

Reform Judaism and Zionism - 1997

Arise and let us go up toward Zion, unto Adonai our God
(Jeremiah 31:5)

Issue

To acknowledge the relationship between Reform Judaism and Zionism in this 100th anniversary year of the First World Zionist Congress as put forth in the “Miami Platform” of the Central Conference of American Rabbis.

Background

Reform Judaism and Zionism were the responses of the Jewish people to the challenges of the Age of Enlightenment. By the 18th century across Europe the established norms of society which had been operative for centuries (feudal-medieval communities) were transformed into the nation-state.

The Edict of Emancipation which ensured the rights of the individual gave the Jews citizenship in the nation-state but took away their communal autonomy. At the same time the dislocation and frustration among the populations resulting from the socio-economic and political changes led to the rise of modern anti-semitism.

The first major Jewish response to the modern age was Reform Judaism. By the 19th Century Western European Jews believed that Judaism would have to reflect the changing historical conditions since Judaism as a form of community was no longer relevant in the emerging modern world.

Zionism emerged several generations after Reform Judaism. Disillusioned by their exclusion from the nationalist movements in Europe and the persistence of anti-semitism many Jews believed that only in a nation-state of their own would Jews be fully free and equal. With the First Zionist Congress in 1897 began the development of a political framework which led to the establishment of the State of Israel.

For the early reformers Judaism was to be a universal religion disseminating the prophetic ideals of social justice. They rejected the particularistic idea of Jewish peoplehood. In 1885 the CCAR adopted the Pittsburgh Platform which declared that “We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community, and, therefore, expect neither a return to Palestine... nor the restoration of any of the laws concerning the Jewish state.”

In 1937 in response to changing conditions in the Jewish world the CCAR adopted the Columbus Platform which stated that “In the rehabilitation of Palestine, the land hallowed by memories and hopes, we behold the promise of renewed life for many of our brethren. We affirm the obligation of all Jewry to aid in its upbuilding as a Jewish homeland by endeavoring to make it not only a haven of refuge for the oppressed but also a center of Jewish culture and spiritual life.”

In 1976 the CCAR in its Centenary Perspective states that “We are bound to that land and to the newly reborn State of Israel by innumerable religious and ethnic ties.” At the same time the document also said, “The State of Israel and the Diaspora, in fruitful dialogue, can show how a people transcends nationalism even as it affirms it, thereby setting an example for humanity, which remains largely concerned with dangerously parochial goals.”

In 1977 the Union of American Hebrew Congregations established the Association of Reform Zionists of America (ARZA) as the official advocate of the Reform movement for all issues pertaining to Israel, Zionism and Reform

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Judaism in Israel. ARZA strives to deepen a love of Israel within the Reform community, to bring Reform Judaism's values of social justice and religious tolerance to Israel and to assist in the building of a liberal Jewish movement in the State.

In 1992 the first Reform Zionist Think Tank was convened to begin a Reform movement-wide dialogue on the relationship of Reform Judaism to Zionism and Israel. It was time to reexamine and redefine the ideological and spiritual bonds that connect Am Yisrael (People of Israel) to Eretz Yisrael (the Land of Israel) to Medinat Yisrael (the State of Israel). From this beginning and subsequent discussions and study has come the document, "Reform Judaism & Zionism: A Centenary Platform" (The Miami Platform) adopted by the Central Conference of American Rabbis.

The principles in the Platform include:

- 1) "We believe that the eternal covenant established at Sinai ordained a unique religious purpose for Am Yisrael... Medinat Yisrael, the Jewish State, is therefore unlike all other states. Its obligation is to strive towards the attainment of the Jewish people's highest moral ideals to be a...kingdom of priests,... a holy people and a... light unto the nations."
- 2) "We, therefore, affirm Am Yisrael's reassertion of national sovereignty, but we urge that it be used to create the kind of society in which full civil, human, and religious rights exist for all its citizens."
- 3) "Even as Medinat Yisrael serves uniquely as the spiritual and cultural focal point of world Jewry, Israeli and Diaspora Jewry are inter-dependent, responsible for one another, and partners in the shaping of Jewish destiny."
- 4) "To help promote the security of Medinat Yisrael and ensure the welfare of its citizens, we pledge continued political support and financial assistance."
... "we commit ourselves to intensifying Hebrew instruction in all Reform institutions."
... "we resolve to implement educational programs and religious practices that reflect and reinforce the bond between Reform Judaism and Zionism."
... "we call upon all Reform Jews, adults and youth, to study in, and make regular visits to, Israel."
... "we encourage aliyah to Israel."
... "we call upon Reform Jews everywhere to dedicate their energies and resources to the strengthening of an indigenous Progressive Judaism in Medinat Yisrael."
- 5) "We seek a Jewish state in which no religious interpretation of Judaism takes legal precedence over another."
- 6) "We believe that the renewal and perpetuation of Jewish national life in Eretz Yisrael is a necessary condition for the realization of the physical and spiritual redemption of the Jewish people and of all humanity."

Resolution

Therefore Women of Reform Judaism:

- 1) Applauds the World Zionist Congress on its 100th Anniversary;
- 2) Commends the Central Conference of American Rabbis on adopting "Reform Judaism & Zionism: A Centenary Platform" (Miami Platform).
- 3) Urges Women of Reform Judaism affiliates to study and discuss this historic document and encourage discussion on the Miami Platform within the congregation; and
- 4) Encourages participation in the Women of Reform Judaism mission to Israel, Feb. 14-24, in recognition of Israel's 50th year.

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