

## REVIEW ARTICLE:

*Emanuel Feldman*

A striking development has been the resurgence of Covenantal Theology in Reform circles. Whether this radical break with previous trends signals a return to the traditional position on Revelation is discussed in this examination of representative works of leading Reform theologians. The author of this essay, Rabbi Feldman, is spiritual leader of Congregation Beth Jacob, Atlanta, Georgia, and Editor of TRADITION'S Book Review Department.

## REFORM AND REVELATION

Covenant, Sinai, Mitzvah, Revelation, Sacred Commandment, *Kavannah*: In reading three recent books\* by contemporary Reform leaders, one is struck by the traditional religious vocabulary. Some observers have even lamented that Reform leaders these days sound more Orthodox than our Yeshivot. But it is only the sound that is similar. The thought remains Reform — but with a difference.

It is this difference which fascinates and is so appealing. Reform has come a long way since its Pittsburgh Platform of 1885, in which it referred to the Bible as "reflecting the primitive ideas of its own age." Today prominent Reform thinkers like Jakob Petuchowski, Emil Fackenheim, Lou H. Silberman, and leaders such as Da-

vid Polish and Gunther Plaut are making serious efforts to come to grips with fundamentals: What does it mean to be a Jew and a part of this ancient covenant.

Samuel Holdheim, the leader of Reform in Germany a century ago, gave up circumcision and the Sabbath. What would he think of Plaut's reference to him and his kind as "the dead end of 19th century optimism . . . tending to the de-Judaization of life?" Fifty years ago, Emil G. Hirsch fought against the inclusion of a Torah scroll in his Chicago temple. What would he think of Lou Silberman's remark that the last century's prejudices "have narrowed [Reform's] vision and distorted our perspective"?

The change in direction is best

\* *Rediscovering Judaism*, ed. by Arnold J. Wolf (Chicago, Quadrangle Books, 1965); *The Higher Freedom*, by David Polish (Chicago, Quadrangle Books, 1965); *The Case For the Chosen People*, by W. Gunther Plant (New York, Doubleday, 1965).

## Reform and Revelation

illustrated by *Rediscovering Judaism*, an ambitious collection of essays by predominantly Reform thinkers (Zalman M. Schachter is the lone exception). Lou Silberman, in a searching piece, attempts to find a new ground for Reform. This graduate of Hebrew Union College and professor of Jewish Thought at Vanderbilt, decries "the intellectual desert in which liberal Judaism has set up its tents." Pointing out that the substance of Reform's thinking has been indiscriminately borrowed from non-Jewish sources, he calls for a radical reappraisal of its basic positions so that the point of view of liberal Judaism may be intellectually sound and spiritually relevant.

Jakob Petuchowski, in the same volume, seems to offer the kind of approach which Silberman demands. Petuchowski has for a number of years been the leader in a reevaluation of the theological positions of Reform, and it has been he more than any other Reform theologian who has been promulgating the idea of *Torah min Hashamayim* among his Reform brethren. Professor of Rabbinics at Hebrew Union College, he has been a consistent advocate of Revelation as a fundamental of Jewish thought. But again it is Revelation with a difference.

One is not condescending when one feels sympathetic with Petuchowski's efforts. He labors mightily to hold on to some kind of Revelation. He is aware of its central place in Judaism, and he knows that without it there can be no Covenant, for without a *Metzaveh* (commander) there can be no

*Mitzvah* (commandment). And he himself indicates that traditionally there was a) the historical *fact of Revelation*: it was an event in history; and b) Revelation had content: God revealed laws, truths, codes of conduct. All this Petuchowski feels in his Jewish bones, and it is evident in all of his writings — and in his essay in *Rediscovering Judaism* — that he is far ahead of his Reform colleagues in his grasp of these fundamental issues.

But though he grasps them, it is not with both hands. For he attempts to mold his Revelation into the canons of contemporary criticism and thought, and it is here that he parts company with the tradition. While he wants to return Revelation to modern Judaism, it is a factless and contentless version of Revelation, couched in the jargon of contemporary criticism. Instead of Revelation as a **fact** he substitutes events which Faith interpreted as "mighty acts of God." Thus Israel looked upon its Exodus from Egypt as "Revelation" of God. Now if Revelation is man-centered and not God-centered, if it draws its authority from man's apprehension of physical events, what can be the *content* of such "Revelation"? What can it say to man? Obviously it can have no content of itself. What, then, is the place of the *Mitzvah*, and how are we to view the legislation which we find in the tradition? Legislation, says Petuchowski, is man's "responses" to the experience of Revelation.

That this does not fully satisfy Petuchowski is indicated on the

## TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

very next page:

How impotent are all theories limiting God's abilities to communicate with man when seen in the light of one moment of true prayer! How clumsy the attempt to fit Jewish history into a "rational pattern" when there is no escape from the fact of the Covenant which was made "with him that standeth here with us this day before the Lord our God, and also with Him that is not here with us this day!" (p. 50)

Petuchowski's dilemma is echoed, albeit dimly, by David Polish of Beth Emet Temple in Evanston, Ill., and W. Gunther Plaut of Holy Blossom Temple in Toronto. Polish, in his *The Higher Freedom*, has the inevitable chapter on "The Wonder of Sinai," at which Israel "committed themselves to be under the divine mandate in perpetuity." He adds, "there is no return to Judaism which does not reach all the way back to Sinai." But lest he sound too traditional he states his caveat immediately: "this is not to say that the Covenant of our ancestors is the same Covenant for us or that the Torah of Moses of 1000 B.C.E. is the Torah of Moses of 1965 C.E." And yet he insists that Sinai is a real event, for "had there been no Sinai, nothing at all . . . there could be no enduring tradition about it. Traditions are not contrived." Of course, this tradition "undoubtedly" was extravagantly embellished through the years, but — and here the modern sophisticate collides with the innocent wish to believe — "there had to be something to be embellished." Polish does not explain how this central event in Judaism

differs from those claimed for Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, or, for that matter, Indian totem worship. All have traditions, and since "traditions are not contrived," and since "there had to be something to be embellished," how is Torah's claim to my loyalty greater than the totemite's? Because all Israel was overwhelmed by "an awareness of the holy"? Agreed. Agreed also that "a community dedicated itself and its posterity to the divine and the holy." But unless Revelation is an event and unless this event has something specific to say, it can have no more claims on me — or my very life — than do non-revelatory religions.

Gunther Plaut also sings rapturously of Sinai in his *The Case For The Chosen People*. For him, it is a new dimension in history, and Jewish history is a fiction without it. Judaism was born at this moment of Revelation, "this great single burst of spiritual reaching" explains the riddle of the Jew, and "it is a confrontation never achieved before or after." So far, so good. But, like Polish, he equivocates. "Sinai is a succession of moments or a single one, a succession of places or a single one." Nor is he ready to say what it was that God revealed. The Torah? This he finds "simplistic" and "untenable." Rather, he approvingly quotes Rosenzweig (as does Petuchowski) who says that at Revelation God revealed only *Himself*. But if God can reveal Himself, why can He not reveal His "Thou shalt" as well? Is a God revealing Himself more tenable and less simplistic than His revealing His To-

## Reform and Revelation

rah? And if He revealed only Himself and no *Mitzvot*, is not Jewish history the very "tortuous tale of a people suffering for the sake of nothing" which Plaut tries to avoid?

That Plaut is aware of the difficulties inherent in his position is indicated by the tortuous path his normally lucid mind takes in this entire section. Thus he says the Bible is "humanly composed," yet comes "close" to God's will, and that therefore the Bible is "partly human and surely in part divine." Which is which? This is no problem. That which he does not comprehend is human, and subject to human error, and need not be believed, such as Saul's war on Agag, or the Biblical institution of the *eved* (slave). But is this not a gross presumption? For in rejecting that which we do not fully comprehend we imply that in the legislation of ethics and morality we do possess full comprehension of God's will.

Like Petuchowski, both Polish and Plaut wrestle at length with the problem of the *Mitzvah*. If Revelation is not a fact and it has no specific content, what is the place of the *Mitzvah* in a Jew's life? Again we find pretty phrases and noble sentiments, followed by a backing away at the moment of truth. Thus Polish: "these laws . . . reveal an earnest and deep desire to seek out a religious discipline, and to move in accordance with a sacred system of observance. *Mitzvot* are some of the instruments by which the Jew is daily reminded of the Covenant, and by which he daily relives it." *Mitzvot* make it possible regularly to cross the abyss between man and God. But in the

same chapter Polish tells us that scholars in previous ages under the *halakhic* system, "radically transformed the original intent of Biblical laws," and that "many of the laws . . . are invalid for most Jews." The confusion is compounded when, again in the same chapter, the author decries Reform Judaism which "pronounced only the ethical passages in the Bible as relevant to the modern age," for if one part is irrelevant, the entire Bible can become one great irrelevancy. "This road," he writes, "leads to disaster and nihilism." But Polish's road, with its pious pronouncements tempered by critical reservations, leads to confusion and anarchy.

Plaut also recognizes this dilemma of Reform: "I may do less today and more tomorrow. Quantity is not decisive, quality is." Inwardness, *kavannah*, counts above all else and as man changes, so does his ability to choose and to hear. He hears "that which I am capable of hearing out of my own individual existence, and that which I hear through the collective historic voice of my people." What he does is less important than why or how he does it. "At the beginning stands concern." Concern with the "peoplehood of Israel," with "man," with "God." But concern is not enough and there must be deed. Which deed? Plaut, eloquent as he is, falls here into the self-made morass of verbiage: "He may do much or little, he alone will determine it out of his being, his listening, his relation to Covenant and people. On the bridge of deeds, truly performed, the Jew meets his

God." But since such deeds come from a "self-assumed discipline," we can only conclude that the God one will meet will be a self-assumed one. One would hope that millions of Jews martyred themselves for something more specific and sacred and concrete than all this.

Plaut, incidentally, displays real sympathy and understanding of Orthodox Judaism. Although he complains that "it is in many ways easier to be an Orthodox than to be a liberal Jew." — thus repeating an old canard which considers the Orthodox Jew as a robot responding to external commands — he evokes a beautiful and sympathetic image of the *Taryag* — oriented life: "One does not build character merely by desiring it; there must be habituation and this is achieved through *taryag mitzvot*." But unfortunately, Plaut himself does not accept the divinity of the Torah, and thus begins his dilemma. He cannot answer satisfactorily his own question: Once Jewish law loses its divinity, is there any authority for observance?

In the light of the traditional categories utilized by these writers, one is struck by the contrast between them and Reform leaders such as Wine and others who deny not only a personal and omniscient God, but deny the very existence of God himself. Are Petuchowski, Silberman, Polish, and Plaut really in the same group? On the other hand, is not Wine the logical culmination of a Jewish theology which has a revelation with nothing revealed, a command with no commander, and a covenant without

any terms? That it has all resulted in an absurdity should not be a surprise. For support, Wine and his defenders can cite Plaut: "not slavish preservation of the past is at stake . . ."; or Polish: The Bible and prophecy "speak in terms of the commandment, but it is not ceremonial or ritualistic. It is ethical . . ."

That Revelation has now become respectable even among Reform theologians — although they manage to bend the concept to their own use — is an ironic turn of events. For it is *Torah min Hashamayim* — Revelation — which is the historical line of demarcation between the Orthodox and the non-Orthodox. And yet this new preoccupation with Revelation is not surprising, for it is an attractive philosophical concept. It is definite, it is absolute, and to a theology which has been uncertain about its fundamental approach to Torah and its origin, the idea of Torah from Heaven is a strong magnet. There is in it a certain grandeur and majesty.

But one cannot have his theological cake and eat it too. One can hardly speak of a Torah from Heaven which consists only of man's "response" to what he perceives as God's "mighty act." One cannot embrace conditionally and subjectively an idea which by its very nature is unconditional and objective.

Revelation has always meant, in its basic terms, that the Torah was directly revealed by God to Israel through Moses at Sinai. The sources of this doctrine, other than the theophany in Exodus, are the

## Reform and Revelation

well known passages in *Bava Batra* 14b - 15a, and in *Sanhedrin* 99a. From the latter source especially it is clear that *Torah min Hashamayim* means not merely divine inspiration — Shakespeare was “inspired,” and Beethoven: are they to be compared to Moses? — but that every word in the Pentateuch (with the possible exception of the last eight sentences) is the word of God, or directly revealed. On this basis all Jews, until the advent of Reform, accepted the principle of Maimonides that the whole Torah now in our possession is the same as that given to Moses.

Orthodoxy does not claim to know the specific nature and exact process of Revelation. To picture the Orthodox view as one which looks upon Moses as a kind of divine secretary taking God’s dictation is to oversimplify and to vulgarize.

Revelation can only be adumbrated, sketched, apprehended, felt. This was a unique and wondrous event. God revealed Himself and His word to Israel. The hand of God reached down and touched the trembling, uplifted hand of man. Can such an awesome moment in time be brought within the restricting confines of words and sentences? *Ufanai lo yaira-u* — and my face will not be seen (Exodus 33:23). We apprehend only a momentary, fleeting shadow. By its very nature Revelation can have no concrete nature for us in terms of understanding its exact mechanics.

This much, however, we do know: Whatever the process, God somehow spoke to man and man heard. To deny Revelation as

an event with a specific message for Israel is to deny forever the Jews’ search for God. It is only through Torah as God’s revealed word that the Jew — and mankind — can hope to transcend himself and reach out beyond himself to God. If the Torah is merely human, or at best dependent on human interpretation of acts and events, man’s restless quest for meaning and light is itself meaningless. If the Torah is not God’s voice speaking to man, where shall we turn? Our groping is the groping of madmen and our search for word from Him is an egotistical illusion. It is inconceivable that a Creator of a universe which has order and purpose should leave man, who is most in need of order and perfection, to fend for himself.

God is One, His name is One, and Israel is one. And God revealed Himself and His Torah to Israel. Unless this is so we must face three alternatives: a) a Torah that is not from Heaven; b) a Judaism without communication with God; c) a lack of any basis for one’s religious commitment to God.

Reform theologians recognize these implications of a non-revelatory faith. They too want some basis for communication with, and commitment to, God, and so they lay claim to *Torah min Hashamayim*. Unfortunately it is a reformulated Torah from a reformulated Heaven.

One can say this for Silberman, Petuchowski, and their colleagues: they are facing their dilemmas honestly. They recognize Reform’s non-Jewish roots and want desper-

## TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

ately to grasp at something more authentic. They are aware of the spiritual dead-end into which it has all led and are striving to return to something more classically Jewish. If they grasp the forms of traditional thought while refusing to relinquish that of contemporary

theology, one can only sympathize. One only hopes that their new-found Revelation will become a viable *Torah min Hashamayim* and not another ersatz Torah which is, when all is said and done, *min haaretz*.