

# [Reform judaism in the 19th century](https://assignbuster.com/reform-judaism-in-the-19th-century/)

The most extreme precursor to the Reform movement was a man by
the name of Samuel Holdheim. He was born in 1806 in Kempo in the
province of Posen. At a young age he studied at a yeshiva and received
a Talmudic education. He began to study German and secular subjects
after his marriage to a woman with a modern education. After their
divorce several years later, he began studying at the University of
Prague and Berlin and received a doctorate from the University of
Leipzig. Following service in Frankfurt -Am-Oder he became a
Landesrabbiner or chief Rabbi of Mecklenberg-Schewerin. In the year
1847 he became the rabbinate of a reform congregation in Berlin . At
this point he already disapproved of most liberal Rabbis and came to
be known as the most exemplar of reform Rabbis in all of Europe ( 241)
The question comes to mind as to what exactly triggered this
different belief in Judaism which differed significantly from previous
tenents. It started during the time of the French revolution, a time
when European Jews were (for the first time) recognized as citizens of
the countries in which they lived in. Ghettos were being abolished,
special badges were no longer required and Jews could dress the way
they wanted, settle were they pleased and work the occupations they
Many Jews settled outside of Jewish districts, and began to
live like their neighbors and speak the language of the land. They
went to public schools and began to neglect Jewish Studies and forget
In 1815, after Napoleon's defeat, Jews lost the rights of
citizenship in many countries. Many Jews converted to Christianity in
order to retain those rights. Many thoughtful Jews were concerned
about this. They realized that many of these changes took place not
because of a dislike for Judaism, but in order to obtain better
treatment. Many rabbis believed that the way to address this was to
force Jews to give up public schools and universities. This didn't
Rabbis suggested that observance might have to be changed in
order to appeal to the Jew living the modern world. They realized that
every now and then old practices and new ones were introduced,
resulting in a different lifestyle then 4000 or even 2000 years
previously. They fathomed that these changes often made life easier
for the Jew. They concluded that in order to make Judaism attractive
to all Jews this change had to continue. A group of Rabbis assembled
in Germany, and changes began, thus developed the start of Reform
Judaism. Holdheim a reform Rabbi himself felt that the Jews living
during his time period should change the laws given to them at Mt.
Sinai and the halacha that the Talmud and Mishna state. Holdheim
believed that the laws of the Torah and the Talmud that were in effect
when the Jews had their own country and government have lost their
legitimacy. Judaism now had to be in accord with both the letter and
the spirit of laws of the nations they were living among. Even the
laws of the Torah whose source was God had to be regarded as valid for
certain times and places as he said " with the change of the
circumstances and conditions of life for which God once gave those
laws , the laws themselves cease to be operative, that they shall be
observed no longer because they no longer can be observed". Thus ,
Holdheim said that the biblical and Talmudic laws concerning marriage,
divorce and personal status are no longer relevant and the Jews in
these cases should be ruled by the state government (Sasson 835). He
concluded that laws between man and man should be left to the rule
of the state they lived in but questions of prayer and religious
institutions should be left to the Rabbis because prayer was the
most important part of religious life.
Holdheim denied the authority of the Talmudic dicta, the oral
law. He says that it was written by the hand of man but was divinely
inspired. His conclusion was that Jewish life should be based on
spiritual and ethical guidance of the Torah. Even though he didn't
reject the Talmud and Mishna one-hundred percent for him they were no
longer used for Jewish law but storehouses of wisdom and ethics (Gay
155). Illustrations of commandments that he rejected during this time
period were the celebration of Shabbat on Saturday. The reason for
this was there was normal school on Saturdays and the Jews felt school
was more important than observing the word of God (Gay 155). Holdheim
also went a little far fetched and said that he couldn't find anything
wrong with intermarriage , even though the Torah clearly states it. He
also stated in 1844 that circumcision wasn't required even though he
had absolutely no reason for this( 243). Other important beliefs of
Holdheim were anti-Zionism, the observance of only one day festivals
and that men and women should be treated equally in terms of mitzvot
(Gay 155). Most of these changes in the religion were so that the Jews
should adapt with the nation they were living in. Since they
themselves didn't constitute a nation and these laws were prerogatives
of the state the Jews should abide by the law of the land (Sasson
Reform Judaism wasn't the only way of belief during this time
period. Others like Samson Raphael Hirsch went in the totally
opposite direction of Holdheim. Hirsch felt that Judaism had to be
observed the way we were told to under almost any and every
circumstance(Gay 154). If Hirsch wouldn't have taken this different
stand a true Jewish nation wouldn't exist today. Holdheim didn't
realize that he was weakening the nation and could have ultimately led
to the extinction of the Jewish people
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