

AFFIRMATIONS
OF
LIBERAL JUDAISM

The *Affirmations of Liberal Judaism* was originally written by the late Rabbi John D. Rayner. The Rabbinic Conference of Liberal Judaism, the collective 'author' of this edition, gladly acknowledges that the text remains substantially Rabbi Rayner's work.

First published in 1992

Re-printed in 2002 and 2009

Revised edition 2006

Liberal Judaism

The Montagu Centre, 21 Maple Street, London W1T 4BE

T: 020 7580 1663

montagu@liberaljudaism.org

www.liberaljudaism.org

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LIBERAL JUDAISM

A Judaism for the 21st Century

To be a Jew is to be the inheritor of a religious and cultural tradition.

To be a practising Jew is to accept with love and pride the duty to maintain and transmit that tradition.

To be a practising Liberal Jew in the twenty-first century is to believe that tradition should be transmitted within the framework of modern thinking and morality; it is to live according to the prophetic ideal of doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God.

In the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland and in Luxembourg, there are over thirty Liberal and Progressive congregations, large and small. All work together to uphold and spread their common beliefs, combining rabbinic and lay resources, through an international organisation, Liberal Judaism.

The Liberal Jewish movement was founded in 1902 by Jews committed to ensuring the continuity of Jewish faith, tradition, practice and ethics within a contemporary framework. They worked unsparingly to re-instil Judaism in the hearts of sceptical Jews through services, public meetings, sermons, writings and inspirational leadership. The movement they founded, the Jewish Religious Union, was later renamed the Union of Liberal and Progressive Synagogues and is now known as Liberal Judaism.

At the start of its second century, Liberal Judaism continues to uphold and work for the aims and ideals of its founders, and to benefit from the contributions of countless Jews who have been attracted to Liberal Judaism and continue to find in it a dynamic modern faith and way of life that are rooted in Jewish tradition.

This document sets out the common ground we share with other streams within Judaism as well as our distinctive approach.

These are the Affirmations of Liberal Judaism

AFFIRMATIONS OF LIBERAL JUDAISM

Liberal Judaism is the dynamic, cutting edge of modern Judaism. Liberal Judaism reverences Jewish tradition, and seeks to preserve the values of the Judaism of the past while giving them contemporary force. It aspires to a Judaism that is always an active force for good in the lives of Jewish individuals, families and communities today, and equally makes its contribution to the betterment of society.

Liberal Judaism confronts the challenges of our time, welcomes gladly all advances in human knowledge, and responds constructively to changing circumstances.

Liberal Judaism values truth above tradition, sincerity above conformity and human needs above legal technicalities.

Liberal Judaism is always willing to engage in dialogue with other streams of Judaism, or with other religions, or with secularism. It is always ready to reconsider, modify and innovate.

Liberal Judaism is the Judaism of the past in the process of becoming the Judaism of the future.

COMMON GROUND

1 JUDAISM

We affirm our commitment to Judaism, the religious and cultural heritage of the Jewish people, and the centrality within that heritage of the Jewish religion, which, since the time of Abraham and Sarah, has proclaimed the sovereignty of the One God.

2 THE JEWISH VIEW OF GOD

We affirm the Jewish conception of God: One and indivisible, transcendent and immanent, Creator and Sustainer of the universe, Source of the Moral Law, a God of justice and mercy who demands that human beings shall practise justice and mercy in their dealings with one another.

3 THE JEWISH VIEW OF HUMANITY

We affirm the Jewish conception of humanity: created in the Divine Image, endowed with free will, capable of sublime goodness but also of terrible evil, mortal yet with a sense of eternity, able to enter into a direct personal relationship with their Creator, and to restore that relationship, when it is broken, through repentance (תשובה, *t'shuvah*).

4 THE JEWISH VIEW OF HUMAN HISTORY

We affirm the Jewish conception of human history: a drama of progress and setback, triumph and tragedy, yet divinely destined to lead to an age when all worship the One God, good will triumph over evil, and the reign of freedom, justice, love and peace will be permanently established throughout the world.

5 B'RIT (COVENANT)

We affirm the Jewish concept of *B'rit* (ברית, Covenant): the special relationship that came to exist between God and our Hebrew and Israelite ancestors, and the responsibility which therefore devolves on their descendants, to be God's witnesses and servants.

6 THE JEWISH PEOPLE

We affirm our commitment to the Jewish people, bearer of the Jewish religious and cultural heritage, and our duty to defend the civil rights, and to seek the material and spiritual welfare, of Jews and Jewish communities everywhere.

7 JEWISH HISTORY

We affirm our pride in Jewish history: a unique record of survival and creativity in many lands and diverse circumstances, including times of persecution and suffering, which reinforce our commitment to Judaism's survival.

COMMON GROUND

8 THE STATE OF ISRAEL

We affirm our commitment to the State of Israel, our duty to seek its security, aid its development, support its absorption of immigrants, and further the fulfilment of the high ideals of Justice and Equality for all its citizens set out in its Declaration of Independence. We also commend all peace initiatives directed at both creating a State of Palestine alongside the State of Israel, and establishing the conditions for peaceful co-existence between the two peoples.

9 JEWISH LITERATURE

We affirm our devotion to Jewish literature – Bible, *Mishnah* (משנה), *Talmud* (תלמוד), *Midrash* (מדרש) and all great literary expressions of the Jewish spirit – as an inexhaustible source of wisdom to which we constantly turn for guidance and inspiration.

10 TORAH (TEACHING)

We affirm the Jewish conception of *Torah* (תורה, Teaching): that at Mount Sinai as well as subsequently, through revelation and inspiration, reflection and discussion, our people gained an ever growing understanding of God's will, and that this is a continuing process.

11 MITZVAH (COMMANDMENT)

We affirm the Jewish conception of *Mitzvah* (מצווה, Commandment): that as Jews we are obligated to lead a life of exemplary ethical quality, to work for the betterment of human society, and to practise a devotional discipline of study, prayer and observance.

12 TALMUD TORAH (STUDY OF TORAH)

We affirm our commitment to *Talmud Torah* (תלמוד תורה, study of *Torah*): the formal and informal education of children and adults in Jewish history and literature, thought and practice, and the Hebrew language, as the foundation of Jewish life and the precondition of its perpetuation from age to age.

13 ETHICAL VALUES

We affirm our commitment to Judaism's ethical values, which include reverence for life, respect for persons and property, love of neighbour, practical kindness (גמילות חסדים, *g'milut chasadim*) and charity (צדקה, *tz'dakah*), social justice and peace, the conservation of nature and the humane treatment of animals.

14 THE JEWISH HOME

We affirm our commitment to the Jewish home as a 'little sanctuary' (מקדש מעט, *mikdash m'at*), filled with the beauty of holiness, in which the values and traditions of Judaism can be exemplified, taught and transmitted from generation to generation.

COMMON GROUND

15 THE SYNAGOGUE

We affirm our commitment to the Synagogue (בית הכנסת, *beit ha-k'nesset*) as Judaism's democratically governed community centre, serving its traditional threefold function as a house of prayer, study and fellowship and as the heart of the Jewish community.

16 PRAYER AND WORSHIP

We affirm the importance of prayer and worship, through which individual and community seek ever anew to experience God's presence, to draw spiritual sustenance from their religious heritage and to dedicate themselves to their responsibilities.

17 JEWISH LITURGY

We affirm the importance of the Jewish liturgy, including the recitation of the *Sh'ma*, (שמע, Hear) the public reading of *Torah* and other biblical writings, and an abundance of blessings, prayers and hymns composed by Jewish sages, poets and mystics in many lands and ages.

18 THE SABBATH

We affirm the importance of *Shabbat* (שבת, Sabbath): the sanctification of the seventh day as a day of rest and joy, study and worship, which may be observed by cessation from work and positive acts of celebration such as the kindling of lights, *Kiddush* (קידוש, Sanctification) and *Haodalah* (הבדלה, Separation).

19 THE DAYS OF AWE

We affirm the importance of the Days of Awe (ימים נוראים, *Yamim Nora'im*), comprising *Rosh ha-Shanah* (ראש השנה, New Year) and *Yom Kippur* (יום כיפור, Day of Atonement), devoted to deep reflection, repentance and spiritual renewal.

20 THE THREE PILGRIMAGE FESTIVALS

We affirm the importance of the 'Three Pilgrimage Festivals', comprising *Pesach* (פסח, Passover), *Shavu'ot* (שבועות, Pentecost) and *Sukkot* (סוכות, Tabernacles) followed by *Simchat Torah* (שמחת תורה, Rejoicing in the *Torah*), celebrating Freedom, Revelation and Joy.

21 CHANUKKAH AND OTHER DAYS OF CELEBRATION AND MOURNING

We affirm the importance of the festival of *Chanukkah* (חנוכה, Rededication) and we encourage the observance of other days of celebration, such as *Purim* (פורים, Lots) and *Yom ha-Atzma'ut* (יום העצמאות, Israel's Independence Day), and days of mourning such as *Tish'ah b'Av* (תשעה באב, Ninth of Av) and *Yom ha-Sho'ah* (יום השואה, Holocaust Day).

22 JEWISH RITES OF PASSAGE

We affirm the importance of many of the traditional Jewish rites of passage, including appropriate acts of ritual relating to birth, circumcision, baby-naming, coming-of-age, marriage and the consecration of a new home, as well as death and mourning.

DISTINCTIVE APPROACH

23 THE DYNAMIC, DEVELOPING CHARACTER OF JUDAISM

Judaism has never stood still. It has always moved forward, sometimes slowly, sometimes faster. Its history is a history of continuity and change. We affirm the dynamic, developing character of our Jewish religious tradition.

24 THE DIVERSITY OF JEWISH TRADITION

Judaism has never been monolithic. There have always been varieties of Judaism. The more conservative Sadducees and the more progressive Pharisees represent only one of many past conflicts. We affirm the diversity of our tradition.

25 RESPECT FOR CONSCIENTIOUS OPTIONS

The Emancipation of the Jews of Western Europe in the 19th century wrought far-reaching changes in Jewish life. It raised fundamental questions about Jewish belief and practice, and about the perpetuation of Judaism, and the resultant debate produced a multiplicity of options. We affirm the respect due to all conscientious options.

26 PROGRESSIVE JUDAISM

We affirm our commitment to the movement known as Progressive Judaism, united in the World Union for Progressive Judaism and especially to the liberal strand within it whose pioneers have included Abraham Geiger, David Einhorn, Kaufmann Kohler, Claude Montefiore, Lily Montagu and Israel Mattuck.

27 A SYNTHESIS OF JUDAISM AND MODERNITY

Orthodox Judaism carries on Judaism virtually as it was before the Emancipation. Conservative Judaism modifies it minimally. Jewish Secularism expresses Jewish identity in non-religious terms. We affirm Progressive Judaism because it alone seeks a synthesis of Judaism and modernity.

28 BIBLE SCHOLARSHIP

In the Middle Ages, Jews (like Christians and Muslims) held their sacred writings to be divinely revealed and free of error. Modernity rejects such fundamentalism and maintains that truth must be sought open-mindedly from all sources. We affirm the spirit of free inquiry. Among other things, we accept modern Bible scholarship, which has shown that the biblical writers, however divinely inspired, were fallible human beings and children of the Ancient Near East in which they lived.

29 THE MESSIANIC AGE

Rabbinic Judaism accepted the apocalyptic belief in a Messiah who would one day gather in the exiles and sit on the throne of a restored Davidic monarchy. We affirm the universalistic hope of the Prophets for a 'Messianic Age' brought about gradually, through the acceptance of God's will by all humanity.

DISTINCTIVE APPROACH

30 THE SYNAGOGUE HAS PERMANENTLY REPLACED THE TEMPLE

Rabbinic Judaism believed that with the coming of the Messiah, the Temple would be rebuilt and animal sacrifices would again be offered by priests. We affirm our belief that the Synagogue has permanently replaced the Temple. Accordingly, we recognise no distinction between persons of priestly descent (כֹּהֲנִים, *kohanim*) and other Jews and we encourage the use of instrumental music in synagogue worship.

31 SINCERITY IN WORSHIP

We affirm the paramount need for sincerity in worship: we may not say with our lips what we do not believe in our hearts. To that end, though we retain much of the traditional Jewish liturgy, we have revised it, with some omissions and modifications, and many amplifications. For the same reason, we use English as well as Hebrew in our services.

32 THE EQUAL STATUS OF MEN AND WOMEN IN SYNAGOGUE LIFE

We affirm the equal status of men and women in synagogue life. The Liberal Jewish movement has been the pioneer in that respect in Britain. There is no sex segregation in our synagogues. Women and men may lead services, become rabbis and hold any synagogue office.

33 THE EQUAL STATUS OF BOYS AND GIRLS IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

We affirm the equal status of boys and girls in religious education. Accordingly, we have introduced the ceremony of *Bat Mitzvah* (בת מצווה, Daughter of Duty) to complement the traditional *Bar Mitzvah* (בר מצווה, Son of Duty) at the age of thirteen, and we attach great importance to the further ceremony, created by Liberal Judaism, of *Kabbalat Torah* (קבלת תורה, Acceptance of *Torah* or Confirmation) at fifteen or sixteen.

34 THE EQUAL STATUS OF MEN AND WOMEN IN MARRIAGE LAW AND RITUAL

We affirm the equal status of men and women in marriage law and ritual. With us, therefore, bride and bridegroom alike play an active role in the Jewish marriage service. Similarly, we object to the traditional *Get* (גט, bill of divorce) by which the husband unilaterally 'sends away' his wife and have created instead a reciprocal *Get*. Moreover, recognising that there are loving, committed relationships other than marriage between a man and a woman, Liberal Judaism recognises the right of Jewish same-sex couples, with and without children, to receive equal treatment in all areas of congregational life, including the right to celebrate their partnerships with a Service of Commitment conducted by a rabbi.

DISTINCTIVE APPROACH

35 CHILDREN ARE NOT TO BE HELD RESPONSIBLE FOR THE ACTIONS OF THEIR PARENTS

We affirm the principle, forcefully stated in the 18th chapter of Ezekiel, that children are not to be held responsible for the actions of their parents. We therefore reject the law of *mamzer* (מזזר, bastard) which penalises the offspring of unions prohibited by the biblical laws of consanguinity and affinity.

36 CHILDREN OF MIXED MARRIAGES ARE TO BE TREATED ALIKE

Since genetically children inherit alike from both parents, whereas culturally the influence of either may prove the stronger, the traditional law of matrilineality cannot be justified. Instead, we affirm the common-sense view that children of mixed marriages – that is, those between a Jew and a non-Jew – are to be treated alike, regardless of whether the mother or the father is the Jewish parent, and considered Jewish if so brought up. Moreover, we support the inclusion of couples and families with mixed backgrounds into the life of our congregations, including providing the opportunity for mixed couples to solemnise their partnerships with an Act of Prayer conducted by a rabbi, and, where possible, to be buried together in our cemeteries.

37 INCLUSIVE ATTITUDE TO JEWISH IDENTITY

We affirm the need for an inclusive attitude to Jewish identity. We welcome sincere proselytes and make the process of conversion no more difficult than it needs to be. Likewise we welcome into our congregations all who have a good claim to be regarded as Jewish, regardless of marital status or sexual orientation.

38 ETHICAL EMPHASIS OF THE PROPHETS

We affirm the ethical emphasis of the Prophets: that what God chiefly requires of us is right conduct and the establishment of a just society. Religious observances are a means of cultivating holiness. As such, they are also important, but not of the same order of importance.

39 SINCERITY IN OBSERVANCE

As we affirm the need for sincerity in belief and worship, so we affirm the need for sincerity in observance. Therefore observances must be in accord with our beliefs and individual Jews must be free in this area to exercise informed, conscientious choice. That applies, among other things, to the details of Sabbath observance (שמורת שבת, *sh'mirat Shabbat*) and the Dietary Laws (כשרות, *kashrut*).

DISTINCTIVE APPROACH

40 INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY

We affirm the importance of individual autonomy, and therefore legislate only in so far as it is necessary to do so. Nevertheless, individuals need guidance, and communal life requires rules. Both in the guidance we offer and in the rules we make, we endeavour to reconcile tradition with modernity.

41 RABBINIC LAW AND THE MODERN WORLD

In particular we affirm the need to harmonise Rabbinic Law (הלכה, *Halachah*) with the social realities and ethical perceptions of the modern world, for instance, we reject the antiquated ceremony of *chalitzah* (הליצה, Taking off the Shoe) releasing a brother-in-law from a no longer permitted levirate marriage, and we observe the Festivals according to their biblically prescribed duration, without the 'extra day' instituted in post-biblical times for reasons which have long since ceased to apply.

42 RESPECT FOR OTHER RELIGIONS

Committed though we are to Judaism, and profoundly convinced of its unsurpassed excellence, we nevertheless recognise that ultimate truth is mysterious and manifold, and that other traditions sincerely seek and find it in different ways. We therefore affirm the need to respect other religions and, through dialogue with them, especially Christianity and Islam, to promote mutual understanding, friendship and enrichment.

AFFIRMATIONS OF LIBERAL JUDAISM

As Liberal Judaism enters its second century the *Affirmations of Liberal Judaism* offers a new and comprehensive overview of its basic beliefs, laid out and discussed in a sequence of forty-two propositions. They show how the ambition of the movement's founders has been fulfilled for a Judaism that is rooted in traditional values and takes account of the modern age. They also demonstrate the dynamism of the founders' original vision, committing their successors to take up the challenges posed by an ever-changing society. Reviewed and revised from earlier editions, the *Affirmations of Liberal Judaism's* propositions extend from Judaism to Rites of Passage and from The Developing Character of Judaism to Respect for Other Religions. In achieving a twenty-first century Liberal Judaism, they also take up such contemporary issues as the right of same-sex couples to equal treatment.

In the *Affirmations of Liberal Judaism*, readers will find easy access to a lexicon of Liberal Judaism for these first years of the new century. They will also find much to stimulate, perhaps provoke.