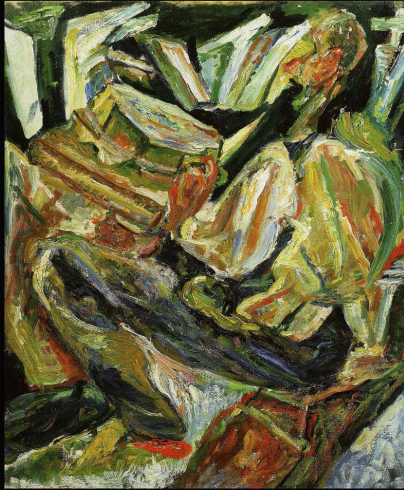


Re-forming Judaism

Moments of Disruption in Jewish Thought



EDITED BY

Rabbi Stanley M. Davids and Leah Hochman, PhD

Study and Discussion Guide

by Deborah Bell

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Introduction

“How did [we] get here from there?” (xiii). It is not a simple task to answer this question, posed by Rabbi Stanley Davids in the introduction to *Re-forming Judaism: Moments of Disruption in Jewish Thought*. Jewish stories encompass millennia, and Rabbi Davids’s question is one that Jewish people have been grappling with throughout its history: how do we understand our story? How do we explain its trajectory?

In twenty-one chapters, the contributors to *Re-forming Judaism* explore and examine disruptive changes throughout Jewish history and how Jewish people’s responses to them have re-formed Judaism time and again over millennia. Chapters span centuries of Jewish thought and practice, and we see that “the path from the ancient Middle East to contemporary liberal Judaism [was] most certainly neither linear nor predetermined” (xiv). Although we can neither understand all of the antecedents nor predict the outcomes of the disruption, we can witness them over time.

This witnessing involves degrees of interpretation, and thus, often manifold ways of understanding history, which from our perspective provides for a rich learning experience. We are able to examine and question these disruptions and outcomes and refract them through concepts integral to Jewish experience such as continuity, memory, narrative, and identity.

In addition, embedded in our understanding of change are multiple systems of beliefs, ideas, and assumptions, including those about the essential nature of existence (e.g., creation, God, human beings, human societies and institutions, and so on). Oftentimes, we hold many of these beliefs and assumptions implicitly, which is to say, we have not yet uncovered or examined them. Thus, exploring this material provides us with an opportunity to increase understanding of ourselves and how we interact with the world, thereby enhancing our ability to make intentional choices of how we would like to live in and contribute to it.

We encourage you to take your time with this material and its manifold layers of meaning (e.g., historical, theological, philosophical, sociological, ritualistic, and many more). As the volume’s coeditor Dr. Leah Hochman observes, “Disruptions are seldom moments of immediate transformation and are more often an unfolding of long processes of understanding, reconciling, rejecting, reorienting, and otherwise making meaning . . . Doing so is Jewish instinct: we have embedded transformative and traumatic experience in our liturgy, in our texts, in our self-understanding, in our theology, and in our ritual behaviors” (328).

How to Use This Guide

This guide is designed to enhance the teaching and study of the twenty-one distinct chapters in *Re-forming Judaism* for adult and teen learners. The guide will facilitate learning in numerous environments such as in adult education classes (e.g., in synagogues, community centers, campus Hillels), book clubs, and *chavruta* (paired learning), to name but a few. It will also do the same for individual learners.

Because each chapter focuses on a distinct topic, each has its own teaching plan in the guide. Yet all are organized in the same format, consisting of the following elements:

- ▶ Key ideas: excerpted text that focuses on core themes and changes at the center of each chapter.
- ▶ Discussion questions: questions crafted to encourage deep engagement with the texts and facilitate expansive learning.
- ▶ Personal reflections: prompts that provide learners with opportunities to engage retrospectively, as well as prospectively, with ideas and arguments in the texts to consider how disruptive changes have affected their past, present, and how they could affect the future—not only in their lives, but also in broader populations.

This guide was created to not only facilitate deep engagement and learning of the material, but to also increase the sense of community and shared history that study of our people, history, and traditions can elicit. Please note that the page citations in parentheses that occur throughout this guide refer to the page numbers in the book *Re-Forming Judaism*.

How to Use This Book

We encourage you to take a modular approach to this volume. That is, while a selection of chapters could certainly be coordinated and taught in a class exploring Judaism's response to change, any one or a combination of these chapters could be taught on their own or in tandem with another topic. To enumerate but a few possibilities:

- ▶ “Power, Pragmatism, and Peoplehood: Mordecai Kaplan’s Radical American Judaism” and “The Pittsburgh Platform of 1885: The American Reform Rabbis’ Declaration of Independence” could be used in a class on the development of progressive Judaism in America.
- ▶ “The Gender Revolution: Disruptions of Jewish Feminism” could be taught in class about feminism or gender in Judaism as could “‘They Are Israel’: Nonbinary Gender Then and Now.”
- ▶ “Christianity: A Pauline Revolution” could be featured in a class focusing on the origins of Christianity.
- ▶ “Holocaust Testimony: Listening, Humanizing, and Sacralizing” would contribute to a course class about the Holocaust, the importance of witnessing, or collective trauma.

CHAPTER 1: *The Disruptive Prophets: Linking Action and Intention*

Kristine Henriksen Garroway, PhD

KEY IDEA

Dr. Garroway describes the role of the prophet as “the voice box of God to human beings”; they are disruptors because the prophets “shake up the status quo and point the people Israel in new directions.” Moses, she writes, “is special and given a place of privilege within Jewish tradition. He facilitates the covenant with Israel and the giving of the law at Sinai. While this moment might not seem like a disruption, it is” (3).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ▶ According to Garroway, what was revolutionary about the covenant at Sinai?
- ▶ How did Moses facilitate this disruption?
- ▶ The covenant and its statutes are conveyed in three different biblical books: Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. How does Garroway describe the differences between each? Do you agree with her reading? Do you discern other differences in your reading of these texts?

KEY IDEA

According to Garroway, “the next point of prophetic disruption comes when the people Israel face a major military threat from the great Mesopotamian empires of the Assyrians and Babylonians in the eighth to sixth centuries BCE.” While “the first moment of prophetic disruption led to the creation of the covenant, the second moment of disruption challenges the people in their practice of the covenant” (7).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ▶ How did the prophets of this period understand the Sinaitic covenant?
- ▶ What values and behaviors did these prophets emphasize in their messages to the people?
- ▶ How would you describe the differences between *kavanah* (the right intention) and *keva* (set actions)? Is it possible to have both *keva* and *kavanah* when living Jewishly? Does each concept play a role in your life and observance?

KEY IDEA

Garroway writes that “prophetic Judaism has deep ties to contemporary Reform Judaism. It champions the universalist, ethical proclamations of the prophets over and against the rigid confines of halachah that have come to characterize Rabbinic Judaism and the more orthodox branches of contemporary Judaism. . . . The tension that exists today between actions driven by values and actions driven by adherence to mitzvot is not new” (12).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ▶ Do you agree with Garroway's characterization of the differences between Reform Judaism and "the more orthodox branches of contemporary Judaism"? Why or why not?
- ▶ Why do you think that, as Garroway writes, "it was not until the turn toward modernity . . . that the prophets again found their voices heeded" (11)?

PERSONAL REFLECTION

- ▶ Is there a place in your practice and observance where prophetic voices are salient or meaningful for you?
- ▶ What is the significance and relevance of the covenantal relationship for you, for your community, for Jewish peoplehood and identity?

CHAPTER 2: 586 BCE: Defeat and the Emergence of Jewish Peoplehood

Jacob L. Wright, PhD

KEY IDEA

According to Dr. Wright, “what makes 586 BCE so pivotal is not the intensity of the injury, but the corpus of writings and a new collective identity that emerged in response to it. This was the moment that Judeans became Jews, and without it, there would be no Jewish history, or Jewish thought—or other moments of disruption that reshaped this collective identity and produced new corpora of writings” (17).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ▶ How would you describe the “new collective identity that emerged” after 586 BCE?
- ▶ According to Wright, what choices did the biblical authors make that shaped this identity?
- ▶ How did this new collective identity facilitate “Judaism’s . . . manner of survival from antiquity to the present” (18)?

PERSONAL REFLECTION

How do you define Jewish peoplehood today? What are its parameters? According to Wright, “by virtue of a covenant with their God, Israel had become a people (i.e., nation) long before it established a kingdom (i.e., state)” (23–24). In what ways is covenant a part of your sense of Jewish peoplehood?

KEY IDEA

Wright argues that the Hebrew Bible’s “account of a people’s past is exceptional for the ancient world, not only in its length and subject matter, but also in its basic structure. The pattern of most inscriptions begins with defeat and ends in triumph. The biblical narrative presents the opposite, with the liberation and success at the beginning, and destruction and downfall at the end” (22).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ▶ According to Wright, what two master narratives are interwoven in the Hebrew Bible?
- ▶ How did the biblical authors “turn . . . existential disruption or rupture into an opportunity to pursue something new and more enduring” (23)?
- ▶ What are the implications of the “text-based identity” (28) created by the biblical authors? What advantages has this identity conferred?

PERSONAL REFLECTION

According to Wright, “What we witness in the scene depicted in Nehemiah 8 is nothing less than the birth of ‘the People of the Book,’ with a new approach to education that informs this text-based identity” (28). How connected do you feel to Jewish texts? Do you think such a connection is important or essential to Jewish identity today? If so, what more can Jewish communities do to teach and study our texts?

CHAPTER 3: Christianity: A Pauline Revolution

Rabbi Joshua D. Garroway, PhD

KEY IDEA

According to Rabbi Dr. Garroway, “in order to make sense of Paul, one must first make sense of Jesus; to make sense of Jesus, one must reckon with ancient apocalypticism; and to understand apocalypticism, one starts with the question ‘Why do bad things happen to good people?’” (35).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ▶ What were some of the events and societal trends that contributed to apocalypticism in the second century BCE?
- ▶ How did thinkers of that time explain why bad things happen to good people?
- ▶ Why do you think we continue to see apocalyptic beliefs in some traditions today? What purpose(s) might they serve?

PERSONAL REFLECTION

In your religious journey to date, have you been introduced to or studied apocalyptic texts such as the Book of Daniel? What interested you about these texts? What did you find difficult? What possible benefits are there to studying them?

KEY IDEA

Garroway writes, “On Paul’s reckoning, God’s elect people were not composed of individuals who could trace their origins back to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Abraham had but one offspring of significance, namely Christ, and therefore genuine descent from Abraham could be claimed only by a person who became united with Christ through baptism. Once ‘in Christ,’ an individual’s actual pedigree became irrelevant. In Christ, ‘there is no longer Jew or gentile,’ as Paul puts it in the famous baptismal formula of Galatians 3:28” (42).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ▶ According to Garroway, how did Paul interpret Jewish scripture?
- ▶ As Garroway writes, “the triumph of this Pauline Christianity was hardly inevitable” (45). How did other Christian groups of the time such as the Ebionites and Nazoreans differ from Pauline Christians? In particular, what was their relationship to Jewish scripture and ritual?

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Garroway writes that “developments in Jewish-Christian relationships since the middle of the last century . . . indicate that a new era may be upon us, one in which the familiarity between these two biblical religions breeds mutual admiration and esteem rather than contempt” (47). Have you experienced improvements in Jewish-Christian relationships in your communities? How might we continue to improve these relationships in the future?

CHAPTER 4: *Persecution, Martyrdom, and Divine Justice: How the Afterlife Came to Be*

Rabbi Candice Levy, PhD

KEY IDEA

In this chapter, Rabbi Dr. Candice Levy discusses a response to a disruption—that is, the Rabbis’ response to what Levy identifies as the disruption of religious persecution of Jews during the Second Temple period. Levy writes, “the shift in eschatological expectations from the biblical belief in the absolute finality of death to a Rabbinic belief in life after death can be explained in several ways: external factors, such as cultural and religious influence facilitated by exile and dispersion, altered political and social landscapes, as well as internal factors, such as the need to respond to the theological crisis precipitated by subjugation and religious persecution” (50).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ▶ According to Levy, how did the Rabbis respond to subjugation and religious persecution during the Second Temple period?
- ▶ How did the Rabbis understand divine justice?

PERSONAL REFLECTION

What do you think about the concepts of divine retribution and justice? In what ways has studying this chapter challenged, complicated, or expanded your ideas of this concept?

KEY IDEA

Levy writes: “We have seen that a belief in the afterlife emerges as a consequence and response to the disruption caused by religious persecution. These moments of severe disruption forced Jews to confront the theological dilemma prompted by their inability to reconcile established beliefs in the covenantal promises of God with the reality of their experience” (58).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ▶ How did the Rabbis imagine the afterlife?
- ▶ What purpose(s) did the Rabbis’ concept of an afterlife serve?
- ▶ How did the Rabbis envision the relationship between God and humans in their imaginings of the afterlife?

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

- ▶ In your religious journey to date, what have you learned about concepts of an afterlife? Why do you think the concept persists? What purposes does the belief in an afterlife serve today that might be different from the Second Temple period?
- ▶ Imagine a radical disruption to our present life on Earth that could pose an existential threat such as artificial general intelligence, biogenetics, or colonization of other planets. How might such events—or any other radical event you could imagine—change eschatological expectations or the concept of an afterlife?

CHAPTER 5: “They Are Israel”: Nonbinary Gender Then and Now

Gwynn Kessler, PhD

KEY IDEA

According to Dr. Kessler, “if we take biblical binary gender as a starting point, the mere mention of *tumtum v’androgynos* across Rabbinic sources from the third century CE forward provides strong evidence not only of a disruption but also a rupture in the ways biblical and Rabbinic authors wrote about bodies and gender; only the latter acknowledged genitalia and bodies beyond a male-female binary frame” (65).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ▶ According to Kessler, how is gender presented differently in biblical and Rabbinic sources?
- ▶ How did the Rabbis define *tumtum v’androgynos*?
- ▶ How did the Rabbis use midrash to expand the concept of biblical binary gender?

KEY IDEA

Kessler argues that Mishnaic and midrashic texts “disrupt binary biblical constructions of gender and compel us to see Rabbinic constructions of gender as working beyond a male-female binary...” (74).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ▶ How can learning about the rabbinic understanding of gender change the way we think about gender—and the gender identity revolution—today?
- ▶ What was your response when learning about the Rabbinic understanding of gender?
- ▶ How can learning more about the way Jewish thought historically approached gender identity impact the way we think about gender identity today?

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Imagine you were writing a midrash about gender. What Jewish sources would you cite to develop your story? What would be the theological or ethical message of your midrash?

CHAPTER 6: *The Radical Rationalist: Maimonides Reshapes Rabbinic Discourse*

Tamar Ron Marvin, PhD

KEY IDEA

According to Dr. Marvin, Maimonides was “a radical thinker who garnered strident criticism in his lifetime and set off waves of controversy thereafter. . . . The tension between the dialectical exuberance of traditional Jewish discourse and Maimonides’s quest to systematize Jewish law and belief underlies all subsequent Jewish thought” (83).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ▶ What was radical and controversial about Maimonides’s thinking?
- ▶ What are some of the ways in which Maimonides reshaped rabbinic discourse?

KEY IDEA

According to Marvin, despite Maimonides’s “prodigious mastery of traditional Jewish knowledge and radical willingness to reconstruct it systematically . . . the law does not usually go according to Maimonides. In this, *Mishneh Torah* fails its essential task, to standardize Jewish law.” (94)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ▶ Why does the law not usually go according to Maimonides?
- ▶ Marvin (and indeed most scholars) maintain that Maimonides’s thought and writings were revolutionary and disruptive. Yet, his conceptualizations did not always win out. What might this say about the nature of disruption? How is it possible for one thinker to influence “all subsequent Jewish thought” (83), yet have works that “fail [their] essential task” (94)?

PERSONAL REFLECTION

What do you think about Maimonides’s concept of the *via negativa*—that is, his assertion that we can say only what God is not and nothing about what God is? How do you speak about or describe God?

CHAPTER 7: *The Zohar Transformation: A New Understanding of Torah, God, and Humanity*

Rabbi Lawrence A. Englander, DHL

KEY IDEA

Rabbi Dr. Englander describes the reciprocal nature of the *Zoharic* innovation of the thirteenth century: “If we are created in the image of God, and if we have this sense of incompleteness, then God, too, must feel incomplete. And just as we reach out to God in search of wholeness, so does God reach out to humanity to attain completion” (104).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ▶ What were some of the societal conditions that contributed to the Zoharic response?
- ▶ What is the theurgic process? Why was this a revolutionary approach?

KEY IDEA

Englander writes that the “*Zohar* seemed best able to meet the challenges of a shattered Jewish world; its teachings acknowledged the disruption within both the divine and human realms and offered a means of response . . . through study, prayer, and social activism, the Safed mystics taught that human beings had the potential to perform *tikkun*—restoration and repair—by releasing divine sparks into the universe” (107).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ▶ How might you conceive of a disruption in the divine realm? How might such a disruption manifest itself in the human realm?
- ▶ Englander asks, “Can we adapt the methods of the *Zohar* Transformation to attract our own fellow Jews back into the fold?” (108). What is your answer to Englander’s question? What might those adaptations be?

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Englander writes that “adapting to new conditions while maintaining ancient traditions is part and parcel of the Jewish historical experience” (109). How have you, in Rabbi Natan’s conceptualization, “preserve[d] tradition by transforming it” (110)?

CHAPTER 8: *Sabbatianism: Convulsions and Creativity*

Rabbi Stanley M. Davids

KEY IDEA

According to Rabbi Davids, “the ongoing debate over which event or events played a significant role in the rise and growth of Sabbatianism is important for those who want to fully understand the nature of the convulsive disruption itself: how a charismatic leader both initiated the disruption and then precipitated its decline” (114–115).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ▶ Who was Shabbetai Zvi? Where and when was he born? What was his Jewish education?
- ▶ What historical conditions and events might have played a role in the rise and growth of Sabbatianism? In particular, what role might Lurianic Kabbalah have played in its rise?
- ▶ How did Sabbatianism spread? How were other figures, such as Nathan of Gaza, instrumental in its growth?
- ▶ Why do you think some Messianic movements succeed? What purposes do they serve psychologically, spirituality, and in other ways?

KEY IDEA

According to Davids, “the strange activities of Zvi along with the Lurianic Kabbalah taught by Nathan of Gaza paved the way for Jewish communities to transition ‘from mere factual reality to the transfigured reality of the heart.’ Elijah was said to have walked the streets of Aleppo. Reports were received of visions and miracles and pillars of fire . . . And elsewhere, the ten lost tribes, armed and ready, were said to be on the march” (119).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ▶ What was the appeal of Sabbatianism?
- ▶ Why did Sabbatianism not emerge as a religion apart from Judaism?
- ▶ Who were Jacob and Eva Frank? What role did they play in the end of Sabbatianism?

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Davids writes that “the contemporary post-Sabbatian world, the world of 2023 and beyond, still bears the impact of the convulsive and disruptive life, acts, and vision of the mystical Messiah and the prophet from Gaza” (127). Why do you think Messianic movements persist? What is appealing to you about these movements? What is repellent?

CHAPTER 9: *Jewish Thought in the North African Sephardic Diaspora: Continuity and Change*

Michal Ohana, PhD

KEY IDEA

Dr. Ohana writes, “After the Spanish expulsion in 1492, Jewish exiles sought refuge in the Ottoman Empire, Western Europe, and North Africa. The influx of Sephardic exiles ushered in a new wave of intellectual activity to the local Jewish community in North Africa. While previous studies have shown their contribution in the fields of halachah, poetry, and historiography, this essay seeks to point out that a new chapter began in the realm of Jewish thought as well” (131).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ▶ What role did Rabbinic literature play in the work of the exiles and their descendants in the North African Diaspora in the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries?
- ▶ According to Ohana, how did “Jewish thought produced in North Africa during the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth centuries differ . . . from the classic medieval pattern” (141)?

KEY IDEA

Dr. Ohana discusses the effects of place on Jewish Diasporic literature; that is, how the unique characteristics of a place—including its culture, aesthetics, and proclivities—inform and shape the literature created there. For instance, she writes that “the Jewish thought produced in North Africa during the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth centuries differs in some ways from the classic medieval pattern: there are no interpretations or translations of Greek or Muslim literature and no independent essays. Yet, the Sephardic descendants in North Africa continued to deal with medieval Jewish thought in their new homeland. They adopted the writings of medieval and contemporary commentators, philosophers, astrologers, and kabbalists and integrated them into their own works as they saw fit” (141–142).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ▶ In what ways do you think characteristics of North Africa in the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries affected Jewish literature created there?
- ▶ Dr. Ohana discusses the relationship between place and homiletics, in particular the Sephardic Sermon. What topics do you think Jewish communities living in North Africa in the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries might like addressed in their weekly Shabbat sermon?

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Think about a country or region where you have lived vis-a-vis Jewish literature and writing created there. How do you think characteristics of this country might have informed and shaped its Jewish literature? Consider these effects across many genres including philosophy, theology, homiletics, and fiction writing.

CHAPTER 10: *Haskalah in Berlin: Moses Mendelssohn, Immanuel Kant, and the Foundations of Reform Judaism*

Yoav Schaefer

KEY IDEA

Schaefer writes, “in the late eighteenth century, unlike in the premodern world, the beliefs and commitments on which Judaism was based were subjected to scientific and philosophical scrutiny and could no longer be simply taken for granted. From that point onward, Jewish thinkers sought to demonstrate Judaism’s compatibility with the principles of Newtonian science and the central tenets of the European Enlightenment, including individual liberty, freedom of expression, religious toleration, and a belief in the power of reason” (147).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ▶ In *Jerusalem*, Mendelssohn argued that Judaism was compatible with both natural theology and the demands of the secular state. Do you think this argument remains relevant today? Can you think of present-day corollaries—that is, examples concerned with demonstrating Judaism’s compatibility with principles or conditions in the contemporary world?
- ▶ According to Schaefer, how did Kant’s philosophy deal “the final death blow to the rationalist tradition to which Mendelssohn was heir” (153)?
- ▶ What was the challenge that Kant’s philosophy posed to all revealed religions, including Judaism?

KEY IDEA

According to Schaefer, “beyond denying Judaism any substantive connection to his ideal of rational religion, Kant’s *Religion* portrayed Judaism as antithetical to the universalism and rationalism of a religion of reason altogether. . . . Kant defined Judaism in purely political and secular terms. In his words, ‘The Jewish faith, as originally established, was only a collection of merely statutory laws supporting a political state.’ This meant, Kant concluded, that Judaism was not truly a religion at all . . . Lacking entirely in ethical content, ‘Jewish theocracy’ was concerned exclusively with the imposition of purely civil laws upon the ‘slavish [Jewish] mind.’ Moreover, Kant argued that Judaism, given its this-worldly and political character, was antithetical to morality” (159).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ▶ Given Kant’s attitude towards Judaism and his excoriating description in *Religion*, what reasons does Schaefer offer as to why “Kant’s philosophy still has much to offer to Jews and Judaism today” (161)?
- ▶ Schaefer argues that “Jews do not have to accept the entirety of Kant’s conception of rational religion in order to see it as an ideal to be approximated” (162). Do you agree? On the one hand, thinkers have every right to change their positions and thinking on any matter. On the other hand, what are possible concerns with cherry-picking information from a philosopher’s corpus?

PERSONAL REFLECTION

If you were able to personally respond to Kant's writings about Judaism (let's say you meet for coffee), what questions would you ask him? What comments would you share with him? How do negative characterizations of Judaism or Jewishness make you feel? How might you respond to a description that describes Judaism as only law?

CHAPTER 11: *Breaking the Chain: The Radical Thought of Rabbi Samuel Holdheim*
Michael A. Meyer, PhD

KEY IDEA

Dr. Meyer writes, “Rabbi Samuel Holdheim disrupted the course of the Reform Movement in his time, fiercely dividing opinion among his colleagues because he told unpleasant truth, radically set individual choice against authoritative text, and raised the religious status of Jewish women. [T]oday his views find broad acceptance, even as they continue to stoke controversy” (175–176).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ▶ Name some of the ideas and changes Holdheim wished to initiate regarding Jewish practice and law.
- ▶ What does Holdheim’s approach to halachah in the diaspora reveal about his personal values/philosophy/history?
- ▶ In Holdheim’s view, where did religious authority lie within Judaism?
- ▶ Where do you see his influence in contemporary Reform Judaism?

KEY IDEA

Meyer writes that “Holdheim’s most frequent criticism of the traditional Judaism . . . pertained to the status of women. He called attention to a double sexual standard for the two sexes . . . arguing that ‘in Talmudic Judaism women occupy a religious position that is deeply subordinated beneath that of men. Only the altered religious consciousness of the present, set against that of the Talmud, has freed them from it . . . So long as our religious institutions rest on Talmudic principles, women will, with respect to religious practice, factually have to tolerate a lower status’” (172–173).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ▶ Describe Holdheim’s critique of the traditional wedding ceremony. Are there other life cycle events where these critiques changed our practice?
- ▶ What values informed the changes Holdheim proposed?
- ▶ What was Holdheim’s position on “outmarriages” and “mixed marriages” (173, 174)?

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Holdheim’s influence had a profound impact on Reform Judaism. What are your personal thoughts about these changes? What changes would you make to contemporary Judaism, and why would you make them? What do you feel is most essential about Judaism and why would you retain it?

CHAPTER 12: *Sephardism and Modernity: Jewish Communities in Flux*

Rabbi Marc D. Angel, PhD

KEY IDEA

Rabbi Dr. Angel writes that “it took a generation or two for Ashkenazim and Sephardim to begin to reconnect after centuries of separation during the long diasporic exile. Until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Ashkenazic world of Europe had little interaction with living Sephardim. And the Sephardic/pan-Sephardic world, concentrated, for the most part, in Muslim lands, lived in its own cultural bubble. The two communities developed along different historic lines; although sharing the same religion and peoplehood, they were, to a large extent, strangers to each other” (179).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ▶ Why do you think the Ashkenazim and Sephardim were “like strangers to each other” (179)?
- ▶ Angel describes one disruption of the Sephardic/pan-Sephardic world as confronting the Ashkenazim. What did this look like? What have been some of the outcomes of this confrontation?

KEY IDEA

Angel writes that “at present, the Sephardic/Ashkenazic rift is still evident, especially in Israel . . . [where] ‘ethnic’ politics is still a factor.” He asks, “Will these ethnic divisions continue indefinitely? What will the terms ‘Sephardic’ and ‘Ashkenazic’ mean one hundred years from now? How many Jews will be ‘pure-blooded’ Sephardim or Ashkenazim?” (192).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ▶ How does Angel address each of these questions?
- ▶ How would you assess Angel’s predictions for these and his additional “one hundred years from now” (192) queries?

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Angel writes that “the third disruption of the Sephardic/pan-Sephardic world is actually a disruption for all Jewry. It is a disruption—or rather a transformation—brought about by the coming together of Jews of all backgrounds, by intergroup marriage, by growing understanding and appreciation of the history and cultures of each of our diverse communities” (193). Do you agree with his assessment or do you envision a different future, disruption, or transformation?

CHAPTER 13: *The Pittsburgh Platform of 1885: The American Reform Rabbis' Declaration of Independence*

Rabbi Kari Tuling, PhD

KEY IDEA

Rabbi Dr. Tuling writes, “In 1885, a group of Reform rabbis met in Pittsburgh to create a statement of principles for the emergent American Reform Movement. Only eight points long, this document represented a key moment of disruption; Isaac Mayer Wise later referred to it as a ‘declaration of independence’” (197).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ▶ In what ways might the 1885 Platform represent, as Isaac Mayer Wise assesses, a “declaration of independence” for the emergent American Reform Movement?
- ▶ What do you think the drafters of the 1885 Platform were attempting to convey about American Reform Judaism’s relationship to Judaism’s past, its present, and its vision for Judaism’s future?

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Did any ideas, beliefs, or statements in the eight points of the 1885 Platform surprise you? If yes, why? Did you find any challenging or potentially problematic? Do you think contemporary American Reform and Progressive Judaism is “genuinely willing to wrestle with the larger questions of meaning and practice in the context of emerging scientific and philosophical ideas” (208)—such as artificial intelligence or genetic engineering—with the same commitment as the Platform writers?

CHAPTER 14: Power, Pragmatism, and Peoplehood: Mordecai Kaplan's Radical American Judaism

Rabbi Michael Marmor, PhD

KEY IDEA

Rabbi Dr. Marmor writes that “no person has had a more consequential impact on American Judaism than Mordecai Kaplan (1881–1983). His views on God, denominations, peoplehood, election, community, creativity, Zionism, education, prayer, and more have made a profound impression on the American Jewish experience. In his foundational 1934 work *Judaism as a Civilization*, he described and critiqued the main versions of Judaism as he saw them—Reform, Conservative, and Neo-Orthodox—and set out the need for a radically new approach to being a modern American Jew” (211).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ▶ Describe Kaplan’s conception of God.
- ▶ According to Marmor, “rather than restrict Judaism within the unsuitable confines of the term ‘religion,’ Kaplan preferred the expansive notion of civilization” (221). How did Kaplan define the notion of civilization? How was the notion of Jewish civilization conceptually different from that of religion? How might these differences manifest in practice?
- ▶ Marmor writes that “many scholars think the word ‘peoplehood’ was coined by Kaplan. In any case, it was he who brought it into parlance and gave it currency” (222). Does your connection to Judaism change when considered through the lens of Kaplan’s definition of peoplehood?

KEY IDEA

According to Marmor, “Kaplan knew viscerally that the life he imagined for the generation of his grandchildren would be modern and enlightened, American and democratic, and thoroughly Jewish. He applied his formidable analytical capacities to thinking through what would have to change in order for this result to become possible. His radical conclusion was that a reconstruction of Jewish life was called for, one in which the metaphysical basis of the old paradigm was replaced with new ideas, new liturgies, new theologies” (219).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ▶ What does modernity mean to Kaplan? What did Kaplan consider to be three essential characteristics of modern thought?
- ▶ Why did Kaplan reject the doctrine of election? What are your thoughts on the doctrine of election?
- ▶ What were some of the changes Kaplan recommended in Jewish practice? Where do you see these changes today? Do any of them surprise you?

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Marmor writes that Kaplan's "entire project can be seen as a response to [the] challenge: how to articulate a vision for Jewish life in line with the insights and dictates of modernity, that is, how to ride its wave and not be drowned by it" (213). How do you think American Judaism has responded to this challenge? What corrections or changes do you think might be necessary in order for it to stay on top of the wave?

CHAPTER 15: *The Breakup: Rethinking American Jewish Literary History*

Adam Rovner, PhD

KEY IDEA

Dr. Rovner contends that “the mass circulation of Jewish fiction has been overlooked by mainstream Jewish literary historiography” and “offers a broader conception of the historical processes of Jewish fiction’s dissemination as a way to consider what has been both included in and excluded from an always evolving American Jewish self-understanding” (230).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ▶ What is “better fiction”? How does Rovner define it as a literary category?
- ▶ How does “better fiction disrupt the idea of what sort of fiction matters and influences readers” (231)?
- ▶ How does Rovner use Book-of-the-Month Club selections and readership demographics to “shine light on the erasure of a set of texts and their attendant reformist values” (240)? Why does this reframing matter?
- ▶ Might Rovner’s methodological approach be creating a disruption in literary analysis? What are the implications of his analysis? How might they disrupt? Discuss how you think he is correct or missing the mark in his analysis and disruption.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

What works of Jewish fiction have had an impact on you and your Jewish identity? What shifting trends can you identify in Jewish works of fiction today compared to works from ten, twenty, thirty, and so forth, years ago? What does this say about shifting Jewish identity?

CHAPTER 16: *Liturgy as an Instrument of Intellectual Change: Between Comfort and Disruption*

Rabbi Sonja K. Pilz, PhD

KEY IDEA

In this chapter, Rabbi Dr. Pilz probes the relationship between comfort and disruption in Jewish liturgy. After acknowledging that “many regular pray-ers come to synagogue looking for a home, a sense of belonging, comfort, to be seen . . . the recurring liturgies of almost any Jewish service bring about, by their very nature, a sense of continuity and tradition . . . By definition, Jewish liturgy thus creates tradition through repetition and similarity; intellectual disruption is not part of the standard Jewish liturgical recipe.” She explores, “to what degree can—or should—liturgy be disruptive” (254).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ▶ Pilz writes that “we, very much still living in the aftermath of the Holocaust and shaped by the traumas of increasing environmental, social, and financial instability, have not created liturgies that reflect those very cornerstones of life in the twenty-first century” (254). Do you agree or disagree with this statement? What would you identify as the “very cornerstones of life in the twenty-first century”? If creating a new liturgy, who gets to decide?
- ▶ Pilz argues that the Reform Movement’s liturgical books lack “a vision of what the Reform community might—and maybe should—become, or what else it could be at this moment in time and in the future” (252). Do you think that the Reform Movement’s liturgical books lack such a vision? More fundamentally, do you think liturgical books should incorporate such an aspirational, future-focused vision? Moreover, codifying such a vision raises questions of authority (and authorial intent)—that is, who and how would it be decided who shapes this vision?
- ▶ Pilz addresses her question, “To what degree can—or should—liturgy be disruptive,” by suggesting a model for the next liturgical process that includes “select[ing] a core group of four or five rabbis and cantors trained in theological thought not only to define the core elements of a Jewish theology reflecting the then-current state of the Movement, but also to develop a vision for the desired theological identity of the Movement” (255–256). What do you think of this suggestion? What opportunities, as well as challenges, could you identify with such a model? Do you think such a model is feasible or desirable? This suggestion, like others in this chapter, also raises questions of authority. How should these be addressed?

PERSONAL REFLECTION

- ▶ You are in charge of creating the next Reform prayer book. Create a vision for the book. What are your guiding lights (ethical, aesthetic, and spiritual) for the book. Would your book have an aspirational focus akin to what Pilz suggests

(i.e., “a vision of what the Reform community might—and maybe should—become . . .”) or otherwise? How would you address questions of authority and authorial intent? Who would be the deciders?

- ▶ If and when you engage in prayer, what media (e.g., sacred or other books, music, visual media, scent) might you use? How do they augment your prayer experience? What other benefits do they confer? Do you ever experience barriers to their use?

CHAPTER 17: Reform Jewry Sings a New Song: Disruptions and Innovations

Cantor Evan Kent, DMA

KEY IDEA

Cantor Dr. Kent identifies and details three “disruptions that have changed (and continue to change) the sound of liturgical music in the Reform synagogue:

1. The popularity of Jewish summer camp and the emotional, social, and cultural impact it had on generations of Jewish adolescents.
2. The development of a Jewish folk-rock-pop style, with Debbie Friedman as the leader of this movement.
3. Demographic changes in the Reform Jewish community” (262).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ▶ According to Kent, how has each of these developments—the popularity of Jewish summer camp, Jewish folk-rock-pop style, and demographic changes in the Reform Jewish community—disrupted Reform liturgical music?
- ▶ Have you personally experienced any of these disruptions? If so, how have any such experiences shaped your Jewish engagement and practice?
- ▶ What disruptions and innovations have you witnessed in liturgical music in your worship community(ies)? What might those that were adopted have in common with another? What about those that did not stick and were dropped; did they have anything (e.g., characteristics, dynamics, rollout) in common?

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Have you seen ways that contemporary popular music has influenced Jewish liturgical music? If yes, please describe the influence and effect. How did you respond? Would you say the influence and change was disruptive? If yes, how so?

CHAPTER 18: *The Gender Revolution: Disruptions of Jewish Feminism*

Rabbi Elyse Goldstein

KEY IDEA

According to Rabbi Goldstein, “the feminist disruption in the Jewish world in every category—ritual, prayer garments, language, worship, leadership, theology—caused an awakening of awareness to gender and its politics that now continues to animate Jewish life, scholarship, thought, prayer, and practice. Simply put, once we began questioning the role of being female in the way we envision Judaism, the question of any and all gender-specific roles, assumptions, expectations, definitions, and significance in what a Jew practices, how a Jew prays, and what a Jew wears or looks like would have to follow” (293).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ▶ Goldstein writes that “the scope of feminist disruptions within Judaism was very broad” (281). How does she describe the effects of disruption in the areas listed below? What changes have resulted in:
 - Rabbinic authority;
 - Theology;
 - God-language;
 - Ritual?
- ▶ Goldstein identifies disruptions catalyzed by first- and second-stage feminism. What changes did each stage provoke? Do you view these as two distinct disruptions or waves of the just one disruption? Could the second have happened without the first?
- ▶ Goldstein writes that third-stage Jewish feminism is in its nascency. What might be some changes and innovations that will result from this stage?

PERSONAL REFLECTION

While reading the chapter, did you identify changes and innovations provoked by disruptions that have been especially meaningful for you? Are there additional changes in any of the areas identified by Goldstein (e.g., theology, ritual, leadership) that have not yet happened that you would like to see?

CHAPTER 19: *Moving Beyond Post-Holocaust Theology: Critical Theory as a New Paradigm*

Rabbi Jason Rodich

KEY IDEA

Rabbi Rodich argues that “Reform Judaism needs to once again lead a reform of Judaism” and needs “ritual and religious practices that are in line with who we actually are today . . .” (302). He suggests that “critical theory, a mode of social inquiry that aims to critique society and expand human liberation, might serve as an important framework for Jewish theology . . . as a spiritual resource and philosophical approach in place of theology” (295 and 300).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ▶ Rodich argues that theologies formed after the Holocaust are not working for Reform Jews today. What are some of the reasons he provides? Do you agree with his assessment or his proposed remedies?
- ▶ What are some changes you have seen or would like to see in “ritual and religious practices that are in line with who we actually are today . . .” (302)?
- ▶ In what ways do you think critical theory could become a sacred practice? What might be possible challenges to this approach? What are possible benefits?

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Rodich’s observation, “it is not clear to me to what one turns in our Reform liturgy to make sense of, for example, the rise of fascism, endless gun violence, or the climate crisis if one does not actually believe in the God described there” (297–298), raises several questions, including those about our conceptions and depictions of God and our expectations of the Divine and prayer. How much does it matter to you how the Divine is depicted across our liturgy? Must you “believe in the God described there” (298) to have a meaningful prayer practice? What expectations do you have for your prayer? For instance, does it help you to make sense of the world—the good and the bad? Might it help in other ways?

CHAPTER 20: *Holocaust Testimony: Listening, Humanizing, and Sacralizing*

Stephen D. Smith, PhD

KEY IDEA

Dr. Smith writes that “testimony will continue to have impact within the unfolding contemporary context if we allow it to do so. The trajectory of Holocaust memory will be carried through the chain of witness, in which the testimonial narrative will cease to grow, but its effects will continue to be felt if the entire corpus moves from object to subject when the last surviving victim dies. This is a powerful disruption in the Jewish journey through history whose consequences cannot yet be understood—even as we struggle to rehumanize the dehumanized” (316).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ▶ Describe Smith’s concept of witnesses as “subjects to *encounter*” (312). How does he conceptualize testimony as a type of relationship? How does he apply Buber’s and Jung’s thinking to support rethinking testimony as a relationship?
- ▶ Smith describes testimony in several ways, including as a polemic, a narrative form that “provides meaning in addition to facts” (310), and a new genre of Jewish literature. Describe and discuss how Holocaust testimony functions in each of these forms.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Smith writes that “testimony will continue to have impact within the unfolding contemporary context if we allow it to do so” (316). What are some ways that you have seen testimony have impact? In what other ways do you think Holocaust testimony could “be carried through the chain of witness” (316)?

CHAPTER 21: *Inclusive Judaism: A Vision for the Future*

Rabbi Nora Feinstein

KEY IDEA

Rabbi Feinstein writes that “grappling with the process by which tradition absorbs or resists change limns our sacred texts and subsequent commentaries. Indeed, the first post-prophetic teaching of the Rabbis in *Pirkei Avot* comes from the Sages of the Great Assembly: ‘Be deliberate in judgment; develop many students; and make a fence for the Torah’ (1:1). I want to suggest that these three teachings in fact provide guiding principles for imagining an inclusive Judaism moving forward” (323).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ▶ Describe how, according to Feinstein, each of the three teachings from *Avot* (1:1) “provide guiding principles for imagining an inclusive Judaism moving forward.”
- ▶ How can, as Feinstein writes, “recognizing those people who have been disregarded, itself a disruption to extant norms and narratives, provides us with the opportunity to strategize about inclusion” (320)?
- ▶ Would you add any areas, topics, or questions to discussions about creating an inclusive Judaism that Feinstein did not include in her considerations?
- ▶ The editors of this book readily acknowledge that significant events and moments of disruption were not included in this book. In contrast, this concluding chapter argues for a radically inclusive Judaism. What events would you include that were not included? Explain why you would include these. How might a theology of inclusion incorporate these events?

PERSONAL REFLECTION

What would a truly inclusive Judaism look like to you? Whose voices and experiences do you think have been excluded? How would you include and incorporate them into the narrative? What would be your guiding principles for imagining an inclusive Judaism?