

*Rethinking Modern Judaism*, by Arnold M. Eisen

reviewed by [Hayim Goren Perelmuter](#) in the [January 5, 2000](#) issue

What came first, the chicken of belief or the egg of ritual? And how do they relate to each other? This is a central question posed by Arnold Eisen in his absorbing and wide-ranging account of contemporary Jewish practice. The transformation of that practice resulted from two events sparked by the French Revolution: the Enlightenment and the emancipation of the Jews. It is the ongoing concern of the brightest and the best in emerging Jewish scholarship, of which Eisen is a rising star.

When the Reform Rabbis met in conference earlier this year the central issue was the rewriting of the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform steeped in the spirit of Enlightenment (and Protestant) rejection of ritual. Eisen was invited to give one of the major presentations preceding the debate, since this book, with its thoroughgoing analysis of the impact of the Enlightenment, had just appeared. The Enlightenment's primary political thrust was shaped by an infrastructure of theory, from Spinoza through Locke, Voltaire and Kant; by the French and American Revolutions; and by the impact of the transformation of Judaism and Jewish practices, as Jews attempted to come to terms with modernity.

Eisen's scholarly book is not an easy read. However, anyone with a curious mind who is willing to struggle with the book's academic language and dense analyses will gain many valuable insights and will be rewarded by the fascinating case studies Eisen presents. The academic reader will find the book a scholarly and intellectual tour de force. Especially noteworthy is Eisen's brilliant presentation of the Enlightenment's core problems with Jews, and the love-hate relationship between Judaism and the Jewish people and the Enlightenment and modernity. Eisen begins this discussion with Immanuel Kant's comment on Moses Mendelssohn—that is, with a statement by one of the foremost Christian spokespersons for Enlightenment theory about the father of Jewish Enlightenment thought and reform.

The best minds of the West did not know quite what to do with the Jews. They could accept them as individuals but could not comprehend their identity and survival as a group. "To the Jews as individuals everything, to the Jews as a nation, nothing!" was the cry at the French National Assembly. Kant, the secularist idealist, brought the

essence of the Pauline argument that faith is more important than works into his secular morality. But he found no place for Jewish practice. The essence of Christian supersessionism passed into modern thought. Similarly, anthropologists and social theorists from Émile Durkheim to Peter Berger ignored the Jews as a people/nation, albeit a homeless and dispersed one. This issue of the rebirth and acceptance of Jews as individuals but not as a people was a continuing problem for Jews in the onward march of modernity, and for the world as well.

Eisen skillfully introduces us to the principal Jewish thinkers in the West who dealt with this issue. He traces the Jewish people's transformation of their rituals to adjust to modernity, while stubbornly keeping alive a core link to ancient tradition and dreams. The book's case studies demonstrate how this occurred in the Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist wings of Judaism, as well as among Jewish feminists. For example, Eisen examines the Passover Seder, the Jewish ritual most widely observed even by the least observant and most secular of Jews. Eisen shows how it was observed in a French home by a Jewish veteran of the Revolution's wars, in a secular agnostic kibbutz in Israel, and by a group of Jewish feminists.

Eisen is persuaded that a faith and a people best survive through practice rather than through belief. As he puts it, "The vitality of Judaism in contemporary America rests precisely on the dynamics of ritual practices that allow multiple messages. Belief in revelation has not kept the vast majority of Jews Jewish . . . neither has lack of belief in revelation driven them away." This linkage of a sense of autonomy with a discipline of ritual practice represents a great hope for the future. Rituals preserved and reinterpreted create a link to the roots of pristine faith and peoplehood.