

PROBLEMS WITH CURRENT LIBERAL APPROACHES

The liberal denominations of Judaism (the Reform, Reconstructionist, Renewal, and Humanist movements) have similar problems and I will elaborate on them here. These are problems of survival into the next century. The liberal movements are withering and I would like to explain the root causes. They preside over the decline of Judaism. There are many excuses for this happening but the truth lies in the basic principles.

The Conservative movement is a compromise between liberal and orthodox themes. It hopes to take the strengths of each but the danger is that it will also take the weaknesses of each. In another essay I have already described my problems with the orthodox approach to Judaism and here I will examine the liberal side. I feel both extremes have wandered far from the Judaism that was originally intended and the one that can serve humanity's interests.

I see the following serious problems with the liberal approach to Judaism:

- *It scoffs at the laws and biblical wisdom and considers them to be highly imperfect and mostly outdated*
- *It regards the laws and foundations of Judaism as not particularly unique*
- *It denies the mission or chosenness of the Jewish people*
- *It makes Judaism too individual-based and not enough group-based*
- *It rejects the national or land-based aspects of Judaism*

I will elaborate on these mistakes one-by-one but all together they result in the current declining state of Jewish liberal denominations. These positions need to be reconsidered. That doesn't mean we need to swing to other extremes. As I've already written, orthodoxy is not the answer either. Jewish life is hurting for one very good reason, namely that the Judaism we have these days is not even close to the Judaism that was set up a long time ago on a few extremely wise principles.

The items I have starred above can very easily be shown to directly cause the lack of participation problem at the synagogue level, the childrearing/intermarriage problem, the politically self-hating/guilt problem, and all the other problems that beset the liberal Jewish world. I will make these arguments shortly.

The overall theme of these problems is a desire to fit in, a desire to resemble as much as possible the surrounding religion. These are wrong directions for Judaism. We have our own journey and our own destination.

The problems I am describing make of Judaism not much of a legacy. The Jewishly-uneducated and the next generation has to wonder what is so worthwhile about Judaism. What is so special about this family tradition? Judaism can be made so uninspiring that it seems more like a historical burden than something of life-enhancing value. Obviously it is not compelling enough to bring this or the next generation into the synagogues (see my article about religious services), classes, or social relationships.

Let's look at the problems in detail.

1. The liberal view of the laws and biblical wisdom.

These are considered to be a mixture of good and bad ideas, a hodge-podge of basically primitive approximations to our current heightened sensibilities. In other words, they don't need to be studied or consulted. The view is that you can do just as well by using your own judgment or current political correctness. Basically, you are considered perfectly capable of making all ethical decisions and current western society is considered to have reached the peak of ethical understanding.

In other words, do what you want. You certainly don't have to be worried about some ideas from 3500 years ago. Anything of value in them is either already part of our legal system or of the wider culture.

What is the consequence of this type of liberal Jewish thinking? It raises the question, "So, what do we need Judaism for?" Is it anything more than a common painful history?

2. The liberal view of Judaism's uniqueness

It cannot be allowed that Judaism is unique in its approach to anything, that it still has something different, but of value, to offer the world. This would go against the idea that ethically the world is already quite perfected and all we have to do now is to eliminate all arbitrary differences. On the contrary, liberalism needs to continually teach that Judaism is really not that different than the surrounding religion. Our places and methods of worship are very similar, our morality is liberal, our politics are as or more liberal than anybody. We can say, "Look, liberal Judaism is just like every other major religion. We agree with all of you on pretty much anything of importance."

Again, if Judaism is not unique in very good ways, then why keep it? Why associate with Jews? Why not intermarry? What difference does it make whether the children know they are Jewish? What's all the fuss? Shouldn't Jews feel equally comfortable anywhere and involved with anyone? Jews might as well blend in... and that's exactly what's happening. The sad thing is that the world loses a potentially valuable influence.

3. The liberal view of the Jewish mission or chosenness

This is related to the previous item about uniqueness. The liberal view cannot tolerate any talk of the Jews having a unique purpose in history. Not only would it set Judaism apart again but it would raise the question as to whether the mission has been completed. It would be the opposite of blending into the greater society if Jews maintained their desire to have a serious beneficial effect on the world. (It's true that the concept of chosenness has brought a lot of grief to Jews in the course of their wandering, but that is due to the interpretation as "G-d's favorite people" instead of the correct one, as "G-d's experimental subjects", with the mission of demonstrating the benefits of a life according to His laws.)

Now, without a special purpose or mission for its existence, Judaism cannot survive in the larger society. The group and each individual needs the energizing effect in order to continue facing frequent discomfort or outright adversity, in order to feel satisfaction. It may not be politically correct to think of yourself (a an individual, a congregation, or the land of Israel) as wanting to set an ethical example but that is exactly the central idea of Judaism. If you don't accept that, you are headed to oblivion. If you don't accept your mission, there really is no point in regarding yourself Jewish. Go ahead and convert to "citizen of the world".

4. The liberal view of Judaism as individual-based

Once again to blend in by becoming more like the surrounding religion, liberal Judaism thinks of itself as something you carry around in your head, nicely tucked away, i.e. that you can be a good Jew if you never associate with other Jews, that you can be a complete Jew by having only a close personal relationship to G-d. This is wishful thinking; it is not the way Judaism is designed to work. In Judaism, families, congregations, other organizations, cities/towns, and even countries all have important roles to play. Our relationship to G-d is in large part determined by our participation in these larger groupings. To ignore this, is to practice some deformed, should I say misinformed, version of Judaism. If Judaism is a tree of life, you would be experiencing only a branch. If you cut yourself off from Jewish institutions, you are pretty much on your way out of Judaism.

5. The liberal view of Judaism as landless

This item is related to the previous one in that it involves a larger group, namely an entire nation. Liberal denominations and even current-day Israel might not like it, but Judaism does have a nationalist component. Judaism needs a land to demonstrate the benefit of those laws that deal with national behavior, whether that is the workings of a national justice system, the waging of war, whatever.

I understand that liberal congregations give a great deal of support to Israel but in terms of doctrine, they would disagree with the country intentionally having a biblically-inspired organization, ethical climate, and identity. If liberal and secular Jews continue to insist that Israel imitate western culture, then the Jewish mission will be seriously hampered. What is our claim to the land if we don't admit Israel as the site of G-d's grand social experiment?

In conclusion

As a Jew, what do you stand for? How do you define Judaism to your children? How do you define it for the convert? What is Judaism in case anyone is interested? Merely being a nice guy, a liberal, a politically correct individual, or more than that? It doesn't have to be complicated but Judaism is more than that. It's more than appearing at your birth, your bar-mitzvah, your wedding, and your funeral. What will you be in-between?

The liberal denominations can try to reform, reconstruct, renew, reinvent, humanize, or update Judaism in any way they please. If the mistakes I have discussed above are part of the plan, they are in for serious disappointment. It's like taking a thing of beauty, like a plant, and twisting it, chopping off parts of it, making believe that it's something else; in the end you will lose this plant. It will die in front of your eyes. Judaism has many ideas of value to this planet .It has already taught the nations much but we're not even close to experiencing all the wonderful things it can bring.

[Share Article With a Friend](#)