

Branches of Judaism

Pre-Enlightenment Judaism

In the early 18th century, there were no formal movements within Judaism. Belief and practice varied (e.g., hasidic and non-hasidic, Ashkeai and Sephardi), but since Jews, no matter what their personal practice, had no chance of being accepted into the Christian world, it was unthinkable and nearly impossible for a Jew to leave the Jewish community. Therefore, there was no need to create a strict definition of what it meant to be a proper Jew.

Reform Judaism

In the post-enlightenment 19th century, the Reform movement changed significant parts of Judaism to make it more compatible with a changing world. For example, in the United States the language of prayer became English instead of Hebrew. In addition, Reform Jews believe that the mitzvot in the Torah are only meaningful if they add to one's relationship with God. Most of the traditional restrictions of Shabbat and Kashrut are not observed by Reform Jews.

Orthodox Judaism

In response to the changes that Reform Judaism was introducing, the traditional Jews, led by one particular Rabbi named Samson Raphael Hirsh, asserted that the only acceptable Jewish belief was that every letter of the Torah was given to Moses by God on Mount Sinai, along with a detailed commentary. Therefore, all traditional practices of Judaism reflect the will of God and cannot be changed in any way. Note that it was not until the birth of Reform that the traditionalists saw the need to create strict boundaries around the definition of a proper Jew. Thus Orthodoxy, which literally means "correct thought," was not born until after the advent of the Reform movement.

Conservative Judaism

Conservative Judaism responded to Orthodoxy by saying that there has always been a way to change Jewish law and tradition, but the basic system of mitzvot cannot be changed. Most of the observances of Shabbat and Kashrut, for example, remain unchanged, although most Conservative Jews tend to treat them more liberally than do Orthodox Jews. Examples of changes include giving women an equal role in synagogue ritual (in most, but not all, Conservative synagogues) and more flexibility to change the traditional prayers to reflect modern concerns.

Reconstructionist Judaism

Founded in the mid-20th century, Reconstructionism is the most recent of the major movements of Judaism. It operates under the principle of "The tradition has a vote, not a veto." In other words, unlike Reform, the entire basic system of mitzvot is still an important part of Judaism; but unlike Conservative, an individual mitzvah can be modified or rejected if the community no longer finds it meaningful.