

## **The Pittsburgh Platform**

**1885**

### ***The Pioneering Statement of Classical Reform Judaism in America***

*In November of 1885, the leading Reform rabbis in the United States convened at Temple Rodef Sholom in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to ratify a formal statement of the beliefs of American Reform Judaism. This eloquent and inspiring document became the foundation for the Classical Reform tradition, and remains an important source for our interpretation of our faith.*

We recognize in every religion an attempt to grasp the Infinite, and in every mode, source or book of revelation, held sacred by any religious system, the consciousness of the indwelling of God in man. We hold that Judaism presents the highest conception of the God-idea as taught in our Holy Scriptures and developed and spiritualized by the Jewish teachers, in accordance with the moral and philosophical progress of their respective ages. We maintain that Judaism preserved and defended, midst continual struggles and trials and under enforced isolation, this God-idea as the central religious truth for the human race.

We recognize in the Bible the record of the consecration of the Jewish people to its mission as priest of the one God, and value it as the most potent instrument of religious and moral instruction. We hold that the modern discoveries of scientific researches in the domains of nature and history are not antagonistic to the doctrines of Judaism, the Bible reflecting the primitive ideas of its own age, and at times clothing its conception of Divine Providence and justice dealing with man in miraculous narratives.

We recognize in the Mosaic legislation a system of training the Jewish people for its mission during its national life in Palestine, and today we accept as binding only the moral laws, and maintain only such ceremonies as elevate and sanctify our lives, but reject all such as are not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization.

We hold that all such Mosaic and rabbinical laws as regulate diet, priestly purity and dress originated in ages and under influences of ideas altogether foreign to our present mental and spiritual state. They fail to impress the modern Jew with a spirit of

holiness; their observance in our days is apt rather to obstruct than to further modern spiritual elevation.

We recognize in the modern era of universal culture of heart and intellect the approaching of the realization of Israel's great Messianic hope for the establishment of the kingdom of truth, justice and peace among all men. We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community, and, therefore, expect neither a return to Palestine, nor a sacrificial worship under the sons of Aaron, nor the restoration of any laws concerning the Jewish state.

We recognize in Judaism a progressive religion, ever striving to be in accord with the postulates of reason. We are convinced of the utmost necessity of preserving the historical identity with our great past. Christianity and Islam being daughter religions of Judaism, we appreciate their providential mission to aid in the spreading of monotheistic and moral truth. We acknowledge that the spirit of broad humanity of our age is our ally in the fulfillment of our mission, and, therefore we extend the hand of fellowship to all who cooperate with us in the establishment of the reign of truth and righteousness among men.

We reassert the doctrine of Judaism that the soul of man is immortal, grounding this belief on the divine nature of the human spirit, which forever finds bliss in righteousness and misery in wickedness. We reject, as ideas not rooted in Judaism, the beliefs both in bodily resurrection and in Gehenna and Eden (Hell and Paradise) as abodes for everlasting punishment and reward.

In full accordance with the spirit of Mosaic legislation, which strives to regulate the relation between rich and poor, we deem it our duty to participate in the great task of modern times, to solve, on the basis of justice and righteousness, the problems presented by the contrasts and evils of the present organization of society

# CLASSICAL REFORM JUDAISM

## A Concise Profile

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Like all religious groups, today's Reform Judaism embraces a broad spectrum of interpretation, belief, and practice. A diverse range of philosophies and worship styles are reflected in this spectrum, appropriate to a liberal religious movement that affirms individual and congregational freedom and autonomy. "Mainstream" Reform in contemporary America, reflects the widespread embrace of traditional Jewish ritual and observance that has characterized the movement's theological perspectives, liturgies, and approach to observance over the past forty years. These trends are primarily reflected in the 1975 Prayer Book of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, *Gates of Prayer*, and, to an even greater extent in its new liturgy, *Mishkan T'filah*.

The term "Classical Reform" is the most commonly used expression to denote the historic expression of Reform Judaism, as it developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The use of the term "Classical" is admittedly problematic, and it raises the danger of viewing a vital, dynamic expression of religious commitment as antiquarian, or bound to a particular historical period. It also has been used to narrowly define and limit the timeless and

enduring teachings of authentic Reform to a particular period in its development. Other terms associated with this interpretation are “Prophetic Judaism,” referring to the centrality of the ethical ideals of the Biblical Prophets, and “Progressive Reform,” reflecting both the dynamic element of change, as well as a spiritual and social liberalism. Whichever term is used, the particular ideals and expressions embraced by Classical Reform are clearly distinctive in the contemporary Reform spectrum.

### *Historical Background*

In essence, this tradition embodies the liberal spiritual ideals, rich intellectual foundations and broad universal vision of the early pioneers of Jewish Reform, initially in Germany, but primarily in the United States. Theologically, Classical Reform was grounded in the Biblical tradition of the Hebrew Prophets, interpreted as the emphasis on ethical action and social justice, rather than on ritual observance or ceremonial law. Intellectually, it was an outgrowth of the modern academic, scientific study of Jewish history and philosophy that emerged in Germany in the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; culturally, it reflected the transformation of Jewish communal life at that time, in response to the Emancipation of European Jewry from the social isolation of the ghetto. In America, the early Reform Movement embraced the pluralistic culture of American democracy and developed a liturgy and rationale reflecting the unique experience of Judaism in the free and open society of the United States. It taught that Judaism had always developed new responses to the challenges of each generation, and had historically engaged in a creative encounter and synthesis with many cultures throughout the ages - affirming that modern

Jews had the right and responsibility to continue this dynamic process for a new chapter in Jewish history. American Reform's intellectual approach to Biblical interpretation and authority, as well as its progressive response to social issues, also reflected the influence of the development of liberal religion generally in the United States in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The Classical Reform tradition is rooted in the legacy of the “radical” wing of the early movement, which sought a substantial revision of both synagogue worship and theological principles. Its leading rabbinic advocates were David Einhorn, Emil G. Hirsch and Kaufmann Kohler, as well as the more “moderate” Isaac Mayer Wise, the consensus-building founder of the central institutions of the American movement. The first major statement of principles of Reform Judaism known as the “Pittsburgh Platform,” adopted by both viewpoints in 1885, remains a formative expression of historic Reform teaching. In particular, its interpretation of the primarily religious nature of Jewish identity, and its emphasis on the ethical and spiritual, rather than the ritual nature of Judaism, continue to influence many Classical Reform Jews today. The subsequent formulation of the Movement's ideals, known as “The Guiding Principles” was ratified by the Central Conference of American Rabbis in Columbus, Ohio in 1937. This document represented a significantly different focus in its affirmation of Jewish “peoplehood,” and reflected the trend toward a reclamation of traditional ritual. While the different points on the Reform spectrum were clearly emerging by that time, it is important to realize that what is now understood as “Classical” was, in fact, the dominant perspective and style that emerged from the “union” of these two historic positions - embodied in the integration of their respective prayer books into the historic common liturgy of American Reform, the

*Union Prayer Book*. Indeed, despite the debates on the role of Zionism that divided the two ends of the Reform spectrum in the 1940's and 1950's, what is now called "Classical" in fact remained the broader Movement's predominant worship style and synagogue culture, until the significant shifts that influenced a major neo-traditionalist trend in the 1960's. Much of this redirection of American Reform Judaism was a response to the tragedy of the Holocaust and to the new dynamic of Jewish identity engendered by the birth of the State of Israel in 1948. These trends were further reflected in the two subsequent formulations of theology and practice by the CCAR over the past forty years – the "Centenary Perspectives" of 1975, and the new "Statement of Principles" adopted in Pittsburgh in 1999. These platforms represented the continuing emphasis on ritual observance and the centrality of the State of Israel for Jewish identity. Classical Reformers fully embrace the strong expressions of commitment to social justice and inclusive community that distinguish these documents. However, we continue to affirm the validity and viability of the movement's historic liberal principles and worship traditions as an alternative context for understanding both of these issues, as well as our response to the transforming events of our time.

A consideration of the historical context of the early development of Reform Judaism, and its subsequent "Classical" interpretation, raises the common question – and often the critique - of the dynamic of "assimilation" as a factor in this process. We understand this dynamic as a positive embrace of progressive, pluralistic American culture and democratic values by German Jewish immigrants in the 19th century and by the Reform movement generally as time went on. Instead of viewing this as a desire for social acceptance, it can also be seen in the broader context of the continuum of

Jewish social history. That experience has always reflected a conscious encounter and creative synthesis of Judaism's distinctive values and traditions with the broader cultural environments in which we have lived and entered into as fully as circumstances permitted. The influence of American religious aesthetics, particularly those of liberal Protestantism, on Reform worship styles, can also be interpreted in this light. This dynamic was identical to the blend of Jewish religious observance and folkways with the broader culture of medieval Russia and Poland or the Islamic world, which shaped the Orthodox Hasidic and Sephardic traditions. Reform Jews in America were engaged in a positive, creative process of *acculturation* that had always been at work in every period and place in Jewish history. In the free open, pluralistic society of the United States, this reflected a deep and faithful commitment to Judaism and the Jewish future. There were many, easier paths to true "assimilation," than the painstaking rabbinic scholarship and spiritual creativity that shaped Classical Reform in Europe and America.

### *Major Principles*

The fundamental principle of Classical Reform is that the eternal Jewish Covenant with God is at the heart of our identity and history as Jews. While our faith engenders and empowers many different understandings and interpretations of the Divine, it is the religious quest for faith and meaning that is at the core of our Jewish identity.

We believe that Judaism is primarily a universal religious faith, rather than an ethnic, cultural or nationalist identity. As a spiritual community, we cherish the unique ties of history and destiny that link us to our fellow Jews

throughout the ages and around the world today. We understand the Jewish People as a community of faith, bound together by our shared experience, and grounded in the distinctive teachings of the Jewish Religion. The rich and varied ethnic and cultural traditions of the Jewish experience throughout the ages offer meaningful dimensions for our religious identity, but our faith is timeless and universal in its aspirations.

We uphold the historic Reform concept, linked to our emphasis on the ethical and moral vision of our Hebrew Prophets, of the “Mission of Israel.” This belief holds that as Jews, we are called to be witnesses to the Unity of God and the unity of all humanity, and that we must work as individuals and as a community to bring justice and peace to the world. The leaders of the Classical Reform tradition have always been in the forefront of these efforts and challenges, addressing the great social issues of American history with prophetic courage and action. We affirm this broad, universalistic and humanistic spiritual vision.

We cherish the distinctive worship traditions of historic Reform – a meaningful, participatory liturgy that appeals to both mind and heart. This commitment has always embraced a primarily English language worship Service, enriched by the timeless elements of Hebrew texts and song that symbolically link us to our past and to our fellow Jews throughout the world. And yet, we would insist that what makes a worship experience truly “Jewish” is not its degree of Hebrew usage, but rather the ideals and values it reflects. Classical Reform worship also embraces the role of inspiring choral and instrumental music that elevates the spirit and reflects the highest artistic standards; drawing on both the great historic musical traditions that



have been the distinctive heritage of the Reform synagogue, as well as the compositions of contemporary creativity. Yet another dimension of historic Reform worship is the importance of intellectually challenging preaching that offers the wisdom of our Jewish tradition in addressing both the pressing moral and social issues of our day, as well as our personal spiritual growth and the deeper meaning of our human experience. We believe that these characteristic qualities of Classical Reform worship Services, which for many of us are most meaningfully embodied in the historic liturgy of the *Union Prayer Book*, continue to offer a vital, creative option for many Jews today. This includes not only the many members of our congregations who were raised in and cherish this tradition, but also countless younger people – who are searching for a meaningful and accessible form of Jewish identity and worship, based not on nostalgia nor ethnicity, but rather rooted in the realities of their experience in our contemporary, pluralistic society.

We particularly affirm and celebrate the unique experience and heritage of the Jewish experience in America. Our Torah's principles of liberty, justice, and the equality of all people, have shaped American democracy from its earliest colonial beginnings. Inspired by the promise of the American values of freedom and opportunity, Jews have played a vital role in the founding and building of this nation. Classical Reform Judaism has always cherished this noble heritage and has remained committed to the nurturing of a distinctly American expression of Jewish worship, life, and culture, which reflect the best of our nation's democratic ideals. We are proud citizens of this country, fully embracing our rights and obligations to the United States. These obligations include prophetic dissent, expressed in the democratic process, as well as full civic engagement in our society. We believe that the

major setting for the continued dynamic development, influence and mission of Judaism in the future, will lie here in a vital and spiritually renewed American Jewish community.

The question of our relationship as American Jews to the State of Israel, is one of great importance and has a complex history in the development of the Classical Reform perspective, which embraces a broad diversity of opinion. However, there are a number of perspectives that many of us would share. The historic Reform position has always held that the national period in the early history of our people was an important formative chapter - creating the shared sense of experience and fostering the spiritual and ethical values that it was our destiny to proclaim and share with all humanity. While this dynamic view of Jewish history rejects the concept that we who live throughout the world today are in “exile,” we affirm that our link to the land of Israel is a deep and historic one and that the State of Israel has profound significance for the Jewish experience. We share with all Jews – and with many other people of good will - the hope and prayer for a secure, prosperous Israel, living in peace and justice with its neighbors.

We celebrate the rich diversity within today’s changing Jewish community. We are particularly committed to offering a warm, loving and unconditional welcome to the ever-increasing number of interfaith and multicultural families in our midst. We believe that we must support our young people and their partners and spouses with “open hearts and open doors” - celebrating their weddings and offering them a spiritual community that respects both of their identities and integrity. We believe that Classical Reform Judaism’s broad, universal message and embracing, accessible

worship have a unique role to play in reaching out to our young people in interfaith relationships, empowering them to find a meaningful setting for sharing their experience of Jewish tradition together.

Our contemporary Reform movement includes a broad diversity of interpretations and styles. Our hope and commitment is that the historic tradition of Classical Reform, which embodies its own integrity and enduring significance in the midst of the many rich streams of Jewish experience through the ages, is recognized and honored for its continuing vitality and potential to speak to a new generation of Jews today.

10/09

## The Society for Classical Reform Judaism