



The Ziegler School
of Rabbinic Studies

Walking with History

Edited By
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UNIT 7: THE ENLIGHTENMENT

DR. STEVEN LOWENSTEIN

Around the year 1750, dramatic changes began in the religious landscape of the Jewish people. While change took different forms in different countries, there were few parts of the Jewish world in which the “modern” pattern did not replace the medieval one.

In the traditional Jewish world, the organized Jewish community had great power over the life of the individual. The vast majority of Jews saw themselves as a nation in exile, banished from the Holy Land for their sins and destined to return only when God sent a Messiah to redeem them. In public, almost all Jews observed biblical and rabbinic laws such as the Sabbath, kashrut and family purity. We don’t know what people did in private, but open violation of religious norms was exceptional. Men received an exclusively Jewish education based on study of the Bible and Talmud; many Jewish women received virtually no education. Most Jews acted in traditional ways simply because that is what Jews did. There were certainly sectarian conflicts in pre-modern Jewry, but even most sectarians believed that the Torah was the law of God and must be obeyed.

Then, how Jews observed Judaism and how they thought about it began to change. The causes for change were multiple, though scholars tend to focus on two – the influence of rationalist western thought beginning with the European Enlightenment, and the transformation of the political and social world by the French Revolution and industrialization. These intellectual and social influences affected both the majority societies in which Jewish minorities were embedded and the Jewish minority societies themselves.

In the late 17th century, a number of leading European thinkers, like Descartes, Leibniz and Spinoza, argued that the universe could be explained by reason and philosophy alone. In the 18th century, these rationalist trends were popularized throughout Europe, most famously and radically in France, but also in Britain and the German lands. The educated public, including government officials, authors, cultured women, and even much of the clergy, accepted these new ideas. The United States Declaration of Independence is an Enlightenment document, talking as it does about Nature and Nature’s God and finding it “self-evident” that “all men are created equal”.

The Enlightenment led educated non-Jews to raise questions like “Are the Jews equal too?” and “Should Jews expect the same treatment as non-Jews”? Within the Jewish community, some individuals learned non-Jewish languages, read the books of the Enlightenment and began to write Enlightenment works themselves. Unlike medieval philosophy which was tied to theology, it seemed that Jews could now discuss ideas with non-Jews without reference to differences in religion.

German Jew Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786) is perhaps the most famous early Jewish Enlightener. Brought up as a traditional Jew, Mendelssohn became a figure within the general Berlin Enlightenment. Initially, he thought there was no contradiction between being an observant Jew and accepting the rationalism of the Enlightenment, but a challenge by a Christian writer forced Mendelssohn to defend his position. In his book *Jerusalem* (1783), Mendelssohn argued that Judaism had no “dogmas” in contradiction to reason but instead had “a revealed legislation” given by God and incumbent on Jews alone as part of their constitution as God’s chosen people. Mendelssohn also worked for the cultural adaptation of Jews to their surroundings, translating the Torah into High German instead of Yiddish, at the same time as his close friend Hartwig Wessely wrote a series of Hebrew language pamphlets urging the introduction of secular studies into Jewish schools. Rabbinic attacks on these cultural projects were much stronger than objections to Mendelssohn’s



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participation in the general German Enlightenment. Moses Mendelssohn remained a relatively isolated figure in the history of Judaism. Non-traditional Jews rejected his defense of the binding nature of the “ceremonial law” and traditionalists thought his cultural innovations were dangerous.

But it was not primarily arguments about philosophy or theology which led to the disruption of the dominance of the traditional Jewish way of life; it was a change in the way society worked in general. In most of the pre-modern world, especially Europe, governments dealt with their subjects as members of the groups into which they were born. Subjects were nobles, commoners, merchants, peasants or clergy, not equal citizens standing as individuals before the government. The traditional Jewish way of life made sense within this system. Jews were one of the separate groups within society, but more different than most, because they were a nation in exile. They could control their communal Jewish life through powerful self-governing bodies which taxed, fined, educated, and supervised the religious lives of their members. As “foreigners” Jews did not have an unquestioned right of residence, but when governments permitted Jews to live in their territories, they generally interfered little in the internal life of “the Jewish nation”.

The Enlightenment, combined with the political and social changes in the wake of the French Revolution, made this system untenable, especially in Western and Central Europe. The rise of the unitary nation-state meant the gradual disappearance of the separate estates of the realm and their replacement by citizens, equal before the law and loyal to the nation-state. If the Jews wanted to remain under separate laws and to regard themselves as a separate nation, they would no longer have a place in society. This new state of affairs, which granted Jews “as individuals everything” and “as a nation nothing” raised questions about whether the Jewish religion in its traditional form was itself a barrier to political and social integration. Some argued against Jewish equality based on the social separation brought about by Jews’ refusal to eat with non-Jews. Some argued that since Jews believed in a Messiah who would bring them back to the Promised Land they could never be loyal citizens.

Besides political transformation of the status of the Jews in society, there were social and economic changes which brought economic opportunities, western education and the cultural influence of the majority cultures into the Jewish communities. The Industrial Revolution transformed society, first in England then in Western Europe, Germany and the United States, and eventually almost everywhere. In many countries, Jews participated in business opportunities in disproportionate numbers, and entered the middle class. With the introduction of compulsory secular education, many Jews became acquainted with Western culture, learning to identify with the dominant nationality and to speak its language. The majority cultures with their many opportunities were attractive, and Jews rushed to participate in them. Jewish creativity in the various national cultures and the sciences became notable and influential.

Changes in the political and social position of the Jews varied in speed and nature from country to country. Sometimes social and cultural changes came before political emancipation; in other cases political equality came first. Some countries (like France, Great Britain and the United States) granted rights to the Jews relatively rapidly and with few conditions. The German states moved more gradually and with many conditions. In Eastern Europe, especially the Russian Empire, Jewish legal equality was delayed until the Russian Revolution of 1917, long after Russian Jewish society began to modernize culturally. Finally, in the Middle East, modernity often came through European influence, and affected the Jews before it affected the society at large. Changes in religious forms and Jewish self-identification differed depending on the nature of larger political and societal changes, but virtually everywhere, a spectrum of Jewish ideology and practice replaced the traditional way of life.



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Early on, some countries saw a gradual loosening of adherence to Jewish practices, such as Sabbath observance, without any ideological movement to justify it. In parts of the former British Empire, for example, many Jews no longer observed tradition, but still thought that they really should do so. In Germany and the United States, Jews rejected the dichotomy between practice and belief. These were the pioneer countries of religious denominationalism, where each group justified its practice with its own ideology of what Torah really was. Political emancipation, especially in Germany, challenged the Jews to see their Judaism as purely religious and not national or ethnic.

Almost the opposite happened in Eastern Europe, where most Jews lived in a multi-ethnic society with long-delayed political equality. There, many Jews who rejected the Jewish religion continued to identify with a separate Jewish ethnic culture and with Jewish languages (Yiddish and Hebrew). Eastern Europeans divided themselves between the religious (Orthodox) and the secular, and pioneers brought this pattern to Israel, where it is still dominant.

In the Muslim countries, many Jews began to lessen their traditional observance, but without a sharp ideological break, and without losing a sense of their separate ethnicity. This Sephardic pattern often honors tradition while observing it selectively.

The denominational pattern familiar to most American Jews first developed in Germany as a reaction to the Jews' new political status. Beginning with Napoleon's defeat in 1815 and continuing until 1871, Jewish rights in the German states often depended on the Jews proving they were worthy members of the nation. The separate Jewish status was abolished. Jews were integrated into the educational system and drafted into the army, and rabbinical courts were disbanded. Rabbinic leaders not only lost their power, but also much of their influence over individual Jews, since they did not possess secular knowledge and often did not speak German. At the beginning of the changes, a small minority of Jews thought the opportunities of the new society and the breakdown of communal power spelled the end of Judaism, and they pursued radical social integration through conversion, intermarriage or the abandonment of all religion. They saw no Jewish alternative to the old tradition, and so abandoned Judaism when they gave up traditional beliefs and practices. The rise of denominationalism would provide non-traditional Jews with alternatives that let them remain within the Jewish community.

Early Reform Judaism, led by lay people, emerged in Germany in the wake of the Napoleonic invasions. It instituted changes in two different dimensions. One group, seeing the continued national element in Judaism as a barrier to political integration, founded temples in which they introduced German prayers alongside Hebrew ones, and removed prayers for the return to Zion, rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple and reinstitution of sacrifices. Less radical groups tried to change traditional synagogues from within by introducing greater decorum, German-language sermons and choral music. When the traditional rabbinate issued blistering attacks on the innovations, Reformers defended their practices on a piecemeal basis without yet developing an overall theory in which to situate them.

A generation later, in the 1830s and 1840s, a new cadre of young university trained men entered the rabbinical profession and began to construct a range of ideological positions which accepted western culture and tried to preserve elements of tradition. Among adherents to the entire corpus of traditional practice, tradition began to be transformed into Orthodoxy. While earlier traditional Jews had followed their way of life with little reflection, the Orthodox turned the defense of tradition into a systematic ideology which argued systematically and forcefully that the changes proposed by Reform were a rejection of God's eternal and unchanging Torah.



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Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) was the foremost spokesman for this Orthodoxy, which accepted decorum, the German language and western culture, but vehemently rejected change in religious practice. Reform rabbis like Abraham Geiger (1810-1874), inspired by the philosophy of Hegel and the critical text studies they had learned from their Classics professors, introduced a new way of looking at the nature of Torah which they called “progressive revelation”. They argued that Judaism naturally progressed with the “spirit of the times” as God’s will became gradually clearer. Using critical text study, Reform thinkers argued that the rabbinic Mishnah and Talmud were clearly different from the earlier written Torah, and that Jewish law had in fact always changed. This was a direct rejection of Hirsch’s idea of an eternal unchanging Torah.

Between the two extremes, Zacharias Frankel (1801-1875) founded what he called “positive historical Judaism”. Frankel believed that change was necessary but feared that too much change would break continuity with the Jewish past. Unlike most Orthodox and Reform leaders of his day who saw Judaism as primarily a religious ideology, Frankel left more of a place for peoplehood. He placed authority with the Jewish people rather than with “the spirit of the times”. Although Frankel did not start a separate movement in Germany, his thought was later continued by the founder of Conservative Judaism in America, Solomon Schechter (1847-1915).

Jewish denominationalism in the United States dates to the wave of German immigration between 1820 and 1880. Reform Judaism came to the United States in two ways, by direct influence of the German example and by the adjustment of Jewish immigrants to America. Some had come under the influence of Reform before their immigration, and several notable German Reform rabbis immigrated to America. The majority of German Jews, however, arrived in America poor and traditional, and as they became prosperous and Americanized, they sought a more American form of religious life. In the 19th century, Reform Judaism was more radical in America than in Germany. Men uncovered their heads, English prayer was common, men and women sat together and organ music accompanied the prayers. Reform’s radical principles were proclaimed in the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885 which declared that Jews were no longer to be considered a nation, rejected a return to Zion and explicitly abandoned kashrut and other traditional rituals. Judaism was conceived of as a spiritual faith, not as a set of ethnic, religious or cultural practices.

By 1880, it seemed that Reform would become the dominant form of American Judaism, but sociological and ideological changes swung the pendulum in the opposite direction. Horrified by the Pittsburgh Platform and the 1883 “Treifa Banquet” at Hebrew Union College, the Reform rabbinical seminary, in 1886 a group of moderates founded the Jewish Theological Seminary as a more conservative rabbinical school. Around the same time, a huge influx of Eastern European immigrants put the formerly dominant German Jews in the minority. The Jewish population of the United States went from about 280,000 in 1881 to over 2 million in 1924. The newcomers brought a more ethnic conception of Judaism with them from Eastern Europe, and identified either with traditional Judaism or with a radical leftist rejection of all religion. They rarely found the Reform temples of established upper-middle class American Jews attractive.

Although most of the new immigrants originally attended small traditional synagogues (or none at all), they and their more Americanized descendants had a huge impact on all the Jewish denominations in America. They revitalized American Orthodoxy, and moved the Reform movement in a more ethnic direction, reintroducing traditional ceremonies, Hebrew prayer and traditional melodies, and supporting Zionism. An increasing number of the children of immigrants became recruits to the new and growing Conservative



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Movement, which seemed to combine retention of the spirit of tradition with a willingness to change and fit into American life. By the mid-20th century, Conservative Judaism had become the dominant Jewish religious movement in America.

Religious developments since the middle of the 20th century have taken a different direction from those in the previous century. In the earlier period, Jews generally related to majority culture as outsiders looking in. Their chief concerns were how they could participate in the larger society while retaining their Jewish identity, and what adjustments Judaism had to make to fit into modern culture. In recent years, the emphasis has shifted. Most Jews have “made it” in American society. They no longer have to prove their fitness for acceptance, but now Jews are faced with a different issue. Many ask: Now that I am successful and integrated, what gives my life meaning? The search for roots, authenticity and spirituality has sent Jews in many different directions – from a revival of Orthodoxy, to an in-depth re-evaluation of the role of women in Judaism, to explorations of mystical and meditative practices. The major movements are in flux; all have important internal differences. Newer movements, such as Reconstructionism and Jewish Renewal, have attracted important followings, especially among the well-educated. Many Jews see themselves as non-denominational, while others are not quite sure what their denominational labels mean. Jewish identity has become more individualistic, more fluid and less subject to rules. Younger Jews, especially, seek to construct their own Judaism, taking from a myriad of sources and refusing to allow anyone to define their Judaism for them. In the words of Arnold Eisen “the Jew within” is gaining emphasis, while institutional Judaism seems to be playing a lesser role.¹ It remains a challenge to the religious movements to channel this radical individualism in a direction that will strengthen Judaism as a whole.

¹ Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen, *The Jew Within: Self, Family and Community in America*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000.



UNIT 7: THE ENLIGHTENMENT – TEXT 1

MOSES MENDELSSOHN (1729–1786), JERUSALEM, OR, ON RELIGIOUS POWER AND JUDAISM, TRANSLATED BY ALLAN ARKUSH¹

I consider this an essential point of the Jewish religion and believe that this doctrine constitutes a characteristic difference between it and the Christian one. To say it briefly: I believe that Judaism knows of no revealed religion in the sense in which Christians understand this term. The Israelites possess a divine *legislation* – laws, commandments, rules of life, instruction in the will of God as to how they should conduct themselves....but no doctrinal opinions, no saving truths, no universal propositions of reason. These the Eternal reveals to us and to all other men, at all times, through *nature* and *thing*, but never through *word* and *script*.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- Mendelssohn asserts that Judaism has no dogmas, just what human beings can figure out through reason unaided by revelation. In your opinion, is this an accurate description of Judaism? Are there things that the Jewish religion requires its adherents to believe? If yes, could these required beliefs be learned without the Torah?
- Is Mendelssohn's claim that Judaism has "no saving truths" a criticism of Christianity? If yes, how so? If no, how do you read it?
- How convincing do you find Mendelssohn's argument that Jewish law is binding on all Jews because God commanded it, while non-Jews are not obligated to obey it? Why would Jews obey the Torah if they can get all the necessary divine truths without it?
- Mendelssohn is sometimes said to be the first Modern Orthodox Jew, because he insists the Law is divine and obligatory. He is sometimes said to be the forerunner of Reform Judaism, because he states that all truths can be learned without revelation. Which of these claims seem more accurate? Why?

¹ Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem, or, On Religious Power and Judaism*. Hanover: University Press of New England, 1983, p. 89-90.



THE ENLIGHTENMENT – TEXT 2

JOHANN DAVID MICHAELIS (GERMAN BIBLE SCHOLAR, 1717–1791), ARGUMENTS AGAINST DOHM, 1782,
TRANSLATED BY L. SACHS¹

Does the Law of Moses make citizenship, and full integration of the Jew into other peoples, difficult or impossible? I think it does! The purpose of this Law is to maintain the Jews as a people almost completely separate from other peoples, and this purpose is an integral part of all the laws, down to those concerning kosher and non-kosher food, with the result that the Jews have lived as a separate group during 1700 years of dispersion....

One must mention something in addition to the Law of Moses...which casts doubts on the full and steadfast loyalty of the Jews to the state and the possibility of their full integration, namely their messianic expectation of a return to Palestine. The Jews will always see the state as a temporary home, which they will leave in the hour of their greatest happiness to return to Palestine.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **Christian historian Christian Wilhelm von Dohm (1751-1820) favored political equality for Jews. What do you think of Michaelis' argument that Jewish difference prevents their integration "into other peoples"? Is there a difference between Jewish integration into society in 19th century Europe, when countries had a single national culture, and in the multicultural countries of our time?**
- **Do you think that Jewish ritual laws like the Sabbath and kashrut stand in the way of social integration? Is that their purpose? Should Jews continue to observe them despite the separation they may cause? Why or why not?**
- **Michaelis is one of the first Christian writers to raise the issue of Jewish dual loyalty. Do you think this issue applies specifically and only to the Jews because of the Jewish tie to the Land of Israel, or would it apply to any religion that was noticeably different from that of the majority? Is this issue of dual loyalty more or less difficult now that there is an actual Jewish state?**
- **Do you think that the national elements of Judaism can be stripped away, leaving a purely spiritual faith? What would that look like for you? How might your relationship with Israel change? Are the Jews a religion, a nation, or a combination of both?**

¹ Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 42-43.



THE ENLIGHTENMENT – TEXT 3

ZACHARIAS FRANKEL (1801–1875), ON CHANGES IN JUDAISM (1845)¹

The early teachers, by interpretation, changed the literal meaning of the Scriptures; later scholars that of the Mishnah, and the post-Talmudic scholars that of the Talmud. All these interpretations were not intended as idle speculation. They addressed themselves to life activities and imparted different forms to the practice of certain precepts. Thanks to such studies, Judaism achieved stabilization and avoided estrangement from the conditions of the time in various periods.... But on the other hand, they [the rabbis] established a rule which was intended as a guardian and protector against undue changes. It reads as follows: That which was adopted by the entire community of Israel and was accepted by the people and became a part of its life, cannot be changed by any authority.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- When Frankel discusses the chain of changes made by teachers through interpretation, he says “All these interpretations were not intended as idle speculation. They addressed themselves to life activities and imparted different forms to the practice of certain precepts”. What does this mean to you? Can you think of some Jewish practices that have changed in response to “life activities” and through interpretation? How would the major movements within Judaism today react to this statement? How would each movement explain the relationship of later practice to Scripture?
- When Frankel says “That which was adopted by the entire community of Israel... cannot be changed by any authority” it is meant to be a conservative statement limiting innovation. In our day, when so many of the “community of Israel” no longer observe most Jewish rituals, how do you read this statement? Is Frankel’s rule still valid as a limitation on innovation?
- In his essay, Dr. Lowenstein points out that Zacharias Frankel founded “positive-historical Judaism”. He adds: “Although Frankel did not start a separate movement in Germany, his thought was later continued by the founder of Conservative Judaism in America, Solomon Schechter”. Using our text above, discuss how you think Frankel’s ideas influenced and influence Conservative Judaism. What does the term “positive-historical Judaism” mean to you? Do these ideas apply to the other major movements within Judaism? What about them is universally Jewish, and what is specifically Conservative?

¹ Mordecai Waxman, editor, *Tradition and Change: The Development of Conservative Judaism*. New York: Burning Bush Press, 1958, p.48.



THE ENLIGHTENMENT – TEXT 4

THE PITTSBURGH PLATFORM OF THE CONFERENCE OF REFORM RABBIS (1885)¹

We recognize in the Mosaic legislation a system of training the Jewish people for its mission during its national life in Palestine, and today we accept as binding only the moral laws and maintain only such ceremonies as elevate and sanctify our lives, but reject all such as are not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization. We hold that all such Mosaic and Rabbinical laws as regulate diet, priestly purity and dress originated in ages and under the influence of ideas altogether foreign to our present mental and spiritual state. They fail to impress the modern Jew with a spirit of priestly holiness; their observance in our day is apt to obstruct rather than to further modern spiritual elevation.... We consider ourselves no longer a nation but a religious community, and therefore expect neither a return to Palestine, nor a sacrificial worship under the administration of the sons of Aaron, nor the restoration of any of the laws concerning the Jewish state.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- In his essay, Dr. Lowenstein says that “In the 19th century, Reform Judaism was more radical in America than in Germany”. Why do you think this is true? What underlying values can you detect in this text? Think about the time and the place and the people, and ask yourselves: What may have motivated The Pittsburgh Platform?
- How do you feel about this statement? Which, if any, of its statements reflect your values? Which go against your values? Does any of it make you uncomfortable? Why?
- Compare this text with the one in Text 3. How are they similar, and how are they different?

¹ Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995, p.468-469.



THE ENLIGHTENMENT – TEXT 5

STEVEN M. COHEN AND ARNOLD M. EISEN, *THE JEW WITHIN*¹

More and more, the meaning of Judaism in America transpires within the self. American Jews have drawn the activity and significance of their group identity into the subjectivity of the individual, the activities of the family, and the few institutions (primarily the synagogue) which are seen as extensions of this intimate sphere....In broad strokes, that which is personally meaningful has gained at the expense of that which is peoplehood-oriented. American Jews today are relatively more individualistic and less collectivist. Taken as a group, their patterns of belief and practice are more idiosyncratic and diverse, less uniform and consensual... They celebrate the autonomy of this choosing [of activities and meanings] and do not worry about its authenticity. Indeed they welcome each change in the pattern of their Judaism as a new stage in their personal journeys.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **Cohen and Eisen write in the year 2000. Does their description of contemporary Jews match with your own experience? Do you think it is true that Judaism is becoming ever more personalized and internal? What does this mean for the future of denominations?**
- **Cohen and Eisen wonder if the move toward personal, individual Judaisms is good or bad for the Jews. What do you think?**
- **Why do you think the search for personal meaning and the view of Judaism as part of a “personal journey” have gained such prominence in our time? What parallels, if any, can you draw between Western secular culture and the Judaism of the Enlightenment and Western secular culture and the Judaism of today?**

¹ Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen, *The Jew Within: Self, Family and Community in America*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000, p.183-184.





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