



We Are the Heirs of the Temple – Reform Jews in Hamburg

The date is fast approaching when countries around the world will celebrate the 200th anniversary of the founding of the community at Hamburg Temple – the forerunner of all Reform Jewish communities. In December 1817, the foundations were laid for progressive Reform Judaism in Hamburg. In the prayer room of the Temple on Brunnenstraße, men and women met to say the ancient Jewish prayers and sing psalms, not just in Hebrew but also in their native language. Accompanied by a boys' choir and a cantor, the old rituals became more interesting, more understandable and more accessible for all those involved. Before long, many Hamburg Jews flocked to these services, which met with resistance from the Orthodox community. Despite this, Reform Jewish life flourished until the 1940s.

Inspired by the example of Hamburg, the Reform Jewish movement spread to many Jewish communities in Germany and later, to the rest of the world. It is noteworthy that Reform Judaism resulted in the creation of many works by wise philosophers, including the great Jewish German philosopher, Moses Mendelssohn. He translated the five books of Moses and commentaries on the other books of the Bible into German. Jewish theologian Saul Ascher was the first to formulate the concepts of Reform Judaism, whose meaning was not, in his mind, keeping the laws and commandments, but in a particular worldview. He called upon people to accept and represent general humane values and to move with the scientific progress of the times. At that point, the Orthodox community, however, represented the view that the secular sciences detracted from the study of the Torah, while Ascher believed that only by learning about these matters would the Jews also be able to develop spiritually.

These views are also fundamental for the heirs of the Temple, i.e. the Hamburg Reform community (LJGH), which was re-established in 2004. Since that time, the members of the community and its circle of friends (approx. 500 people) have actively participated in religious and secular events that enable them to integrate the old ideals of the Temple into daily life and also to promote the integration of its members into German democratic society.

The religious rites of the community are performed by Hamburg State Rabbi, Dr Moshe Navon, who received his comprehensive training at the Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem and his doctorate in Bible Studies from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. What is particularly interesting here is that his teachers in Jerusalem were the descendants of German Jews who had belonged to a Reform community. They understood the importance and necessity of the rebirth of Reform communities in Germany. As a result of their recommendation and that of the World Union, Moshe Navon came to Germany.

“For me, Reform Judaism isn’t just a denomination of Judaism, it’s the religious and ethical development of the behaviour of a free person in a free, democratic society. I try to teach every single member of our community how important it is to respect our ancient Jewish traditions. They have to keep the commandments that G_d has given us.” (Moshe Navon)

Services are held every week on Fridays and Saturdays, where the congregation sing prayers and psalms, led by trained singer and cantor Dana Zeimer. On special occasions, they are accompanied by the Klezmerlech choir and services acquire a special feeling and significance when accompanied by Galina Jarkova on the piano and Daniel Lachmann on the violin.

All events since 2015 have taken place in the context of the 200th anniversary of the Hamburg Temple. Listing them all would go beyond the scope of this article; however, several things are worth mentioning: March this year saw the choir and Klezmerlech dance group join forces with the Wort literature club and Klassik musical salon for a literary and musical event inspired by themes from Jewish history. This event was hosted by two Protestant communities – the St. Anschar community in Eppendorf and the Heilig-Geist-Kirchengemeinde in Pinneberg.

The history of the Hamburg Temple played a major role in this event. The performance, which was held in German and Russian, was a huge hit – the audience sang Jewish songs along with the choir, danced Jewish dances and even asked for the texts for the event in order to better understand Jewish beliefs and Jewish life. The varied programme will be performed once more at the Orion literary and musical society’s rooms in Lübeck. There is also the annual German Festival of Jewish Music planned for the end of June. The leitmotif here, too, will be the history of Hamburg Temple and the Reform Jewish community.

Our community is a member of the Union of Progressive Jews in Germany and we actively take part in its events.

In addition, the members of our community also take part in interfaith services. They play an active role in Christian-Jewish dialogue and help to co-host the “Week of Brotherhood”. Together with the Evangelische Nord-Kirche, we are working on a project to research Christianity’s Jewish roots.

Working with children is very important in our community; they are integrated into our community, into services, festivals, working groups and competitions.

Today, it is impossible to imagine the Western world without the influence of Reform Judaism. We who develop and cherish these traditions, understand this and are working towards ensuring their survival. Reform Judaism isn’t just a denomination that anyone can affiliate with or take over – it is conscience, intellect, it embodies deep-seated values and an understanding of Judaism that can only be understood through humane morals.

During its century-long existence, the Hamburg Temple developed in place of the theology of sacrifice, buried at the heart of the Old Temple in Jerusalem 2,000 years ago, the theology of inner renewal and personal fulfilment – the theology of humanity and brotherhood. Four hundred Jewish children attended the Temple at Oberstrasse 120, even during the terrible reign of the Nazis. Contemporary witness Eva Stiel describes it in Andreas Brämer’s book, “Judentum und religiöse Reform: Der Hamburger Israelitische Tempel 1817–1938” [“Judaism and Religious Reform: the Hamburg Temple 1817–1938”]:

“Like the first Reform Jews, we gained our faith at a time when the world was filled with doubt. In challenging the past, we learned how to see and how to reason. Each new step requires independence in our thinking and decision-making. If we were to give up this independence and, instead, just give into tradition without a second thought, we would be giving up the very best of ourselves – that is, our inner vitality and honesty. We only want to take on those elements of tradition that we can actually put into practice as people of understanding and compassion. How much of this will be adopted, we still cannot say. But what is certain is that we don’t simply want to copy the old sclerotic ways without our own inner participation. That is precisely what the founders wanted to counter. Here, we finally have the space to say what separates us from the founders of the temple and what unites us. What is new and what separates us is the renewed faith in the living G_d of the Bible and a higher appreciation for the Jewish tradition. What unites us is our inner independence in the face of tradition, and we want to adopt this as a legacy and spread its wisdom.”

The Reform Jews returned to Hamburg after the Shoah in order to continue on this path as people of conscience and kindness. If you come to the Torah with open eyes, you will discover that the path to personal freedom lies in the relationships between people. If you learn to treat your fellow humans with love and dignity every day, you will be raised up by G_d: “The service of G_d consists in what we do to our neighbour” (Leo Baeck). The world is suffering once again from the terror of inhumanity, which tries to denigrate and destroy other people. In these times, we should treat our fellow humans with even greater respect and dignity in order to offer constant resistance to the onslaught of inhumanity.

Vera Venediktova

Contact:

PR for the Hamburg Liberal Jewish Community (LJGH e.V.)

Große Johannisstraße 13, 20457 Hamburg, Germany

info@davidstern.de

www.davidstern.de