

(Re)Defining Reform(ing)

Rabbi Richard N. Levy, Director of HUC's School of Rabbinic Studies in L.A., speaks with Rabbi Suzanne Singer, Director of the Introduction to Judaism Program for the Pacific Southwest Council of the Union for Reform Judaism, about the movement's direction and core mission.

Dear Suzanne,

Ten years ago, a diverse group of rabbis gathered at Camp Kutz in upstate New York to begin discussions on what eventually became the Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism, the "Pittsburgh Principles." With all the changes the movement had undergone since the Centenary Perspective was adopted in 1976, and with a new century about to dawn, it seemed time for the Reform rabbinate to issue a new statement that would, as the preamble to the Principles stated, "define Reform Judaism in our own time." Why did I — as the president of the CCAR — initiate this process, along with the professional and board leadership of the Conference, and how does it illuminate change in the Reform movement? In terms of its devotion to study, spiritual concerns, and observance of mitzvot, the movement had progressed much further than was widely perceived. At the same time, we needed to correct the perception — if not the reality — that increased ritual observance, prayer, and study were crowding out the movement's historic commitment to social justice. Both — sanctifying time and place, and working for peace and justice among the peoples God created — were part of our mandate to "bring Torah into the world."

The Principles process taught us that in the 21st century, while rabbis might initiate change, they can succeed only through partnerships with cantors, educators, and lay people. We must see change as organic: when we want to make changes in any aspect of our religious life — worship, study, ritual, or social justice — we must take all aspects into account. Social justice needs to include study and worship (in the streets before a protest, for example), and worship to be effective needs to involve liturgical study. As we begin to use our new prayerbook, *Mishkan T'filah*, in earnest, we must ask how our prayers can spill out of Shabbat use to affect the ways we relate to God at home, in nature, and in the public square. I regret that we have been so slow in encouraging an

expansion of Jewish dietary practices because they are a brilliant example of such integration: studying biblical and rabbinic texts on the subject, acting on environmental concerns and worker justice, infusing mitzvot daily into our kitchens, our dining rooms, and our shopping carts. The movement has embraced *tallitot* and *kipot*, we are increasingly endorsing the building of *mikvaot* (ritual baths) — why are we still so fearful of embracing traditional and contemporary Jewish dietary concerns, especially since we know that food habits learned while growing up tend to remain with one throughout life?

I also regret that we have expended such little attention on raising up a committed new generation of Reform Jews once they enter college. While our synagogues, day schools, and camps have often performed brilliantly in bringing enthusiastic Reform Jews to high school graduation, with few exceptions the movement has abandoned them once they enter college, where most students are at a loss as to how to continue their Jewish lives in a manner that seems consistent with their upbringing. By failing to invest significantly more human and financial resources on campus, we are undermining what our camps and schools have accomplished, and we are putting our Jewish future in jeopardy. Kashrut and the campus are two worthy targets for the next major push by the movement. What do you think?

Rabbi Richard N. Levy

Dear Richard,

I believe that we need to correct not just the perception but also the reality "that increased ritual observance ... [has been] crowding out the movement's historic commitment to social justice." A case in point: When I was a student at Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles just a few years ago, *tefillah* was increased from twice to four times a week. Where students once made lunch for the hungry some mornings before school, they now prayed. And, more recently, when I focused a lesson on social justice during a

class I was teaching on the prophets, rabbinical students said they didn't see the connection.

Unfortunately, I think that with greater observance has come greater insularity. I applaud your goal of integrating *kashrut* with concerns about the environment and worker justice. Unfortunately, few observant Jews combine dietary practice with awareness of kosher slaughterhouse conditions. If the Reform movement is to focus on *kashrut* or the campus, we must make it crystal clear how Jewish tradition can respond to the urgent concerns of the day. An example: Recently, fast-food giant Burger King joined major restaurant chains in establishing animal welfare standards in its choice of suppliers. I wish our movement had been at the forefront of pushing for this reform. We could have made the connection between the humane treatment of animals and *kashrut*.

According to recent studies, though young Jews want to be involved in social service, they are not so attached to Judaism. They fail to see the connection. They often view Judaism as irrelevant, boring, and obsolete. Let us offer them a revitalized tradition that moves us beyond the borders of our own community and into the public square. Let us infuse our ritual, prayer, and study with the urgent call to right the wrongs of society. And let the Reform movement again make a priority of speaking truth to power.

Rabbi Suzanne Singer

Dear Suzanne,

It is crucial that we not put ourselves in a position of choosing between a life of prayer and other spiritual observances and a life devoted to social justice. As you know, HUC has initiated an ambitious new curriculum in leadership and social justice. While a Reform approach to dietary practice can help us demonstrate forcefully how to integrate these paths, the institutions of the movement must embrace this integration. We all need to overcome our fear that we are being inauthentic Reform Jews if, in addition to bringing issues of humane slaughter to the table, we also abstain from pork and shellfish, or in addition to acting on our concern for the conditions of farmworkers, we also show concern to separate milk from meat. We can bring *HaMotzi* and *Birkat HaMazon* to the table as well as concern for the manner in which animals are raised. I agree with you that there are increasing opportunities to join with firms and institutions to make sig-

nificant progress on a number of these issues — but we can't do it if we are always afraid of internal backlash.

This is of course just one area where spirit and justice overlap. The URJ is rolling out a new initiative on Shabbat observance that will both help us experience heightened awareness of the *kedusha*, the holiness, that surrounds us on the seventh day, and also blend a concern for the holiness of the workers and the land, prayer, home and synagogue observance. Shabbat observance is one way to engage college students in a life-changing environment, from inspiring worship and music to food, good talk, study, and finding ways to build Shabbat concerns for social change into the next week. What does the greeting "Shabbat Shalom" imply? Are we as a movement ready to join the conversation on how and when to disengage from Iraq? Are we ready to raise our voices to counter those in the Jewish community who are content with the status quo in the Middle East? The Shabbat community is ripe for organizing into a force dedicated to actualizing Shabbat principles in the weekday "public square."

I am all in favor of Reform Jews speaking truth to power. I am only concerned that we remember where the source of true power lies, and that we do all we can to be in touch with that Source — through serious prayer and study — that when we stride out into the streets we know we are doing so in the service of that Source.

Richard

Dear Richard,

I agree with Leo Baeck that, "In Judaism love of God is never a mere feeling; it belongs to the sphere of ethical action." I don't view our social justice efforts as "in the service of that Source." Rather, our connection to the Source should propel us to engage in service to others. Let us be in touch with the Source through prayer and study, but only if it keeps us honest, ethical, sensitive to the plight of others, and grateful for the blessings in our own lives.

I too hope that our prayers for shalom are not idle chatter. Indeed, how can we pronounce such words in synagogue if we are not willing to actively promote peace? Though we shouldn't have to choose between prayer and social justice, in today's high-stress society people often don't have time for both. Choices must be made: spending Saturday morning at services or at a

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homeless shelter? And while we shouldn't be considered inauthentic Reform Jews if we are equally concerned about separating milk and meat and about the working conditions in factories, what about the reverse? If our focus is on the latter, does that make us any less authentic? Were our Classical Reform forefathers less Jewish because they eschewed *kashrut* and *kippot*? And do we admonish, as many rabbis do, Jews who never go to shul but are engaged in fighting for living wages?

When the Israelites marched through the desert, the tribe of Dan brought up the rear, gathering those who had fallen behind. The Torah commentary *Etz Hayim* explains that Dan was chosen because the Danites loved their fellow Israelites even though their religious faith was weak. "There is a need in today's community for people who express their religious faith by caring for the left-behind."

Suzanne



Addressing the Newest Frontier

Lawrence Hoffman

I choose to be a Reform Jew because with Jewish emancipation, the question ever after became, "Why be Jewish when you no longer must be?" and because Reform Judaism answered that question by positing uni-

versal purpose for Jewish particularism. It is Judaism's mission to realize a prophetic vision of justice for all humanity and, along the way, to provide a life of goodness and wholeness for every individual.

Can we avoid becoming too comfortably domesticated to meet the next frontier? Reform must pursue principle fearlessly without losing its nerve.

Later times brought new frontiers but the same question. At its inception, Reform Judaism warded off wholesale assimilation by offering honesty about the times, loyalty to truth, consciousness of history, and insistence on ethics. Working on the frontier entails sometimes overstepping the mark, so Reform has learned, when necessary, to correct its course — reclaiming appropriate traditions of the past, for example, and recovering Jewish peoplehood; but even then, it remained firm in the resolve that both tradition and peoplehood serve the higher end of remaining God's agent in furthering the moral betterment of history.

Change is America's cultural norm and Reform is the movement that most welcomes change, not just for its own sake, but because it is the Jewish way. Because it takes new voices to challenge old certainties and envision fresh horizons, Judaism's quantum leaps forward have generally accompanied waves of immigration. Migrations can also be internal, arriving from within our midst, and we are enjoying three of these now. The first is the arrival of women to positions of power and influence. The second, still in its infancy, is non-Jews who find their way, through marriage and otherwise, into a Jewish orbit. The third is the children of baby boomers, now replacing their parents' generation as the defining voices of our future. These migrations from within constitute the new frontier.

I emphasize this universalistic mission not to disparage our properly cultivated particularism that set in during the 1970s, but to emphasize the intangible unobservables that make Reform what it is: uncompromising justice, unremitting honesty, and unwavering openness to how we study texts, worship, and listen to other voices. In the interests of bilateral equality, for example, we initiated patri-

lineal descent; taking spiritual seekers seriously, we devised outreach. For these and other initiatives, we have often been castigated. That is the nature of the frontier. It attracts charges of assimilation, ignorance, and worse. Professing openness, we have (at our best) attended to critics, who are sometimes right. But believing in our mission, we have (also at our best) stayed the course.

But such advances require institutions to move them forward, and therein is our challenge. Despite dedicated leaders who strive for excellence, our institutions can be described as routinized bureaucracies that produce mediocrity rather than brilliance. Our organizational culture is risk-averse. Too much of our seminary training shapes rabbis to meet the need, not create it; to fit the mold, not break it.

We are, moreover, so scattered that we replicate costs, are institutionally poor, and sacrifice efficiency. With three separate state-side

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