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## **Progressive halakhah**

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Introduction

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## Introduction

Progressive *halakhah*\* is based on a scientific and historic approach to the Jewish tradition which leads modern scholars to affirm the developmental character of Scripture and rabbinic literature. Revelation is a divine-human encounter rather than the transmission of infallible law by God to human beings. Progressive *halakhah*, therefore, is founded on a non-fundamentalist reinterpretation of revelation. Critical investigation of the classic sources demonstrates diversity, flexibility, and creativity in Jewish law. Earlier studies reveal principles and criteria for determining the *mitzvot* for our time. Such criteria of Liberal *halakhah* will, among other things, 1) give priority to ethical dimensions in applying *mitzvot* to life, 2) view *kedushah* (holiness) as a rationale for evaluating commandments, and 3) provide some role to the individual conscience in determining *halakhic* choice.

Progressive *halakhah* has developed greatly during the last five decades. This has occurred in the United States, Europe and Israel. The impetus in this direction came as the American Reform movement moved from its more radical earlier positions.

The need for a new approach to *halakhah* had not been felt by the large pre-war Central European Liberal community. As that community had not participated in a sharp break with the Tradition, it did not need to discover new ways of returning to it. This meant that no clearly identifiable Reform or Liberal Jewish approach to *halakhah* was developed by that creative community. There was a strong interest in historical studies like those of Geiger and Frankel which set a theoretical foundation for *halakhic* changes, however, in the succeeding generations no practical Liberal *halakhah* developed.

\* The terms Progressive *halakhah*, Reform *halakhah*, and Liberal *halakhah* are used interchangeably throughout this book.



Matters were different in America. The nineteenth and early twentieth century had witnessed a rebellion against *halakhic* strictures. By the second decade of the twentieth century, however, a change had become visible in the debates of the Central Conference of American Rabbis. The position developed by the Columbus Platform (1937) and the newly revised Union Prayerbook (1940) demonstrated a new mood. A need for practically expressed standards of ethics and observance began to be felt. This was expressed through the work of Solomon B. Freehof's *Reform Jewish Practice*, vols. I (1944), and II (1952) as well as a similar effort by David Polish and Max Doppelt. In the subsequent decades the field of Reform Responsa was developed by Solomon B. Freehof, and *halakhic* discussions became more common in the *Journal of Reform Judaism*, volumes of responsa published by the Central Conference as well as other forums.

In the years following the Second World War, similar interests in *halakhah* began to be shown by the Reform, Progressive and Liberal Jewish communities of England and various other countries. In Israel the developing Progressive movement undertook its own effort in this direction. During the past two decades, numerous articles, written in the spirit of Liberal *halakhah*, were published in the national Hebrew press. For the most part these efforts were conducted by rabbis working alone or in the framework of their own movement with little relationship to Reform *halakhists* in other part of the world. In order to establish cooperation among Liberal *halakhic* scholars and lay-persons, the Freehof Institute of Progressive *Halakhah* was established in 1990. It is an affiliate of the World Union for Progressive Judaism.

The Freehof Institute of Progressive *Halakhah* is a creative research center devoted to studying and defining the progressive character of the *halakhah* in accordance with the principles and theology of Reform Judaism. It will work to establish the ideological basis of Progressive *halakhah*, and its application to daily life. The Institute hopes to foster serious studies, and to help

scholars in the Reform, Liberal, and Progressive rabbinate along with some Conservative and Orthodox colleagues as well as university professors serve on our Academic Council. The contributors to this volume are members of this Council.

This collection of essays is the product of the founding colloquium held in London during May 1990. This book is the first in a series which will explore different areas and seek to lead us closer to these goals. The subjects are diverse and the approaches taken by the authors are equally so. We wish to encourage a wide ranging discussion as well as the exploration of contemporary and historic themes.

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