Editors’ Introduction: Why Science Matters to Judaism

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When Israel Jacobson, in Jacob Marcus’s felicitous phrase,¹ became “the founder of Reform Judaism” by creating the first Reform temple in 1810, he did so because he sought to view his ancestral faith through principles of enlightenment and reason. That is to say, Jacobson, and his many German Reform successors, struggled to reconceive Judaism in light of the highest conceptions of truth that their contemporary society had to teach. These labors were well received, and, in Reform Judaism’s two-centuries history, resulted in a stream within the Jewish tradition that has grown, so that today it claims to be the largest Jewish denomination in the United States.

The Reform Movement may be best known for its rejection of what came to be known as Orthodoxy by its outward manifestations of rejection of halachah. After all, the significant changes in ritual practice wrought by the movement are the most visible manifestations of the movement. The historical rejection of head coverings, of kashrut, alterations in the liturgy, the introduction of organ music—these are what one saw (or heard) when observing Reform worship.

But undergirding this public behavior was a commitment to the rationalizing and universalizing thinking that, very roughly speaking, began permeating the intellectual atmosphere of the Jews of western Europe in the early decades of the nineteenth century. through what came to be known as the Wissenschaft des Judentums, was, inter alia, the search for truth, in this case largely the

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search for historical truth. The work of such historians as Leopold Zunz, Abraham Geiger, and Heinrich Graetz was first and foremost the application of ideas and techniques of historical scholarship that passionately sought to learn what was true of Jewish history, its people, its ideas, and its literature.

Further, out of that context came one way Reform Judaism conceived halachah: that halachah formed a protective husk surrounding the kernel of a profound idea. This husk protected the kernel, that is, a truth, throughout the Jews’ trials and tribulations throughout their history. Now, in modern times, the husk could be cast away, revealing the kernel, the truth of the matter, which can now be unpacked, unfettered by its formerly necessary protective shell. Here, too, we see the notion that the Reform Jewish program contains commitment to the truth.

In the European experience, perhaps the clearest example of the Jewish quest for the truth, here quite clearly philosophical truth, may be seen from the very title of Hermann Cohen’s last work, Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen Judentums (Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism) (1919). This great work of Jewish philosophy, the culmination of Cohen’s literary career, refracts Judaism through the lens of Cohen’s own neo-Kantian thought and seeks to reveal Judaism as the icon of reason par excellence. The result is a highly philosophical Judaism, and perhaps the greatest statement of the method and meaning of Liberal Judaism ever put to paper.

In the United States, four documents, platforms written in a period of over a century, seeking to explicate principles of Reform Judaism, also demonstrate that identical commitment to truth. Note as we briefly examine these documents that their points of consideration are incomplete. By its nature, a platform can only hint at the ideas represented; it cannot give details. Yet, as we focus on specific aspects of these documents, we will see an interesting shift when we arrive at the last of them.

The first plank of the first platform, the Pittsburgh Platform (1885) states: “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.” It is clear that the authors wish to express their belief in the importance of “scientific researches” that explicate the “primitive ideas”
expressed in the Bible. Science, the plank suggests, will be the tool for the maturing of concepts found in embryonic form in the Bible. This idea is crystallized in the sixth plank, where it says: “We recognize in Judaism a progressive religion, ever striving to be in accord with the postulates of reason.” Obviously, this brief statement does not articulate what “reason” means. Nevertheless, it can be inferred that “reason” refers to thinking outside of the Jewish tradition that both judges the Jewish tradition and is an epistemological tool that aids in the understanding of Judaism. These tools enable Judaism to be “progressive.”

The Columbus Platform (1937) similarly states: “Reform Judaism recognizes the principle of progressive development in religion and consciously applies this principle to spiritual as well as to cultural and social life. Judaism welcomes all truth, whether written in the pages of scripture or deciphered from the records of nature. The new discoveries of science, while replacing the older scientific views underlying our sacred literature, do not conflict with the essential spirit of religion as manifested in the consecration of man’s will, heart and mind to the service of God and of humanity.” The main idea here is that the progressive (note that word again) nature of Judaism develops through its history. What is the tool that aids that development? “The new discoveries of science,” that is to say, the alterations in our view of the world that Jews receive from scientific research. Again, Judaism judges itself and progresses by the truths put forth by universal culture, whatever that means, and however it occurs.

The 1976 Centenary Perspective, written in commemoration of the centenary of Hebrew Union College and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, says: “It now seems self-evident to most Jews [beyond the Reform Jewish community]: that our tradition should interact with modern culture; that its forms ought to reflect a contemporary esthetic; that its scholarship needs to be conducted by modern, critical methods; and that change has been and must continue to be a fundamental reality in Jewish life.” This somewhat triumphalistic statement makes the point that Reform Judaism has taught the Jewish world the importance of interacting with modern culture (whenever “modernity” is taking place). And, presumably, because cultures change, Judaism, continually interacting with culture, will be compelled to reevaluate its intellectual assumptions over and over again. This claim is seen to be the case
in the past; we have no reason to assume that it will change in the future.

But a curious thing happens when one views the last of these platforms, the Pittsburgh Platform of 1999. The notion of the necessity of interaction between Judaism and culture is nowhere to be seen. Now, analysis of a worldview based on the absence of an idea is fraught with danger. Perhaps the authors took what we have been discussing here until now for granted. Yet a careful reading of this latest platform reveals no interest at all in philosophical concerns. True, it speaks of God, but tends toward describing experience of God rather than thought about God.7 It speaks, too, of Torah, and mentions the notion of progressive revelation. “We cherish the truths revealed in Torah, God’s ongoing revelation to our people and the record of our people’s ongoing relationship with God.”8 However, missing throughout the totality of the platform is the concern for what might be called the encounter of Judaism with wider culture that we have seen manifest in its three earlier sisters. Rather, the authors appear to be concerned with introducing a kind of piety that focuses on experience of God and performance of mitzvot at the expense of the intellectual side of the tradition. It would be too much to claim that this last platform reveals an anti-intellectual bias, but its contours clearly do not embrace the intellectual in the proclivities of its predecessors.

This absence may reflect a turn within Reform Judaism away from those deeper intellectual concerns that historically have been part of the Reform self-image and method since its inception in 1810. And, if so, this issue of the CCAR Journal may be seen as a call to return to that intellectual attitude. (Note that this “return” is not necessarily a return to any specific view or method; rather, it is an acknowledgment of the assumption that Judaism has always interacted and grown, that is, benefited, in the interaction with external culture, and as such ought to continue.)

Norbert Samuelson has been engaged in the issue of the interaction of Judaism and science for several decades.9 He has argued that Judaism must pay attention to contemporary science because today science is the arbiter of truth. He goes even further to claim that Judaism will not be able to survive the twenty-first century unless it rethink itself in light of the truths of science. Not only should Jews become informed about science, they must realize that their beliefs (as expressed, for example, in the liturgy) are based
on outdated philosophy and science that must be rethought. (We mention liturgy in particular because it is the context where Jews encounter Jewish theology in their daily life.) Samuelson’s recent book, *Jewish Faith and Modern Science: On the Death and Rebirth of Jewish Philosophy* (2009), explores the issues he thinks are important for Jewish philosophers to consider if Judaism is to reflect the highest intellectual perceptions possible.

In this issue of the *CCAR Journal*, Samuelson has contributed a trigger piece that reflects much of his thinking on this matter found in *Jewish Faith and Modern Science* and several other books. The opening essay is followed by two articles that explicitly respond to Samuelson. The rest of the essays were inspired by Samuelson’s lead piece or reflect on the issues that he has outlined in his books. What make the essays in this issue unique is that they come from a diverse audience of academics, rabbis, scientists, and educators. In addition, the contributors identify themselves with diverse streams of contemporary Judaism: Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Orthodox, indicating that the contemporary Jewish need to engage the sciences is not limited to just one branch of Judaism. All Jews today, regardless of affiliation, need to become familiar with contemporary science and become prepared to rethink the Jewish tradition accordingly. A Judaism that is based on outmoded or even false pictures of the universe will not be able to survive.

About a third of the essays in this issue are written by Jewish academics who hold positions in American universities. Whether the positions are located in departments of Religious Studies, programs of Jewish Studies, or Divinity Schools, Judaica scholars today can access the dialogue of science and religion, a particular academic discourse that has been in existence for about four decades. And yet, the field of Jewish Studies has hardly made an effort to become familiar with the discourse on science and religion. In part, this lack of interest reflects the (somewhat accurate) perception that the dialogue of science and religion is particularly Christian because Christianity is a religion that focuses on belief (*doxa*) rather than practice (*praxis*). By contrast, so many tend to think, Judaism is a way of life in which beliefs are secondary in importance to actions. This perception is historically mistaken and theologically inaccurate: Historically Jews have always engaged in thinking as is evident from the creative legacy of Jewish philosophers and theologians especially during the Middle Ages in Spain.
and Italy and during the modern period in Germany; and theologically the command to reflect on the meaning of God’s revelation is at the heart of biblical religion, and Rabbinic Judaism pondered in great depth how to balance reflection (iyun) and action (maaseh). This proper balance between the theoretical and the practical was itself a topic that was discussed at some length by medieval Jewish philosophers.

Medieval Jewish philosophers, the most famous of whom is Moses Maimonides (d. 1204), illustrate the balance between theoria and praxis as much as they illustrate the conviction that Judaism must take note of contemporary science. Rethinking Judaism in light of the science of the day is precisely what Jewish philosophers from Rav Saadia Gaon (d. 940) to Rabbi Hasdai Crescas (d. 1410) have done, showing Jews how science is an integral part of Judaism. In fact, science (or “natural philosophy” as it was called in the Middle Ages) was understood to be the inner meaning of the divinely revealed tradition. To be good Jews as far as Maimonides and other Jewish Aristotelians were concerned required the knowledge of science, especially physics and metaphysics. This thinking resulted in a scientifically informed theology.

For various reasons alluded to in Samuelson’s essay, the rethinking of Judaism in light of the natural sciences did not take place in the modern period, even though in the early modern period a small number of Jews did become familiar with and immersed in the study of science. In the nineteenth century, when Jews underwent the process of emancipation and social integration, they separated interest in science from Jewish religious commitment, departing from the medieval heritage. Jews who were now able to enter European universities could become famous scientists, but very few of them cared about rethinking the Jewish tradition in light of the science that they generated. During the nineteenth century Jews excelled in the natural sciences and they were even the leaders and founders of several scientific disciplines (e.g., chemistry, microbiology, and medical anthropology). Yet the commitment to science often came at the expense of commitment to traditional Judaism, and thus the growing separation between Judaism and science became common in the modern period to the detriment of Judaism. To the extent that Judaism was impacted by science, it was the social sciences, especially history, that posed the most serious challenge requiring Jewish intellectuals to respond. All
forms of Liberal/Progressive Judaism have manifested the impact of academic study of history on their interpretation of Judaism. By contrast, the natural sciences were considered either irrelevant to Judaism or pertained only to the material level that Judaism transcends.

The dissociation of Judaism and science thus impacted both modern Jewish theology as well as modern academic study of Judaism (i.e., Jewish Studies), and not for the best. This issue of the CCAR Journal suggests ways in which the rethinking of Judaism in light of the sciences could begin to take place and revive Jewish philosophy, theology, and ethics. The sciences of physics, biology, psychology, neuroscience, anthropology, and ecology, to list just a few, are all relevant to Judaism if we want Judaism to be believable. In agreement with Samuelson’s call, this issue argues that it behooves all Jews today to become familiar with these sciences and to think through their implications for Judaism both as a way of life and as a body of truths. There are many ways to undertake this rethinking, and thus these reflections will be undertaken on many levels. Whether one rethinks Judaism in one’s own private study, in the classroom, on the pulpit, in oral exchanges, or in academic writing, one simply cannot remain oblivious to what contemporary science has to say about the universe and about human beings.

Two points emerge from this issue’s intriguing essays: (a) the centrality of process philosophy/theology for the rethinking of Judaism and (b) the degree to which the dialogue between Judaism and science can and should be informed by a similar dialogue that takes place among Christians. The two points, of course, are related. The process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead was adopted by Christian theologians such as John B. Cobb and David Ray Griffin in their rethinking of Christianity, resulting in very innovative recasting of traditional beliefs. Indeed dialogue of religion and science has been most robust among Christian thinkers and the discourse has remained largely Christian; very few Jews take part in it. It is quite telling that several of the contributors to this issue were trained in Christian seminaries, universities, and Divinity Schools, and that they actively engage in interfaith work. It is our belief that a closer interaction between Jewish and Christian theologians can only strengthen contemporary Judaism, by introducing novel ways of thinking and framing traditional theological and philosophical problems.
However, the Jewish engagement with contemporary science is not only unidirectional, when science compels Judaism to reinterpret itself. The reverse can also happen when Judaism’s insights can inform how the business of science is conducted, how science reflects about its own procedures, and how language is employed in the theory and practice of science. Between Judaism and science there could be a genuine dialogue, but this dialogue will not take place unless Jews (among whom there are many practicing scientists) wish to effect such dialogue rather than keep the two conveniently apart. The participants in this issue hold that the dialogue between Judaism and science is beneficial for the future of Judaism and that it can take place theoretically and practically, even though the task is challenging.

Reform Rabbis, the primary audience of the CCAR Journal, could be at the forefront of the dialogue because of the historic commitment of Reform Judaism to reason. Reform rabbis and those sympathetic to the élan of Reform Judaism should find the contents of this issue of great interest. We have seen that this concern is an ongoing one in the history of the intellectual leadership of the movement, even if, lately, that interest seems to have diminished. We hope that these articles will spur a renewed concern in that interest and its purpose. To those wishing to enter the field of science and religion and engage in greater depth in the discourse on Judaism and science, we append a select bibliography to help direct one’s entry into this conversation. If this issue succeeds in its goal, even modestly, then perhaps we can see a return within our own Reform tradition to that particular search for meaning.

Notes

4. Ibid.

7. “We regard with reverence all of God’s creation and recognize our human responsibility for its preservation and protection. We encounter God’s presence in moments of awe and wonder, in acts of justice and compassion, in loving relationships and in the experiences of everyday life.” http://ccarnet.org/Articles/index.cfm?id=44&pge_prg_id=4687&pge_id=1656.


