

## **Emil Hirsch and Kaufman Kohler: A Comparison**

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Kaufman Kohler and Emil G. Hirsch helped shape the Reform movement in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For decades, as Michael Meyer points out, “their thinking, expressed especially in sermons, articles and lectures, was reflected with minor variations by lesser lights in pulpits throughout the United States.”<sup>1</sup> Although their thinking converges on many questions, they differ on several important issues, including the role of God, the meaning of revelation, and significance of Jewish tradition. Their similarities and differences resemble, in several respects, the theological agreements and disagreements between mid-nineteenth-century German Reformers Abraham Geiger and Samuel Holdheim. Kohler, like Geiger, emphasized the historical continuity between the Judaism of the past and reforms in the present, whereas Hirsch, like Holdheim, emphasized the sharp break between the Judaism of the past and, in a phrase he occasionally used, the “Reformed Judaism” of the present.<sup>2</sup> This essay will examine their thinking on four central issues of Jewish theology: the role and activity God, revelation, Jewish chosenness, and the place of traditional Jewish practices in Reform.

Kohler understood God as rooted in the natural world and as the source of the moral order that inheres in it. He did not argue, as some of the twentieth century religious naturalists did, that moral values were derived from the divinely-constructed natural

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 270-271.

<sup>2</sup> See Meyer, *Response to Modernity*, 275.

order. Rather, he contended that the two were of one piece, writing, “Our entire modern mode of thinking demands the complete recognition of the empire of law throughout the universe, manifesting the all-permeating will of God. The whole cosmic order is one miracle.”<sup>3</sup> Knowledge of God led human beings to proper behavior, and this behavior testified to God’s reality. In discussing God, Kohler used rabbinical imagery, such as God as law-giver, and biblical concepts, such as *yirath elohim* “fear of God.” Yet he constantly sought to provide new understanding of these image and concepts consistent reason and ethical monotheism. God the lawgiver, for example, is source of the eternal moral law, and fear of God is an incentive for moral behavior.<sup>4</sup> Kohler’s reflections on God are also permeated by history, as he frequently seeks to catalogue the views of rabbis and scholars, seeking to work out, as he puts it, “the entire content of the Jewish faith from a modern viewpoint, which must include historical, critical, and psychological research, as well as the study of comparative religion.”<sup>5</sup> The scholarship provides the basis and rationale for the necessary reinterpretation. As he writes, “If Judaism is to retain its prominent position among the powers of thought, and to be clearly understood by the modern world, it must again reshapes its religious truths in harmony with the dominant ideas of the age.”<sup>6</sup> Kohler’s use of the traditional God language and imagery is not surprising, since he sought in his scholarship to determine their varied meanings over time and to draw from the philosophies of the modern world in understanding them anew.

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<sup>3</sup> Kaufmann Kohler, “Miracles,” in Gunther Plaut, ed., *The Growth of Reform Judaism* (New York: World Union for Progressive Judaism, 1965), 221.

<sup>4</sup> See Kaufmann Kohler, *Jewish Theology: Systematically and Historically Considered* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1968 edition), 21.

<sup>5</sup> Kohler, *Jewish Theology*, 27.

<sup>6</sup> Kohler, *Jewish Theology*, 27.

Using the traditional language signaled both his self-conscious continuity with the Jewish past and his understanding of the task of the Jewish theologian.

Hirsch did not write or preach about God as much as did Kohler. What he did say suggests that he had a naturalist view of God similar to that Mordecai Kaplan. Hirsch frequently quoted the English writer and literary critic Matthew Arnold, who saw God as “that power, not ourselves, which makes for righteousness.”<sup>7</sup> Like Kaplan, Hirsch saw God as an impersonal force, and he focused not on describing the nature and activity of God, but on urging just human behavior as a response to God’s demands. This emphasis is evident in an address he gave before the Central Conference of American Rabbis in 1895, where said, “No Jew has the right to accept or reject Judaism. It is a call, a duty that comes to him with the accident of birth from a Jewish mother—or let me rather say, it is a providential appointment.”<sup>8</sup> Just behavior was the primary way for Jews to heed their “providential appointment.” For Hirsch, what one believed about God was secondary to one’s actions.

Hirsch’s and Kohler differing evaluations of the significance of a proper conception of God is illustrated in their contrasting attitudes toward Felix Adler. Adler, the son of prominent Reform rabbi Samuel Adler, trained for the rabbinate, but abandoned Judaism in order to create a universalist, non-sectarian group that emphasized morality and ethics. Calling his group “Ethical Culture,” Adler criticized Reform Judaism for maintaining its

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<sup>7</sup> See Meyer, *Response to Modernity*, 275; see also Bernard Martin, “The Religious Philosophy of Emil G. Hirsch,” *American Jewish Archives* Vol. 4, No. 2 (1952), 73.

<sup>8</sup> Emil G. Hirsch, “The Philosophy of the Reform Movement in American Judaism,” *CCARY*, Vol. 6, (1895), 103.

theism and sense of Jewish particularity, arguing that it did not meet the needs and insights of the modern era. Adler used many of the Reformers' arguments against them, arguing, for example, that if religion progresses, then the Reformers could not claim that their understanding of God was the highest conception, and that progress in this era demanded abandoning particular religious commitments for a universal moral fellowship.<sup>9</sup>

Kohler denounced Adler in strong language, describing him as one who abandoned God and belief in immortality and proclaimed himself “moral governor of human society *in place of the great King of the world.*”<sup>10</sup> In 1878, Kohler refused to permit Felix Adler to speak at his synagogue, Temple Sinai of Chicago, when a group of young men associated with the synagogue invited him to deliver an address. In contrast, Emil Hirsch maintained a friendship with Adler, corresponding with him and emphasizing their shared beliefs. In one letter, he said, “I believe the gulf between your position and mine is neither wide nor deep.”<sup>11</sup> Hirsch lauded Adler's focus on ethics, and saw their differences in terms of what Reform Judaism permitted its adherents to believe. As Hirsch wrote, “We have found no cogent reason to abandon our fellowship within the historical synagogue on the plea that the ethical ambition is...cramped, or obscured, or limited by certain creedal postulates. These postulates are involved in the very warp and woof of the ethical conception of the universe and human life.” One gets the sense from these words that Hirsch may have

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<sup>9</sup> See Benny Kraut, *From Reform Judaism to Ethical Culture: The Religious Evolution of Felix Adler* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1979), 22.

<sup>10</sup> Kaufmann Kohler, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 22, 1978; quoted in Kraut, *From Reform Judaism to Ethical Culture*, 155.

<sup>11</sup> Emil G. Hirsch, Unpublished typescript of letter to Felix Adler, June 6, 1918; quoted in Kraut, *From Reform Judaism to Ethical Culture*, 225.

abandoned Reform Judaism if he saw its conception of God as hindering ethical progress and behavior. Even though Adler believed it did, he and Hirsch found commonality in seeing ethics as central to a proper conception of the universe.

Kohler and Hirsch both denied the belief that God revealed the written Torah and oral law to Moses at Mount Sinai. Both shared a belief in religious progress, agreeing with the language of the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform that “modern discoveries of scientific researches in the domains 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 man in miraculous narratives.”

Kohler, however, emphasized the “gradual evolution of the God idea,” writing that the “divine revelation in Israel was by no means a single act, but a process of development, and its various stages correspond to the degrees of culture of the people.”<sup>12</sup> What is gradually revealed through different forms in various ages is God’s unity and will.

Revelation is vouchsafed to Israel because the life of Israel illustrates the working out of God’s will. As he writes, “Judaism... beholds in the working out of the world’s salvation through Israel’s life and thought, simply the process of divine life working in human forms and channels, in full consonance with reason and history.”<sup>13</sup> Kohler seemed to equate revelation with spiritual evolution, the notion that human consciousness of God evolves over time through interactions with different peoples and contexts. Although the principle of gradual spiritual evolution recurs in Kohler’s writings, his approach to supernaturalism varies. As Joseph Blau has pointed out, Kohler, at times, sees divine

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<sup>12</sup> Kaufmann Kohler, “The Need for Higher Criticism,” in Plaut, ed., *The Growth of Reform Judaism*, 227; and Kohler, *Jewish Theology*, 36.

<sup>13</sup> Kaufmann Kohler, “The Spiritual Forces of Judaism,” *CCARY*, Vol. 4 (1894), 140.

revelation as “progressive,” forming the “great historical sequence in the history of Israel.” At other times, however, Kohler advocates an ahistorical view of revelation, arguing, for example, that “modern science...can pass no opinion as to whether or not the entire work of creation was accomplished by the free act of a Creator. Revelation alone can speak with unfaltering accents...”<sup>14</sup> Although viewing revelation as an unfolding phenomenon, Kohler seems not to have disavowed some point of supernatural origin.

Hirsch’s understanding of revelation was, characteristically, less nuanced and more forthright. He rejected the idea of a supernatural communication and opposed use of the phrase “divine revelation.” After Kohler read this paper containing a draft of the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform before the assembled rabbis who eventually passed a modified version of it, Hirsch objected to the appearance of the phrase “divine revelation” in the second paragraph of Kohler’s draft. He said, “I would not use the word, for it stands for an idea which I do not hold. I do not believe in revelation, if thereby is meant what is generally supposed to have occurred at Sinai.”<sup>15</sup> It was not only the idea of a supernatural giving of the Torah to Moses at Mount Sinai that led Hirsch to object to the phrase “divine revelation.” Hirsch also saw the word “revelation” as implying that Judaism had certain required beliefs about God—dogmas—and he argued that Judaism never has been a religion of dogmas. Judaism, he argued, is primarily about ethical behavior, not belief, and revelation carries with it the idea that certain beliefs are divinely ordained.

Furthermore, the idea of miraculous divine intervention in the world is a Christian one, he

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<sup>14</sup> See Joseph Blau, “Introduction,” in Kohler, *Jewish Theology*, xxx; Kohler, *Jewish Theology*, 36, 147.

<sup>15</sup> Emil Hirsch in “Proceedings of the Pittsburgh Rabbinical Conference,” reprinted in Walter Jacob, ed., *The Changing World of Reform Judaism: The Pittsburgh Platform in Retrospect* (Pittsburgh: Rodef Shalom Congregation, 1985), 109.

contended, whereas the mishnaic idea of *torah min ha-shamayim* is no more than an affirmation of religious humility, the idea “every truth comes from heaven,” which a pious individual evokes so as not to “claim all the credit for himself, but avow that it is God who made him find it.”<sup>16</sup> Whereas Hirsch objected to “divine revelation,” he did not reject the word “revelation.” He equated it with the prophetic spirit, the impulse for righteousness and justice inherent in every Jew. Like Kohler, he also had a notion of spiritual evolution, of a gradual growth and refinement in human understanding of God. As Bernard Martin points out, “Revelation, for Hirsch, is synonymous with reason. Its instrument is human genius. With the procession of the suns, there is progress in religious thought, for men of genius arise and discover new insights.”<sup>17</sup> Hirsch emphasized the human side of spiritual evolution, referring to God as ultimately unknowable but human action as the sign of divine knowledge. Kohler placed a greater emphasis on God-consciousness as the spiritual evolution, and, at times, assigned God a role in generating this consciousness.<sup>18</sup>

Both Kohler and Hirsch interpreted Jewish chosenness in terms of the mission of Israel. God chose the people of Israel to teach its superior conception of God and bear the message of ethical monotheism to the world. “The real purpose of the election and mission of Israel,” Kohler wrote, “was announced by the great prophet of the Exile when he called Israel the ‘servant of the Lord,’ ...in order that he may declare the praise of God among the peoples, and be a harbinger of light and a bond of union among the nations,

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<sup>16</sup> Emil G. Hirsch, “Is Revelation a Jewish Concept,” in Plaut, ed., *The Growth of Reform*, 206-207.

<sup>17</sup> Martin, *Religious Philosophy of Emil G. Hirsch*, 75.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Kaufmann Kohler, “The Spiritual Forces of Judaism,” CCARY Vol. 4/5 (1895), 140.

the witness of God, the proclaimer of his truth and righteousness throughout the world.”<sup>19</sup>

Although he said the Reformers had stood by this mission in the world, as other Jews clung to “Oriental garb and tribalism of the Ghetto,” he contended the mission of Israel was part of Judaism throughout its entire history.<sup>20</sup> The mission idea was not an accommodation to the modern world. It was part and parcel of Judaism whose opportunity for realization was enhanced by the enlightenment and emancipation of modernity.

Hirsch shared Kohler’s understanding of divine election as implying a Jewish mission to exemplify and teach the truths of ethical monotheism. Like Kohler, he saw the mission ideal as central to the Jewish understanding of God and of revelation as well. Unlike Kohler, however, he foresaw this mission ending in complete absorption of all peoples and religions, including Jews, into a universal humanity. Kohler envisioned a universal redemption, but he did not, like Hirsch, explicitly discuss the disappearance of Israel. Hirsch did, however, as evidenced in his conclusion to an address on the philosophy of Reform Judaism, where contemplating that time, when the “last minute of the twelfth hour shall have run its measured pace,” and “Israel will descend to sink his identity into the warmer life of a new-born all-embracing humanity.”<sup>21</sup> Hirsch saw Judaism as a means toward the achievement of this end of religious and national unity. The mission of Israel to work toward this time was that “which binds the latest future, the youngest present to the most distant past. It gives unity to Jewish literature, to Jewish history. It gives

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<sup>19</sup> Kohler, *Jewish Theology*, 324-325.

<sup>20</sup> Kohler, “The Spiritual Forces of Judaism,” 134.

<sup>21</sup> Hirsch, “The Philosophy of the Reform Movement,” 112.

direction to Jewish thought and Jewish idealism.”<sup>22</sup> For Hirsch, the Jewish ethical mission was the historical and religious essence of Judaism. It linked Jews to their past and future, and to God.

Although neither assigned divine authority to halacha, Hirsch and Kohler displayed varying attitudes toward Jewish ritual and traditional observances. Kohler’s approach to traditional practices changed during his lifetime. In the 1870s, for example, when he was rabbi of Temple Sinai of Chicago, he instituted the Sunday morning service, gradually abandoning the Sabbath morning service. By 1894, however, he was a severe critic of this practice, calling it a “patricide.” “It may crowd temple to overflowing, but it will never satisfy any but the intellectual aristocrat who lacks pious reverence for the past. It destroys or undermines the Sabbath, but fails to build up a Judaism loyal to ancient institutions.”<sup>23</sup> The Kohler of the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform and the Kohler of his several addresses before the CCAR in the 1890s express different attitudes toward Jewish tradition. The former, as we have seen, focused on the “God-idea” of Judaism and chose to “accept as binding only the moral laws and maintain only such ceremonies as elevate and sanctify our lives, but reject all such as are not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization.” The latter admonished other reformers who “while laying all the stress on prophetic ethics...overlooked the fact that without a positive religion, without fear of God and His law, and without a great aim and object of life as motive-power and incentive to righteousness, ethics is nothing but fine phraseology.”<sup>24</sup> Kohler acknowledged that the institutions of the Sabbath and the Jewish festivals were “pre-

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<sup>22</sup> Hirsch, “The Philosophy of the Reform Movement,” 106-107.

<sup>23</sup> Kaufmann Kohler, “Is Reform Judaism Destructive or Constructive,” *CCCARY* Vol. 3/4 (1894), 112.

<sup>24</sup> Kohler, “The Spiritual Forces of Judaism,” 142.

Mosaic” yet he called them “powerful fashioners and educators of Jewish home-life,” and he urged a renewed focus on the emotional side of Jewish practices rather than destructive logic of rational approaches to tradition.<sup>25</sup> Even while describing Judaism as primarily a means of instilling ethical norms, Kohler called for new forms and symbols to elevate home and public observances of the Sabbath and holidays.

Hirsch echoed Kohler’s call for new and meaningful forms and symbols, but he attached little importance to them. His opposition to halakhah was adamant. Biblical criticism, he argued, had proved that practices like circumcision and the dietary laws were “non-Jewish rites,” which, he argued, were used “to convey the essentially Jewish thought of sanctification and righteousness.”<sup>26</sup> Judaism was never focused on law, he contended, but “now, as in the prophetic, in the wisdom books of the Bible...as in the Talmud, in the Haggadah, it is morality and humanity” which characterized Jewish practice and self-understanding.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps in response to Kohler’s call for cultivating the emotional power of ritual, Hirsch conceded that “emotions have their functions in the economy of man individual or social, yet, Judaism must oppose whatever leads to mysticism. If the emotions supply us with the power that propels, reason still must guide...”<sup>28</sup> Hirsch feared that forms and symbols would distract Jews from their principle mission and prevent them from working with non-Jews on this mission. Like Samuel Holdeim, he saw Jews as entrusted with “the keepership of the best treasures of humanity,” and Jews’ ultimate responsibility was to learn, teach and proclaim the universalist message with

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<sup>25</sup> Kohler, “The Spiritual Forces of Judaism,” 139.

<sup>26</sup> Hirsch, “The Philosophy of the Reform Movement,” 104.

<sup>27</sup> Hirsch, “The Philosophy of the Reform Movement,” 104.

<sup>28</sup> Hirsch, “The Philosophy of the Reform Movement,” 105.

which God had entrusted them.<sup>29</sup> This message was to permeate every aspect of the Jew's life. "The distinction between sacred and secular is not Jewish," he argued.<sup>30</sup> The rabbi's goal is to bring Judaism's message to as many people as possible—Jews and non-Jews—so that they can work together and act on that message in their lives. Thus, more important than observing the Sabbath on its traditional day is proclaiming Judaism's message at a time when more people can listen and appreciate it.<sup>31</sup> Forms and symbols were necessary so that proper ideas could "bring their influence to bear upon the will and sentiments of men," yet they are only "crutches" in "weak moments of halting hesitation."<sup>32</sup> They are not obligations but reminders. According to Hirsch, the only obligation of the Jew is to remain a Jew, a custodian of the purest understanding of God, and exemplify that understanding by fulfilling one's historic destiny and working to bring about the messianic age of universal harmony.

Both Kohler and Hirsch influenced the theology and practices of the Reform movement during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. From his pulpit and array of civic work in Chicago, Hirsch stood at the forefront of Reform's embrace of social justice as a central tenet of the movement. As president of the Hebrew Union College from 1903 to 1921, Kohler oversaw the training of Reform rabbis and exerted influence through his books and articles. Given his institutional role within the movement, Kohler may have built a longer-lasting legacy. With his calls in the 1890s for greater emotionalism in ritual

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<sup>29</sup> Hirsch, "The Philosophy of the Reform Movement," 106.

<sup>30</sup> Hirsch, "The Philosophy of the Reform Movement," 109.

<sup>31</sup> See Hirsch, "The Philosophy of the Reform Movement," 107-109.

<sup>32</sup> Hirsch, "The Philosophy of the Reform Movement," 105.

and Sabbath and holiday observances, he also anticipated the direction the movement's rabbis and leading thinkers would take in the 1920s and 1930s.