

I was conducting a week long class at a summer institute, and asked the participants, most of whom were not Jewish, whether they would be interested in participating in a Sabbath evening worship service. They were. Comments following the service, in which I used the old Union Prayer Book, were most positive other than that of a young Jewish woman who said that services in the Reform synagogue she attended were quite different. She asked why I had chosen to make use of this very dated prayer book. I asked if she remembered what happened to Classic Coke. The modest proposal that follows does not seek to establish a new religion, or a new denomination. The Reform Jewish movement is a living organism which has every right to change with the passing of time, so long as it continues to meet the religious needs of the majority of its participants. But there are those of us who remember with fondness what Reform Judaism used to be, and find the changes which the past decade have introduced both foreign and unsettling.

Contrary to most Orthodox opinion, Judaism from the start has contained widely divergent religious sentiments. The priests struggled with the prophets. Pharisees fought with Sadducees and neither had use for the Essenes. The writings of Maimonides were burned by those who found them too rational. Heinrich Graetz, the great Jewish historian of the last century labeled the Jewish mystical tradition an aberration. Hassidim and Misnagdim, Zionists and anti-Zionists, Reform and Orthodox contended as authentic spokesmen for the faith. An interesting phenomenon born in the Haskalah, the enlightenment period of the last century, was Jewish secularism. Proponents claimed, and most Jews in our generation would authenticate the claim, that they had a right to be part of the community although they were not religious. They cited in support of this their strong ethnic feeling for the Jewish collective, Jewish history and the Jewish "homeland." If one who has no feelings for the Jewish religion is entitled

A Jewish Universalist Agenda

by Jay R. Brickman

to be called a Jew, why is there not a like place in the Jewish apparatus for those who believe in the religion but have little or no feeling for Jewish national identity? I have chosen as a name for such a program the Jewish Universalist Agenda (J.U.A.). It is modeled on similar convictions to those which shaped Reform Judaism in its origins.

The Birth of Reform

Reform was born in Germany at the beginning of the 19th century as an aftermath of the French Revolution. The new liberalism that swept Western Europe, conferred on Jews for the first time the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. Ghetto walls were torn down. Jews were invited to participate in the economic, political and cultural life of their lands of residence. Orthodox religious practice had flourished in the isolated Jewish community. Because there was little intellectual contact with the secular world, ancient doctrines were unquestioned. Because there was an absence of other diversions, dedicating the bulk of one's energies to religious study and practice became a norm. Because an authoritative rabbinic leadership exerted enormous control over the community, there was little opportunity for independence of thought or behavior.

Suddenly this was all changed. Jews could participate in the culture of the outside world, and in doing so, many found the traditional religious forms to be unsatisfactory. New philosophic concepts conflicted with the ancient ideology. New standards of decorum clashed with the atmosphere of the traditional worship. Many ritual restrictions, like the dietary laws, placed limitations on the degree to which the Jew could integrate socially with the non-Jewish neighbor.

Prior to the establishment of Reform

there were many Jews who abandoned the faith, accepting conversion as a key to total acceptance in the larger society. Others resisted the lure of what they considered an alien culture and wrapped themselves more tightly in traditional ways. The Reformers argued that there was a way of living simultaneously in both worlds. They subjected the traditional thought and practice to major modifications and the compromise proved quite satisfactory to a certain percentage of the Jewish population. From the start Reform was not a mass movement. It appealed particularly to Jews of wealth and general culture who wished to feel more at home in the larger society. They were of course roundly denounced by the more conservative elements of the community.

Ideological Split In Reform

From the start there was an ideological split within Reform. Abraham Geiger was a learned scholar who attempted to demonstrate that Reform was the normative consequence of the new circumstances. He endeavored to convince the Orthodox to modify their ways. His attitude was followed in this country by Rabbi Isaac Meyer Wise. The early institutions he established: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, Hebrew Union College, Central Conference of American Rabbis, did not make use of the term Reform. Wise believed his teaching was an American Judaism which should be acceptable to all Jews. He even believed that in time it would attract non-Jews and become the religion of America. Geiger's intellectual opponent was Samuel Holdheim, rabbi of a small Reform congregation in Berlin. Holdheim was not the least interested in winning other Jews to the cause, or in defending his position before traditional critics. Rabbi Emil G. Hersch was the most prominent spokesman for this view on the American scene. It is this position which I shall endeavor to express in relationship to traditional and the new Reform/Traditional Judaism. I am critical of neither. I just wish to propose an alternative for Jews like myself who find neither position congenial to their religious needs.

The principles upon which Classical Reform were based were few and were simple. The first was the rejection of an ideology that viewed the Holy Land as

Rabbi Jay D. Brickman serves Congregation Sinai in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He holds degrees from the University of Michigan (B.S.), the University of Wisconsin (M.A.), and the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (M.H.L., D.D.). He is a student of Jungian psychology and has a private practice in spiritual counseling.