



This Month in Our Reform Jewish Heritage – May 2017

Our Spiritual Commencement: June Celebrations and the Tradition of Confirmation

by Rabbi Howard A. Berman

As we enter the month of June, with so many families celebrating the milestones of academic graduations, tens of thousands of American Reform Jews will be fondly recalling a “commencement” moment in their own personal religious lives – their Confirmation ceremonies. For generations of members of our Movement, the celebration of this major Festival of Shavuot (which was observed on May 31 this year) had been given deep personal



meaning as the occasion for the culmination of their years of Religious School education. The experiences of the Confirmation process in most temples made an indelible impression on many adolescent minds and hearts, highlighted by the year of personal study with their rabbi – often their first opportunity to develop a personal relationship with a previously distant figure. The preparation of the impressive Service, with the learning of one’s part in the various liturgies that became popular, or composing a personal statement of Jewish commitment... the ceremony itself on Shavuot, with the procession of the class in white gowns...the “Floral Offering” at the Ark... variations on all of these images are embedded fondly in many of our memories.

The focus of much of the study of the history of Reform Judaism centers on the various ritual traditions and observances that were rejected by our Movement’s pioneers, in their efforts to free our faith from centuries of superstition and obsolete cultural practices that had lost their meaning in the modern world. However, it is also important to reflect on the creative development of new ceremonies and approaches to Jewish life and worship in which the early Reformers engaged. None was more characteristic of the liberal Jewish spirit than the Confirmation ceremony. First introduced at the very beginnings of the Movement in Germany in 1810, this concept was originally intended to broaden the scope of the traditional Bar Mitzvah. Either as a supplement or a substitute, the new experience was conceived to provide a meaningful way for young people to understand the deeper spiritual and moral values of Judaism, beyond the ritual



preparation for a Bar Mitzvah Torah reading. A number of core Jewish ideals were incorporated. From the beginning, Confirmation reflected the major Reform principle of gender equality by including both girls and boys, becoming the first (and very radical) opportunity for an inclusive, egalitarian religious celebration in Judaism. Moreover, Confirmation was linked to the observance of the Festival of Shavuot. The connection was brilliant... we would commemorate the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai with a new and meaningful ceremony that would bring that

experience to life for each new generation. In the authentic liberal Jewish spirit, every child would be given an opportunity to learn our tradition, and then, at a more mature age than 13, would have a context for “confirming” their own personal spiritual commitment to continuing Jewish life and learning as young adults – symbolically reliving the Sinai moment by accepting the Torah for themselves.

Confirmation came to represent the genius of Reform Judaism’s commitment to creatively renewing our tradition. However, in our time, Confirmation has sadly declined in importance in our Movement. The excesses of Bar and Bat Mitzvah celebrations have become the focal point for “coming of age” and many congregations have failed to provide a more meaningful milestone to offset the clichéd stereotypes that these lavish parties embody. Parenthetically, one of our most important festivals has become a neglected holiday, where once it was one of the major highlights of the year in Reform temples. As we struggle to find effective ways to engage our teenagers in continuing Jewish experiences and education, a renewed commitment to the possibilities of Confirmation- called either by its historic name or by the contemporary Hebrew term *Kabbalat Torah* – can be a vital resource, alongside summer camp and youth group. As in so many instances, we can find inspiration and direction from the courageous, creative spiritual vision of our own Reform Jewish heritage!

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First photo in this article: 1938 Confirmation class, [Temple B'rith Sholom](http://templebrithsholom.net/), Springfield, Illinois (<http://templebrithsholom.net/>)

Second photo: Confirmation class (date unknown), [Rockdale Temple](http://www.rockdaletemple.org/), Cincinnati, Ohio. (<http://www.rockdaletemple.org/>)

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