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REFORM JUDAISM, NORTH AMERICA

There are approximately 1.5 million Reform Jews belonging to slightly more than 900 Reform congregations in the United States and Canada. In addition, there are many others who identify as Reform Jews without belonging to or participating in a Reform congregation. The Reform movement has grown dramatically relative to the other Jewish religious streams and in particular the Conservative movement. Reform Jews form a plurality of those affiliated with one of the Jewish denominational groups in the United States, which in turn is less than 50 percent of all American Jews. The Reform movement has been regarded as the trendsetter among the large American Jewish denominations. While the Reconstructionist movement has frequently embraced various reforms slightly earlier and Jewish Renewal and others have embraced spiritual innovations much more vigorously, the Reform movement has nevertheless been seen as the most influential progressive voice because of its numbers.

Although the earliest synagogues in colonial America were Sephardic Orthodox,

the Reform movement began to develop in the United States in the 1820s and 1830s with the growing immigration of Jews from Central Europe. The first attempt at building a Reform temple in the United States began in 1824 in the Sephardic community of Charleston, South Carolina, when forty-seven members of Congregation Beth Elohim signed a petition to the board of directors requesting that they consider a number of minor ritual reforms, including the introduction of a small number of prayers in English. The board rejected their request; they seceded and formed a separate congregation, rejoined the mother synagogue a few years later, and eventually were one factor in the entire congregation embracing Reform.

In the period between 1836 and 1881, American Reform Judaism grew steadily with the arrival of about 250,000 Jews from Central Europe, some of whom may already have been sympathetic to the movement. On the eve of the large-scale immigration of Eastern European Jewry that began in the 1880s, the Reform movement dominated American Judaism. It appealed to people who wanted to maintain a Jewish identity and various Jewish practices without a system of compulsory ritual adherence. No longer obligated to observe all the laws and customs of Orthodox Judaism, members of Reform synagogues could maintain forms of practice that remained distinctive and meaningful in a modern Christian-dominated society and yet did not separate Jews significantly from their Christian neighbors.

The first leader of American Reform Judaism was Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise (1819-1900), who arrived in the United States from Bohemia in 1846. He was the main influence behind the establishment of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations

(UAHC) in 1873, and he founded the Hebrew Union College (HUC) in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1875 (the first seminary for rabbinic training in North America), and the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) in 1889. He was regarded as the leader of the moderate wing of the Reform movement, which battled with the radical Reformers, most of whom lived along the East coast. Led by Rabbi David Einhorn (1808-1879), the radical Reformers eventually succeeded in creating a de-ritualized form of liberal Judaism, which became known as Classical Reform. Classical Reform was defined by the 1885 Declaration of Principles, which became known as the Pittsburgh Platform. It minimized ritual and emphasized ethical behavior in a universalistic context as the central message of the biblical prophets (M. A. Meyer, Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism [1988]).

An important feature of American Reform Judaism was its stated commitment to the equality of women; this was expressed in various ways, including mixed seating during worship. Wise took credit for instituting family pews in Albany in 1851, but his boast was somewhat overstated because his congregation purchased a church building without an Ezrat Nashim (women's gallery) and therefore had little choice but to let the men and women sit together. In 1854, mixed pews were introduced in New York City; by the 1870s, they were the norm in most American synagogues. Girls and boys were educated together and American Reform congregations replaced **Bar Mitzvah** with **Confirmation**, a group ceremony for young people in their mid-teens (bar mitzvah made a comeback after World War II and bat mitzvah began to become popular in the 1970s). Ordination of women as rabbis and cantors, however, did not occur until late in the

twentieth century (see below and ORDINATION, FEMALE). The first synagogue sisterhood groups emerged in the 1890s and local groups were linked when the ***National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods** (now Women of Reform Judaism [WRJ]) was established in 1913. In 2005, WRJ had 75,000 members in five hundred local affiliates in the United States, Canada, and twelve other countries in 2005; the organization independently financed the publication of The Torah: A Women's Commentary (ed. T. Eshkenzi and A. Weiss [2007]), with contributions from over two hundred and fifty female scholars and rabbis (see SISTERHOODS).

The movement also had and has men's organizations in many temples, and a national organization to coordinate local chapters. The North American Federation of Temple Brotherhoods changed its name to Men of Reform Judaism (MRJ) in May, 2007. MRJ is a coalition of over 250 affiliated brotherhoods with 25,000 members across North America, which according to its website is dedicated to *tikkun olam*, 'repairing the world', through the practice of Brotherhood. They define their mandate broadly, explaining that MRJ members are actively involved in youth education, adult education, social action, and all types of fellowship activities which contribute to the enrichment of their synagogue communities. While many Reform congregations have brotherhoods as well as sisterhoods, these men's groups have struggled. While women historically found in organizational outlet for their energies through sisterhoods, men could serve on the board of the Temple and had no need of any auxiliary organizations. As women have become fully integrated into the power structure of reform temples over the last 30 years, some men have withdrawn from volunteer involvement entirely.

Reform theologians were influenced by the modern biblical criticism of their time and were involved, as well, in the academic study of religion. They fostered a Reform Judaism that did not interpret the Bible in a literal manner and saw no conflict between religion and science. Most believed that God created the world in some form or manner, and continues to be involved as part of an ongoing process of progressive revelation. Late nineteenth century and early twentieth century reformers stressed the importance of ethical monotheism. They believed that the ethical message of Judaism derived from one beneficent creator God who exists as the source and goal of all humanity. Without the existence of God, any attempt to aspire to high ethical standards of behavior would be useless. The mission of Israel was to spread the concept of ethical monotheism, serving as God's messengers in an age without prophets.

As a corollary to this idea of the mission of Israel in the Diaspora, most but not all Reform leaders rejected Zionism. Judaism was a portable sanctuary and Jews could practice their religion wherever they lived. Minister Gustavus Posnanski famously declared at the dedication of the new building of the newly Reform congregation in Charleston, South Carolina, "this country is our Palestine, this city our Jerusalem, this house of God our Temple." These Reform leaders believed that since Jews were fully accepted as equal citizens in the United States of America, they had no need and no inclination to leave what they regarded as their homeland. Various American Reform statements of principles confirmed that they no longer believed in the religious concept of the ingathering of the exiles. For example, rabbinical leaders at the Philadelphia Conference of 1869 wrote, "The Messianic aim of Israel is not the restoration of the old

Jewish state under a descendant of David, involving a second separation from the nations of the earth, but the union of all the children of God in the confession of the unity of God, so as to realize the unity of all rational creatures, and their call to moral sanctification.”

While a number of Reform leaders, such as Rabbi Max Heller and Rabbi Bernhard Felsenthal, supported Zionism, the majority undoubtedly agreed with these words of the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885, “We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community; and we 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 a Jewish state.” While this was the majority sentiment in the late nineteenth and very early twentieth century, it began to change after future Supreme Court Justice Louis Dembitz Brandeis became a Zionist in 1912. After the Nazi advent to power in Germany in 1933, increasing numbers of Reform Jews understood that regardless of religious theory, there was a dire need for a place of refuge for European Jews. By the early 1940s, only a handful of Reform Jews remained staunchly anti-Zionist. They organized the American Council for Judaism, which exists in attenuated form to the present.

The American religious environment changed in the years immediately following World War II and the Reform movement adjusted accordingly. Jews of every persuasion were moving in ever larger numbers to the suburbs, and it was important for the religious denominations to organize new congregations that would in turn contribute to the development of their movements. Much of the credit for the relatively successful

adaptation of Reform Judaism to the post-World War II environment goes to Rabbi Maurice Eisendrath (1902-1973), who became executive director of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (renamed the Union for Reform Judaism in 2003) in 1943 and its president in 1946. Eisendrath increased the profile of the movement by moving the national headquarters from Cincinnati to New York City in 1948. The "House of Living Judaism" was built on Fifth Avenue and 65th Street in Manhattan, beside the major New York City Reform synagogue, Temple Emanu-El. While there had originally been one rabbinical seminary, the Hebrew Union College (HUC) in Cincinnati, by the end of the twentieth century, there were four separate centers. The 1950 merger of the Jewish Institute of Religion (JIR), which had been established by Rabbi Stephen Wise (no relation to Isaac Mayer Wise), with the Hebrew Union College provided a New York City location. HUC-JIR then established additional campuses in Los Angeles and Jerusalem, making it the largest and most prestigious Reform rabbinical seminary in the world.

One of the central issues facing the Reform movement was how to provide its members with guidance on ceremonial observance without creating another legal structure. Any obligatory system of religious laws would have been anathema to most Reform Jews. Nevertheless, many religious leaders felt that Reform Judaism allowed for too much freedom and that most lay people interpreted this as meaning that they did not have to observe any ritual whatsoever. Reform "covenant" theologians believed that one of the solutions to this problem was to reemphasize the centrality of the b'rit, the covenant between God and the children of Israel. This was presented as an organic historical relationship that was reciprocal and continued from generation to generation.

Emphasis on this covenant provided a liberal framework for helping people to understand that incorporating religious practices into their lives could be an expression of commitment to this relationship with the divine.

The Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion began ordaining women in 1972; in recent decades, female rabbis have brought an energy and dynamism that have enlivened Reform worship and education. The first woman to be ordained was Rabbi **Sally Jane Priesand**. HUC-JIR established The Sally J. Priesand Visiting Professorship in her honor in the fall of 1999 at the New York Campus. By the early twenty-first century, women rabbis, as well as cantors, synagogue presidents, and other religious leaders, have become increasingly numerous, not only in Reform Judaism but in Reconstructionist and Conservative Judaisms, as well (see ORDINATION, FEMALE).

Another area where Reform Judaism has changed dramatically is in the realm of liturgy. The Union Prayer Book had been a ubiquitous presence since the closing years of the 1800s, and by the 1960s, many younger people found its ponderous language excessively formal and its theological conceptions outdated. There was, however, no consensus on what a new prayer book might look like. The CCAR Liturgy Committee decided that it was not possible to create a single service that would be satisfactory to the different theological positions within the movement and so they decided to include multiple services, thus allowing for considerable theological diversity. When Gates of Prayer: The New Union Prayer Book was published in 1975, it included ten Sabbath evening and six Sabbath morning services. The services all followed a similar prayer structure, but they differed in theological focus and the specific prayers that were used

to express those theological positions. Unfortunately, Gates of Prayer was published in a non-gender sensitive format and critical voices began to be heard almost immediately. Also, the transliterations were put in the back, making them almost impossible to find in a timely way.

Many found the prayer book to be too heavy to hold in their hands or lap for the length of the service and asked for something smaller and lighter. The CCAR responded by producing two experimental paperback prayer books in 1992 and 1993 and a more permanent grey hard cover gender sensitive Gates of Prayer in 1994. The expectation was that an entirely new prayer book would be published shortly, but the project was delayed again and again as the Liturgy Committee attempted to deal with all sorts of unforeseen issues. One of those issues was the rapidly increasing popularity of computers. Some Reform rabbis recommended that the new prayer book be published on a compact disc (CD) rather than in a physical format. This would allow individual worshippers as well as entire congregations to edit the prayer book as they saw fit and to publish their own versions if they so chose. This idea was eventually rejected and, after numerous drafts, a new prayer book, Mishkan T'filah (Tabernacle of Prayer) was published in 2007.

Mishkan T'filah was the first Reform prayer book in memory to have a Hebrew name and, unlike previous prayer books published by the CCAR, it only opened from the Hebrew side, whereas Gates of Prayer could be purchased with either an English opening or Hebrew opening. It incorporated many traditional elements that had been excised from the original Union Prayer Book, although there were still places where the

liturgy differed from the Orthodox prayer book, either because of theological differences or for purposes of brevity. Despite considerable concern that the early drafts of the new prayer book were rather poor, response to the final draft was enthusiastic and the entire first printing was soon sold out.

Outreach was another revolutionary development in American Judaism that was pioneered by the Reform movement. In December 1978, UAHC President Alexander Schindler called for a sustained effort to reach out to the unaffiliated and particularly the growing number of Jews who had intermarried. Arguing against the norms of the times, Schindler said that intermarriage did not necessarily mean that a couple was lost to the Jewish community (“Not by Birth Alone: The Case for a Missionary Judaism,” Alexander M. Schindler, from D. E. Kaplan, ed., Contemporary Debates in American Reform Judaism: Conflicting Visions [2001]). This led to an extensive effort to welcome interfaith couples as well as converts, now referred to as “Jews-by-choice”.

As more intermarried couples began raising children, the question of how to treat the offspring of Jewish fathers and gentile mothers became more acute. On March 15, 1983, the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) passed a resolution prepared by the CCAR Committee on Patrilineal Descent entitled “The Status of Children of Mixed Marriages.” The CCAR resolution stated that “we face, today, an unprecedented situation due to the changed conditions in which decisions concerning the status of the child of a mixed marriage are to be made.” The opening sentence of the resolution read, “The purpose of this document is to establish the Jewish Status of the children of mixed marriages in the Reform Jewish community of North America.”

There was a great deal of controversy about this resolution, both before and after its adaptation. Some saw it as a radical and unwarranted departure from tradition, while others hailed it as a revolutionary breakthrough. The sheer numbers of children of such unions make patrilineal descent an essential element of Reform outreach and many within the Conservative movement believe that they need to adopt a similar approach as soon as possible.

The Reform movement also moved toward the full acceptance of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered individuals. In 1990, the Hebrew Union College began admitting openly gay and lesbian students to their rabbinic program. In 1996, the CCAR passed a resolution supporting the rights of homosexual couples to a civil marriage, and in 2002 it supported the rights of rabbis to officiate at same-sex commitment ceremonies.

A new theological platform for Reform Judaism was approved in 1999 at the CCAR annual conference in Pittsburgh, where the original classical Reform Pittsburgh Platform had been endorsed in 1885. The new platform reintroduced many traditional religious concepts and rituals (R. N. Levy, [A Vision of Holiness: The Future of Reform Judaism](#) [2005]). Although these were presented as options that could be evaluated rather than as commandments that had to be observed, their inclusion was a clear indication of the Reform movement's increasing return to many traditional Jewish practices (M. Washofsky, [Jewish Living: A Guide to Contemporary Reform Practice](#) [2001]). On the other hand, the Reform movement has also accepted new definitions of Jewish identity and religious fidelity, such as patrilineal descent (D. E. Kaplan, [American](#)

Reform Judaism: An Introduction [2003]). Reform Judaism is, as a number of observers have pointed out, moving in two directions at the same time.

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