

# The Politics of Exclusion in Judaism

## R. Jacob Ettlinger and Hierarchical Judaism

**Jacob Ettlinger** (17 March 1798 – 7 December 1871) (Hebrew: יעקב עטלינגר) was a German rabbi and author, and one of the leaders of Orthodox Judaism.

1. Thus, German Orthodox attitudes towards nonobservant Jews were formulated in light of two central facets of their own identity that stood in contrast with each other. On the one hand, they recognized that they were members of a heterogeneous collective within which their lifestyle was clearly not upheld by the majority. On the other hand, they saw themselves as being in a class of their own, the long group that remained "loyal to the law" in a Jewish world occupied by "weak" individuals who had "betrayed" the covenant with God. (91)
2. The 1840s are considered a watershed decade in the evolution of German Reform Judaism and the response of Orthodox...Based on some of the Orthodox reactions [to three Reform synods], one might be led to conclude that the traditionalists were ready to adopt a practical policy of cutting off from their version of Judaism all those who deviated too far from religious observance...Ettlinger...focused on his own efforts not on the complete exclusion of others but on developing tools that would enable Orthodoxy to create its own distinct positive identity. (92)
3. In 1843 a number of individuals within the community of Frankfurt am Main demanded to register their newborn sons as Jews despite their unwillingness to have them circumcised...Most of those who responded, including Ettlinger, rabbi of Altona [Hamburg, Germany] demonstrated their basic agreement with the declaration of the chief rabbi of Frankfurt, Solomon Trier: "The father who persists in his sin and contemptuously, with evil intent and renunciation of the Torah, does not allow his son to be circumcised, is a heretic, has left the Jewish people, and is disqualified from giving testimony or taking an oath." (92)
4. In the summer of 1847, [Rabbi Solomon Eger, son of R. Akiva] Eger visited Ettlinger with the intention of gaining his support for banning the Reform ["to separate them from Israel, so that they shall not be considered Israelites in any way"]...Eger said that Ettlinger agreed in principle but was afraid that his ability to maintain the traditional character of his own community would be compromised if he gave his open support. This was due to the many powerful Jews in Altona who, out of respect for their learned rabbi, supported his communal principles despite being personally oriented toward Reform...Eger's letter alludes, however, to the fact that Ettlingers motives were not merely political; rather he felt that "publicizing such a ruling regarding the heretics"; would guarantee their "adoption of evil practices in public."

Ettlinger, in contrast [to Hatam Sofer], was unwilling to ban even those individuals who openly professed their Reform beliefs. This approach is evident even in his letter regarding those in Frankfurt who sought to avoid circumcising their sons...For in the same correspondence he pointed out that authorities are no longer justified in "troubling ourselves over the behavior of individual transgressors and investigating whether their actions were grounded on faulty premises or indiscretion."(94-95)

5. One of the factors contributing to Ettlingers departure from the approach of his predecessors was his realization that Reform had established itself, at least for the foreseeable future, as a permanent fixture within German Jewish society. This my new means implies that he extended it legitimacy. But as opposed to those

of the previous generation who felt that they still had a chance to destroy Reform before it spread to the masses, he lived in an age in which nonobservance was becoming the norm. In such an environment, he felt that his main goal should be to develop vehicles for strengthening the endangered observant minority. Thus, he focused his energies on making sure those who remained faithful to traditional Jewish practice would be able to stand firm against any further encroachments from Reform or other challenges that modern society presented. (95)

6. Ettlinger went out of his way to assure his son's father-in-law that ideally (*me-ikkar ha-din*) he supported the halakhic opinions that prohibited drinking the wine of public Sabbath desecrators:

However, as to the sinners of Israel of our time I do not know how to consider them. For because of the multitude of our sins the sore has spread widely, to such an extent that for most of them the desecration of the Sabbath has become like a permissible act... There are those among them who offer Sabbath prayers and sanctify the day [through *kiddush* on the wine] and then violate the Sabbath regarding both biblical and rabbinic prohibitions. The Sabbath desecrator is considered an apostate [*mumar*] only because by denying the Sabbath, he denies the creation and the creator. But this man acknowledges them by his prayer and *kiddush*. ***And certainly their sons who arise in their places, who neither know nor have heard of Sabbath ordinances, are similar to Sadducees who act according to the ways of their parents and they are like an infant taken captive among the idolaters...and it is possible that Sadducees*** too who were not used to being among Israel and did not know the basic principles of the religion and do not act brazenly against the Sages were not considered intentional sinners [*mezidim*].

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