

Participation, not just Acculturation:

The Early Jewish Reform Movement and the Evolution of the Service

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From the outset of the Jewish reform movement, reformers worked to structure and transform the devotional service. Indeed, the first wave of reformation dealt primarily with service reform; philosophical reform did not appear until later. The successes and failures of service reform then guided the restructuring of Jewish philosophy which appeared in the second wave of reform. This, in turn, translated into revision of the liturgy and further reform of ceremonial practice. Consequently, reform services evolved as participatory services which, despite centralized practice, were more accessible to congregants than the traditional services had been.

The reformation of Judaism in Germany reconciled, for many Jews, conflicts between tradition and the desire for acculturation. While the hope for conformity and access to modern German culture was a central motivation of the German reform movement, acculturation was but one goal of the reform movement. Early reformers Moses Mendelssohn, David Friedlander, and Israel Jacobson perceived decay of Jewish practice and

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observance. Through their reforms, these three translated Jewish texts and refined elements of the service to make Jewish practice “attractive” to the modern, liberated Jew.²

Before the rise of reform in Germany, Jewish service procedure faced serious decline. At the end of the eighteenth century, both the practice of rituals and language of devotion in German Jewish services had become “unintelligible” to the average congregant.³ Decline both in service decorum and in Jews’ understanding of Hebrew produced a service environment ill-fitted to encourage religious commitment. Services were marked by repetitive chanting, which was rendered cacophonously, with each congregant praying individually. Decorum was nonexistent. There were frequently chaotic pauses in the services in order for certain participation rights to be sold at auction. This environment rendered the service “boring,” “bewildering,” and “repulsive” to the modern Jew.⁴ This form of worship neither touched congregants’ emotions, nor encouraged engaged participation with the liturgy.

Moreover, these traditional Jewish services were conducted entirely in Hebrew. While this language had always been inaccessible to half the Jewish population—the women—it was quickly becoming inaccessible to the average male Jew, as well. Rabbi Joseph Maier, the chairman of the first rabbinical conference in Brunswick, declared that Hebrew was “a secret for nine tenths of the people, a thick wall of separation between the worshiper and his God,” arguing that performing the devotional service in Hebrew prevented service participants from engaging in prayer.⁵ This language barrier was further exacerbated

² Philipson 1967, p. 17.

³ Ibid., p. 10.

⁴ Cronbach 1963, p. 109-110.

⁵ Plaut 1963, p. 154.

following Jewish emancipation, as more and more Jews lost Hebrew as they became conversant in pure German.

Moses Mendelssohn, the first leading Jew to entertain innovations in Jewish practice, worked to awaken Jewish “linguistic emancipation.”⁶ While a strict traditionalist, himself, Mendelssohn recognized the necessity of transitioning Jewish life into the modern age. He translated the *Torah* into German; this opened the door for the introduction of the vernacular in reform. Mendelssohn’s primary goal was to bring the Jew acceptance and involvement in German culture. In his mind, however, acceptance was not to be won through revision of devotional practice. Quite the contrary, Mendelssohn encouraged Jews to acculturate while continuing strict observance of Jewish law and custom.

While he is, somewhat ironically, often credited with being the first “reformer,” Mendelssohn in fact was only responsible for one reform beyond the *Torah* translation. Siding against tradition, Mendelssohn argued that Jews did not need to bury their dead on the day of death.⁷ The reasoning for this was twofold, based both on Talmudic arguments and on the principle that families and relatives should be involved in the funeral. While this change was Mendelssohn’s only serious reform, Mendelssohn contributed ideas of modernization to the reform movement. Later reformers would use Mendelssohn’s logic, establishing reform both on Talmudic theory and on standards of religious participation.⁸

The first such reformer was David Friedlander, a forward-thinking, cultured student of Mendelssohn’s. Friedlander was active in the reform movement at the close of the eighteenth century. Like Mendelssohn, he hoped to aid the acculturation and acceptance of Jews into German society. Friedlander, however, was not as confident in the value of

⁶ Philipson 1967, p. 6.

⁷ Raphael 1985, p. 5.

⁸ Ibid., p. 6.

traditional Jewish practice as his teacher had been. Instead, he felt that the purposes of many prayers were misplaced; the focus on the coming of the Messiah and the return to Jerusalem seemed offensive and irrelevant, “in direct contradiction to the genuine spirit of Judaism.”⁹

Following Mendelssohn’s example, Friedlander also worked to ease the language barrier, which prevented many Jews from engaging in their religion. He produced a translation of a Hebrew prayer book, for which he was criticized by traditionalist rabbis. In response to this criticism, Friedlander composed his “Epistle to the German Jews,” arguing that congregants could not pray meaningfully without being able to comprehend the prayers.¹⁰ Clearly, Friedlander had recognized an existing need amongst the modern Jews—approximately seven hundred and fifty copies of his translation were ordered in advance.¹¹

Friedlander also observed the unfortunate state of the devotional service. He found that Jews were not only unable to understand the prayer book text, but were also disgusted by the disordered and undignified structure of the services. Friedlander helped develop many of the early, more modest, service reforms. Fearing that the religion was still not touching its members, however, Friedlander eventually came to hope for drastic reforms.¹² While these unrealistic later ideas of Friedlander’s were ineffective, they indicated the distressing state of the times.¹³

While Friedlander moved past his mentor, recognizing that the ritual structure Judaism, itself, needed to change for the modern age, the overarching reformation he

⁹ Plaut 1963, p. 11.

¹⁰ Philipson 1967, p. 9-10; Plaut 1963, p. 11.

¹¹ Meyer 1988, p. 25.

¹² Friedlander eventually proposed a merging of Christian religious practice with Jewish religious values; this suggestion was soundly rejected by both Jews and Christians. Indeed, such a solution would of course be only superficial and therefore proved unreasonable.

¹³ Philipson 1967, p. 11.

proposed was ineffective. Nonetheless, the failures of Judaism that both Mendelssohn and Friedlander identified would be the first addressed in the reform of the Jewish service.

The first actual reform of service practice was instituted by Israel Jacobson. A wealthy businessman, Jacobson traveled extensively and observed the state of Jewish devotional practice across Germany. After seeing firsthand the “lifeless formalism,” of synagogue practice, Jacobson became certain that overarching reform was necessary.¹⁴ As he was not a religious scholar, he lacked the expertise necessary to introduce deep, permeating, reform. Nonetheless, Jacobson successfully encouraged and enacted some of the earliest reforms.

In March, 1808, Jacobson was named president of the Westphalian consistory. There, in consultation with Friedlander and several other leading Jewish intellectuals, Jacobson established aesthetic improvements in local Jewish services. He introduced German sermons and hymns, his primary innovation in the service structure. In addition, some prayers in Jacobson’s services were read in German, as opposed to Hebrew.¹⁵ This introduction of the vernacular in the Westphalian services was striking and fairly successful in renewing Jews’ interests.¹⁶ While these services were terminated following the recapture of Westphalia by Germany, Jacobson went on to apply the same model to reform Jewish services in Berlin. Again, these reforms were successful in recapturing Jewish involvement. After their inauguration, Jacobson’s “decorous and intelligible” services were so popular in the Prussian capital that they had to be expanded.¹⁷

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 16-17.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 17.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 22-23.

After this wave of reformation, blanket reforms were enacted in several congregations across Germany. An edict in the Duchy of Saxe-Weimar ordered vernacular readings and translations of the entire Jewish service, an end to service disorder, and the removal of certain prayers from the liturgy. In addition to these drastic reforms, this edict required that the mourners' *Kaddish* prayer be spoken in German and then repeated by the mourners, thereby rendering the important mourning prayer accessible to congregants. Similar reforms were enacted to improve participation in the Jewish services conducted in Westphalia and Wittgenstein; this was also when responsive reading of introductory psalms first appeared in reformed services.¹⁸ These service reforms further involved congregants in the service procedures and rituals, while simultaneously stabilizing and structuring the service. While these changes were revisions to the exterior of Jewish practice, rather than shifts in religious philosophy, they were enacted by concerned Jewish theorists to restore Jews' participation in their religion and stem the tide of apostasy.

Reform also took root in a Hamburg congregation, in 1817, revitalizing the reform service and renewing the discussion of Jewish religious reform. Members of this worship community founded the "Hamburg Temple Association," distinguishing themselves from the Hamburg Synagogue. The choice of the name "Temple" was significant, as it implied acceptance of Friedlander's early idea that modern Judaism needed to escape its focus on the return to and rebuilding of Jerusalem. In their decision to call their house of worship a temple, the founders of the Hamburg Temple Association acknowledged that, in order to promote the significance of Judaism in daily life, the center of daily Jewish practice had to be established locally.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 36-37.

The goal of the Hamburg Temple, as stated in the Constitution of the Hamburg Temple Association, was to “restore public worship to its deserving dignity and importance” through reform of the Jewish service.¹⁹ The Hamburg Temple modeled itself after Jacobson’s Berlin congregation, holding dignified services with an organ, choral services, and some readings in the vernacular. Several new innovations appeared, as well: the prayer book used at these services was printed from left to right and gave Sephardic transliterations of the Hebrew prayers.²⁰ Like the other service innovations, these changes improved the accessibility of devotional practice to congregants. Furthermore, the Hamburg Temple’s founders promoted religious education and confirmation of both male and female children, introducing reforms which would allow females to become involved in the religion.²¹

The early reform movement was a “people’s movement,” led by wealthy and active members of the Jewish community.²² Many of the goals of these early leaders were aesthetic. As the earliest reformers were acculturated Jews hoping to maintain and improve their positions in society, it might appear that exterior reforms were enacted only to improve the perception of Jews in the eyes of Christian society. This, however, was never the case. Acculturation was not the sole object of reform. From Mendelssohn’s early modernizations and Friedlander’s early theories through the establishment of a reformed Jewish service at the Hamburg Temple, a key intent of reform was to reinvigorate Jewish worship by reengaging Jews in the devotional service.

The second, more successful wave of reform took its cues from the first reformers, reaching the modern Jew through modification of Jewish practice. Indeed, David Einhorn,

¹⁹ Plaut 1963, p. 31-32.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 31-32; Meyer 1988, 56.

²¹ This established a precedent which would later lead reformers to argue for the equal involvement of both genders in the service proper.

²² Philipson 1967, p. 18, 23.

one of the foremost organizers of the second wave of reform, declared that the “exterior [of Jewish practice] must be re-fashioned, this form must be changed if Judaism is to continue to influence the lives of its followers [...]”²³ Similarly, Abraham Geiger, another prominent second-wave reformer, admonished that ceremonies could not “remain mere rituals which no one understands.”²⁴ Guided by the early reforms, the second wave of reformers drastically revised the liturgy in hopes of renewing the relevance of religious practice for the contemporary Jew. These liturgical changes came partnered with reforms to further ease participation in and understanding of the Jewish service, particularly in order to involve Jewish women in religious practice.²⁵ While the second wave of reform was concerned primarily with philosophical reform, it built directly upon the first reformers’ structural reform of the Jewish service, basing their discussions of liturgical philosophy on the exterior revisions in service structure enacted in the early reforms.

The translation and restructuring of Jewish ceremonies was not sufficient to produce all of the changes necessary to reconcile Judaism with the post-emancipation world.

Nonetheless, early reforms in the Jewish service structure significantly improved congregants’ access to the service. Through extending participation in the service, the early translations, revisions, and innovations set the stage for later reforms and, more importantly, renewed contemporary Jews’ interest in their religion.

²³ Philipson 1967, p. 43.

²⁴ Wiener 1962, p. 170.

²⁵ Plaut 1963, p. 253.

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