

On Hungarian Illiberalism Then and Now—Vaetchanan 5782

August 12, 2022

Rabbi A. Brian Stoller

I'd like to begin tonight in Germany, in the early part of the 19th century.

In the city of Hamburg, a group of liberal-minded Jews calling themselves "Reformers" introduced a variety of changes to the traditional synagogue liturgy and practice. These changes included reciting some of the prayers in German instead of Hebrew, altering the traditional service by modifying or shortening certain prayers, and playing the organ on Shabbat.

Had this group been viewed as just a small band of weirdos, the practices in their little temple probably wouldn't have received much attention. But, in fact, their reforms started to gain some traction among a not insignificant number of German Jews.

Enough traction that the traditional rabbinical establishment became concerned about it.

Actually, "concerned" is an understatement. They were *alarmed*. They saw this fledgling Reform movement as a major threat to their way of life and to Judaism as they understood it.

They said the Reformers were "evil." They called them "apostates," "heretics," "destroyers" of the faith. They wanted to shut this new movement down—and fast.

So, Germany's traditionalist establishment decided to marshal some of Europe's leading Orthodox rabbis to join them in their crusade against Reform. Together, they published a series of essays and responsa attacking the Reformers and condemning their practices as unacceptable and un-Jewish.

Though Germany was the initial battleground between the traditionalists and the Reformers, the rabbi who quickly emerged as the most prominent and zealous opponent of Reform lived in Hungary.

His name was Rabbi Moses Sofer. He's better known by his rabbinic moniker "Chatam Sofer."

Chatam Sofer was then, and is still today, regarded as a Torah genius—certainly the most important traditionalist figure of his era. And he remains deeply influential today, 200 years after his death.

He is widely regarded as the father of what is known today as "Haredi" (or ultra-Orthodox) Judaism.

Chatam Sofer expressed his philosophy with a motto he borrowed from the Mishnah and repurposed for his fight against Reform: "*Chadash asur min ha-Torah*"—meaning: "Innovation is forbidden by the Torah."

On this basis, Chatam Sofer condemned the Reformers' changes as, in the words of historian Michael Meyer, "beyond the pale of Judaism."

But he didn't stop there. He also sought to stigmatize the Reformers' themselves by casting them as so different and so threatening that no self-respecting "kosher" Jew would want to go anywhere near them.

To illustrate this strategy, my teacher and mentor Rabbi David Ellenson points to this extraordinary passage from one of Chatam Sofer's responsa. Chatam Sofer wrote this about Reform Jews:

“Our daughters should not be given to their sons, [nor] their sons to our daughters. Their community is like the community of the Sadducees and the Boethusians, the Karaites and the Christians. They to theirs and we to ours. And if they were subject to our jurisdiction, my view would be to push them beyond the boundaries [of our community].”¹

“They to theirs and we to ours.” No intermarriage between Orthodox Jews and Reformers.

Chatam Sofer had no power over the Reformers, of course, but if he had his druthers he said he would kick them out of the Jewish community altogether.

Does this make Chatam Sofer a bad guy? I don’t know. He is deeply respected—revered, even—still to this day in many quarters of the Jewish world.

Even Reform scholars and rabbis are known to quote his teachings admiringly. His commentaries and other writings are, after all, quite brilliant and rich.

But whether Chatam Sofer was a bad guy or not, he was certainly what we might call “illiberal.”

Chatam Sofer wouldn’t have used that term to describe himself, nor would the Reformers of his time have used that word either.

“Illiberal” is a modern term first suggested by the political analyst Fareed Zakaria and developed by contemporary political scientists.

Professor Marlene Laurelle, director of the Illiberalism Studies Program at George Washington University, defines “illiberalism” this way:

She says it “proposes solutions that are majoritarian, nation-centric..., favoring traditional hierarchies and cultural homogeneity.”²

And this is exactly how Chatam Sofer responded to the Reform movement: by circling the wagons and raising the defenses against what he perceived as an existential threat.

His goal was to preserve the religious, ideological, and cultural purity of the traditional Jewish community. And if that meant making the tent smaller, so be it.

If that meant banning interaction and intermarriage with Jews who believed and practiced differently rather than tolerating them, fine. That’s what the urgency of the moment demanded in his view.

Not every Orthodox rabbi responded to the social and cultural changes in Europe this way; in fact, some of them, in Ellenson’s words, took steps to accommodate change and keep people inside the tent.

But for Chatam Sofer and others like him, the answer was illiberalism.

I bring all this up because I have been reading in the news this week about another Hungarian illiberal: the prime minister, Viktor Orbán.

Have you heard about this guy? He was in Dallas earlier this week speaking at a political conference.

I mentioned earlier that Chatam Sofer wouldn't have called himself an "illiberal," because the term didn't exist yet. But Prime Minister Orbán *does* describe himself this way.

In a widely noted speech in 2014, Orbán said:

"[The] Hungarian nation is not a simple sum of individuals, but a community that needs to be organized, strengthened, and developed, and in this sense, the new state that we are building is an *illiberal* state, a non-liberal state. It does not deny foundational values of liberalism, [such] as freedom, etc. But it does not make this ideology a central element of state organization, but applies a specific, national, particular approach in its stead."³

Following Professor Laurelle's definition of illiberalism, Orbán seems to mean that while individual freedom is important, the interests of the political and cultural majority are *more* important.

And if that's the case, certain steps may need to be taken in order to assert those majority interests over against the interests of the individual and of minorities.

This philosophy contrasts with what, in political science, is known as "classical liberalism, which is the guiding philosophy of the United States.

In short, classical liberalism is the idea that one person's freedom ends where another person's freedom begins. Meaning: Every citizen has the right to pursue their own vision of the good, so long as doing so doesn't infringe on the same right of others to pursue *their* own vision of the good.

And it's the role of the government to protect that right for everybody.

Reform Judaism is a *liberal* religious philosophy in this sense. In our movement, everyone has the right to believe and practice Judaism as they want to, so long as they don't intrude on others' right to do the same. You don't have to believe or observe any particular way in order to be part of our community.

Orbán seems to have a different vision for Hungary, which is expressed in comments like the one he made a few weeks ago about his self-described anti-immigration policy. Focusing specifically on Muslim immigration into Europe, he said:

"We are willing to mix with one another, but we do not want to become peoples of mixed-race."⁴

Orbán then clarified his statement in response to backlash against what he'd said:

"I am the only politician in the E.U. who stands for an openly anti-immigration policy," he said. "This is not a race issue for us, this is a cultural issue."⁵

This is illiberalism.

While I hate to compare Chatam Sofer with Viktor Orbán, it's clear that their strategies for preserving their respective communities against perceived threats are not dissimilar.

Why should we care about this Hungarian politician's political philosophy and dumb remarks?

Well, because just like the Jewish illiberalism coming out of Hungary in the early 19th century sought to squelch the freedoms of our Reform forbears to believe and practice their religion as they saw fit, I am concerned that the political illiberalism coming out of Hungary today also proposes to suppress our freedoms here in America.

Not because Prime Minister Orbán is seeking to conquer the U.S. or anything, but because a not insignificant political movement in our country is embracing him and suggesting not at all subtly that we in America should emulate his approach.

And that worries me, because when governments pursue illiberalism, it's rarely good for the Jews.

The Anti-Defamation League has already put out a warning to the American Jewish community about Orbán for his praise of Hungary's puppet ruler during the Nazi period and the antisemitic undertones of his rhetoric.⁶

In fact, one of Orbán's own advisors resigned from his team following Orbán's "mixed race" remark, calling it "a pure Nazi speech...worthy of Goebbels" and expressing concern about what she described as Orbán's "illiberal turn."⁷

With its emphasis on preserving majority culture and national purity, Orbán's illiberalism threatens the Jews.

It's sad and scary that this man is being welcomed and celebrated in America today.

This week's parashah, Va-etchanan, includes the words "*Sh'ma Yisrael, Adonai eloheinu, Adonai echad*. Hear O Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is One."

While every community surely has certain features that make it special and unique and give it its own identity, we understand that, ultimately, God's Oneness transcends all human differences.

All are included in God and loved by God because we are all human beings, created in God's image.

As the 20th-century Jewish-French writer Edmond Fleg put it:

"I am a Jew because, above humanity, image of the divine Unity, Israel places the unity which is divine."⁸

That's our creed.

Sh'ma Yisrael, Adonai eloheinu, Adonai echad.

1. As quoted by David Ellenson, "Traditional Reactions to Modern Jewish Reform: The Paradigm of German Orthodoxy," in: Frank and Leaman, eds., *The Routledge History of Jewish Philosophy*, https://www.academia.edu/37665800/David_Ellenson_Traditional_Reactions_to_Modern_Jewish_Reform_The_Paradigm_of_German_Orthodoxy_in_Daniel_H_Frank_and_Oliver_Leaman_edds_The_Routledge_History_of_Jewish_Philosophy_London_Routledge_1996_732_758

2. <https://www.illiberalism.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Laruelle-Illiberalism-a-conceptual-introduction.pdf>

3. <https://budapestbeacon.com/full-text-of-viktor-Orbán-s-speech-at-baile-tusnad-tusnadfurdo-of-26-july-2014/>

4. <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/speech-by-prime-minister-viktor-Orbán-at-the-31-st-balvanyos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp>
5. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/hungary-Orbán-mixed-race-society-racism-backlash-rcna40583>
6. <https://www.adl.org/resources/press-release/adl-alarmed-hungarian-prime-minister-praises-anti-semitic-wartime-leader>
7. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jul/26/longstanding-adviser-to-viktor-Orbán-resigns-over-pure-nazi-speech>
8. "I am a Jew Because..." reprinted in *Mishkan T'filah*