jews have enabled us not only to survive creatively but to connect with the God "who has kept us alive, sustained us, and enabled us to reach this moment."

We Reform Jews are heirs to a vast body of beliefs and practices embodied in TORAH and the other Jewish sacred writings. We differ from more ritually observant Jews because we recognize that our sacred heritage has evolved and adapted over the centuries and that it must continue to do so. And we also recognize that if Judaism were not capable of evolution, of REFORM, it could not survive.

Reform Judaism accepts and encourages pluralism. Judaism has never demanded uniformity of belief or practice. But we must never forget that whether we are Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, or Orthodox, we are all an essential part of *K'lal Yisrael*—the worldwide community of Jewry.

All Jews have an obligation to study the traditions that have been entrusted to us and to observe those mitzvot—those sacred and timehallowed acts that have meaning for us today and that can ennoble our lives, as well as those of our families and communities. It is our mitzvot that put us in touch with Abraham and Sarah; with Moses, Hillel, and the Jews of fifthcentury Babylonia, twelfthcentury Spain, and eighteenthcentury Poland; and with the Jews of twentiethcentury Auschwitz, Israel, the former Soviet Union, and our neighboring town.

Source: This statement was adapted from the pamphlet entitled "What We Believe... What We Do..." prepared in 1993 by Rabbi Simeon J. Maslin, president of the CCAR [Central Conference of American Rabbis]. Copyright: 1997, Union of American Hebrew Congregations: Shamash

JEWISH VIRTUAL LIBRARY

The Jewish Student Online Research Center (JSOURCE)

The Origins of Reform Judaism

Reform Judaism was born at the time of the French Revolution, a time when European Jews were recognized for the first time as citizens of the countries in which they lived. Ghettos were being abolished, special badges were no more, people could settle where they pleased, dress as they liked and follow the occupations that they wanted.

Many Jews settled outside of Jewish districts, and began to live like their neighbors and speak the language of the land. They went to public schools and universities, began to neglect Jewish studies and to disregard the *Shulchan Aruch*.

In 1815, after Napoleon's defeat, Jews lost the rights of citizenship in several countries. Many Jews became Christian to retain those rights. Thoughtful Jews were concerned about this. They realized that many of these changes took place not because of a dislike of Judaism, but to obtain better treatment. Many rabbis believed the way to address this was to force Jews to keep away from Christians and give up public schools and universities. This didn't work.

Leopold Zunz proposed something else. He suggested that Jews study their history and learn of the great achievements of the past. While Zunz was implementing his ideas, a movement began to make religious services better understood, by incorporating music and the local language. Local Rabbis, however, persuaded the government to close the test synagogue.

Shortly after the closing, Rabbi Abraham Geiger suggested that observance might also be changed to appeal to modern people. Geiger, a skilled scholar in both Tanach and German studies, investigated Jewish history. He discovered that Jewish life had continually changed. Every now and then, old practices were changed and new ones introduced, resulting in a Jewish life that was quite different from that lived 4,000 or even 2,000 years before. He noticed these changes often made it easier for Jews to live in accordance with Judaism. Geiger concluded that this process of change needed to continue to make Judaism attractive to all Jews.

Between 1810 and 1820, congregations in Seesen, Hamburg and Berlin instituted fundamental changes in traditional Jewish practices and beliefs, such as mixed seating, single-day observance of festivals and the use of a cantor/choir. Many leaders of the Reform movement took a very "rejectionist" view of Jewish practice and discarded traditions and rituals. For example:

- Circumcision was not practiced, and was decried as barbaric.
- The Hebrew language was removed from the liturgy and replaced with German.

- The hope for a restoration of the Jews in Israel was officially renounced, and it was officially stated that Germany was to be the new Zion.
- The ceremony in which a child celebrated becoming Bar Mitzvah was replaced with a "confirmation" ceremony.
- The laws of Kashrut and family purity were officially declared "repugnant" to modern thinking people, and were not observed.
- Shabbat was observed on Sunday.
- Traditional restrictions on Shabbat behavior were not followed.

Reform Comes to America

American Reform Judaism began as these German "reformers" immigrated to America in the mid 1800s. The first "Reform" group was formed by a number of individuals that split from Congregation Beth Elohim in Charleston, South Carolina. Reform rapidly became the dominant belief system of American Jews of the time. It was a national phenomenon.

Reform Judaism in America benefitted from the lack of a central religious authority. It also was molded by Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise. Rabbi Wise came to the United States in 1846 from Bohemia, spent eight years in Albany, NY, and then moved to Cincinnati on the edge of the frontier. He then proceeded to:

1. Write the first siddur edited for American worshippers, *Minhag American* (1857).
2. Found the Union of American Hebrew Congregations in 1873.
3. Found Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati in 1875.
4. Found the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) in 1889.

Reform Jews also pioneered a number of organizations, such as the Educational Alliance on the Lower East Side of New York, the Young Men's Hebrew Association, the American Jewish Committee and the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai Brith.

By 1880, more than 90 percent of American synagogues were Reform. This was the time of the major Eastern European immigration, which was heavily Orthodox and non-German, as contrasted with the strongly German Reform movement. Many Reform congregations of this time were difficult to distinguish from neighboring Protestant churches, with preachers in robes, pews with mixed seating, choirs, organs and hymnals. Like their counterparts in Germany, American Reform rabbis, such as David Einhorn, Samuel Holdheim, Bernard Felsenthal and Kaufmann Kohler, adopted a radical approach to observance.

Although early American Reform rabbis dropped quite a bit of traditional prayers and rituals, there was still a "bottom line." In 1909, the CCAR formally declared its opposition to intermarriage. And, although decried as "archaic" and "barbarian," the practice of circumcision remained a central rite.

This early radicalism was mentioned in the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform, which dismisses "such Mosaic and rabbinical laws as regulate diet, priestly purity and dress" as anachronisms that

only obstruct spirituality in the modern age. The platform stressed that Reform Jews must only be accepting of laws that they feel "elevate and sanctify our lives" and must reject those customs and laws that are "not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization."

Early Reform Judaism was also antiZionist, believing the Diaspora was necessary for Jews to be "light unto the nations." Nevertheless, a number of Reform rabbis were pioneers in establishing Zionism in America, including Gustav and Richard Gottheil, Rabbi Steven S. Wise (founder of the American Jewish Congress) and Justice Louis Brandeis. Following the Balfour Declaration, the Reform movement began to support Jewish settlements in Palestine, as well as institutions such as Hadassah Hospital and the Hebrew University.

As the years passed, a reevaluation took place in which many members of the Reform movement began to question the "reforms" that were made. By 1935, the movement had begun to return to a more traditional approach to Judaism—distinctly Jewish and distinctly American, but also distinctively nonChristian. Starting with the Columbus Platform in 1937, many of the discarded practices were reincorporated into the Reform canon, and constitute what is now called "Modern" Reform Judaism, or more succinctly, Reform Judaism. The platform also formally shifted the movement's position on Zionism by affirming "the obligation of all Jewry to aid in building a Jewish homeland...."

Source: Adapted from Shamash: <http://shamash.org/trb/judaism.html>

About AICE Publications Research Center
Israel & the States Virtual Israel Search Contact AICE