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Only in America

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INTRODUCTION

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America has had a greater influence on Jewish life and thought than any other land. America was different from the beginning. Here, we Jews were part of the great democratic experiment with religious freedom. We sought ways of adapting the *halakhah*, the basic expression of Jewish life and thought, to this new found freedom. Was it possible or even necessary to adjust or reinvent the halakhic path? What roles have democracy, personal autonomy, and the absence of authority played in this effort? The interplay of these and other forces has influenced all Jewish life in ways both obvious and subtle.

For the first time in two millennia we Jews live in a land not dominated by a single religion. Jewish life in previous countries with their official religions could be pleasant for centuries as we lived in reasonable harmony with the majority; however, more frequently we were barely tolerated, persecuted or forced to conversion. The Jewish minority was often the only nonconformist group. As the dominant culture did not know what to do with us they gave our communities a semi-autonomous status, kept us more or less isolated and used our existence for whatever political purpose was expedient – sometimes as convenient scapegoats while on other occasions as part of an economic experiment. Whatever the situation, the Jewish community governed itself virtually as a semi-autonomous “state within a state” through a well developed system of *halakhah* and even added protective layers to the walls which the majority had built around us.

In America the imposed isolation ceased, we became citizens governed by the national law and the older system of separate status disappeared. As we were no longer a “state within a state” and could now develop our religious life as we wished. Much of the Jewish community seized that opportunity to reinterpret the traditions and to experiment. Reform Judaism was in the forefront. In contrast to

nineteenth century Europe it was possible here as the government had no interest in the religious path which we took. Complete freedom to practice as we wished, to change, or remain static was granted. The essays in this book will show how this has taken place.

The American freedom has increased the influence of the surrounding cultures. We felt free to learn from other groups and try new structures, customs, and patterns. Experimentation in every area of life and practice was possible for those who wished it, while others who wanted to isolate themselves within separate enclaves were free to do so.

The essays in this volume look at some aspects of this developing American path and how we continue to use this freedom. The traditional *halakhah*, designed for a different world, has been modified by all segments of the Jewish community. In this country it never became the legal system governing the entire Jewish community with accompanying enforcing powers. Judaism became pluralistic and voluntary for all Jews. These studies are concerned with these developments within the Reform and Liberal Jewish community.

The essays in this volume look at selected issues from a theological, historical or practical context. Leonard Kravitz begins with a theological analysis and discusses where this American freedom has led us. Peter Knobel leads us in a somewhat different direction as he looks at the conflict which has arisen between personal autonomy, *halakhah*, and *mitzvah* – issues which would not have been raised before the Emancipation, but which are very much with us now. My essay looks at the mechanisms of change which we have adopted and their relationship to the traditions of the past. I have illustrated this through the Reform movement's efforts to elevate the status of women, beginning with the Jewish emancipation

in Europe and continuing in America. Ruth Langer has used the funeral for her study. Even in this normally very conservative portion of religious life where everyone wishes to adhere to old laws and traditions, the influence of America has been great. The Hebrew essay of Samuel Adler represents the scholarly effort of a German rabbi, who later settled in America, as he sought to root changes in the status and practices of women in the *halakhah*. The essay represent a portion of the vast array of Reform Jewish thought on these and associated questions.

Although each essay investigates one avenue of this development, together they demonstrate how different the American approach to the *halakhah* and Jewish religious thought has become.

Having long ago read a book by a certain rabbi, I ask your Jewish tradition teaches about other gods. In the Bible at Isaiah 45: the *Shema*, we read: "Other gods are false; the work of men's hands; they have eyes, but they don't see; they have ears, but they don't hear — and those who follow them, I will be like them." Indeed, the Torah does mention "other gods" *elohim aherim* in the Ten Commandments; but did you think that these and such things, the *Mekhilta*,¹ tells that there are *elohim aherim* that themselves not mean "others," so that you might think that *elohim aherim* are "other gods" but not in the word means that believing in such gods makes those who they are *elohim aherim*, different kinds of people; or the word means that belief in such erroneous notions are *elohim aherim* that what such facts represent, or the word means that to believe in such things is to do it *elohim aherim*, changing, what kind of gods you believe in. Because *elohim aherim* (*elohim aherim*, "A fool may believe anything," and such other words) are no things, really nothing, the New Testament comments on why not