

Reform Judaism: Founded in the Torah

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Which branch of Judaism is oldest? Most people imagine the answer to be “Orthodox.” Yes, we may know that the term “Orthodox” arose only after Reform Judaism was formally established in the 19th Century. Still, most imagine that Judaism throughout history looked like today’s Orthodox Judaism until our Reform founders started to change things in the 1800s.

That commonly-accepted view of Jewish history is false. Reform Judaism was established in the Torah. A prime example is in this week’s Torah portion.

The Israelites are commanded to sacrifice their offerings “only in the place that Adonai will choose in one of your tribal territories.”ⁱ Jerusalem isn’t mentioned by name, because Deuteronomy is set on the opposite side of the Jordan River, before the Israelites enter the Land of Israel, centuries before the Temple was built. However, scholars have firmly established that the works comprising Deuteronomy were written no earlier than the 7th Century B.C.E., long after the Temple was erected.ⁱⁱ In particular, the passage we read tonight fits in neatly with what 20th Century scholars Dudley Weinberg and Gunther Plaut call “[a] radical religious reformation, which was carried out in 621 B.C.E. by King Josiah ... Josiah abolished the ancient practice of worshiping and offering sacrifices at the ‘high places’ [that is, altars scattered throughout the land]; he established the Temple in Jerusalem as the sole sanctuary in which sacrifices could be properly offered.”ⁱⁱⁱ Indeed, the sacrifices described earlier in Torah are often commanded again in Deuteronomy, now with the added injunction that they be offered only at the Jerusalem Temple.^{iv}

So why did King Josiah centralize sacrifices in Jerusalem, and what gives me the right to call that “Reform Judaism?”

A skeptic might call Josiah’s reforms a power grab. By centralizing religious observance, he required all adult males to present themselves and their sacrifices in Jerusalem at least three times a year. The king thus brought wealth and loyalty to the seat of his monarchy. We may grasp the balance between local authority and centralized government little different from today’s debates over whether our federal constitution’s right to reproductive freedom should prevail over state

abortion restrictions and whether Arkansas should control our Little Rock School District or restrict cities from establishing anti-discrimination ordinances.

But Josiah also had religious concerns. Pagan practices flourished in outlying areas.^v By declaring all sacrifices offered outside the Jerusalem Temple to be idolatry, centralized priests could assure proper worship of the one God. We may compare that benevolent centralization to the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments, taking away states' rights to withhold civil rights, now guaranteed by central authority.

What makes that kind of change “Reform Judaism?”

Reform Judaism has always sought to preserve the worship of the one God and fidelity to Torah by taking the tradition we have received, learning what it teaches, subjecting that heritage to critical contemporary scrutiny, and adapting to meet the needs of the day. Josiah and the authors of Deuteronomy did exactly that. They identified a problem with existing Israelite religious practice. They promulgated a reform. Consequently, they perpetuated the sacrificial service of *Adonai*.

That reform becomes even more apparent as the Torah seeks to rectify a problem created by the innovation. Before Josiah came along, the only meat that people were permitted to eat came from animals that had been sacrificed by the priests,^{vi} a portion turned into smoke on the altar but most of it eaten by those who brought the offering and shared with the priests. If all sacrifices had to be offered in Jerusalem, a problem would arise: Those living far from the capital would have to travel a long distance any time they wanted meat or they would go months with none. Therefore, no sooner than they were commanded not to bring sacrifices anywhere other than the Temple, Deuteronomy instructs the Israelites: “But whenever you desire, you may slaughter and eat meat in any of your settlements.”^{vii}

Centuries later, worship that had been centralized at one place was once again dispersed when the Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 C.E. After the Torah had reached its final form, Israel's greatest reformers were not 19th Century German or American Jews but rabbis in the first three centuries of the Common Era. Those sages were challenged to continue the worship of a God who had been served for hundreds of years only through sacrifices offered at a Temple that now laid in ruins. In the words of Rabbi Joshua ben Levi: “The prayers were instituted to replace the daily sacrifices.”^{viii} The rabbi meant “replace” quite

literally. A worship service was designed to substitute for each occasion when sacrifices had been offered in the Temple, three times each day with one extra on each Shabbat and holy day. That creative solution to a nettlesome contemporary problem represents Reform Judaism at its best, some eighteen centuries before our Movement was founded. The rabbis identified a problem, looked to their tradition, and preserved the service of Adonai and adherence to Torah. The basic structure of the Jewish worship service those rabbinic innovators developed is still followed today in synagogues of every flavor throughout the world.

So why doesn't everybody know that the ancient rabbis were Reform Jews?

The rabbis denied that they were changing anything. For example, in the same paragraph where Rabbi Joshua explains the source of our prayers, Rabbi Yossi ben Rabbi Haninah insists "that 'the prayers were instituted by the Patriarchs.'"^x The Talmud gets downright specific: "Abraham instituted the morning prayer...Isaac initiated the afternoon prayer...[and] Jacob instituted the evening prayer."^x In other words, Rabbi Joshua is an outlier. Most of our sages refuse to be seen as innovators.

Our sages of old insisted that the religion that they created had been handed down to them directly from the day that Moses received it at Sinai,^{xi} even though they had radically transformed it. That self-understanding was embraced by the founders of Orthodox Judaism, as explained in 2006 by Israeli Orthodox Rabbi David Sperber who laments "the enormous influence of [a rabbi known as] the *Hatam Sofer* ... and his adage, coined during his early-nineteenth-century battle against the Reform, that 'the new is forbidden by Torah.' The point of the adage is that all innovation is unacceptable, for the way of 'innovation' is the way of the Reform 'innovators.'"^{xii}

Our Reform founders, by contrast, celebrated the modern spirit in the changes they were implementing.^{xiii} Therefore, Jews and other observers may be forgiven for imagining that pioneering adaptation of Torah to fit contemporary needs and sensibilities began little over 200 years ago.

In a moment, we shall sing words from the Book of Esther, after the defeat of the evil Haman: "The Jews enjoyed light and gladness, happiness and honor."^{xiv} Light is often a symbol for knowledge or wisdom. Thanks to innovators, from the days of the Torah, our Jewish people has perpetuated our sacred heritage with enlightenment in every generation. May we always be faithful to our tradition and its creative implementation in every age.

Amen.

ⁱ Deuteronomy 12:13-14.

ⁱⁱ Moshe Weinfeld, "Deuteronomy," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1971, Vol. 5, pp. 1574-1582.

ⁱⁱⁱ Dudley Weinberg and W. Gunther Plaut, "Introducing Deuteronomy," in *The Torah: A Modern Commentary, Revised Edition*, edited by Gunther Plaut, revised edition edited by David E.S. Stein, New York: URJ Press, 2005, p. 1143.

^{iv} Contrast, for example, Deuteronomy 16:5-6 with Exodus 12:3ff and Leviticus 23:8.

^v "The Central Sanctuary," in *The Torah: A Modern Commentary, Revised Edition*, edited by Gunther Plaut, revised edition edited by David E.S. Stein, New York: URJ Press, 2005, p. 1276.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, p. 1277.

^{vii} Deuteronomy 12:15.

^{viii} Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 26b, cited by Natan Aviezer, "Prayer instead of Sacrifice," Bar-Ilan University Parshat Hashavua Study Center, Parshat Tzav 5774/March 15, 2014. Accessed on August 10, 2018 at <https://www.biu.ac.il/JH/Parasha/eng/tzav/1010Aviezer.doc>.

^{ix} *Ibid.*

^x *Ibid.*

^{xi} Pirkei Avot 1:1.

^{xii} Daniel Sperber, "'Friendly' Halakhah and the 'Friendly' Poseq," *The Edah Journal* 5.2, Sivan 5766, p. Sperber 2.

^{xiii} See, for example, the *Declaration of Principles* known as the Pittsburgh Platform, Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1885.

^{xiv} Esther 8:16.