

Perhaps the foremost problem confronting Reform Judaism at this period of its development is that though the fact that it *is*, is clear, *what* it is, is not. Thus in our movement essence lags behind existence, and among the tasks bequeathed to this generation of Reform Jews is certainly the attempt to clarify the essence of Reform in some measure. Among the issues to be resolved in moving toward clarification is the nature of authority in Reform Judaism.

To begin, we must first define the fundamental term in our inquiry: authority. This term has two basic meanings: authority may be the *power* to enforce obedience upon others to a set of commandments: authority may be the *right* to enforce obedience upon others to a set of commandments. Thus there may be entities who have authority in the sense that they have the power to enforce obedience upon others, such as unlawful governments upon their victims, but which do not have the right, namely, justifiable grounds for such power. On the other hand, there may be entities who have the right to enforce obedience upon others, such as lawful governments in exile, but which do not have the power to do so.

We will use authority in the second sense, and our inquiry is whether in Reform Judaism there exists the right to enforce obedience upon others to a set of commandments. The question of whether Reform Judaism should seek the power to enforce obedience is, of

course, dependent for its answer upon the determination of whether it has the right to enforce obedience. If it does not, then clearly, it should not seek such power.

For purposes of our discussion, we may divide the human person into two phases: the phase that constitutes the decision-making self and the phase that constitutes the decision-executing self. Following this distinction, when we say a person is free, we mean that his decision-making self has the authority to enforce the obedience of the decision-executing self. And when we say that some entity has authority over a person, we mean that the entity has the right to supersede the decision-making self and to enforce, in its place, the obedience of the decision-executing self.

We take it as a self-evident proposition that every person has the right to be free. Or to translate this statement into terms of authority: every person is intuitively presumed to be his own authority, with the right to enforce obedience upon himself to commandments he himself issues. This statement is not to be understood as bearing upon the question of whether man's will is ultimately free or determined; it simply means that every person has the right to determine his own acts without external compulsion.

This right, or portions of it, may be transferred to other entities. Various reasons have been offered on familial, political and religious grounds for such

transfers of self-authority by a person to some other entity. The first two instances — transfer of self-authority by a person to familial or political entities — will not here concern us. It is with the third we wish to deal, the transfer of authority over himself by a person to some ecclesiastical person or group of persons on religious grounds.

Historically, the prime religious argument for the transfer by a person of authority over himself to some ecclesiastical entity has been based upon the theological foundation of a creator God. The argument stated generally proceeds in this fashion:

1) There is a God who has created the universe;

2) By the very act of creation, He has authority over everything that He has created:

3) God therefore has authority over mankind;

4) Exercising His authority, God has issued commandments that mankind is to obey;

5) God has made known to X ecclesiastical body, through revelation or tradition or both, what these commandments are;

6) God has also, through revelation or tradition, delegated elements of his authority over mankind to X ecclesiastical body;

7) Therefore, inasmuch as X ecclesiastical body acts in the name of God, mankind is enjoined to surrender certain portions of self-authority to it and to obey the commandments that issue from it.

Two elements are clearly necessary to uphold the above argument: one is

the creator God, the other is revelation. We will now argue that the kind of revelation necessary for this argument is not subscribed to in Reform Judaism.

Revelation may be divided loosely into three categories. The first may be called verbal revelation; the second, dynamic revelation; the third, natural revelation.

Verbal revelation is conceived to be a communication from the divine mind to certain human minds, a communication of ideas contained in words, in which equal sanctity attaches to the words as to the ideas. What this means — if the Torah is taken as an example of verbal revelation — is that not only the ideas expressed in the Torah are binding, but the very words (hence the name verbal) in which the ideas are expressed are equally binding.

Consequently, for example, one would not be free to accept the idea of the Yom Kippur, but to reject the rituals in which the Yom Kippur is commanded by the Torah to be observed, for not only the ideas, but the very words themselves have been enjoined upon man by God. Moreover, according to the notion of verbal revelation, since revelation is the literal word of God, it must be considered entirely infallible and altogether insusceptible of change or alteration except through some subsequent verbal revelation.

Dynamic revelation is conceived to be either the product of a divine influence operating upon man's natural faculties — such as reason and the imagination — or the report of men, who, with human faculties, have witnessed some supernatural event. What this means — if the

Torah is now taken as an example of dynamic revelation — is that part of the Torah was inspired by God or other superhuman agencies, while part was produced by man. Therefore, since only a portion of the Torah is conceived to be the work of superhuman agencies, subsequent generations may in principle discard those parts they consider to be historically conditioned, while retaining those parts they consider to be timeless and universal.

Here then, one would be free to accept the idea of the Yom Kippur and to reject as archaic the Yom Kippur rituals prescribed by the Torah; one could also proceed properly to create new rituals in which the idea of the Yom Kippur is more meaningfully expressed. It must be noted, however, that this view serves to make revelation fallible in practice. For even though part of the revelation is considered in theory to be the work of superhuman agencies, determination of which part has proceeded from these agencies is dependent upon the reason of men living in later times. And since human reason must always be considered fallible, the content that is chosen by man as divine is always open to the question of whether it actually be divine, or not in fact human in origin. Thus though dynamic revelation is partially infallible in theory, it is entirely fallible in application and practice.

Natural revelation is conceived to be the response and creation of human minds in their search through history for values, purpose and divinity in life and existence. What this means — if the Torah is now taken as an example

of natural revelation — is that one may accept and reject its ideas and words at will, for revelation is conceived to be the product of finite minds, and as such, is entirely fallible, its notions subject to change and development. This view differs from dynamic revelation in that it considers no part of revelation to be produced by superhuman agencies or inspired by supernatural events, and thereby, on the theoretical level, increases the element of fallibility present in revelation.

This discussion concerning revelation has no necessary relevance to the question of God concepts, for those who subscribe to different conceptions of the nature of revelation may still subscribe to essentially the same conception of the nature of God. The difference among them would consist in the certainty of their knowledge: those who accept the notion of verbal revelation would believe their God concept to be certain; those who accept dynamic revelation would think their God concept to be almost certain in outline, but probable in detail; those who accept natural revelation would understand their God concept to be probable.

The truth of a concept or belief may be affirmed or denied explicitly — by words. When the concept or belief possesses behavioral implications, it may be affirmed or denied implicitly — by action. Reform Judaism, it is easily seen, has rejected verbal revelation both explicitly and implicitly. The documents of revelation, as they present themselves to Reform Jews, heirs of a particular tradition, are primarily the Pentateuch and the Prophets, and to a lesser degree

the Hagiographa and the Talmud. Now, if these documents are considered to be verbal revelations, then no abrogation of or change in their contents is rightfully possible. But explicitly, in its various platforms, and implicitly, in its ritual practice, Reform has, in its opinion rightfully, abrogated or changed the contents of these documents. Thus Reform Judaism has denied that the revelatory documents of its tradition are verbal revelation. And what remains for Reform Judaism is to conceive the Torah (let this term refer generally to revelatory documents of the Jewish tradition) as either dynamic or natural revelation, and, in either case, as consisting of documents that are fallible.

Now the question that must be raised, in returning to our original issue, is: Does Reform Judaism, on the basis of fallible knowledge, have authority, that is, the right to enforce obedience upon others to a set of commandments? We think the answer is evident; it does not. Our presumption has been that every person is free, possessing the right of self-authority and self-determination. Now, if this presumption is to be rebutted, the rebutter must demonstrate that some entity possesses right in the person superior to the person's own right in himself. And ecclesiastical groups — not so familial or political groups, since these would present another type of argument — must show this right has been granted to them by God (see the argument presented previously, step 3).

But Reform Judaism, owing to its rejection of verbal revelation, cannot demonstrate that it possesses such a

right. The Reform Jew over whom authority is to be exerted can always argue that he does not accept as divine, infallible and binding, the part of the revelation upon which those wishing to exert authority base their claim. And this argument could not, on the basis of dynamic or natural revelation, be refuted. Therefore, members of the Reform group remain always within the presumption of their freedom, and Reform Judaism as an ecclesiastical body remains without the authority to enforce obedience upon others.

Does this mean, then, that no concept of authority is possible in Reform Judaism? We think not. As indicated earlier in this paper, it is possible for a person to transfer his right of self-authority in whole or in part to some other entity, thus giving the other entity authority over him. It is in this sense, we believe, that a concept of authority is appropriate in Reform Judaism. The argument presented above, requiring a verbal revelation as the foundation of authority, is an argument for compulsory authority over others. Whether or not a person wishes to surrender his self-authority, the right granted an ecclesiastical body by this argument gives that body the authority to compel the person's surrender of his right in himself. This is the kind of authority that is lacking in Reform Judaism.

But should a person, for whatever reason it may be, choose voluntarily to accept his rabbi or the Central Conference of American Rabbis as authorities, then the rabbi and the CCAR

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become authorities for him in any situation in which he calls upon them to act as such. Given this concept of authority, it remains meaningful for Reform Judaism to have a responsa committee, for example, because the committee is made into an authoritative body by those persons who seek from it guidance on some problem. But no agency of the Reform movement has, in principle, the authority of compulsion,

and a person may at any time revoke the authority that he has granted some person or group of persons in the movement. We may call the authority of compulsion, *absolute* authority, and the authority of volition, *conditional* authority. Only conditional authority is justified in Reform Judaism and, in the opinion of the author, only conditional authority is consonant with full human freedom and dignity.