

# 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 rabbiner 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 tenets. 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 where they pleased and work the occupations they wanted. 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 their traditions. 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 than 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

<https://assignbuster.com/reform-judaism-in-the-19th-century/>

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

Bibliography: