

JUDAISM, REFORM JUDAISM & GAY JUDAISM

by Joe Hample 7/24/00

Once upon a time in the Land of Israel, the priests used to sell a product called atonement. You would bring the priests grain or fruit or olive oil or livestock: they would ritually spill or burn a portion of your offering, and keep the rest for their own use; and your repentance was validated. This system developed the discipline and spirituality of the people, and provided a livelihood to the clergy. It was a win-win situation.

But Deuteronomy limits the priestly sacrifices to one central shrine, identified with the national Temple at Jerusalem. When the Romans destroyed the Temple in the year 70, the priestly protocol could no longer continue, and Biblical Judaism came to an end. So what could take its place? Well, there were some different schools of thought. One group decided the essence of the priestly system was animal sacrifice, *blood sacrifice*. In this view, the recent martyrdom of a famous Jewish dissident, Jesus, could serve as a new blood sacrifice permanently securing everyone's atonement from now on.

Another party decided the essence of the priestly system was *law and covenant*. The Temple sacrifices might have to be put on hold, but you could still celebrate the sacred times, you could still prepare the ritual foods, you could still peruse the ancient books. You could still fulfill many of the old commandments, and you could honor the rest by studying them and talking about them. A verse from the prophet Hosea was cited: "We offer Thee the bulls of our lips"; in other words, sacrifice could be purely verbal. Here we recognize the parting of the ways between Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism. The key difference is the instrument of redemption. Christians are saved by the body and blood of Christ, but Jews are saved by the Torah, the law.

The Christians published first. The New Testament was largely in circulation by the year 100. It took the Rabbis another century to publish just the outline of the Talmud, called the Mishnah, and the full Talmud took centuries more. The New Testament and the Talmud are alike in some ways. Both give a fuller development to some ideas that are only embryonic in the Hebrew Bible, like immortality. Both include some of the same phrases and aphorisms, like the old saw that humanity is not made for the Sabbath, but the Sabbath is made for humanity. But the New Testament and the Talmud are very different in terms of literary genre. The New Testament is narrative: you could sit down and read it like a novel. The Talmud is more like an encyclopedia than a novel, and very few people have ever read the entire document.

Another difference is that the New Testament is presented as a fresh revelation. The Talmud is presented as a mere clarification of the original revelation—but it's a very imaginative clarification. Of course, the Hebrew prophets had already begun to emphasize the moral dimension of religion. Hosea and Amos and Jeremiah had attacked the hypocrisy of meticulous ritual observance divorced from social responsibility. But the Rabbis went further. For example, the Torah—the Jewish Bible—imposes the death penalty for a long list of offenses, some of them comparatively trivial, to our way of thinking. The Talmud makes the death penalty practically unenforceable, by enacting impossibly high standards of evidence for conviction of a capital crime. Or again, the Torah provides that all debts must be forgiven every seven years, which might sound generous. But what it meant in practice was that people became reluctant to lend money

in the fifth or sixth year, for fear of not getting it back. The Talmud solves the problem by explaining that God only meant to cancel *private* debts in the seventh year: debts that were publicly registered would remain collectible. Once this interpretation was established, credit once again became available to the poor, which presumably dovetails with God's larger agenda. The Rabbis were second to none in their reverence for the text, but they also felt that religion should meet the needs of real people. They pointed to Leviticus 18:5—Keep My laws, for a person shall *live* by them. The requirement is to *live* by the law, not to die by it.

Even after the Talmud was complete, the interpretation of the law continued to evolve over the centuries. There was an increase of concern for vulnerable constituencies like women and the disabled and those born out of wedlock. The Torah allows a man to take many wives, but eventually this was seen as a hardship for women, and in the year 1000 the Rabbis banned polygamy. The Talmud unfortunately excludes deaf people from leadership: deaf people were thought to be feebleminded. But in the Middle Ages the Rabbis announced that deaf people had gotten a lot smarter over the centuries, and it would now be acceptable for them to exercise leadership. Jewish law attaches a certain stigma to the children of adultery or incest, but the leading rabbi of the 16th century, Moses Isserles, forbade any inquiry into a possibly illegitimate birth, defining a sort of don't-ask-don't-tell policy. So in spite of its ancient texts and rules, Judaism was always a living organism. The Jews worshiped a God of justice, and justice might require some flexibility.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, new intellectual winds began to blow across the world. There were scientific breakthroughs; there were revolutions; there was idealism; it was an age of reason. For the Jews, it was an age when the ghetto walls came down, at least in Western countries, and there were new opportunities for participation in the wider society. How would Judaism respond to this new situation? Maybe the doctrines of Jewish separateness, Jewish differentness, were inappropriate to a democratic age. Maybe old fears about impurity and defilement were superstitious. Maybe the exclusion of women from full synagogue participation was anachronistic. It was hard to find a consensus: some innovators went too far; some traditionalists rejected the whole idea of change, and tried forcing Judaism back to some imaginary prior state of changelessness. Reform Judaism was founded in Germany in the 1810s and soon spread to other countries, especially America. Orthodox Judaism emerged in the 1840s as a counter movement to Reform. Conservative Judaism, essentially a more cautious kind of Reform, dates to the 1850s. The Reform movement introduced liturgical changes: more use of the vernacular, more sermons, new kinds of music, worship at more convenient times. Some of these changes were eventually imitated by the other denominations, and of course some weren't.

The 20th century altered the debate again. Progress in America, disaster in Europe, and new beginnings in the land of Israel have kept returning us to the question of what Judaism means in our time. Isaiah calls Israel a light unto the nations. The Jews are a small and scattered people, but our religion has exerted an extraordinary influence on world civilization, and that's because we were the first people to worship a God of justice. You know, Jews have always played a large role in social justice movements. Jews like Samuel Gompers organized the labor movement. Jewish progressives like French premier Leon Blum were influential in Europe. American Jews like Michael

Schwerner and Andrew Goodman gave their lives for the civil rights movement. Many of these activists were secular Jews, but even they were shaped by their heritage, their instinct for the ideals of the prophets. And some activists were religious Jews, like the rabbis who marched with Martin Luther King. Jews have also been prominent in the peace movement and the environmental movement and the women's movement. Incidentally, the Reform seminary ordained the first woman rabbi in 1972; the Conservative seminary followed suit in 1985. Genesis says God created *man and woman* in the Divine image, so surely both sexes are qualified for leadership.

Reform Judaism is supported internationally by the World Union for Progressive Judaism, founded in London in 1926, with a presence in about 40 countries around the globe. In the USA there are close to 900 Reform synagogues, and about a million and a half Reform Jews. In Canada there are 20 Reform synagogues. In England there are 40 Reform synagogues and 30 Liberal and Progressive synagogues, a slightly more experimental movement. In Israel there are 15 Reform synagogues and 25 Conservative synagogues, but they face a difficult situation. Israel recognizes Christianity, Islam, and Orthodox Judaism, but *not* progressive Judaism. Reform and Conservative Judaism endure censorship, discrimination, and harassment in Israel. The progressive denominations have begun to fight the legal battle for equality, but it will be a long and bitter struggle. The irony is that most Israelis are not Orthodox. Liberal Judaism used to be marginal in Israel, but in the last ten to twenty years it's acquired more of a foothold, and it fills a real need. Prominent writers and intellectuals have begun urging unaffiliated Israelis to join a Reform or Conservative synagogue. The courts have upheld the right of Reform and Conservative Jews to sit on religious councils that serve the whole Jewish population. This past January a Reform agency won a \$500,000 grant from the Israeli government to teach children about Judaism and social justice. It'll take time, but the cause of progressive Judaism in Israel will prevail.

Now let's talk about the gay thing. A notorious verse from Leviticus says, "You shall not lie with a man as with a woman: it is an abomination." It's important to see this verse in its historical context. In the ancient Near East, there was a common practice of cult prostitution, often male homosexual cult prostitution, and this is mentioned explicitly in Deuteronomy and Kings. Cult prostitution was forbidden to Jews (and Christians) as an inappropriate form of worship. Nowhere in the Bible does God forbid you to love a person of your own gender. Jonathan loved David; Ruth loved Naomi; and these are respected figures in our tradition. I don't say they were gay, but surely there have been gay Jews since forever. According to the Talmud, one day the famous scholar Resh Lakish gaped at a handsome colleague bathing in the Jordan, and impulsively jumped in after him. The medieval Hebrew liturgist Yehudah Halevi wrote homoerotic poetry. A cross-dressing girl in the Ukraine, the Maid of Ludomir, was a popular Hasidic mystic in the 19th century. And in the 20th century there have been lots of famous gay Jews, from Gertrude Stein to Leonard Bernstein, to Harvey Milk, to Roberta Achtenberg, to Stephen Sondheim, to Harvey Fierstein, and on and on.

Still, Jewish institutions remained largely clueless till after Stonewall. Typically they excluded gays by taking Biblical verses out of context. At best, they accepted gay individuals, but failed to honor gay relationships, or to acknowledge that gays have been oppressed much like Jews. The first gay synagogue was founded in Los Angeles in 1972. Briefly it was called the Metropolitan Community Temple, but founders soon settled on a

Hebrew name, Beth Chayim Chadashim, the House of New Life. In 1973 a gay synagogue opened in New York. In 1975 the Los Angeles and New York synagogues held a conference; the next year they held another conference and invited colleagues from Canada and England to join them; and soon we had a new movement, the World Congress of Gay and Lesbian Jewish Organizations. San Francisco's gay synagogue, Congregation Sha'ar Zahav, was founded in 1977: the name means Golden Gate. These synagogues suffered the growing pains of all gay organizations. The men had one perspective and the women had another. Older people had different priorities than younger people, or people with AIDS. Once the new synagogues achieved some stability, liberal straight people started to join, and then we had to meet their needs without sacrificing our own uniqueness. Somehow, through all these vicissitudes, we found ways to reclaim Jewish tradition and make it work for us. At Sha'ar Zahav, before the Kaddish, the mourners' liturgy, we pray for the lesbian and gay dead, especially those who suffered persecution or loneliness. On the Sabbath before a wedding, we give the happy couple an *aufruf*, the honor of participating in the service, be they women, men, or a mixed-gender couple.

Gradually the Jewish mainstream came around. When Sha'ar Zahav was founded, the local Jewish press wouldn't even take our paid advertising. Within a few years they were running articles on us fairly regularly: we were always doing something new and unusual; we were good copy. Because there's so much assimilation among American Jews, if someone actually wants to cultivate Jewish identity, Jewish leaders are bound to be pleased. In 1975 the Reform movement endorsed gay rights, and in 1977 they approved gay outreach synagogues. Several gay synagogues then joined up, including Los Angeles and San Francisco. Affiliation with the Reform movement meant help in finding a rabbi; it meant support around political and administrative issues; and it meant a chance for dialogue with our straight counterparts.

Most people at Sha'ar Zahav didn't grow up Reform. Suddenly finding ourselves Reform Jews, we've seized the opportunity to help shape the Reform movement. We've pioneered a response to diversity issues that other synagogues are starting to confront, modeling ways to include converts and single parents and the intermarried. We've brought a new passion to Reform Judaism, which used to be pretty cerebral, by bringing back types of tradition and spirituality that Reform Judaism used to reject. At the same time we've influenced the politics of the denomination. In the 80s the Reform movement supported people with AIDS; in the 90s they supported gay rabbis and gay civil marriage. Mike Rankin, who's one of the old stalwarts at Sha'ar Zahav, once lectured Reform leaders about the insensitive treatment of homosexuality in the official Torah commentary published by the Reform movement. The Reform leaders invited Mike to come up with some more appropriate verbiage. Sure enough, the new edition of the Torah commentary handles the subject a lot more delicately.

Last December I attended the biennial convention of the Reform movement in Orlando, FL. Sha'ar Zahav was the best-represented synagogue in the Bay Area: we had a dozen people in Orlando. We discovered tremendous support for the gay community on a wide range of issues. In Orlando I went to workshops on a lot of different subjects, but in almost every workshop something or other was said about gay issues, and it was always something affirming. They are listening to us. This past March, the Reform rabbis meeting in Greensboro, NC, voted in favor of religious marriage for same-gender

couples. This makes Reform Judaism the largest religious denomination ever to take this stance. I think that's pretty cool, and it doesn't just benefit congregations like Sha'ar Zahav, it affects mainstream congregations too. In San Francisco, Congregation Emanuel has a lesbian associate rabbi; Congregation Sherith Israel has a lesbian and gay social group. Even the Conservative synagogue, Congregation Beth Shalom, has an openly gay man on its board. The ripple effect on the other denominations particularly delights me. In 1990 the Conservative rabbis endorsed gay rights, and even the Orthodox have supported AIDS programs.

In Israel, the Reform movement and other liberal organizations are fighting for the rights of women, Arabs, gays, and other minorities. Israel dropped its sodomy laws in 1988, and the media and mainstream culture have become fairly tolerant. The Israeli military never did exclude gays—they need every warm body they can get—but in 1993 they announced a program to ensure that gays receive equal treatment in the military. There's an Israeli gay rights organization called Aguda, and a lesbian rights organization called KLAF. Court battles have been fought and won forcing El-Al Airlines and Tel Aviv University to grant domestic partner benefits to gay employees. There are gay pride marches in Tel Aviv. Just this May, the Israeli Supreme Court upheld the parental rights of a lesbian couple. This month a local court asked Israel's Attorney General to decide if a same-gender couple can marry under Israeli law. Israeli gays have come so far so fast, and won so much sympathy from the mainstream population, it's a kind of miracle. The religious right is hostile, of course, but in Israel the religious right tends to have other priorities, and not to have the single-minded focus on the gay issue that typifies the religious right in this country. Best of all, in 1998 a transgender Israeli singer, Dana International, won the Eurovision song contest for Israel, and straight Israelis joined the gay community in celebrating. Dana International tells interviewers she believes in God, and she includes some traditional Jewish music in her repertoire. I think this is very important, to make the point that Torah and tradition belong to Jews of every type.

Israelis tell pollsters their society's biggest problem is the split between the Orthodox and the non-Orthodox. I think the same thing is true of Diaspora Jewry. And I think this division is unnecessary. With a little diplomacy, all the streams of Judaism can learn from each other and cooperate on common goals. There is more than one way to be Jewish. But I hope we can build consensus around a Judaism that prioritizes *tikkun olam*, repairing the world. Deuteronomy says to love the stranger; Isaiah says to beat your swords into plowshares; the Talmud tells us not to torture animals, not to decimate forests. We have a powerful history of social consciousness in Judaism, and I think we should make the most of it. Of course, social justice isn't the only commandment: the other commandments are important too; but the tradition of interpreting the Torah with compassion is central to a meaningful Judaism.

One more tradition I want to mention: the tradition of interfaith dialogue. Jews and Christians haven't always seen eye to eye, but there have always been Jewish thinkers respected in the Christian world, and vice versa. The Church Fathers and the early Rabbis were surely aware of each other's views, otherwise they wouldn't have settled on the same Hebrew books for the Biblical canon. Maimonides, the 12th century Spanish rabbi, was widely read in the Christian world, because he tried to reconcile reason with revelation, a problem that also troubled Christian philosophers. Azarya de Rossi, the 16th century Italian Jewish historian, read Aquinas and other Christian authors

in his effort to place Jewish history in the context of world history. A milestone was the 18th century literary friendship between two leading German authors, the Christian Gotthold Lessing and the Jew Moses Mendelssohn. In England, Jewish leaders like Moses Montefiore and Chaim Weizmann won the respect of the Christian public.

But of course America has provided the richest opportunities for Jewish-Christian understanding. America is a country conceived in liberty—to coin a phrase. Jews like Francis Salvador, the “Paul Revere of the South,” fought and died in the American Revolution, and there was a kosher table at the constitutional banquet in Philadelphia in 1789. In America, Jews and Christians have worked together in business, in academe, in the arts and sciences, in politics. The National Conference of Christians and Jews, founded in 1927, uses the slogan “We open minds.” In America we take it for granted that different religions will work together to feed the poor, and to help the sick and the downtrodden. This is really an extraordinary expectation, in light of world history. This is a breakthrough, something to celebrate, along with all the other things we share: a God with high standards, a prophetic tradition of justice, the faith that humanity will yet be redeemed, the conviction that every human being is created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God. Like God, we have the power to choose, the power to reach out, the power to love. Our ability to love, our strange and surprising and wondrous talent for love, is sacred in all its flavors. Thank God for our diversity.