
What Does Reform Judaism Stand For?

Jack Wertheimer

IT IS by now a well-documented fact that liberal Protestant denominations in the United States have fallen on hard times. In the mainline churches that once dominated American religious life—and from which emerged the country’s political and cultural elites—the pews have been emptying since as long ago as the 1960’s.* As the average age of churchgoers edges ever upward, the challenge of recruiting both members and qualified clergy looms larger still, adding to the general sense of demoralization and desuetude. In the meantime, membership in conservative Christian denominations, particularly the evangelical churches, has been swelling.

Against this backdrop, the seeming growth and high morale of Reform Judaism—the Jewish analogue to the liberal Protestant denominations—are nothing short of astonishing. Rather than losing “market share” to its more conservative counterparts, the Reform movement has become *the* label selected by the plurality of those who identify themselves with the Jewish religion. Nor is its success a matter only of numbers. The movement’s internal decisions—on everything from synagogue liturgy to the religious status of gays and lesbians

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to rabbinic officiation at intermarriages—are widely regarded as bellwethers of American Jewish life at large. The voice of Reform leaders is also heeded on issues of American public policy, and as its base has grown, the movement has come to expect its views on these issues to carry considerable weight in the councils of the American Jewish community, if not beyond.

Understandably enough, Reform seems to attract the greatest attention when it appears to be acting contrary to type. Late last year, for example, articles in the general and Jewish press marveled at the release of a new Reform prayer book incorporating a much more “traditionalist” attitude toward long-discarded practices and modes of Jewish worship. What could this signify? A healthy openness and self-confidence or, perhaps, a sudden loss of direction? In either case, the time is ripe for a look at the successes Reform has achieved in the last decades, and at the obstacles that may lie in wait for it.

AS IT happens, shifts in direction, even radical ones, are nothing new in the history of Reform Judaism. The movement proudly declares its name to be both a noun and a verb, and ever since its emergence in America 150 years ago, it has self-consciously striven to adjust to the rhythm of the times.

* Figures are available at the website of the Association of Religion Data Archives: http://www.thearda.com/mapsReports/reports/US_2000.asp

In its first period of growth, Reform appealed primarily to Americanized Jews of Central European origin whose families had arrived here in the early and middle decades of the 19th century. By the post-Civil War era, this population had achieved economic success and high social status, and in the process had sloughed off most traditional Jewish practices like observance of the dietary laws (kashrut) and home-based Sabbath rituals. Their synagogues, too, were undergoing what seemed to be an inexorable tide of reformation, introducing organ music, a formal “High Church” aesthetic, abbreviated services, a liturgy largely in English, and rabbinic sermons delivered with oratorical panache.

On the organizational side of Reform, Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise of Cincinnati spearheaded an effort to weld individual congregations into a Union of American Hebrew Congregations. This body, in turn, founded the Hebrew Union College (HUC) to train rabbis. By the early 20th century, Reform Judaism had become the dominant religious expression of the native elite of the Jewish community (as opposed to the newly arrived immigrants from Eastern Europe and their families who, insofar as they affiliated themselves with religious observance, tended to join more traditionalist synagogues).

Historians have debated the reasons for the movement’s rapid spread. Much of the debate is academic, but one question has continued to reverberate: was American Reform built upon a structured ideology—on strongly held principles—or did it primarily reflect a series of pragmatic adjustments to the shifting scene? Perhaps the most sustained attempt to articulate a true ideology was the “Pittsburgh Platform” of 1885. According to that document, drafted at a conclave of Reform rabbis, the movement was committed to Judaism as a religion of ethical monotheism; to a highly rationalistic understanding of the deity, presented as a “God Idea”; to the pursuit of social justice for all; and to a definition of Jewishness as solely a matter of confession. On the negative side, much of the ritual structure of Judaism was dismissed as a throwback to an era now rendered anachronistic by the advances of science and human reason. In particular, the movement rejected “such Mosaic and rabbinical laws as regulate diet, priestly purity, and dress.” By the same token, it also rejected any national component to Jewish identity or hope for the restoration of Jews to Zion.

We cannot know for certain how ardently these principles were held by ordinary Reform Jews, as distinct from their rabbis. In Reform congrega-

tions, however, men were forbidden to wear a head covering or prayer shawl; dietary laws were openly flouted; and the prayer services pointedly eschewed any reference to the national aspirations of the Jewish people.

This period of what is known as “classical” Reform lasted until nearly the outbreak of World War II, when the movement experienced an influx of new leaders with a different set of assumptions. As the children of East European immigrants became a force within both the membership base and eventually the rabbinate, and with the growth of the Nazi menace in Europe, Reform’s longstanding opposition to Zionism began to collapse. By 1937, the Reform rabbinate had accepted a neutral (as distinct from hostile) stance on the issue. During the war, this would give way in turn to a positive embrace of the Jewish national movement, compelling anti-Zionist Reform rabbis to break away and found the American Council for Judaism.

THROUGHOUT THIS period, Reform Jews continued to dominate the leadership of the American Jewish community at large—including the top positions within the Zionist camp, occupied by Rabbis Stephen S. Wise and Abba Hillel Silver. But Reform attitudes were increasingly out of synch with the sentiments of the large majority of Jews in the country, a majority now made up of second-generation Americans who held a generally more positive view of ritual observance and found Reform “temples,” with their socially exclusive policies and their emphasis on strict decorum, to be alien places.

As the new Jewish majority moved out of the inner cities and into the burgeoning suburbs, Reform began to adapt. Suddenly, temples were sponsoring such formerly unheard-of rites as bar-mitzvah and, later, bat-mitzvah ceremonies. The shofar replaced trumpet blasts on the Jewish New Year, and head coverings and prayer shawls made a slow comeback.

Some of this “increased ritualism,” as it was dubbed by its antagonists, represented a self-conscious effort to compete more effectively with Conservative Judaism, which during the 1950’s would overtake Reform as the preferred religious choice of the plurality of American Jews. But many within the movement saw it as a move in precisely the wrong direction, into the benighted past. The historian Jacob Rader Marcus, a revered professor at HUC, spoke for them:

There are today too many Reform Jews who have ceased to be [religious] liberals. Their Reform, crystallized into a new Orthodoxy, is no

longer dynamic. . . . We cannot lead our people forward by standing backward.

Sounding a similar note, rabbis contributing to a 1960 symposium urged Reform to stick to its pristine agenda. As one respondent declared: “We should not fear to be different.”

For the next few decades, the movement zigged and zagged without a defined direction. Clearly, it had repented of large parts of its “classical” ideology. But what it stood for was harder to say. For the centenary of its founding in 1973, the movement had hoped to produce a timely statement of principles; the document finally appeared three years later.

AT SOME point in the 1980’s, however, things appear to have changed again, and Reform emerged stronger, more unified, and more sure of itself. This is the Reform we know today. Several related initiatives undertaken by the movement help explain the turn in its fortunes. Their common watchwords are “inclusiveness” and “choice.”

For one thing, the movement incorporated sexual egalitarianism as a cardinal principle. Initially this meant that women would be treated as complete equals in all aspects of religious and synagogue life. In 1972, HUC had been the first American Jewish seminary to ordain a woman rabbi, a precedent it followed by becoming the first to graduate a woman as a cantor. Over the ensuing decades, women assumed key positions in the governance of congregations and in the movement’s national institutions. In time, Reform also embraced openly homosexual Jews, welcomed so-called gay synagogues into its congregational body, ordained open gays as rabbis and cantors, and sanctioned wedding and/or commitment ceremonies for same-sex couples.

Nor were these the only moves toward inclusiveness. Hoping to retain the allegiance of Jews who had married or who wished to marry non-Jews, significant numbers of Reform rabbis began to bless interfaith unions, thereby overturning a long history of opposition to the practice. Congregations, meanwhile, launched “outreach activities” to draw in intermarried Jews and their families. In 1983, the Reform rabbinate turned aside the accepted rabbinic definition of a person qualifying as a born Jew—the traditional criterion is a person whose mother was Jewish—so as to include anyone who had one Jewish parent of either sex and who took part in public acts of Jewish identification (for instance, by attending a synagogue).

In terms of demographics, this particular initia-

tive produced dramatic results: by the turn of the 21st century, over 25 percent of the member families in Reform temples were intermarried.* And no less open-armed was Reform’s new approach to diverse types of Jewish expression. In ritual matters, the movement now happily accommodated head coverings and prayer shawls for both men and women during services, while continuing to welcome those who eschewed such garb; synagogues and other institutions began to provide for members wishing to observe aspects of Jewish dietary laws, even as they respected the desires of those partial to prohibited foods. And so forth.

Here the guiding principle has been autonomy and choice. Each individual Jew has the inalienable right to define which aspects of the faith are personally meaningful to him; so long as these choices are “informed,” the movement not only tolerates but endorses them.

On two fronts, leaders have pressed hard for their own point of view; in each case, their instincts have appeared to be wholly in tune with the temper of the times. The first concerns synagogue services, which were deemed hopelessly deadening and in desperate need of revision. As Rabbi Eric Yoffie, the head of the congregational body, put it:

[F]ar too often, our services are tedious, predictable, and dull. Far too often, our members pray without fervor or concentration. Far too often, our music is dirge-like and our Torah readings lifeless, and we are unable to trigger true emotion and assent.

In response, congregations began to experiment with liturgies combining traditional prayers with newly composed prayers and poems; organ and choir music gave way to singing accompanied by flutes, stringed instruments, and drums; rabbis dropped their formal sermons in favor of open discussion. Most noticeably, Reform temples in which congregants were accustomed to sitting passively in pews now freed them to move around the sanctuary—carrying the Torah, dancing during prayers, greeting one another as fellow worshippers.

The final step in this process came last year with the release of the radically revised prayer book for Sabbath and holidays.† As was immediately noticed, the new volume incorporates many more Hebrew prayers than its predecessors and restores much of the structure of the traditional worship

* In Conservative and Orthodox synagogues, by contrast, the respective figures were 12 percent and 5 percent.

† See the review by William Kolbrener in COMMENTARY, January 2008.

service. At the same time, though, in the regnant spirit of inclusiveness and choice, it also provides ample room for each synagogue to tailor the liturgy however it sees fit.

The second front is the political. Until recently, it was possible to find Reform rabbis and lay leaders active in both the Republican and Democratic parties, and the movement's pronouncements on matters of public policy retained at least a studied semblance of political neutrality. This is no longer the case. In recent years, Reform Judaism, at the prodding of its Washington arm, the Religious Action Center, has issued resolution after resolution in support of Left-liberal positions across an array of political and social issues. It has opposed the war in Iraq and the nomination of Justice Samuel Alito; sharply rebuked the Christian Right; and vigorously supported the left-wing Democratic stance on gay marriage, affirmative action, and school vouchers.

In all of these areas, the Reform movement has aligned itself perfectly with positions adopted by mainstream liberal Protestantism. But Protestant denominations have split badly over questions like liturgical innovation, abortion rights, and gay ordination. In contrast, on some of the most divisive issues of our time, Reform leaders have not only avoided schism but have evidently built a strong consensus.

Although the new prayer book was completed only after an agonizingly long period of testing and discussion, for example, the movement as a whole seems to have weathered its larger "synagogue revolution" (to use Rabbi Yoffie's phrase) without serious resistance. In the course of that revolution, religious ideology has been replaced by a pragmatic tolerance of pluralism, religious services have become dizzyingly eclectic, drawing upon multiple sources and varying from congregation to congregation, and congregations themselves have absorbed a continuous and apparently frictionless flow of recruits from the ranks of other denominations, from the gay and lesbian community, and from intermarried households. This is to say nothing of Reform's openly partisan stance on political matters.

In sum, whatever tempests have rocked the ship of liberal Christianity, Reform Judaism would seem not only to have navigated the storms but to be moving forward with the wind in its sails.

NEEDLESS TO say, a vibrant Reform Judaism would be good news under any circumstances, and all the more so now that Reform has become the largest Jewish religious movement in

the country. If Reform were to fail, large numbers of American Jews would likely be lost to organized Jewish life altogether. But is the movement thriving as heartily as its upbeat leaders and spokesmen insist? Is it, by its own standards, succeeding in not only retaining its members but inspiring them to intensive religious engagement?

The answer is a highly equivocal one, and it begins with some stark demographic facts. Aside from the minority who actually belong to synagogues, only 15 percent of self-identified Reform Jews report any involvement at all in Jewish organizational life. More than half, moreover, say they have not attended a synagogue within the past year, nearly half cannot read Hebrew, and 30 percent say they feel distant from Israel.

What we know about persons raised within the Reform movement itself is no less sobering. In 2000, fully 70 percent of Jews saying they were raised Reform were not members of any kind of synagogue, a figure that holds steady across the generational board: among older Jews, baby-boomers, and the so-called gen-x and gen-y populations. Seventeen percent of individuals raised Reform do not identify with the Jewish religion, period. Among intermarried Jews who were raised Reform, this figure rises to 28 percent.

Nor is there any evidence that Reform synagogue membership has grown over the past few decades. If temples are holding their own, it is mainly by attracting people from outside, chiefly from the Conservative movement, which has been commensurately shrinking, and from the ranks of Gentiles married to Jews. Whatever this says about Reform's appeal to outsiders, it suggests a serious weakness when it comes to transmitting a strong sense of Jewish religious identification and commitment to those raised within Reform itself.*

What is the cause of this weakness? A new study of schooling under Reform auspices points to one culprit: the lack of a proper education. For the overwhelming majority of children in the movement, formal Jewish schooling ends at bar- or bat-mitzvah age. More than half drop out of supplementary classes after the seventh grade; of those who continue their studies, two-thirds are gone by grades nine or ten. Despite the declared aspirations of the movement to engage Jews in "lifelong Jewish

* According to the 2000-2001 National Jewish Population Study (NJPS), only 42 percent of the members of Reform synagogues were raised as Reform Jews. By contrast, Conservative synagogues drew 60 percent of their membership from within their own ranks; in Orthodox congregations, 73 percent were raised Orthodox. I am indebted to Bruce Phillips and Judith Veinstein for help in obtaining the statistics that I interpret in the preceding paragraphs.

learning,” its teens and adults have so far declined to heed the message.

The same goes for regular attendance at religious services. According to the 2000 NJPS, fewer than ten percent of Reform synagogue members attend once a week. Sabbath-morning services in most Reform temples attract only the family and friends of the bar or bat mitzvah for a ceremony in which, in the words of Rabbi Yoffie, “worship of God gives way to worship of the child.” The central weekly religious gathering remains a one-hour service on Friday evening. This has been the object of major reforms in liturgy and music, and rabbis do report a consequent increase in attendance; but even so, the number of regulars rarely climbs above 10-15 percent of membership.

When the overwhelming majority shun religious study, how are individual Reform Jews expected to make the “informed choices” on which the movement prides itself? When the overwhelming majority cannot be counted on to participate in religious services, what precisely is thriving in Reform temples?

THE INITIATIVES to include once-marginalized populations show equally ambiguous and no doubt unanticipated results. Reform institutions are open as never before to women, welcoming them into positions of authority and leadership. Yet even as women have moved from the periphery to the center, Reform men have been moving rapidly in the opposite direction. As numerous congregational rabbis have testified, the declining presence of men is palpable in the sanctuary, in committee meetings, in national study programs, even in the biennial conventions of congregational leaders. Matters have reached such a pass that at the most recent convention, an all-male religious service, something usually associated with Orthodox Judaism, was sanctioned as an experiment in “bonding.”

Boys, too, seem to have drifted away. Youth groups and summer camps are filled with female teens who, according to one West Coast rabbi, “wonder where their male counterparts are.” In one recent study, boys made up only 12 percent of participants in a leadership camp for ninth graders. On college campuses, similarly, Reform programs struggle to attract males. At HUC, men now constitute only one-quarter of students training to become rabbis, cantors, and educators.

“If you look carefully at the most hands-on people who are running Jewish institutional life today, you are seeing fewer and fewer men,” says Rabbi Sheldon Zimmerman, the former president of

HUC—an observation manifestly not true of other denominations but very true of Reform. And an analogous situation seems to obtain on the home front. The sociologist Sylvia Barack Fishman has found that within Reform families, fathers participate much less than mothers in the Jewish upbringing of the children. This is particularly the case among intermarried Jewish men—to the point where Fishman concludes that “Reform Jewish men who marry non-Jewish women [are] the ‘weak link’ in American Jewish life today.”

In a movement so proudly identified with egalitarian ideals, the fact that men are fleeing institutional life is mystifying—unless we posit a vast gap between Reform’s professed values and the religious desires of its male adherents. In any event, the ironic fact remains that a movement that led the way toward sexual equality in Judaism is now the *least* balanced internally between the sexes. On this score, too, Reform today resembles liberal Protestantism, where men form a dwindling minority in the pews, in congregational leadership, and in the seminaries. Even within Reform, however, few count this fact as a sign of success.

SIMILARLY FRAUGHT with complications is Reform outreach to the intermarried. The numbers themselves are undeniably impressive. Among intermarried families in the United States, 62 percent of those joining a synagogue opt for Reform. But this large population has posed a massive educational challenge. How are synagogues to teach non-Jews about Judaism while simultaneously working to increase the knowledge of their Jewish members? One Reform rabbi has waved away this dilemma by noting that in his congregation, Jews and non-Jews possess exactly the same (i.e., minimal) level of Jewish literacy. Others acknowledge the seriousness of the problem, but are at a loss to remedy it.

Congregational schools now draw half their enrollment from families in which one parent was not born Jewish and only a minority of such parents have converted to Judaism. One can only sympathize with teachers trying to cope with the mixed signals sent to children about the diverse religious practices on display in the homes of intermarried families. So far, there seems neither much willingness to recognize the sheer magnitude of the responsibility the movement has taken on nor any sign of appropriate resources being channeled to address it through schools, camps, youth movements, or college programs.

In fact, there is little critical talk at all about the

consequences of having integrated so large a population of non-Jews and their families into Reform synagogues. Non-Jewish parents who devotedly bring their children to services and classes are now publicly honored as “heroes.” But the movement has been silent on the need to maintain an unambiguously Jewish orientation within the family so as to minimize confusion and foster a strong identification with Judaism. In 2005, Rabbi Yoffie floated the idea of tactfully conveying to Gentile spouses that they were welcome to convert to Judaism and would be eagerly embraced. The response from the movement’s rabbinic and lay leadership was swift and direct. His proposal was deemed to be offensive to the sensibilities of both non-Jews and their Jewish family members, and was soon a dead letter.

According to the head of a major Reform organization, intermarriage is now so taken for granted in the movement that most Reform Jews no longer see anything problematic about it. This has created a bind for the minority of Reform rabbis and rabbinical candidates who do not wish to officiate at so-called inter-weddings—and who know that they may be denied a pulpit for sticking to their principles. Rather anomalously, movement policy still formally discourages rabbinic officiation at such unions, while respecting the right of individual rabbis to follow the dictates of their conscience. But a commission has been formed to re-examine the matter, and expectations are that it will revoke the present policy in favor of a more “inclusive” one, thereby further undermining those wanting to hold the line.

INCLUSIVENESS, IN short, has brought a number of short-term gains to Reform while exacting a very high price in unintended consequences. So has the movement’s stress on the principle of individual choice.

For one thing, by emphasizing autonomy, Reform Judaism has inadvertently weakened the commitment of many of its adherents to the collective needs of the Jewish people. Though the leadership remains intensely attached to Israel and to the welfare of Jews around the world, and has invested in a Reform presence in many parts of the globe, a connection to the Jewish people does not rank high in the priorities of many self-professed Reform Jews. In a recent survey, 44 percent disagreed with the statement, “I have a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people,” and only 21 percent claimed to feel “very emotionally attached to Israel.”

Undoubtedly, this connection is even more at-

tenuated among intermarried families and their children. But the emphasis on personalism has clearly enfeebled the allegiances of many born Jews as well. Rabbi David Ellenson, the current president of HUC, declares that the future of American Judaism is “contingent, to a large extent, upon the success Reform rabbis will have in instilling communitarian religious values and commitments.” It is hard to fathom how rabbis will succeed at this task given the movement’s insistence on the priority of individual choice.

To make matters worse, while rabbis must respect the autonomous right of their congregants to choose which aspects of Judaism they value, congregants need not and do not necessarily respect the autonomous choices of their rabbis, let alone their rabbis’ authority to create a hierarchy of choices rooted in traditional Jewish texts and practices. In this connection, it is by no means clear that many of today’s Reform Jews have adopted the positive approach of a sizable number of younger rabbis toward those traditional practices.

It is not even clear that the movement’s leadership is in accord on this matter. In a remarkable statement issued last summer, Rabbi Yoffie distinguished the Judaism practiced by Reform from other forms of Judaism in these words: “If you take it all upon yourself as an obligation rather than as a choice, you’ve reached the point at which you’re no longer a Reform Jew.”

Here, at last, is a candidly non-inclusive position. What it suggests is that in today’s Reform, red lines continue to exist to the Right: for a rabbi or a congregant to flirt with the basic concept of religious obligation, or venture too close to traditional Jewish observances, is to rule oneself out.

What of red lines to the religious Left? Are there any limits there? True, the movement disapproves of such outlying phenomena as the Society for Humanistic Judaism with its denial of a personal God, or Jews for Jesus. But, as we have seen, it has accommodated all sorts of other innovation under the rubric of legitimate Jewish expression, and has been remarkably silent on what it would consider beyond the pale.

If Reform Judaism were a movement in its adolescence, this perpetual hankering after innovation, this hunger to be in tune with the latest cultural assumptions, this writing and revising of liturgy, this seemingly blithe indifference to the consequences of the choices one has made might be characterized, indulgently, as passing fecklessness. In a mature organization that is also the largest Jewish denomination in America, one would expect a mea-

sure of constancy over the long term and a far-reaching vision for deepening the engagement of its adherents. If Reform's leaders have actually thought deeply about the present and future religious needs of the many Jews and non-Jews in their care, or resolved upon ways of raising their levels of Jewish literacy, teaching them the skills needed for a Jewish life, and defining for them Reform's ideal criteria of Jewish observance, there has been precious little evidence of it.

WHAT DOES all this augur for Reform itself? The movement has wagered its future on the gamble that a coherent and vibrant Judaism can be built on the idea of a big tent, on the informed choice of each Reform Jew, and on a highly elastic definition of both "Reform" and "Jew." Both in what it cannot accept and in what it cannot but accommodate, the movement is very much at one with the individualistic and "pluralist" ethos of contemporary American culture. But for how long will significant numbers of people continue to be drawn to, or stick with, a religious movement that cannot or will not define standards for committed living, and that, except when it comes to political imperatives, has self-consciously shunned the very notion of imperatives? In this regard, the dramat-

ic decline of liberal Protestant denominations may truly serve as a warning of what lies ahead.

No less urgent is the question of what Reform's present position augurs for Judaism as a whole, or for the Jewish people. When one puts together the increasing reliance on large numbers of non-Jewish members, the emphasis on personal autonomy, the minimal level of literacy expected by leaders, the freedom of each congregation to shape its own liturgy and synagogue music, and the low identification with Israel expressed by the rank and file, the inescapable impression is of a movement whose policies, intentionally or not, systematically discount any notion of a collective Jewish enterprise or the solidarity needed to sustain it.

Liturgy, literacy, and religious norms serve in Judaism as binding forces of a common belief system and a common vocabulary; Israel serves as a focal point for common action. All of these are of low priority to a great many Reform Jews and will necessarily become of even lower priority as more non-Jews enter the movement's synagogues, with no requirements imposed or expected. From the point of view of the future unity and distinctiveness of the Jewish people, one can only hope that it is not too late for this movement, which has reversed course so often in the past, to reform itself yet again.