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Parshat Yitro: How much uniformity do we need in modern Judaism?

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In this week's parsha, the basic beliefs of Judaism are outlined in the form of the Aseret Ha-Dibrot. God's revelation giving us what are popularly called the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai is the central message of Parshat Yitro. These Ten Commandments are understood to be "set in stone" but are they? Putting it another way, how much uniformity do we really need in modern Judaism?

As a Progressive Jew, I am deeply concerned with this question. As a historian, I look to the past to help partially provide answers. Let us examine the debate over the 1937 Columbus Platform, the Reform movement's second statement of principles. I argue that it was at this moment that many of the issues that concern us today first became prominent.

The Columbus Platform attempted to reinvigorate the movement by allowing for a degree of religious pluralism. Whereas the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform, the first such attempt to write up a set of comprehensive beliefs, had posited only one way to practice Reform Judaism, the 1937 platform began to recognize divergent practices and even different belief systems.

This created a new problem: It became very difficult to maintain a consistent theology. If God is commanding a certain way of behaving, that should be reflected in certain

behavioral norms. Without behavioral norms, how can one argue that God has a specific set of expectations? At the 1935 Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) conference, Rabbi Louis Binstock of Temple Sinai in New Orleans argued that it was unacceptable that everybody did what they wanted to.

Some Reform congregations had Friday night and Saturday morning services, others had Saturday morning and Sunday morning services, and still others had Friday night and Sunday morning services. Because rabbis were teaching completely different approaches to Sabbath and holiday observances, Reform congregants in different parts of the country would inevitably grow up with dramatically different and even contradictory ideas about religion in general, and Judaic beliefs in particular.

Binstock claimed that the increasing diversity of the Reform movement in the interwar period was not a positive factor but destroyed respect for Judaism as a tradition and as a religion. “I do feel that Reform Judaism must declare itself positively; decree definite dogmas of affirmation or denial . . . furnish a clear chart of religious principles and truths by which we must steer safely and surely in the present storm-tossed sea of religious strife.”

In the subsequent debate, HUC theologian Rabbi Samuel Cohon argued that although he did not want Reform Judaism to accept dogmas per se, he felt a clear formulation of the principles of Judaism to be critical. Then people could understand what Judaism stood for and how they could observe their religion. Cohon called for a “crystallization of thought as to what is primary and what is secondary” among the theological principles of Reform Judaism.

When he presented a report of the Commission on the Guiding Principles of Judaism in 1936, he stated: “The time has come for us in this age of chaos to take our Judaism seriously and instruct our people in the way they should follow and the things they should do. We should teach them that we believe in God, in Israel, and in Torah, and show them how to revive prayer, ceremonials, and other observances, whereby we can strengthen our lives.”

Cohon believed that Reform congregants needed guidance through the chaos produced by a rapidly changing religious environment and a deteriorating world economic and political situation. If Reform rabbis could provide no firm direction in terms of religious belief and practice, the religious lives of their parishioners would degenerate further—a point similar to Rabbi Kaufmann Kohler’s in 1885 and one of Kohler’s reasons for pushing the Pittsburgh Platform.

But the Columbus Platform was less successful in creating a document that conveyed a clear and decisive religious vision. Perhaps that was inevitable. Times had changed, and religious agreement was becoming harder to reach within the Reform movement. The

platform is today remembered mostly as an affirmation of Jewish peoplehood. The document accepted the notion that the Jews are a people and a nation as well as a religious group.

But it failed to unify the entire movement behind a shared religious vision. Nevertheless, the 1937 platform did signal the growing influence of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan on Reform Judaism. The focus on Jewish peoplehood and the revival of interest in Jewish “ceremonials” reflect Kaplan’s notion of Judaism as a civilization that encompasses the Jewish people and its historical character expressed through its rituals, ceremonies, and other communal practices.

A clear formulation of the principles of Judaism is absolutely critical if we intend to build a thriving and vibrant Progressive Judaism around the world. That is the only way we will be able to understand what Judaism stands for and how – as well as why — we need to observe our religion.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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