

Autonomy, Personal

One of the central issues in Judaism today is how to reconcile the autonomy of the individual with the needs of the community. For the U.S. Jewish community in particular, this challenge takes place on two levels. On one level, there is the question of whether individual Jews are entitled to make their own religious choices or whether they must obey external authorities. Must an individual observe kashrut (dietary laws), or is that a matter of personal choice? And if it is a matter of personal choice, does that decision have to be made on the basis of certain established criteria, or can the person make a personal decision based on completely subjective factors? On the second level, there are questions of how the Jewish community can and should orient religious belief and practice in the context of an open society such as the United States.

ROOF investigates these issues of autonomy as they reflect the concerns of U.S. Jews born after World War II. As the “Baby Boomer” generation has matured, becoming the parents of Jewish school children and forming the bulk of congregational membership in all U.S. Jewish denominations, members of that generation have brought liberal social perspectives to their respective religious institutions. Roof describes how these individuals grew up “in a post-60s culture that emphasizes choice, knowing and understanding oneself, the importance of personal autonomy, and fulfilling one’s potential—all contributing to a highly subjective approach to religion.” Roof argues that the Baby Boomers are a generation of seekers and that denominational loyalties that were once taken for granted can no longer be assumed.

Eugene Borowitz is a Reform Jewish theologian who has dealt with autonomy and related issues in great depth. In BOROWITZ (1984) he asks, “must we observe all the Commandments and traditions?” In response, he explains that in the Reform movement, the right of individual self-determination has always held a treasured place, but that in the late 20th century the concept of *mitsvah* in the sense of ceremonies and symbols commended if not commanded has become a more popular position in the movement.

In BOROWITZ (1990), the author addresses the inherent conflict between autonomy and tradition. Borowitz argues that “the Reform of Judaism to meet the situation of an emancipated Jewry became possible only when, even unconsciously, human autonomy could be asserted and given precedence over the authority of Jewish tradition.” He explains that Moses Mendelssohn asserted autonomy in the theological realm but remained orthodox, while Israel Jacobson believed that it was the individual Jew’s right, as well as his duty, to follow his conscience and that this autonomy was more important than conforming to the dictates of tradition.

While all of the Jewish denominations in the United States have had to deal with the question of autonomy versus conformity, the Reform movement has taken a particularly clear position on the issue. MEYER describes how that element of the Jewish community has attempted to meet the challenges of modernity and address conflicts between individuality and communal loyalty. Meyer asks, “What, after all this history and contemporary divergence, binds the Reform Movement together?” If each individual is entitled to use his or her personal autonomy to make independent religious decisions and groups of Jews in different communities, cities, or countries are free to move

in dramatically different directions, then “where is its diachronic and synchronic continuity?” Meyer admits that “in some respects very little” holds the Reform community together, but he also explains that the early reformers believed that Orthodoxy could not meet the challenges of the modern world, and therefore the Reform movement developed a concept of an evolving Judaism as the best hope for Jewish religious survival. Personal religious autonomy lay at the heart of such a theological system.

SILVERSTEIN considers the theme of autonomy in the course of his study of the Reform movement in the United States from 1840 to 1930. He argues that scholars have taken two distinct approaches when evaluating the movement. Many earlier works focus on Reform as theology. This perspective led to studies focused on rabbinic leadership, ritual debates, and ideological platforms. In contrast to this approach, many of the more recent studies have concentrated on social and cultural changes and their impact on the Jewish community. The religious autonomy enjoyed by all U.S. citizens allowed for the development of a pluralistic religious system.

In the United States today, autonomy is taken for granted by most Jews. Even some participants in the contemporary Reform movement, while reiterating the centrality of religious autonomy for each individual and community, believe that there is a dire need for greater direction and structure in Jewish society. WERTHEIMER describes how the four principal U.S. Jewish denominations have met the challenges of post-World War II society, confronting the “fragmenting world of organized Judaism.”

Arnold Eisen is one of the leading intellectuals seeking to provide Jewish theological responses to the challenge of individual and communal religious autonomy. In EISEN (1997), he argues that it is possible to revitalize Judaism in the United States by rebuilding a relationship with Jewish tradition. Eisen uses each of the five books of the Torah to demonstrate how Jews can find meaning in their tradition and hence choose to continue the covenant that their ancestors made with God.

In EISEN (1998), he argues that there has been a massive transformation of Jewish religious belief since the beginning of the 19th century and that these changes “continue to perplex Jewish communities and shape Jewish religious options today.” Asserting that it may be more useful for the scholar to concentrate on the study of religious practice rather than that belief, he contends that contrary to many simplistic accounts, Jews did not go through a straightforward threestage process of adopting Enlightenment ideas, casting off traditional Judaic beliefs, and then modifying or even rejecting the concept of the performance of the mitzvot. Rather, “Jews for the most part navigated their way through modernity’s unfamiliar terrain much as we do today: via *eclectic patterns of observance and varied, often individual, sets of meanings* discovered in those patterns or associated with them” (emphasis in the original).

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