

# Reform Judaism: In 1000 Words

## The History of Reform Judaism



### Context

*Jewish history has always been a process of evolution and struggle, in relation with the changing world around. **Rabbi James Baaden of Sha'arei Tsedek North London Reform Synagogue and LIG Utrecht, Netherlands** explores here some of the unique shifts in thought and practice that led to the emergence of what today is known as Reform Judaism, and denominations more broadly.*

### Content

In the early modern era Jews in Europe began to think of their spiritual practices and texts as a “religion”. This was an important shift: something called “Judaism” came to be comparable to other religions, such as Christianity. And as Christianity was dominant throughout Europe, the Christian model of religion shaped the development of Judaism. Belief is the core of Christianity (and Islam), for instance. Moreover, Christianity had the form of a centralised hierarchical church, focused on the issue of authority: authority to define belief and standardise practices. A massive explosion in European Christianity – the Reformation – had taken place: Protestants had challenged the authority of the Roman Catholic Church introduced numerous “reforms”. In fact, the Catholic Church was not the one and only established Church – other sections of Christianity had gone their own way centuries earlier, calling themselves “Orthodox” – a Greek word meaning “right-teaching”.

As the eighteenth century shifted into the nineteenth, the many other distinctive features of modernity unfolded: cities expanded, money became the central medium of commerce, trade and industry grew, fewer people worked on the land, the importance of royal houses and the aristocracy dwindled, new ideas of human rights gained ground and ordinary people (at first men, then women too) had greater access to education and the institutions of political power. Many Jews decided that it was time to reform their Jewish religion. This was particularly the case in the central European states which later became Germany. Mostly, this took place at the local level – for instance, in Hamburg and Berlin. Key individuals, especially rabbis, took the lead: Israel Jacobson, Abraham Geiger and Samuel Holdheim are the best known. To justify the reforms, they pointed to the realities of the modern era, but also referred to the vision of the prophets of ancient Israel and the innovations of the early rabbis.

The changes related to nearly all aspects of Jewish thought and practice. In the texts which Jews used in worship, references to Temple and sacrifice were removed. Notions of a resurrection after death were likewise deleted or re-phrased. The forms of synagogue worship were shortened, repetitions of prayers were omitted, conduct in the synagogue became more solemn and decorous, composed hymns were sung (often based on earlier Hebrew liturgical poems), texts in the local language – mainly German – were read. More emphasis was placed on the Hebrew Bible, and less on rabbinic literature. In certain synagogues, organs were installed.

Today these “micro” adjustments continue to preoccupy many of us, yet perhaps we overlook the broader historical developments – which may have a more enduring influence. Five may be highlighted:

First, others in the Jewish world in the early nineteenth century objected to the reforms - and they then adopted the Christian term “orthodox”. As in the bitter Catholic/Protestant contest, they tended to oppose all changes; although in fact the Jewish world had previously found ways to accommodate difference – as in the case of the Ashkenazic-Sephardic division.

Secondly, the synagogue developed as a focus of Jewish life, a cognate of the parish church, and the home became less important. Third, the role of rabbi gained greatly in prestige and power as it grew more similar to the role of the Christian clergyman. Fourth, the question of authority came to the fore in the spiritual life of Jewish communities. Fifth, certain things did *not* happen: issues of equality and gender, for instance, were for a long period not a central concern, just as they weren't yet in broader society.

During the nineteenth century, the United States became the “heartland” of Progressive Judaism. A national Reform organisation with a seminary and a standardised prayer book came into being – this had not been the pattern in Germany. European intellectual influence remained strong, however – American leaders of Reform Judaism such as David Einhorn, Kaufman Kohler and Isaac Mayer Wise all spoke German. The Reform Synagogue became the “local church” of millions of American Jews, especially with the growth of middle-class suburbs. Meanwhile, the progressive movements had encountered objections from within, leading to the development of “Conservative Judaism”, with centres in Breslau in Germany (present-day Wrocław in Poland) and New York City, both called the “Jewish Theological Seminary”. This *via media* or middle-way response emphasised a modern, enquiring approach to text and scholarship alongside a conservative maintenance of traditional practice. In Britain, the “West London Synagogue of British Jews”, with a shorter, simplified liturgy had been founded in 1840 to unite Ashkenazim and Sephardim; it was not inspired by progressive reforming endeavours in Germany or the United States, although it did appoint a Minister, Reverend David Woolf Marx, who introduced many reforms. At the beginning of the twentieth century, a British progressive movement, Liberal Judaism, emerged – led by a woman, Lily Montagu, ably assisted by the eminent scholar Claude Montefiore. Liberal Judaism developed its own systematic programme and experienced some development in the early twentieth century. In the 1930s, several notable German rabbis, refugees from Nazism, found Liberal Judaism in Britain *too* liberal for them; they soon played a role in new synagogue communities which became the basis of British *Reform* Judaism.

Progressive Jewish movements around the world have addressed new realities and concerns in recent decades. The Shoah annihilated central European Jewish communities, including progressive Jewish institutions, but it was not till the 1970s and 80s that Jews in North America and Western Europe began to focus on the significance of this catastrophe. At the same time, the prominence of the Zionist movement in the twentieth century and the foundation of a Jewish state in 1948 required some time to begin to be processed in the sphere of Jewish religion. And towards the end of the twentieth century, the area of gender equality and sexuality emerged as a major focus. Shifting in a more conservative direction, however, there has also been a notable movement towards restoring texts and traditions which earlier generations of Progressive Jewish movements had “reformed” out of existence.

Nevertheless, the broader developments inherited from the nineteenth century remain in effect today. The Orthodox/Progressive split is still with us. The Modern (and Western) “movement” model of religion as a belief-centred community, as well as the key role of authority, remain dominant. The roles of synagogue and rabbi are even more central. Perhaps an enquiring, wide-ranging historical awareness can help us to think in new ways about seemingly fundamental dimensions of religious life. Perhaps it can even enable us to look beyond the model of religion.

## ***Contemplation***

*In this article, James emphasises that Reform Judaism did not, as is often incorrectly assumed, ‘grow out of’ or ‘break away’ from Orthodox Judaism. Rather, all Jewish denominations, indeed the concept of denominations, emerged from the historical realities created by the emancipation of European Jewry, the emergence of textual criticism, and the budding shoots of modernity. Does this change how we think about our religious life and relations with other parts of the Jewish world? What are the changes in our world which affect our Judaism today?*