

WHY I AM A LIBERAL JEW

Delivered by
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Last night, my friends, I tried to outline some reasons for being Jewish, or at least some reasons that I am a Jew. Today, I want to discuss more full reasons for being a Reform Jew, a Liberal Jew. I would guess that what I said last night could apply to any Jew: Reform, Conservative, Orthodox. And that was meant to be. The basis for what we are, no matter which synagogue we attend, is, I believe, the same. We are all Jews, only sometimes others don't want to admit that.

There is little doubt in my mind, nor should there be in your minds, that Liberal Judaism is increasingly under attack. In fact, liberal religion is under attack. It is under attack from militant, fundamentalist Islam. Witness the video from Osama bin Laden last week. Liberal religion has been under attack from right wing Christianity. We live in a conservative, some would say reactionary, age. The pendulum in our society, in every aspect of our society, around the world and here in America, is moving away from the liberalism of the generation of my youth to the conservatism of today. And religion is often at the heart of this move.

And the Jewish community is not immune. A militant Orthodox Judaism, here and in Israel, calls into question not only the religious beliefs of non-Orthodox Jews but even our status as Jews. It is not my intention today to review the details of those attacks. Nor is it my purpose to engage, at this moment, in verbal battle with those elements in our community. But I believe that they have affected liberal Jewish life and the way some liberal Jews have come to think about themselves and about Judaism. By the way, by way of explanation, I believe that there are only two Jewish religious communities in America, Orthodox, with all its varieties, and liberal, which includes Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist and any religious Jews who are not Orthodox.



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There are liberal Jews, members of Reform and Conservative congregations, who apparently have come to believe that they are less authentic than the Orthodox. There are liberal Jews, some of whom are leaders of our community, who apparently feel that the only authentic kind of Judaism is Orthodoxy. They support Orthodox institutions in the community over liberal institutions. They support them with dollars and with votes in community councils. They seem to feel guilty about their own lack of observance. Their perception is that the Orthodox are more observant; that you cannot be observant and be a liberal Jew, and thus they give up on liberal Judaism and its institutions.

In fact, some would argue that all liberal religion is under attack. A column in last week's **Baltimore Jewish Times**, written by a friend, who identifies himself as a liberal Jew, is entitled "**Liberal Decline.**" He makes reference to a much longer essay which was published in the **New York Times Magazine** on August 19, entitled "**The Politics of God.**" Excerpted from a book by Mark Lilla, a professor at Columbia University, it is an interesting comparison between the fundamentalist theological politics of Islam and the liberal theological politics of the West. I will have more to say about this as the holidays progress.

One statement of Lilla stood out for me, however. In discussing the growth and decline of liberal theology in the West, Lilla writes, "*the liberal deity turned out to be a stillborn God, unable to inspire genuine conviction among a younger generation seeking ultimate truth.*" While there may be some truth, historically, in this statement, and it may be somewhat true today, as a liberal Jew, I must take exception. This is the kind of attack, from an intellectual point of view, that may be an attack from within.

And this point of view holds that liberal religion, liberal Judaism has failed, that Orthodoxy is triumphant, and that it is only a matter of time until liberal religion goes out of existence. The idea of a "*stillborn God,*" implies that we ought to give up on liberal religion, on liberal Judaism.

But I am a lifelong, committed Reform Jew. I am an unashamed, unapologetic liberal. And so, today, I want to speak to those who may have given up on liberal Judaism. Today, I want to speak not to our Orthodox brothers and sisters, who may not listen to me anyway, but to us. We need to know what liberal Judaism has been, and what it is, and why it is so important to maintain and sustain and improve upon our heritage. I speak as a Reform Jew, for that is what I am. But I seek to challenge the notion that the "*liberal deity is a stillborn God.*"

I. REFORM IN THE CONTEXT OF JEWISH HISTORY

We need to begin with a brief historical perspective. Reform Judaism, as we know it, was born in Germany at the beginning of the 19th century. But the seeds of Reform, the principles upon which it is based, are embedded deep within the fabric of Jewish history. They have always been a part of our people.

Reform is based upon the concept of change, not for the sake of change, but to meet the needs of the day. Judaism has a long and creative history of disagreement and debate. When the people wanted

a king, the prophet Samuel resisted. When Temple worship became form without substance, the prophets protested. When the Temple lay in ruins and the people were in exile, we discovered that God could be portable too. When the Torah was completed and nothing more could be added, the Pharisees insisted upon the need to establish an oral law alongside the written one.

And at every one of these junctures, and more throughout our long history, there have been those who resisted change. Samuel could not understand the need for a king. The priests threatened the prophets for their zeal. There were those in Babylonia who were sure they could not “*sing the Lord’s song in a strange land.*”

The Sadducees were vehement that only the written Torah was the law. Hillel and Shammai, two of the great early rabbis, debated every point of law and of liturgy. They established a tradition of debate which lasted for more than a thousand years. The creativity, the genius, the source of Jewish survival came from those who debated and who were able, through that process to change. Had there been nobody to speak for change, more than once Judaism might not have survived.

It was only the Middle Ages, a time, perhaps not unlike our own in outlook, that the possibilities for change in Judaism became increasingly restricted. Codes and commentaries on the codes, dislocation and ghettoization made it difficult for creative change to continue. A militant Orthodoxy closed the door on liberalism and change within Jewish life.

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At the beginning of the 19th century, when Napoleon’s armies swept across Europe, a new wave of liberalism ushered in the modern age. And Jews, some Jews, found themselves caught up in this new breath of freedom. Confronted with the opportunity to be citizens, of a sort, faced with the possibilities to be free, to be modern, to be whatever they wanted to be, many had to rethink what it meant to be a Jew.

Some, unable to solve the dilemma of being Jewish and modern, escaped their Judaism altogether. Most of the descendants of Moses Mendelssohn were not Jews. Others, seeking to cope with their new found freedom within the context of Jewish life, began to reformulate their ideas about Judaism. These were our spiritual ancestors. They were the founders of Reform Judaism and later Conservative Judaism. At first in Germany, then in this great and free land, these rabbis and laypeople, scholars and merchants discovered once again that there was a great tradition of change within Judaism. And they began to reform the ideas, the customs, the outlook of modern Judaism. We are their heirs.

II. LIBERAL JUDAISM TODAY

We have come a long way since Israel Jacobson brought an organ into the chapel of his school in Seesen. We have grown in numbers and in influence. We have established institutions in this country and around the world. We have educated rabbis and cantors, educators and laymen. We have become an important part of Jewish life.

Many of us are Reform or Conservative Jews simply because that is what our parents were. Others grew up Orthodox, but have come to liberal Judaism. Some of us are Jews by Choice and have made the intellectual and emotion decision to become Jews. Some may consider themselves other than liberal Jews but are here because this is the only game in town. I think you would agree, however, that all of us, whether born into liberal Judaism, recent additions to the group, or not so sure about being called liberal, all of us, especially in this day, need to understand what liberal Judaism is all about. We need to know more than our history. We need to know what we stand for and what is the basis for our approach to Judaism and to Jewish life.

Were I to ask you to tell me especially about Reform Judaism, and maybe about Conservative Judaism, most of you, I would bet, would tell me what Reform or Conservative Judaism is by telling me what it is not. *“In Reform,”* you might say, *“you don’t have to keep kosher. You don’t have to wear a kippah.”* In Conservative Judaism – *“You don’t have to sit separately. You don’t have to walk on Shabbat.”* You don’t have to do this, and you don’t have to do that. For too long we have defined ourselves by what we don’t have to do; by what we are not. Today I want to try to point out what it means to be a liberal Jew from a positive perspective. For too long we have seemed to apologize for what we don’t do; for what we are not. Today, I want to celebrate what we are and what we stand for and for what we do.



First and foremost, liberal Judaism stands for intellectual freedom. Based upon our belief that human beings have been partners with God in the formulation and transmission of our heritage, we encourage people to study, to learn, and to think for themselves. No blind obedience to rabbi or code is meaningful for liberal Jews.

We reject blind obedience not because we want to fly in the face of authority, but because we see in each person a being capable of thought and action, of understanding and discernment. We celebrate the worth of each individual and each person’s ability to make decisions for herself or for himself. We understand the value, the necessity of knowing the tradition in order to make informed Jewish choices. But our source of authority comes from the individual within the community with the guidance of tradition and reliance upon God.

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For we see in tradition, and in the God who gave it, great value. The Bible, the Talmud, all of Jewish tradition is more to us than just a book, more than just a great piece of literature. These are our heritage. They are sacred books. Sacred because of the commitment of our people to their study, their preservation, sometimes at the peril of their own lives; and sacred because beyond the words and the ideas and the personalities, we discern the hand of God.

One of the ways we have defined ourselves in distinction to our more traditional co-religionists, is by saying that they believe that God gave the

Torah, (read all of Jewish tradition,) to Moses at Mount Sinai. They believe, therefore, that all of it is holy and unchangeable. We, on the other hand, believe that our literature, including the Torah, even the Ten Commandments, was written by human hands, and is therefore capable of being changed. This has led some to say that there is no authority in liberal Judaism.

Let me confess that I have struggled mightily with this dilemma. If there is no Divine Presence for us in our tradition, then what, indeed is the basis for observing it. If it is the product of human mind and heart, then we are free to change it at will. And if it is not, so our Orthodox cousins would say, then it cannot be changed at all.

This is, of course, the crux of the disagreement between us. It is also the most thorny problem which faces us as liberal Jews. It is such a difficult subject that one of my colleagues, Rabbi Joshua Haberman, once suggested that we ought to appoint a high level commission to deal with just this problem, the problem of revelation, the problem of authority in liberal Judaism. Perhaps this is what Professor Lilla meant when he said that the liberal deity was a “*stillborn God*.”

I would not presume, today, to suggest a definitive solution to this problem. But perhaps there is a middle ground. Perhaps it is possible to preserve the Presence of God in our heritage and at the same time hold on to the intellectual freedom we so deeply cherish. I am sure that it is no surprise to any of you who have listened to what I have said for the last four years, that I believe in God. I believe in a God who has influence in this world. And I see in the sacred texts of our people, the presence of God. I believe in the sanctity of Torah and Talmud and all the rest.

But I also believe that God is involved in change. My God need not be fixed or stagnant. No perfect, unchanging God for me. Neither need our people be stagnant and unchanging. The texts we hold dear are reflective of a time and place quite different from our own. The people who wrote them were intoxicated with the idea of God. (Oh, that we were so smitten!) And God was revealed through them.

But the details of their search, as contained in the way they ordered their lives, was for them and for their time. Some of it, much of it, may be important for us. Some of it, may lack depth and meaning for our day. And we, who ought to believe no less than they in God, must find for ourselves the details of Godlike living.

We are no less Jewish than our ancestors. We are no less Jewish than the Orthodox. At least we ought not be. We must search our heritage, our sacred texts, we must look at the world around us, and we must be creative, as creative as our people have always been, in finding for ourselves meaning and substance for our lives. This is the meaning of liberal Judaism in all its variety and depth and all its glory.

III. WHAT LIBERAL JUDAISM CAN BE

There is more, so much more I could say about what we are. I could speak of our commitment to education, to social justice, to equality for men and women. I could tell you of the challenge that liberal religion, liberal Judaism represents for us. But those are details, in many ways. Those are the actions that are inspired by our commitment to freedom, our recognition of the need for change, and our devotion to God and our heritage.

As you might expect, we have tried to talk about God. We have affirmed the reality and oneness of God even as we celebrate our different understandings of the Divine presence. We have affirmed that the Jewish people is bound to God by an eternal covenant and that every human being is created in the image of God, therefore, all human life is sacred. We encounter God's presence in moments of awe and wonder, in acts of justice and compassion and love. We respond to God through prayer even as we seek to strengthen our faith.

We affirm that Torah is the foundation of Jewish life. We cherish the truths revealed in Torah even as we are called to a lifelong study of Torah. Torah gives meaning and purpose to our lives.

We affirm that we are Israel, a people aspiring to holiness, singled out to be witnesses to God's presence. We are committed to love for the Jewish people, all of them. We embrace religious and cultural pluralism as an expression of the vitality of the Jewish people. We pledge to work for the complete equality of women and men in Jewish life. We are an all inclusive community, opening doors to Jewish life to people of all ages, to varied kinds of families, to all regardless of their sexual orientation, to those who have converted to Judaism and to all who strive to create a Jewish home.

There is much, much more. As you might imagine as with any statement of a group of rabbis, there was much discussion and debate before each one of these statements was adopted. And I am sure that there will be more. One of the hallmarks of liberal Judaism is its ability to change. The changing world in which we live demands new statements and new ideas about it, about our place in it, and about the Judaism which we cherish.





IV. CONCLUSION

What does it mean to be a liberal Jew? It means a commitment to freedom and to change within the context of Jewish tradition. It means searching for positive values in our confusing world. It means a passionate commitment to our liberal heritage.

For too long we have been too passive about what we believe and about who we are. We need to be as committed, as passionately committed to our position as the Orthodox are to theirs. We need to make our Judaism, our liberal Judaism a part of our lives, and more than just two days a year.

This is the great challenge which faces us in a world in which liberal religion, liberal Judaism is increasingly under attack. We must know who we are and what we have been and what we can become. We must recommit ourselves to our sacred tasks. And with the help of God we shall grow in strength of commitment and of faith.

Amen.