

Reform Judaism

The Pittsburgh Platform (1885)

1. We recognize in every religion an attempt to grasp the Infinite, and in every mode, source or book of revelation held sacred in 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 amidst continual struggles and trials and under enforced isolation, this God-idea as the central religious truth for the human race.
2. We recognize in the Bible the record of the consecration of the Jewish people to its mission as the 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 domain 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 men in miraculous narratives.
3. 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 its 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.
4. We hold that all such Mosaic and rabbinical laws as regulate diet, priestly purity, and dress originated in ages and under the influence of ideas entirely foreign to our present mental and spiritual state. They fail to impress the modern Jew with a spirit of priestly holiness; their observance in our days is apt rather to obstruct than to further modern spiritual elevation.
5. 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 of the laws concerning the Jewish state.
6. 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.
7. We reassert the doctrine of Judaism that the soul is immortal, grounding the belief on the divine nature of 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.
8. In full accordance with the spirit of the Mosaic legislation, which strives to regulate the relations 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.

Orthodox Judaism

The Condition of Jewish Belief (1965) Rabbi Norman Lamm

I believe the Torah is divine revelation in two ways: in that it is God-given and in that it is God-given and in that it is godly. By "God-given," I mean that He willed that man abide by his commandments and ***that will was communicated in discrete words and letters***. Man apprehends in many ways: by intuition, inspiration, experience, deduction and by direct instruction. ***The divine will, if it is to be made known, is sufficiently important for it to be revealed in as direct, unequivocal, and unambiguous a manner as possible, so that it will be understood by the largest number of the people to whom this will is addressed. Language, though so faulty an instrument, is still the best means of communication to most human beings.***

Hence, I accept unapologetically the idea of the verbal revelation of the Torah. I do not take seriously the caricature of this idea which reduces Moses to a secretary taking dictation. Any competing notion of revelation, such as the various "inspiration" theories, can similarly be made to sound absurd by anthropomorphic parallels. Exactly how this communication took place no one can say; it is no less mysterious than the nature of the One who spoke. The divine-human encounter is not a meeting of equals, and the herygma that ensues from this event must therefore be articulated in human terms without reflecting on the mode and form of the divine logos. How God spoke is a mystery; how Moses received this message is an irrelevancy. That God spoke is of the utmost significance, and what he said must therefore be intelligible to humans in a human context, even if one insists upon an endlessly profound mystical overplus of meaning in the text. ***To deny that God can make his will clearly known is to impose upon Him a limitation of dumbness that would insult the least of His human creatures.***

Literary criticism of the Bible is a problem, but not a crucial one. Judaism has successfully met greater challenges in the past. Higher Criticism is far indeed from an exact science. The startling lack of agreement among scholars on any one critical view; the radical changes in general orientation in more recent years; the many revisions that archaeology has forced upon literary critics; and the unfortunate neglect even by Bible scholars of much first-rate scholarship in modern Hebrew supporting the traditional claim of Mosaic authorship — all these reduce the question of Higher Criticism from the massive proportions it has often assumed to a relatively minor and manageable problem that is chiefly a nuisance but not a threat to the enlightened believer.

Torah is not only God-given; it is also godly. The divine word is not only uttered by God, it is also an aspect of God Himself. All of the Torah — its ideas, its laws, its narratives, its inspirations for the human community — lives and breathes godliness. Hillel Zeitlin described the Hasidic interpretation of revelation (actually it was even more true of their opponents, the Misnagdim, and ultimately derived from a common Kabbalistic source) as not only Torah min ha-shamayim (Torah from Heaven) but Torah she-hi shamayim (Torah that is Heaven). It is in Torah that God is most immediately immanent and accessible, and the study of Torah is therefore not only a religious commandment per se, but the most exquisite and the most characteristically Jewish form of religious experience and communion. For the same reason, Torah is not only legislation, halakha, but in its broadest meaning, Torah — teaching, a term that includes the full spectrum of spiritual edification: theological and ethical, mystical and rhapsodic.

Given the above, it is clear that I regard all of the Torah as binding on the Jew. To submit the mitzvot to any extraneous test — whether rational or ethical or nationalistic — is to reject the supremacy of God, and hence in effect to deny Him as God. The classification of the mitzvot into rational and revelational, or ethical and ritual, has descriptive-methodological but not substantive religious significance. Saadia Gaon, who a thousand years ago proposed the dichotomy between rational and nonrational commandments as the cornerstone of his philosophy of law, maintained that even the apparently pure revelational laws were fundamentally rational, although man might not, now or ever, be able to grasp their inner rationality. At the same time, far greater and more genuine spirituality inheres in the acceptance of those laws that apparently lack ethical, rational, or doctrinal content.

Conservative Judaism

Text A: “I am more interested in issues such as *why* there is a Halakha in the first place, and why it has any authority over us. ...I have become increasingly impatient with those who insist on talking about ‘the’ Halakha or ‘the’ halakhic process, as if these were monolithic, self-evident and predetermined forms. ... My view of Halakha ...reflects my theological commitments as to how it came into being in the first place. (Rabbi Neil Gillman, “For the Sake of Heaven” USCJ Review, Fall 1999)”

Text B: “...the Halakha flows like a river and one cannot ignore the direction of the flow. There may be a point where the river can choose where it will go. But once that decision is made there is no going back. ... The centrists of 1973 could not but agree with [the] arguments that there was no reasonable way to argue that the halakhic sources could be used to support women’s inclusion in the minyan. Jewish law and practice developed so that it was indeed the law that women did not count in the minyan. However, they also believed that law can change. One cannot retroactively reroute a decision that was made upstream by the flow of the river. However, from where we stand the river continues on its journey. It has not emptied into a lake. While we cannot change what has already been determined upstream, we can direct the river from where we stand and influence where it will flow from us. (Rabbi David Fine, *Women and the Minyan*, CJLS OH 55:1.2002)

Text C: “If we can only be a Movement with those who think, talk, and practice precisely as we do, then what hope is there for embracing the entire Jewish people, let alone all humanity?” (Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson, USCJ Review, Fall/Winter 2006).

Text D: “[The Mishnah asked:] From what time may one recite the Shema in the morning? From the time that one can distinguish between blue and white. Rabbi Eliezer says: between blue and green. ...Others say: From the time that one can distinguish a friend at a distance of four cubits. Rabbi Huna says: The Halakha is as stated by ‘Others’. (TB Berachot 9b)”

Text E: Make one cherub at the end here and the other at the end there; of one piece with the cover shall you make the cherubs at its two ends. The cherubs shall have their wings spread out above, shielding the cover. They shall face each other, the faces of the cherubs being turned toward the cover. There I will meet with you above the cover, from between the two cherubs on top of the Ark of the Pact. (Ex. 25:1920,22)

Text F: Rabbi Katina said, “When the Israelites would ascend to the Temple on the Festival, the priest would roll up the curtain and display for them the cherubs joined together in an embrace. The priest would then tell them, ‘Behold God’s Love for you, similar to human love.’” (TB Yoma 54a)

Text G: At the core of Conservative Judaism is the belief that in every generation, the legitimate structuring element of organized religion—in this case, Halakha—is the product of collective covenantal negotiations that have taken place since the birth of the Torah itself. Halakha is part of our language. Holiness is its partner. The Conservative Movement, in its relationship to Halakha, much like the cherubs, must be identified and identifiable with the very material that birthed it, stretching both toward each other and toward the world beyond, using our wings to both protect the core of our tradition and the nexus of emerging holiness. But like the revelation brought about by the priest rolling back the curtain, we are shown that change does not take place in Conservative Judaism just because it can. Change takes place because it is necessary and the embrace of change is an act of sacred love. (Rabbi Menachem Creditor, “The Revelation of an Embrace: A Vision of Conservative Judaism” CJ Winter 2009)