

# Research paper on jewish reform and conservative movements

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## **Jewish Reform and Conservative Movements**

Aside from Christianity and Islam, Judaism can be considered one of the oldest religions still practiced and worshiped today. Its history traces back since the early centuries and like Christianity and Islam, Judaism is known for its monotheistic faith. Much like its counterparts, Judaism has grown significantly throughout the years, establishing societies and communities adhering to the laws subscribed by its sacred text. However, as years progress, there are instances where some of the religion's traditions and customs are clashing with the modern times. Some Jews recognized this problem and proposed for changes in the faith, but others did not agree, primarily as it would disrupt the centuries old faith that has enmeshed itself to society. Jewish reform had been triggered by the desire of some Jews to ensure they remain connected with their overall community whilst being able to practice their faith openly. This paper will discuss the history and nature of the Jewish reform movement and the conservatism argument.

Religion in the 18th to 19th century was a period of immense turmoil as several religions have divided into various sects, while a few experienced oppression. For Judaism, Jewish modernity took place after the Haskala or the Enlightenment in the 18th century. Around this period, Westernization have been prominent throughout the region beginning from the Sephardim in Western Europe. The Marrano sect were the first ones who introduced the concept of westernizing the faith as they brought Western education that they have gotten while staying in the Iberian Peninsula. The Marrano teachings were recognized and practiced by some of its leaders – one being Baruch de Spinoza, who used the Western teachings to all biblical traditions.

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Italian Jews were also open to the reform as they even participated in the dawn of the Renaissance period. Eventually, the growing influence of Western culture had brought in new opportunities for Jewish citizens such as economic opportunities and further expansion. However, there were still areas who resisted this changing Western environment and continued to ensure that Jews were confined in their community and adhere to their traditional cultures. Some did not agree with this sentiment, thus the beginning of the movements to call for reform.

With the growing desire of some Jews to introduce reform to the religion, one of the first who has proposed his version of what Judaism should become in the current period was Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786). The philosopher was known to practice traditional Judaism, but had been influenced by the European Enlightenment. Although he agreed with the philosophy behind the religion, Mendelssohn was asked by Christians who asked him as to why he still continues to follow a faith that is unenlightened. He responded to this question with the book 'Jerusalem' in 1783, stating that Judaism is an inherited faith and it revealed the divine legislation. Mendelssohn also declared in the book that he is a believer of the universal religion. He called on to his fellow Jews and proposed that European culture should be integrated with traditional Judaism in order to establish mutual respect for both Jews and Christians and ensure that Jews can also participate in other cultures. Many of his followers or the maskilim follow his model for maintaining piety while co-existing in the modern world. Mendelssohn also translated the Torah in order to gain more followers in Germany, as well as help Jews understand the religion better without the necessity of getting lost

in the discourse. His translations became popular with many Germans in the period, allowing acculturation to persist throughout Europe.

Mendelssohn's work was carried on by the Berlin Haskala (Enlightenment) who supported his work, especially after Mendelssohn died. They introduced a periodical known as the Ha-Me'assef (The Collector), which introduced virtues of secular culture and proposals for secular education. When the Edict of Toleration was enacted by Emperor Joseph II, poet Naphtali Wessely, who worked with Mendelssohn for the German-translation of the Torah, called for reforming the Jewish education sector to ensure full emancipation. Subjects such as math, German, history and literature should take priority before considering traditional Jewish studies. The Bible was also included in the subjects to be studied for secularization and like the other secular subjects, must take precedence before studying the Torah. Jews immediately responded by establishing modern schools in areas such as Frankfurt and Hamburg. The results of this secularization were bountiful as the secular interpretations of Judaism became possible. However, there were still flaws with this movement as secular culture and westernizing religion only endangers Judaism's age-old beliefs and traditions.

While Mendelssohn established the concept of reforming the religion, it was Israel Jacobson (1768-1828) who founded the Reform Judaism movement. Jacobson was a known philanthropist and built one of the first few synagogues advocating the reform movement. The most popular of these synagogues built by Jacobson was the one in Seesen as it was known to be similar to churches. The structure had a reader's platform (bimah) placed in front of the ark rather in the center as compared to traditional synagogues.

The inscriptions located throughout the building were written in both Latin and Hebrew and it was notable that it held an organ and most of its services played instrumental music, prayers and sermons. The first Reform temple was opened to the public in 1817 in Hamburg and despite the critics arguing against the alterations, Reformers cited their rights to revise rituals under the Talmud. In 1819, the group released their own version of the religion's prayerbook which ensured that the repetitive prayers and edited prayers and poems directed to nationalism and messianic redemption. It was Jacobson who supported the initiative and gotten many experts to review it before publishing. One of the rabbi respondents was Rabbi Aaron Chorin of Hungary, who stated that reform is allowable to free the liturgy to allow its followers to understand the word of the faith. Shortly after the revision of the early reformers of Jewish tradition and prayers, a group of Jewish intellectuals established the Society for the Culture and Academic Study of Judaism to understand the history of Jewish tradition throughout the history of the Western world. However, in 1824, the society collapsed and the intellectuals who founded it like poet Heinrich Heine converted to Christianity to gain more followers and succeed in their careers.

Eventually, several sects have been created within the Early Reform movement as the moderate reformers were under Abraham Geiger (1810-1874) and the extremists were under Samuel Holdheim (1806-1874). Each group emphasized secular reform for Judaism and they argued that Judaism's ethical teachings is a major contribution to Western society. However, while they showed Judaism as a religion that is universal and flexible, reformists rejected beliefs they believed to be particularistic. They rejected the practice

of dietary laws and traditions on Sabbath day, as well as the worship conducted in the idea the Temple built by King Solomon would be rebuilt. Their synagogues, much like the one in Seesen, varied from the traditional form of these worship centers as they were based in Germany, the United States and in areas where they believe, they can worship in peace. The reformist movement continued to grow and in 1840, reformist leaders met in three major rabbinic conferences to discuss several issues involving their efforts.

There are also some reformists, such as Samson Raphael Hirsch, who has created his own version of the reformist movement known as the Neo-Orthodoxy. Hirsch's ideals was somehow similar to Mendelssohn's Haskalah as he believes that Jewish life and tradition should be changed while still recognizing the nature of Jewish law. Hirsch had also stressed that the "externals" to Judaic life such as languages, dress, and education should be subjected to the spirit of the age. Reform, Hirsch claims, can be regulated through a service that is led by an expert rabbi both trained in the secular culture and rabbinic traditions. Experts say Hirsch's Neo-Orthodoxy is also similar to some extent to Positive-Historical Judaism given its retention of Judaic law while's proving their worth as a part of the German nation. Hirsch and his followers also did not agree with Geiger and his Reform Jews in the extent he believes that emancipation cannot be rushed while acculturation to secularism was not enough to practice the Jewish faith. However, despite getting a huge following, the Orthodox reformists had to contend to a Reform Judaism-led society as their brand of reform was well accepted by the people in the 19th century when the German leaders accepted one

Jewish community in their territories. Eventually, the Reform Judaism movement also grew towards the United States in 1881. While the arrival of the Ashkenaic Jews had reduced their numbers, Reform Judaism advocated change and reform as seen in the Columbus Platform of 1937. Much like in Europe, Reform Judaism had slowly flourished in the United States especially when it comes to foreign policy issues of the country towards Israel.

Throughout these movements, it is visible that their beliefs have gradually shifted throughout the 19th century. Frank and Leaman (2003) stated that the Reformers wanted to discover the “ authentic” version of Judaism which was fitted to the age. Historical law and facts allows Jews to understand things better and shaped Jewish ideologies. For its leaders, Judaism must be refashioned whilst maintaining the use of its current principles to expound the nature of the belief further and justify its content. Abraham Geiger himself stated that Judaism’s changes needed to be shown and understood, not hidden and misunderstood. Reform Judaism also ensured the discovery of the four major epochs of Judaism: the Revelation, the period of tradition, “ rigid legalism” and the “ rigid codification”. Many Reformists and even experts stressed that liberalism is an integral component of the growth of reform as liberalism expounds on the growth of updated beliefs and the understanding of the person of himself. Jews also adhering to the reformist thinking also see themselves as a “ people” rather than being a collective religious group.

On the other hand, however, it was in these three conferences in Germany in 1840 that led to the growth of the Conservative Judaism movements. The leader of the movement was Zacharias Frankel (1801-1875) who took part in

the Frankfurt Rabbinical Conference of 1845 but walked out after the conference when the discussion entailed the removal of Hebrew as a mandatory language to use in worship. While Frankel agreed with reforming Judaism, he wanted the religion to recognize its roots and traditional practices. Frankel then founded the Jewish Theological Seminary of Breslau in 1854 and taught Positive Historical Judaism that is meant to preserve Judaism. Frankel's branch of Conservative Judaism had been transmitted around the globe while the Reform movements were influencing Europe. These conservative groups or the Masorti mostly occupied the American territories whilst under the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, established in 1887. The JTS followed the Breslau model when it came to their understanding of Judaism. The leaders of this sector of Judaism tried to resist the course of change as it is crucial for its believers to commit themselves to the values taught for centuries and must be interpreted accordingly. It was Solomon Schechter who established the ideology of the group, declaring that iconoclasm is an integral part of Judaism which has to be open to changes. Schechter also founded the United Synagogue of America (later known as the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism), which is under the World Council of Synagogues (established in 1957). Despite losing some people in the course of the 21st century, the movement continues to debate actively with other sects of Judaism to ensure decorum is respected.

The movement has its own hierarchy as there is a Committee of Law and Standards that tackles issues on religious practice. Unlike the reformist groups, Conservative Judaism permits women to have an active voice in the



synagogue, permitting mixed seating and reading the Torah. In some parts of the world, Conservatives were open in training these women to become rabbis. Conservative Judaism, according to Hollander (2013), also utilizes the Torah, the Mishna and other early writings known to Judaism as a part of its attempts to protect the traditions of the faith. The group also follows the teshuvot established by the CJLS, which organizes the administration of the Conservatism movement. Members to the main council can be voted from representing synagogues around the globe while 6 are nonvoting members. The CJLS also handles concerns on the position of the entire movement written in a teshuva or the “ official halakhic position of the Conservative movement.” Conservative Judaism must also respect Zionism or the movement that would push for the creation of the land of the Jews. The Mitzvoth or responses to God must also be interpreted by the congregations in every meeting and worship services. Unlike the Reform synagogues that allow any language to be used in worship services, the Conservative Judaism synagogues uses Hebrew and the standard dress code must be followed: men must wear the kippot. In every service, the kashruth or food laws, Sabbath/Shabbat and holidays must also be followed and respected. History reflects that like most faiths, Judaism had stood strong against the test of time as its people were oppressed and separated themselves from the main faith to sects they believe is closer to the truth. The proposals of the Reform Judaism movement is actually warranted considering the possibilities of traditional values conflicting with the current norms or becoming outdated. Reform does not necessarily mean complete change, but mostly a reinterpretation of beliefs that would be acceptable to current

society. However, while change is critically needed, there is still a necessity to reconsider just how much should be changed as Judaism has been practiced for centuries. Conservative Judaism showcases this belief as not all traditions must be edited for the sake of keeping up with the times. As the believers of this century's old religion continue to adhere to their respective sects, Judaism remains an integral part of history and religion even at the present time.

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