

Judaism and the Future of Religion in America: A Symposium in Response to Dana Evan Kaplan's American Reform Judaism

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DANA EVAN KAPLAN'S BOOK PRESENTS A CONTROVERSIAL portrait of the contemporary American Reform movement. As editor of JUDAISM, I asked leaders of the various American Jewish religious streams to comment on his book, as a means of focusing a general discussion about the condition of Reform Judaism today. Since much of American Judaism is mirrored in the Reform movement, Dana Kaplan's book thus offers us the opportunity to begin an assessment of the religious developments of recent decades.

Kaplan portrays the Reform movement as dynamic and growing and simultaneously deeply divided and internally inconsistent. He argues that the Reform movement needs to develop and articulate a coherent theology and increase the religious demands it places on its adherents. He notes that American Reform Judaism has had a bold vision for the renewal of Judaism. There have been radical innovations, among them the acceptance of Jewishness by patrilineal descent, outreach to intermarried couples, full ritual participation for women, gay and lesbian marriage, a lobbying effort to gain formal recognition for the Reform movement in the State of Israel, and a campaign to restructure and re-orient synagogue worship practice. Yet Kaplan claims that the Reform concept of religious autonomy may eventually destroy the movement. He recalls Rabbi Alexander Schindler's comment that "as liberal Jews, we assert our autonomy; we insist on the right to choose. But all too often we choose nothing at all." Kaplan notes that this problem is the Achilles' heel of liberal religion. He argues that if Reform is "to prosper and grow, both numerically and religiously, it is going to have to develop a coherent, effective strategy for reconciling autonomy and authority."

The six respondents commenting on *American Reform Judaism: An Introduction* represent different viewpoints: none of them speak on behalf of their respective movements. In focusing on the views Kaplan presents, rather than simply delineating their impressions of the Reform movement, these respondents construct an evaluation of the state of American Reform Judaism, and, implicitly, of American Jewish life.

After they have had their say, Dana Kaplan responds to their remarks.

Trends in Reform and Their Broader Implications

LAWRENCE GROSSMAN

THE REFORM MOVEMENT HAS CONTRIBUTED SIGNIFICANTLY to Jewish life, and its future course is bound to affect the fate of Jews in the United States and around the world.

Beginning in early nineteenth-century Germany, when an insular traditional Judaism, just emerging from the ghetto, found itself incapable of addressing the corrosive challenges of modernity, Reform showed that one could retain Jewish identity while participating fully in the majority culture. In this respect Reform blazed a trail for other Diaspora Jews, who today navigate comfortably between their Jewish and secular worlds—if sometimes in ways that would not have made the founders of Reform happy. Even the most religiously Orthodox accept, albeit only *de facto*, the necessity for some acculturation in order to preserve their way of life, implicitly testifying to the truth of Reform’s insight, the need for some synthesis between tradition and modernity.

It was Reform, too, that pioneered an active Jewish public-policy role within the Western nation-state, an imperative now taken for granted in Jewish circles far removed from Reform. This has been especially true in the United States, where Reform took the lead in applying Jewish teachings to the struggle for social and economic justice. The Jewish push for religious dialogue with the Christian world was a Reform innovation, and the ramified pattern of American Jewish organizational life would be unthinkable without the early efforts of Jews largely associated with Reform. The movement produced great leaders—Stephen Wise and Abba Hillel Silver come to mind—who were esteemed by Jews across the ideological spectrum.

Given the central importance of Reform in Jewish life, it is strange indeed that Dana Kaplan’s *American Reform Judaism* is the first book to present a complete and coherent picture of what has become the largest stream of Judaism in the United States. Kaplan traces Reform’s history, theology, liturgy, educational efforts, activities in Israel—and, more controversially, its outreach to the intermarried, gays, and lesbians, and the “patrilineal descent” ruling

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granting Jewish status to the children of Jewish fathers and Gentile mothers. Immediately upon publication, *American Reform Judaism* became the standard work on the subject.

As a guide to contemporary Reform, *American Reform Judaism* is a worthy sequel to *Response to Modernity*, Michael Meyer's magisterial history of the world-wide Reform movement from its German origins two centuries ago until the late 1970s. But the two books are sharply different in tone, both because so much has changed over the last quarter-century and because Kaplan, unlike the full-time academic Meyer, has had considerable experience "in the trenches" as a congregational rabbi. The view from the pulpit is likely to be less rosy than from the seminar room.

The Reform Judaism that Meyer portrayed certainly had its problems, but was, nevertheless, bursting with optimism. "In many respects it remains internally divided," Meyer concluded his book. "But with fresh growth, creativity, and an expression of unity, it completed the 1970s with greater self-confidence and better founded hope."

Kaplan is far more ambivalent about Reform's course and future prospects, and he signals his own mixed feelings by having Arthur Hertzberg, an outspoken critic of Reform, write the foreword, and Eric Yoffie, president of the Union for Reform Judaism and the acknowledged leader of American Reform, the afterword.

Several of the book's chapters, rich in factual information and interpretive insight, yet reveal unresolved tension, as if Kaplan is struggling to force himself to believe that Reform, despite the evidence he himself adduces, is on the right track after all. Often, he uses the final paragraphs of chapters to lend a note of optimism to otherwise sobering findings.

Two examples illustrate Kaplan's uncertainty. The chapter on Jewish education describes the abysmally low standards that prevail in Reform schools, but ends with the incredible assertion that the great German-Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig would be pleased with the way Reform was responding to the challenge of transmitting Jewish learning to the next generation. And in the chapter detailing how Reform overrode centuries of Jewish tradition to equalize heterosexual and homosexual relationships—"It is hard to imagine a single prophet finding the idea even remotely acceptable," he points out—Kaplan closes with good news that is dependent on a trite hypothetical: "If gays and lesbians indeed commit themselves to making Reform Judaism even more vibrant, then the Reform revolution will certainly succeed."

The specter that haunts Kaplan throughout the book is the possibility that the numerical growth of Reform Judaism has come at a terrible price: the abandonment of any guidelines, let alone requirements, for affiliation. Identification with Reform, in all too many cases, is nothing more than the default position for people who are Jews in name only—and sometimes not even that, as many Reform congregations encourage the participation, in varying degrees, of unconverted, non-Jewish spouses of members, and of children who are being raised as both Christians and Jews. Contemporary sociologists of religion have learned from the great flowering of fundamentalist forms of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam that religions making the heaviest demands and requiring the most sacrifices are the most successful, leaving us wondering about the future of Reform.

That a good number of younger Reform Jews are observing more religious rituals than their parents hardly compensates for the collapse of official standards since, as Kaplan notes, these observances mostly stem from a longing for “spirituality.” Hence their selective nature, as people conduct a kind of cherry-picking of those rites that evoke subjective feelings of transcendence. The Reform outreach mantra, “We are all Jews by choice,” is a far cry from the sense of Divine commandment that has been central to Judaism from its earliest days, and still flourishes in traditional circles.

To be sure, Reform from the start was based upon rejection of the *Shulhan Arukh*, the code of Jewish law, or any other compulsory standard for the conduct of Jewish life. Indeed, Kaplan demonstrates in detail how averse Reform Jews are toward having anyone tell them what to do. He describes how a set of suggested, nonbinding guidelines for reintroducing certain traditional practices, reflecting the new interest in ritual, was rewritten six times, the end product so watered down that by the time the Central Conference of American Rabbis voted approval in 1999, it had become almost meaningless.

But Kaplan senses that over the last generation, Reform antinomianism has developed a new dimension. It no longer simply denies the authority of Jewish law, but embraces a postmodern erasure of all conventional boundaries. The unprecedented openness of American society to Jews, leading inevitably to rising rates of Jewish-Christian marriage, and the collapse of traditional values among much of the college-educated population have undermined taken-for-granted standards that even the most theologically radical Reform Jew before the 1960s would not have questioned.

For all of Classical Reform’s insistence on the inviolability of personal conscience, and its willingness to accommodate, *de facto*, the life choices of individuals, the movement, up until just a few decades ago, unequivocally

denounced intermarriage as a threat to Jewish survival officiating at a mixed marriage made the rabbi a pariah among his colleagues, and did not challenge, in principle, the rule that the mother's religious identity determined that of the child. One can only imagine what the great historical leaders of Reform, believers in the traditional family, would have said about same-sex marriage. Suffice it to recall the late Jakob Petuchowski's comment on Reform's espousal of unrestricted abortion rights—that a movement that began by rejecting ceremonial law in favor of ethics had ended by abandoning ethics as well, and, like the Cheshire Cat in *Alice in Wonderland*, it had ceased to exist as a living entity, leaving nothing behind but its smile.

Simply put, while Reform has always resisted the imposition of religious obligations on the individual, in our time it has lost the power to resist American culture, which values autonomy, inclusivity, and nonjudgmentalism. It is a culture that distrusts distinctions—between religions, between genders, between sexual orientations—and views them as discrimination. While hardly alone in the Jewish community in succumbing to the relativist pull of postmodernity, Reform is its primary institutional expression. This is surely ironic, given the movement's original “prophetic” impetus; the biblical prophets were, after all, nonconformists who defied the conventional wisdom of their times and were sometimes made to suffer for it.

The awkward use of prophetic rhetoric in defense of what is popular in liberal circles may help explain why Reform pronouncements often sound so hollowly grandiose. The movement's criticisms of Israeli policies, for example, are often couched in the self-righteous language of “telling truth to power,” while in substance they follow the standard line espoused by those in “power”—in the UN, academia, the media, and elsewhere—that Palestinians are a victim people and Israelis their oppressors. In fairness, such Reform statements became rarer with the outbreak of the second intifada in 2000. Kaplan cites another delicious example of misplaced Reform prophetism, the widely publicized decision of Rabbi Paul Menitoff, executive vice president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, to resign from the Boy Scouts of America and make the ultimate sacrifice of returning his Eagle Scout badge in protest over the organization's firing of a gay scout leader.

American Reform Judaism has implications far beyond the confines of the movement it studies. Since Reform has been so central to the development of American Jewry as a whole, and the openness and freedom it espouses has made it the Judaism of choice for a plurality of American Jews today, other denominational expressions are affected by its actions.

It is often said that Conservative Judaism, despite its official adherence to traditional Jewish law, is only ten years or so behind Reform. Conservative Jews are buffeted by the same social forces as their Reform cousins, and the pressures to readjust religious norms to fit are intense. Ask any Conservative rabbi, and he or she will describe how congregants cannot understand the exclusionary policy whereby the movement bars its rabbis from performing Jewish-Christian weddings, thereby alienating the young people. The recent surge in Reform membership has come mostly at the expense of Conservative Judaism, which is losing out on the growing number of intermarried families. While the current major conflict roiling Conservative waters concerns gay marriage and the ordination of gay rabbis, once that is resolved (inevitably in the affirmative), officiating at intermarriages and the Jewish status of the children will be next on the agenda. A substantial segment of the Conservative laity are reportedly already in favor of following Reform and adopting the patrilineal-descent criterion.

If developments within Reform have pulled Conservative Judaism in untraditional directions, they have had the opposite effect within the precincts of Orthodoxy. There is much less anti-Reform (and anti-Conservative) invective from Orthodox leaders now than there was a half-century ago. This is not because Orthodox antagonism to the non-Orthodox movements has lessened; quite the contrary. Whereas Orthodox rabbis used to see the more liberal streams as real threats, offering Jews alternative ways to practice the faith that were less demanding and more in consonance with modern ways, they now believe that Jewish expressions outside of Orthodoxy are simply doomed to disappear as they make their peace with the inexorable tide of intermarriage, below-replacement-level birthrates, and rampant cultural assimilation. Why attack an opponent, they reason, who is busy destroying itself? The isolationist tendencies in Orthodoxy, embodied in the smug notion that it alone carries the key to Jewish continuity, are encouraged by the revolutionary changes in Reform that Kaplan delineates.

Much, then, is riding on the future of the Reform movement. Will it somehow manage to remain Jewish in essence as well as in name, providing institutional proof that Judaism can thrive while engaging the secular society in which it lives? Or will it prove, in the end, a terminal form of a once-great religion called Judaism, disappearing into the postmodern American melting-pot, leaving only sectarian Orthodox Jews behind to gloat, "We told you so"?

The ultimate fate of Reform, of course, is beyond our ken. But Dana Kaplan's *American Reform Judaism* provides the available evidence for anyone seeking to formulate an educated guess.

An Orthodox Perspective

T Z V I H E R S H W E I N R E B

A WISE MAN IN MY FORMER SYNAGOGUE HAD A BRIEF description of the three streams of American Judaism which is particularly instructive as a framework for a response to Kaplan's *American Reform Judaism*. He posited the classic man from Mars who comes down to earth, to the United States in this case, and wants to know about Judaism. He was told of the three "branches"—Orthodox, Reform, and Conservative. He was told that the difference between them was that the Orthodox believe in one God and the divinity of His message, one set of laws binding upon all, and one method of worship exclusive to all others. Reform and Conservative groups, he was told, tend to allow for individual expression, personal choice, pluralism, and the acceptance of many ways to God and many conceptions of God. How surprised he was to find out that the so-called homogeneous Orthodox had hundreds of rabbinical seminaries, numerous synagogue movements, and could easily be divided into dozens of subgroups. More surprising was that there was but one rabbinical seminary and one congregational organization for the Conservative and Reform movements.

It is natural to expect a uniformity and conformity within the Orthodox world, and diversity and heterogeneity in the non-Orthodox streams. The reality, however, is quite the reverse. Certainly there is no uniformity within the Orthodox world. Even within its so-called ultra Orthodox or modern Orthodox components there is tremendous diversity, if not great internal discord. However, Reform Judaism certainly as it is described in Kaplan's introduction to it, comes across as being quite monolithic and controlled from a central body who plans its course and defines its identity.

One would certainly expect that Orthodoxy would be the group to conform to a central body making periodic resolutions. But the Orthodoxy that we know, of course, is very much a grass roots movement. Reform, as Kaplan describes it, is not a grass roots, bottom to top organization, but very much one which from its very inception was shaped and guided by central authoritative bodies. Exploration of this paradox will be the focus of this response.

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It must be said at the outset that as a book, particularly as an introductory one, Kaplan's work is outstanding. He assumes very little background on the part of his reader, and gives just enough historical background of the Reform movement to allow himself to describe the American Reform experience, particularly from the mid twentieth century until today. He covers every aspect of contemporary American Reform Judaism; from its internal theological disputes to its attempts to adapt to contemporary developments and the current needs of its constituencies. He conveys very clearly the tremendous change that Reform has undergone, particularly in recent decades. He gives us a framework to understand how Reform too, like other components of Judaism, and other religions today, is experiencing its "move to the right." His writing is clear, his facts seem, certainly to this non-expert on the subject, to be accurate, and there is enough new information and observation in the book to maintain the attention of even the fairly knowledgeable. There is some repetitiveness in the work, but this is probably unavoidable as the author wishes to discuss in detail the manifestations of some of the basic themes of the contemporary Reform movement. Thus, sub topics such as Reform's attitude to the Gay and Homosexual community, and other contemporary issues are treated separately but reflect the basic stance of Reform defined earlier in the book.

As an Orthodox rabbi, only minimally informed about the Reform movement, particularly in its current struggles for definition, this book was very informative and very helpful.

It therefore remains to me to react to American Reform Judaism as described in Kaplan's work from the perspective of an Orthodox Jew. As I read through the book there was a consistent, even nagging, question which kept distracting me from paying attention to the work. And that question was, "could such a book be written about American Orthodox Judaism?" I found myself coping with this question and trying to imagine what a similar work about Orthodoxy would look like. It certainly could not be contained to the 250 pages of Kaplan's work, nor could it be organized around several central principles or themes as Kaplan does so well for Reform Judaism.

The most striking difference is that the Reform Judaism described by Kaplan is self-consciously determined by several key leaders in the Reform movement. In his description of the history of Reform, the no more than half dozen names from the latter half of nineteenth century with which we are familiar emerge as central figures who determined the nature and direction of the movement. Moving forward into contemporary times Kaplan makes it sound that two or three men, Alexander Schindler and Eric Yoffe among them, through addresses

to major convocations and through their vision and leadership have very much determined the very nature of Reform. The Orthodox world certainly knows its share of charismatic and visionary leaders. Yet, it is hard to imagine describing American Orthodox Judaism as the product of the stated, articulated plans of two or three individuals. Typically, the leaders whose names we associate with contemporary American Orthodox Judaism, such as the Rebbe of Chabad, Rabbi Soloveitchik, Rabbi Aron Kotler, and Rabbi Moses Feinstein, each have impacted on American Orthodox Judaism in many diverse ways but have not pre-determined its essence. The essence of the Chabad movement has firm roots in its origins 200 years ago. The Chassidic influence, too, is rooted in its long tradition. The various phenomena that characterize the yeshiva world are rooted firmly in pre-Shoah trends and practices. Certainly the convocation of no central body, whether it be the Agudath Israel, the Orthodox Union, or various Chassidic courts have set the course for American Orthodox Judaism in the manner in which it occurred in the Reform movement.

My mind also kept dwelling, as I read Kaplan's work, on other contrasts between the American Orthodox experience and what Kaplan describes as the Reform experience. I will "hold my fire" and not critique the Reform movement from a traditionalistic perspective, although reading the book I was very tempted to do so. Rather I will simply use descriptive terms to sharply contrast some of the essential and fundamental—perhaps even existential—differences between the Reform Judaism that Kaplan describes and the Orthodox Judaism that I know.

One area in which the contrast is stark is in the subjective religious experience of the Orthodox Jew versus what the Reform Jew seems to experience. There is no question in my mind, although others would argue this point, that there is such a thing as a religious experience and that all people linked to religion to some degree or another know this subjective, psychological phenomenon. The religious experience of the Orthodox Jew is of an external source—God, Halakha, or Torah—which sets up demands to which one must respond. Note that I am not talking here from a theological perspective but from an inner sense of demand, pressure, and obligation to act. This is well expressed in one of the reminiscences of Abraham Joshua Heschel, who is not typically counted as an Orthodox leader although his religious experiences were clearly traditional. One day he was walking in his University town and towards sunset began to experience this gnawing need to stop his activity and go off to pray. He described this not as a sudden inspirational urge, but rather as a need to respond to the demand of the mitzvah of Tefillah and to

make sure that he prayed the Mincha Service before it was too late in the day. Orthodox Jews across the board experience these types of demands whenever they are faced with a choice of food, as the times of the day move along and different prayer obligations arise, and certainly during different times of the year when religious observances and restrictions come to the fore. The inner experience is one of "I must not . . ." or "I must . . ."

Indeed, this internalization of a sense of demand is precisely what the Talmud requires of the observant Jew. In a famous passage answering the question as to why the first paragraph of the Shema precedes the second paragraph when they are in the opposite sequence in Deuteronomy, the Talmud states that first we must accept upon ourselves "Kabalat Ol Malchut Shamayim," the yoke of Heaven, and only afterward "Ol Mitzvot," the yoke of specific practices. This notion of Kabbalat Ol, accepting the yoke or burden is basic to traditional Judaism and translates into a very powerful subjective experience by all who have been educated in Orthodox practice.

It is hard to imagine a similar experience in the subjective inner world of the Reform Jew. Quite the contrary, the outer source which seems to call forth a response in the Reform leaders is the needs of the constituency and the pressures of the modern world. There is no inner experience of an obligation to be faithful and committed to a stable fixed religious "object." It would follow from Kaplan's work that from the Orthodox perspective the leader must be expert in Jewish law and thoroughly familiar with God's "expectations," whereas the Reform leader is better advised to become expert in sociology of religion and the cultural anthropology of the extra-Jewish society of the day. Indeed, Kaplan's description of the various conventions and assemblies of the Reform rabbinate over the past 150 years is one of periodic redefinition of the religious expectations in response not to a prescribing divinity but to changing social realities.

Striking because of its absence in Kaplan's work is a description of the social experience of the Reform Jew. A similar work on American Orthodox Judaism would have to look at such topics as the Orthodox community or sub-communities. It has long been noted that adherence to the halakhic system necessitates that Orthodox Jews will live in geographically close communities because of the prohibition of driving on Shabbat, and the consequent need to live near a synagogue. This factor of community *gemeinschaft* which pervades the American Orthodox scene results in a number of phenomena which are totally absent in the Reform movement. They include the synagogue as a center for programs emerging from community needs as defined at the grassroots

level, the patterns of intra-community marriage, the role of the rabbi within the community, and the social life of his constituents. As described by Kaplan, Reform communities of individuals living in close geographical proximity to each other and interacting socially primarily only with each other do not exist, and the consequences in terms of difficulty in achieving a cohesive synagogue population are readily understandable.

Also striking is the relatively little space which Kaplan devotes to the role of the family and family life in Reform Judaism. The book that I imagine on American Orthodox Judaism would have to make the institution of family one of its central themes. It can be argued that traditionally, and certainly biblically, the Jewish family played much more of a role in the religious development and experience of the Jewish people than did the synagogue. The synagogue plays an absolutely important role in Reform Judaism, so much so that it is quite possible to conceive an Orthodox Judaism with no synagogues whereas it is inconceivable to imagine what Reform Judaism would look like if all of its synagogues and temples were to close down.

What was fascinating to me was the number of commonalities which exist between Reform and Orthodoxy. They range from specific practices such as Bar Mitzvah ceremonies and celebrations to much broader issues. It was news to me that Reform had opposed Bar Mitzvah ceremonies and celebrations during a certain period of its history, preferring instead some type of confirmation program. A generation or two ago our religion limited the celebration of Bar Mitzvah to a very minimal one, and defined the ceremony of the Bar Mitzvah in terms of the beginning of the observance of Mitzvot such as Tefillin and being called to the Torah. Certainly, Bar Mitzvah ceremonies and celebrations have gone too far in their lavishness and in the ludicrous lengths to which these events are often carried. It would be wise, indeed, to recover the notion of Bar Mitzvah in its original terms, as being the age of majority for eligibility in the performance of mitzvot and in serving as a member of the community, as defined by inclusion in a prayer minyan, and to develop educationally relevant programs to supplement wasteful celebrations.

A much broader and more important commonality is the search for spirituality which Kaplan describes. Long ago our Prophets noted that our religious behavior has often regressed to rote performance, superficial commitment, hypocrisy, and the surrender to the seductions of materialism. These problems were addressed by the great *Neviim* and, we imagine, with some success. However, these problems continued to pervade Jewish history. So much so that numerous movements within our history can be seen as responses to

this spiritual malaise. The movements, of course, include Hassidism and Mus-sar. But even the Reform movement can be seen as an attempt to regenerate spirituality among many who had become disabused of the traditional faith.

Today I know of no sector within the Orthodox world that is not struggling with this very issue. Often in coping with this issue Orthodox Jews turn to music, and particularly to Hassidic *negina*. The Carlebach phenomenon, which bears careful and serious study, is just one indication of how one person has been able to create a true revolution responding to the “search for spirituality” which is quite pervasive. Interestingly, the Reform movement too, as Kaplan points out, has turned to the role of music in the liturgy and has its own musical guru in the person of Debbie Friedman.

The general struggle with materialism is another commonality which Reform and Orthodox face. We do live in an affluent society. Jewish people certainly have material options which their parents did not have and, by and large, these options are antithetical to a deeply religious way of life. Within the Orthodox world the pressures of materialism have led to some serious abuses, occasionally even criminal ones, and have placed great stress upon the health of the family and the very fabric of the community. Kaplan does not describe specifically the impact which wealth and prosperity have upon Reform Jews but one can easily assume that their influence interferes with Reform Judaism’s search for spirituality.

Another area in which there is commonality is the dearth of professionals and qualified rabbis. Within the Orthodox world numerous rabbis and Jewish educators are being produced by literally hundreds of training institutions, though the professional quality of these individuals, and particularly their ability to cope with the stresses of post-modernity, are issues with which Orthodox organizations struggle with. It was interesting to learn that Reform experiences both a dearth of personnel and the insufficient training and professional quality of personnel.

Stressing adult education is another commonality between the Reform and the Orthodox. The specific programs take very different forms obviously, but the consensus that adult education is a necessary and basic requirement for all Jews is certainly something that we have in common. For the traditional Jew, of course, adult education is not a new concept but is part and parcel of “Talmud Torah Keneged Kulam,” of the religious need to be engaged in Torah study throughout one’s life.

In recent times, adult education programs within the Orthodox world have become rather formalized. We are witnessing phenomena such as Daf

Yomi, daily study of a page of Talmud across the Orthodox world, and similar programs. We have also witnessed a proliferation of special materials designed to facilitate Jewish learning by adults, even adults at advanced levels. The books published by ArtScroll, particularly the Schottenstein Talmud, are examples of these materials. Whereas Kaplan describes the Reform movement's goal of adult education, he does not detail the nature of these programs, their evolving state, and the special materials that have been developed for facilitating adult education in today's world. The organization which I head, the Orthodox Union, has found unprecedented responses to programs such as our website, with dramatic impact upon a very wide range of Jewish adults. I do not know much about Reform attempts in this area and Kaplan makes no mention of the use of such technology by an institutionalized Reform in its attempt to achieve its goals in the area of adult education.

Finally, Kaplan devotes a major section of his book to Reform outreach. Outreach is certainly a prevalent word within Orthodox circles, and it is often called *Kiruv*. There is, however, a fundamental and troubling difference between the two outreach programs. The Orthodox world, very much across the spectrum, is committed to outreach and *kiruv* in order to save the Jewish people. The design of outreach and *kiruv* is quite openly to bring as many Jews as possible as close as possible to Torah knowledge and to Torah observance in the short window of time available to us, given the pressures of assimilation. Outreach in Kaplan's chapters on the subject are aimed at Jews who have already intermarried and to their gentile spouses. The commonality of the term and language of outreach is about as far as the comparison goes. In the deeper meaning of the outreach of Orthodox and Reform, we see the very fundamental and irreconcilable difference between the two. American Reform Judaism remains committed to basic approaches which are absolutely unacceptable from the Orthodox perspective. Patrilineal Descent and the problems created by it and the need for specialized kinds of Reform outreach because of it are one powerful example of the great divide between us.

If anyone, for any reason, wishes to inform himself about the history and changing status of American Reform Judaism, this book is ideal. Its exposition of the Reform return to Mitzvot is a welcome development from the Orthodox point of view, although from the Orthodox view it comes with its own problems. As an Orthodox Jew, there is much that I find troubling in the Reform movement as described in this book and in the contrasts between it and Orthodoxy which transcend theological belief and halakhic practice. These contrasts find expression in Jewish family life, in the internal religious

experience, in the social structure of our communities, and in the ways in which we define our religious mission. This is certainly a book that Orthodox Jews can gain from in order to become more knowledgeable about other Jews with whom in many ways we have parted company, but whom we hope some day will turn toward Torah as we understand it and as we believe has been passed down throughout the generations.

An Insider View: A Defense of Theological Imprecision

DAVID ELLENSON

AMERICAN REFORM JUDAISM: AN INTRODUCTION BY DANA

Evan Kaplan constitutes a noteworthy academic achievement. The book is remarkable in both its breadth and depth, and will surely become the definitive work on this largest American Jewish religious movement.

Kaplan himself is superbly qualified to author this work. An American ordained as a rabbi at the Jerusalem campus of Hebrew Union College, Kaplan also earned his doctorate in American Jewish History under the pre-eminent scholar Lloyd Gartner at Tel Aviv University. He thus writes with the knowledge and familiarity of an insider, while simultaneously displaying the rigorous academic training that prepared him for his career as a scholar. In short, Kaplan writes as a sympathetic and engaged, yet disciplined and critical academic, and American Reform Judaism displays his many talents. He is the participant-observer par excellence.

Furthermore, as the current President of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, I must as a reviewer confess the obvious—I am no less a participant-observer of the subject addressed in this book than is Kaplan. I am in this instance what in Hebrew would be termed a *nogei-a ba-davar*, someone whose very life work is devoted to the topic of this study. However, rather than disqualifying me for this assignment, I would hope that my very passion for and involvement in Reform Judaism allows me a privileged perspective in assessing American Reform Judaism and its importance.

The first three chapters provide an excellent and nuanced overview of the history and theology of Reform Judaism in America throughout the last 150 years. Kaplan proves capable of engaging both the lay and academic reader as he presents this history and theology. His accuracy in presenting these developments and the readability that marks his work make American Reform Judaism the single best analysis of this type that is currently available.

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The book should be consulted by all who want an accurate yet concise understanding of the evolution of the institutions and beliefs of Reform Judaism in this country from the days of Isaac Mayer Wise and David Einhorn through the current moment.

While this discussion of the history and figures that have shaped and guided the course of *American Reform Judaism* and its theology is excellent, what genuinely distinguishes American Reform Judaism is the depth Kaplan displays in defining the challenges and issues that confront Reform Judaism in America today. Kaplan devotes entire chapters to the effervescence and controversy that mark current Reform initiatives on worship and prayer, the struggles for recognition and growth of Reform in Israel and the impact these developments in the Jewish State have upon the nature of American Reform, the creative efforts in education that inform the movement, and the energy and excitement that motivate and direct programs on outreach as Reform attempts to engage the intermarried as well as those on the periphery of the Jewish world. In addition, other chapters reflect in detail on matters of women's equality and acceptance of gays and lesbians by the movement. Kaplan explicates the impacts which the standpoints and attitudes present in contemporary Reform on these issues have for the future of the movement.

In each chapter, Kaplan draws heavily upon written materials. However, he has also conducted extensive interviews with Reform leaders in every one of the areas he addresses, and this makes his book unparalleled in its comprehensive portrayal of and insight into all these issues. Anyone interested in reflecting upon the state of contemporary American Reform Judaism will have to read this book, as American Reform Judaism provides the foundation and background that is necessary for any intelligent discussion of the contemporary state of Reform Judaism in America.

Having noted the considerable virtues that American Reform Judaism possesses, I would now like to turn to two issues—one addressed to the Reform Movement itself, the second extending beyond the boundaries of Reform to American Judaism as a whole—that the book raises.

While Kaplan acknowledges the growth and excitement that have characterized Reform during the last two decades, he also regards the lack of any consistent ideology or theology for contemporary American Reform Judaism—the efforts of theologian Eugene Borowitz notwithstanding—as a serious deficiency that must be redressed if the movement is “to reverse the widely held perception that Reform Judaism is only a religion of convenience” (p. 261). In making this statement, Kaplan echoes the stance of Arthur Hertzberg, who,

in his Foreword to the book, asserts, “The one element without which Reform Judaism cannot have a firm future is a unifying religious vision” (p. viii). And Kaplan himself warns, “If the Reform movement is going to prosper and grow, both numerically and religiously, it is going to have to develop a coherent, effective strategy for reconciling authority and autonomy” (p. 261).

In response to this demand for ideological precision, Eric Yoffie, President of the Union for Reform Judaism, in his Afterword to *American Reform Judaism*, succinctly observes, “Who can deny that Kaplan is correct when he says that theological clarity is desirable. . . . But American Jews are resolutely pragmatic and resistant to theological speculation, and always have been. Theological struggle is to be encouraged, but the absence of theological consistency has rarely been a major problem in America for Jews of any stripe” (p. 262). In making this point, Rabbi Yoffie correctly indicates that religious movements and institutions often prosper despite—and perhaps even as a result of—a lack of “theological clarity.” At the very least, he points out that “theological consistency” itself hardly guarantees either religious commitment on the part of most modern Jews or success on the part of modern Jewish religious organizations.

In fact, if one looks at the history of Jewish religious movements in the United States and Germany—the two major venues for the development of modern Jewish religious denominationalism—during the last two centuries, it is remarkable how successful non-ideologues have been in fashioning and sustaining religious organizations and institutions that have flourished and guided religious Jews in the modern setting. For example, Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808–1888) of Frankfurt, one of the great architects of modern Orthodox Judaism and a pronounced ideologue, was frequently quite critical of his Berlin colleague Esriel Hildesheimer (1820–1899), founder of the modern Orthodox Berlin Rabbinerseminar, for his lack of ideological rigor. In his *Horeb*, Rabbi Hirsch maintained that a belief that “the Torah both written and oral was closed with Moses at Sinai,” was the sine qua non for Orthodox Judaism. Jewish law, in his opinion, was not subject to the exigencies of history.

Hirsch was therefore extremely troubled that Rabbi Hildesheimer permitted men like David Zevi Hoffmann and Jakob Barth—who wrote critical academic works on biblical and rabbinic Judaism—to teach at his Orthodox rabbinical seminary. Rabbi Hirsch protested their presence on the Rabbinerseminar faculty in a lengthy letter to Rabbi Hildesheimer on the grounds that their historical investigations undermined the notion that Jewish law was eternal and sanctified. Rabbi Hildesheimer may well have agreed with

the theological position his Frankfurt colleague adopted. However, he was unperturbed by this criticism and pragmatically observed that scholars of the caliber of Hoffmann and Barth, who were simultaneously punctilious in their observance of Jewish law, were required if Orthodox Judaism was to survive in the German setting. Hildesheimer simply ignored the theological point that Rabbi Hirsch made. Nevertheless, his seminary prospered and produced Orthodox rabbis for Jewish congregations throughout Germany and central Europe.

Similarly, in the United States, Isaac Mayer Wise, the “father of American Reform Judaism” and founder of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations as well as the Hebrew Union College, was renowned—as Kaplan himself points out—for his ideological flexibility, signing platforms on one occasion that affirmed the Talmud as the authoritative guide for Jewish life while in another instance assenting to a policy pronouncement that disparaged the Oral Law altogether. Such inconsistency infuriated Reform ideologue David Einhorn of Philadelphia, who inspired the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885 with its clear statement of “classical Reform principles.” Rabbi Einhorn also bitterly attacked the *Minhag America* prayer book of Rabbi Wise for its moderate and ideologically inconsistent character, and warned that before too long American Judaism would be locked in chains and lulled into slavery by the non-sectarian nature of the Wise prayer book. Yet, Wise, like Hildesheimer, succeeded in establishing institutions that have thrived and guided—for all their current lack of ideological exactitude—Reform and other American Jews for over 130 years.

I would indicate once more that I, no more than Rabbi Yoffie, am opposed to “theological clarity.” It may well be “desirable.” However, “theological hesitancy” is not necessarily an impediment to creating a mood or disposition that many religious persons find more compelling in guiding and instructing them in the modern setting, and religious institutions that embody such an ethos may well succeed where organizations that are more ideologically rigid may fail. The genuine test for Reform Judaism today will be whether it can prove capable, as Rabbi Yoffie phrases it, of building “on the religious revival now occurring in our ranks, to encourage Jewish study and observance of both the ethical and the religious *mitzvot*, and to strengthen our ties with the Jewish people in the Land of Israel and throughout the world. In short, we need to immerse ourselves in Jewish *doing*, guided always by our liberal principles, and if we do so, appropriate theological formulation will be developed afterwards” (p. 262).

In making this last point, Rabbi Yoffie points beyond the denominational borders of Reform Judaism to the challenge confronting the contemporary American Jewish community as a whole. The American Jewish community today is no longer—as it was at the turn of the twentieth century—an immigrant community seeking adjustment to the United States. Old ethnic patterns that formerly preserved and divided the Jewish religious community are no longer present, and the rivalry that once existed between American Jews of German and Eastern European descent is no more than an historical memory—if that—for most American Jews. Jews are now fully accepted into American life, and Jews of all stripes and ethnic backgrounds are now full participants in the cultural and economic spheres of the United States. As a result, the attitudes and beliefs that had so sharply divided Reform from Conservative Jews in the first half of the twentieth century are now blurred for most non-Orthodox synagogue members, and a permeability has emerged that allows for crossover among the disparate liberal Jewish movements.

At the same time, the explosion of Jewish day school education in the United States, an increased religious traditionalism among many, the opening of Jewish studies programs in universities, the rise of trips to Israel among countless numbers of Jews, and a serious commitment to formal and informal modes of Jewish education directed at every age group have led to a renaissance in American Jewish religious life. Indeed, Kaplan describes much of this in his book and he, like other commentators, heralds the religious creativity and vitality of the current moment as signs of a Golden Age for Judaism in America.

At the same time, Kaplan recognizes that the reality of acculturation has fostered Jewish assimilation and record numbers of Jews today do not affiliate at all with any synagogue movement. Furthermore, even when affiliation does occur, many of those who do join Reform temples are seldom in attendance and can hardly be said to live lives with Judaism at the center. Jewish demographic mobility from places of origin has led—as the National Jewish Population Surveys of 1990 and 2001 attest—to an attenuation of traditional Jewish associational and kinship patterns that previously promoted Jewish affiliation and commitment among large numbers of American Jews. Liberal forms of Judaism must recognize that most Jews are at best part of a “thin Jewish culture.” As Jews have become fully accepted by gentiles as social equals, and as traditional Jewish attitudes that opposed exogamy have weakened, intermarriage rates have soared. The cultural cohesion that now marks the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of Jews of eastern European and Germanic descent has

surely been matched by a lack of Jewish ethnic homogeneity as a result of the high rate of intermarriage. For most Jews in contemporary America, Judaism is no longer “a habit of the heart.”

All American Judaism today—like Reform—stands at a crossroads where trends of weakened Jewish commitment and attachments compete with pockets of intense Jewish revival and knowledge. The task of Reform Jewish religious leaders will be to strengthen these pockets of revival and knowledge, and thus create, in the words of Rabbi Leon Morris, “a framework for an impassioned engaging liberal Judaism” (p. 253) both within and beyond traditional Jewish institutional structures. The future of Judaism in the United States depends upon the ability of liberal Jewish religious leaders to maintain and revitalize Jewish religious tradition in light of these conditions that confront our community today.

Reform Judaism is well situated to confront the challenge of maintaining Judaism in a tolerant and pluralistic American society. There is a marked affinity between the ethos and directions of an open and inclusive Reform Judaism and the cultural and religious characteristics and behaviors that mark the overwhelming majority of present-day American Jews. The question that remains is whether Reform Judaism will prove sufficiently strong and resilient to serve as a catalyst for attracting great numbers of highly individualistic yet searching American Jews into the riches and spiritual depths that Judaism can provide. In our situation—where Jews can affirm or reject their Judaism—the answer remains unclear. However, the future of all American Judaism, not just the Reform movement, is dependent upon Reform Judaism’s success in this enterprise.

Reform Judaism and the Judaism of Reform Jews: A Conservative Perspective

JACK WERTHEIMER

A JEWISH RIP VAN WINKLE WHO HAD FALLEN ASLEEP IN 1955 and awoke half a century later would be dumbfounded by the reversal of fortune experienced by each of the major Jewish religious movements. Who could have imagined in the middle of the twentieth century that Orthodoxy, which had been written off as a fossil, would regenerate with such dynamism and increasingly come under the sway of *haredi* and Hassidic groups, rather than the modern Orthodox? Who could have foretold that the Conservative movement, which had occupied a broad swathe at the center of the American Jewish community and had outpaced all the other movements at mid-century, would lose significant populations to either end of the spectrum and find itself hemmed in on both sides? And who could have foreseen in the mid-fifties that the plurality of synagogue-affiliated American Jews would join Reform temples that their forebears would have regarded as alien, if not “goyish”?

Although it was not his primary intention to explain why Reform Judaism is now the largest of the religious movements, Dana Evan Kaplan provides some suggestive answers in his book, *American Reform Judaism: An Introduction*. His chapters on “The Outreach Campaign” trace the history of Reform’s embrace of intermarried Jews and their families, a population that now constitutes approximately 30 percent of Reform synagogue members, according to the 2000 National Jewish Populations Study. By virtually cornering this particular market, the Reform movement insured its own growth.

Beyond that fateful decision, the movement embarked on a deliberate program in the 1990s (and perhaps even before) to transform Reform synagogue life. Kaplan surveys the clearly focused campaign to revolutionize religious services, led by what was then called the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. Movement leaders called upon cantors to foster congregational participation rather than rely upon choirs to sing to the congregation; the organ was replaced by string and wind instruments to further encourage

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singing; congregations eschewed the high church formality of the *Union Prayer Book* and even the *Gates of Prayer*, replacing them with liturgical compilations of their own devising; rabbis substituted free-wheeling discussions in place of formal sermons; and congregants were drawn to a more personalized service, featuring petitionary prayers such as the *mi sheberach* for healing. The texture, sounds, and choreography of weekly Sabbath services, though not necessarily of High Holiday prayers, were deliberately altered.

Simultaneously, the movement has also re-thought its approaches to Jewish education: some Reform temples now aspire to become “communities of learners,” involving all members in Jewish study and in the nurturing of young people. Family education occupies center-stage, bringing multiple generations together for Jewish learning. Reform temples are upgrading their adult education offerings and encouraging their members to sign up for Melton and Meah courses. And the Reform camping movement continues to produce new leaders. There is even a small movement to nurture day schools under Reform auspices, a project that would have been inconceivable fifty years ago. Where once the movement trumpeted social action, it now proclaims the virtues of Jewish education.

As to religious practice, movement leaders defined their agenda as the pursuit of “change in both directions”—they continued to re-appropriate previously discarded rituals, even as they re-calibrated the movement to embrace innovation. *Kashrut*, *tashlich*, and *sukkot* were now acceptable within the Reform context, which once had explicitly rejected them as retrograde. As to innovations, Reform was the first to ordain women as rabbis and invest them as cantors; it recognized the parity of homosexual relationships with heterosexual marriages; and it downgraded the importance of marriage as a basis for family life.

Despite these bold steps, the Reform movement, in Kaplan’s view, suffers from an inability to inspire its adherents. The on-going lament of his study is that “American Reform Judaism reduced the tension between itself and the surrounding society to the point where it severely weakened the movement’s ability to motivate its members.” Kaplan expresses serene confidence in the movement’s resolve to change. “The current strategy,” he writes, is to become “a medium-tension movement, demanding enough to command respect, but flexible enough to attract and retain a diverse and pluralistic membership” (p. 67). Unfortunately, the book offers little evidence to support such a conclusion. The shining example of movement resolve to say “no” was the decision to deny membership in the Union to a secular-humanistic synagogue, but that

is also the only example cited by Kaplan of movement limit-setting. To an outsider, the episode is remarkable not for its resolution, but for the debate it engendered on a matter that would seem quite straightforward: Would the Reform movement of an earlier era have even considered embracing a congregation that rejected belief in the Jewish God?

Interestingly, in his "Afterword" Rabbi Eric Yoffie downplays the importance of ideology and celebrates his own movement's need to be "frequently inconsistent" (p. 259). Yoffie is on to something here: perhaps, the Reform movement has grown precisely because it is "messy" (his word), non-ideological, virtually without limits, and not terribly well-defined. By contrast, the mid-twentieth century version of Reform had been highly ideological, and promoted a set of commands and prohibitions. For example, it spoke of a commandment to engage in the work of social justice, and it prohibited men to wear a head-covering and *talit* in the temple. But it was simultaneously losing influence and stagnating. By contrast, the Conservative movement of the time offered a big tent approach and was severely criticized for its ideological fuzziness; yet it kept growing. By the end of the century the roles were reversed, and so too were the fortunes of each movement. A cynic might derive an important lesson from these patterns about the short-term benefits of pragmatism in a society, such as ours, that looks askance at ideology.

Where Kaplan may well be correct is in his contention that over the long term a movement without content and clear expectations will fail to retain the allegiance of its youth. Indeed, Kaplan concludes his book by quoting Rabbi Alexander Schindler's warning to the Reform movement: "our numeric burgeoning can excite our hopes and ambitions, but our efforts will sink into nothingness unless we perceive and embrace Judaism as a serious religious enterprise" (p. 258). Kaplan's book illustrates the important tactical steps taken to render Reform temples more attractive and welcoming; there is certainly much here about pluralism, inclusiveness and even participation. But as Kaplan demonstrates in his analysis of the debate over a new movement platform in 1999, there is considerably less evidence of a clearly defined Reform understanding of its own Judaism. Under the circumstances, one wonders, along with the author, how well the Reform movement will be able to transmit a strong identification with Judaism to the next generation or whether it will continue to rely heavily for its membership upon denominational "switchers" and other newcomers who currently constitute over 40 percent of its synagogue members.

If ideology no longer propels Reform Judaism, the driving force in the movement, Kaplan implicitly acknowledges, is the leadership of the Union,

most notably Rabbis Alexander Schindler and Eric Yoffie. Their addresses at biennial conventions set the tone, and they are the spokesmen and strategists for the movement. Kaplan cites their calls for women's equality, the inclusion of gays and lesbians, outreach to the intermarried, and intensified Jewish education. Left unexplained is how the Reform movement, which prides itself on the partnership between lay and rabbinic leadership, as well as its inclusiveness, simultaneously manages to observe an extraordinarily high level of movement discipline and focus. Yoffie notes this paradox, but the book does not illuminate how this is achieved.

One suspects that behind the scenes there is considerably less pluralism and toleration of certain points of view than Kaplan suggests. In this regard, Kaplan's insider status may have mitigated against a hard-nosed assessment of the movement's religious, ideological, and even geographical fault lines. To begin with the last item: Are there regional rivalries within the movement, and are there on-going tensions between local congregations and the home office in New York? What has happened to those rabbis and congregants who remain committed to the platform of classical Reform Judaism? Are there no pockets of cultural conservatism in the movement where the official position on gays, marriage, and family matters are regarded with dismay? Has the movement's decision to soft-pedal conversion and to favor the acceptance of intermarried families without preconditions prompted any dissent in the pews? Is there no gap between the strong, official pro-Israel stance of the movement and the views of "average" Reform Jews on the Israel/Palestinian conflict? And have the large majority of Reform Jews accepted the domestic agenda pursued by the movement's Religious Action Center in Washington, which tilts far to the left on the political spectrum? If there is widespread acceptance of these positions, readers would like to know how the movement built a consensus among its members. If there are significant populations of dissenters, why do we not hear their voices?

Such questions go unaddressed because fundamentally Kaplan has written a study from the perspective of the elite. Remarkably, for a book that examines a movement that in important ways is the most populist, and that certainly prides itself on its lay participation in decision making, there is little here on average Reform Jews. True, a few lay leaders are given a voice; but for the most part, we are exposed to the views of rabbis and organizational spokesmen. In contrast, there is virtually nothing in this book about the lived Judaism of Reform synagogue members. In a rare exception, Kaplan quotes a lay member who objected to his congregation's decision to invite "an ex-

treme left-wing Israeli attorney” to speak in the synagogue: “I can’t believe my temple, with my dues, is inviting this guy.” Surely, average Reform Jews have their own perspectives and concerns about more far-reaching movement policies.

In large measure Kaplan is victimized by a dearth of sources on such matters. Somewhat paradoxically, as the movement has expanded numerically, it has exhibited far less interest in studying itself than it had in leaner times. Back in the 1960s and 70s, the movement supported research on synagogue members, synagogue board leadership, and rabbis. The movement commissioned work by social scientists such as Leonard Fein, *Reform is a Verb*, Theodore Lenn, *Rabbi and Synagogue in Reform Judaism*, and Mark Winer, Sanford Seltzer and Steven Schwager, *Leaders of Reform Judaism*. With the exception of several studies by faculty at HUC on Jewish education in the Reform movement, there has been virtually no comparable research for over a generation. By writing this book and editing several others, Kaplan has done a great service to the Reform movement. His book essentially begins where Michael Meyer’s magisterial *Response to Modernity* leaves off, and thereby makes an important contribution to the contemporary history of Reform Judaism.

Still the book’s virtual silence about the lived experience of Reform Judaism smacks of elitism: for the most part, this is a study about the Judaism of Reform rabbis. Perhaps, as he continues his research on the Reform movement, Kaplan will go on to explore questions about the Reform *amcha*: How do members of Reform temples construct their Judaism? How frequently do they perform Jewish acts, such as attend synagogue, engage in prayer, celebrate Jewish festivals, read Jewish books and journals, visit Jewish internet sites, give to Jewish causes, etc? How do they understand the religious dimension of their lives? How strongly do they identify with their synagogue, the American Jewish community, Israel, and *klal yisrael*? What kinds of Jewish experiences and learning do they provide to their children? What are their Jewish aspirations for their children? As it happens, the answers to these questions will help foretell not only the future of Reform Judaism, but also will significantly determine how large and vital the American Jewish community will be fifty years from now.

The Identified Patient: Placing the Reform Movement in a Broader Family Context

RICHARD HIRSH

IF AMERICAN JUDAISM COULD BE TREATED IN A FAMILY therapy setting, Reform Judaism might well play the part of the “identified patient,” the member of the family whose symptoms carry the distress and the issues that reside within the larger system and affect as well as implicate everyone. While Reform may be the place where the challenges and crises are most accessible and evident, the difficulties manifest in Reform Judaism today are evident throughout the entire North American Jewish community.

I raise this at the outset because while Dana Kaplan has crafted a comprehensive and challenging survey and analysis of contemporary Reform Judaism, his treatment of the issue facing the movement often seems to stand apart from the larger context in which it lives. The problems he identifies are problems that are shared, to greater and lesser degrees, among the other religious streams in American Judaism; and, thus, his proposed response to the problems facing Reform needs to be evaluated in this larger context.

In this regard, I welcome the invitation from the Editor of *Judaism* to respond to Rabbi Kaplan’s book from a Reconstructionist perspective, even as I note with disappointment Kaplan’s almost total ignoring of Reconstructionism. This is regrettable; unlike Conservative and Orthodox Judaism, each of which is committed officially to halakha as binding, Reconstructionism shares with Reform a position that gives the halakha a “vote but not a veto,” and therefore presents a parallel culture in which many of the same issues affecting Reform are made manifest.

Three Goals

Dana Kaplan has three goals: to provide a general introduction to the American Reform movement; to describe the social and religious dynamics that affect that movement; and to argue that, in the absence of a compelling core theology, the continuity of Reform Judaism is in danger (p. 1).

The survey of the history of the Reform movement that Kaplan weaves through his book is comprehensive and informative, fulfilling his first goal. I did question the interplay throughout the book of official statements and anecdotal evidence, often from private correspondence or conversation between Kaplan and other Reform rabbis or Reform laypeople. While quoting from individuals adds some narrative color, does it really make any difference what Rabbi X thought about something? In this regard, I found Kaplan's extensive treatment of some of the more recent ethical infractions, accusations, and scandals that have occurred within the Reform movement—naming names, citing allegations—to be distasteful as well as unnecessary.

With regard to the second goal, Kaplan ably analyzes many of the social and religious dynamics affecting American Reform, including the issues of intermarriage, gay and lesbian inclusivity, feminism and the declining connection between American Reform Jews and Israel. In particular, he cites the continuing domination of American Judaism by a consumer mentality, in which fee-for-service rather than covenantal community becomes the organizing metaphor.

Inclusivity and Boundaries

Kaplan's thorough analysis of the issues—and of Reform's response to those issues—is a central strength of the book. He argues persuasively that Reform's history of progressive policy and posture positioned it to take advantage of the inclusivity dynamic that has been so central to liberal American religion in general in the past two decades. Reform has thus become a preferred address for many intermarried Jewish families, for converts, for gay and lesbian Jews and families, and for progressive Jewish feminist thinkers. Of course, the flip side of inclusivity is boundaries and standards, and here Kaplan correctly notes that the welcoming attitude of Reform towards these formerly marginal (or, more correctly, marginalized) populations has also generated any number of issues for Reform Judaism.

For example, as Kaplan notes, outreach to intermarried families is fine, but how does the Reform movement then affirm that only children raised solely with a Jewish identity can attend its synagogue schools? Although the Union of Reform Judaism (URJ) (then the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, UAHC) did in fact adopt a policy reflecting that position, what does it mean that, as Kaplan reports, it is routinely ignored in many Reform congregations (and presumably by their Reform rabbis)? Similarly, how do Reform rabbis who do not choose to officiate at interfaith marriages maintain that position in

the face of a consumer-driven demand of their congregants that they get with the program and stop being hypocritical, i.e., welcoming interfaith families but refusing to officiate at interfaith weddings? I found Kaplan's assertion that "the only sensible solution is to avoid the dilemma by agreeing to officiate without preconditions" (p. 178) to be a rather radical concession.

Pragmatism, not Ideology

It is worth noting that some decades ago, when Reform confronted the issues of boundaries and standards, the discussion was often around theology and/or ideology. The old issues that agitated Reform often centered on belief. The "polydoxy" of HUC-JIR professor Alvin Reines, who argued for a radical individualism and an open (anti- or even non-) theology, stirred the movement, as did the debate over whether a "humanistic" congregation could join the UAHC. Today, issues of boundaries and standards center on behavior; and the operative dynamic, as Kaplan notes, is one of compassion, support, and, most critically, being non-judgmental. Thus inclusivity becomes, functionally, an acceptance of just about anything, and the burden is on those rabbis or congregations that choose to maintain a boundary line. Under the current circumstances, it is hard to imagine the URJ rejecting the membership application of a humanistic congregation, as it did back in 1994.

To return briefly to the therapeutic metaphor, these issues are hardly limited to Reform Judaism. Certainly the Reconstructionist movement, as well as the nascent Jewish Renewal movement, pride themselves on a similarly inclusive attitude, and consequently face the same problems of boundaries and standards. The Conservative movement is also affected by issues of inclusivity. Although it enjoys the ideological safety of the halakha, where limitations on inclusivity and acceptance of diversity are automatically constrained in a much more narrow way, Conservatism too faces agitation (increasingly from laypeople, but also from a number of rabbis) over welcoming intermarried families, and over gay and lesbian access.

But it is the Reform movement, owing to its size and prominence, where these issues are played out most publicly, as well as most stridently. Issues of boundaries and standards, for example, almost instantly become issues of rabbinic-lay relations, prerogatives, and power. When the rabbi holds that a child raised simultaneously as a Jew and a Christian cannot be enrolled in religious school or become Bat Mitzvah, and the congregation president and board hold the opposite position (with an eye on the membership rolls and the synagogue budget), in the current climate it is not too hard to predict who will win.

Authority and Autonomy

The Reform trope of autonomy, in the absence of a corresponding trope of community, yields, as Kaplan correctly notes, a bottom-line position in which centralized affirmations, positions, and practices are functionally meaningless. This calls into question the analysis and prescription that Kaplan offers with regard to his third goal, namely that of shaping a core theological understanding around which Reform Jews can gather, and out of which might emerge a normative core of what is and is not acceptable under the heading of Reform Judaism.

In this regard, Kaplan rehearses the 1998–99 debate over a new Reform platform, a debate that became a vehicle through which dormant issues in the Reform movement were reanimated. As Kaplan correctly notes, after the smoke had cleared, the 1999 platform of Reform Judaism adopted by the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) (but not, tellingly, by the UAHC/URJ) died a quiet death, with little practical consequence to show for all the effort, energy, and excitement expended. It is curious to me that Kaplan does not draw some of the logical conclusions from this recent exercise, and instead affirms that the construction of a core theology would (even if it could be created) somehow solidify and stabilize the soft nature of Reform belief, practice, and commitment.

As URJ President Eric Yoffie notes in his Afterword, American Jews (like other Americans) are pragmatists, not ideologues. They are consumers of product and service, who spend their discretionary dollars, time, and energy in places where they perceive value. Reform rabbis may think they represent Reform Judaism, but Reform congregations represent Reform Jews (and, increasingly, the non-Jews to whom they are married). In the push-and-pull between what (Reform) Judaism says and what the Reform Jews in a given congregation want, the outcome is already evident.

So when Kaplan argues that a core theology would contribute to resolving the tensions between autonomy and authority, he seems to overlook that the resolution of that tension has already occurred—autonomy *is* authority. If today’s American Jews have any core and shared belief, it is in their functional self-understanding of themselves as what Steven Cohen and Arnold Eisen have named “sovereign selves.”

Can we imagine, for example, a resolution adopted in 2004 that takes as its point of departure the assumptions of the opening line of the 1983 CCAR Resolution on Patrilineality—“The CCAR declares that the child of one Jewish parent is under the presumption of Jewish identity”? Today’s Jewish and

non-Jewish parents do not come *kippa*-in-hand to the synagogue to *ask* if their child will be considered Jewish—they come to *tell* us they consider their child Jewish, and dare anyone to tell them otherwise.

Folk and Elite Religion

Despite the many strengths of *American Reform Judaism*, there remains one major and pervasive weakness in Kaplan's presentation, namely, that he does not address the distinction between what sociologist Charles Liebman (and others) have named "folk" and "elite" religion.

What exactly is the frame of reference for American Reform Judaism? Kaplan refers indiscriminately to Reform thinkers; Reform rabbis; Reform Jews; Reform Judaism; and the Reform movement as if these were interchangeable. But surely what the "folk" may believe and what the "elite" may affirm are not always coordinate. One might well ask whether the 1881, 1937, and 1976 platforms of Reform Judaism, as well as that of 1999, meant anything to the vast majority of American Reform Jews at the time they were adopted by the CCAR.

In this regard, I found Kaplan's reliance on generalizations and terms such as "most" or "many" to be problematic. For example: "Most Reform Jews believe that God created the world and continues to be involved in an ongoing process of creation;" "most Reform Jews believe that God revealed the Torah to Israel in some form, but they would differ on what form such revelation may have taken;" "Reform Judaism does not accept that the written Torah . . . was revealed to Moses, word for word and letter for letter;" or "Reform thinkers believe that humans have far more control over how the religious tradition develops and is practiced" (all found on page 29).

I suppose if one asked such questions in a multiple-choice format, most Reform Jews (I would argue, without irony, that "*most*" American Jews) would choose such answers. Confronted with a choice like—"The Torah a) is the literally revealed word of God given at Mt Sinai; b) is written by divinely-inspired people; or c) contains things given directly by God, such as the 10 Commandments, that we should follow, but also much written by Jews of long ago, like the rules of animal sacrifice, which we can ignore"—most would choose "c." But that assumes that most American Jews think about such things at all, and that, as Yoffie notes, is an unlikely assumption.

The New Jewish Market

Survey after survey, anecdote after anecdote and statistic after statistic show that American Jews choose synagogue affiliation on any number of issues, but

ideology or theology are likely to be among those least important. It seems to me no coincidence that, in the decade between the 1990 and 2000 National Jewish Population Surveys, the number of Jews identifying as Conservative declined, while those identifying as Reform increased. In that same decade, the communal discussion on intermarriage coalesced around outreach, welcome, and inclusivity; the enfranchisement of gay and lesbian Jews occurred; and the emergence of spirituality (which correlates with Judaism as a religion rather than a civilization) became central. Not surprisingly, the product best positioned to take advantage of these new markets was Reform Judaism.

Kaplan correctly raises the question of whether, having become the home for the majority of affiliated American Jews, Reform Judaism can create a lasting commitment that conveys continuity. The alternatives are not encouraging. We may yet witness the dissolving of any remaining core beliefs into an amorphous inclusivity; or Gen Xers and millennials passing by Jewishness and Judaism on their way to generic spirituality; or the acceptance of syncretistic religious identity whereby Jews-for-Jesus becomes not only one more dimension of an inclusive community, but a normative resolution of the identity issues for interfaith families; or the reduction of Jewish connection to fee-for-service stops as needed in the journey through the lifecycle.

If Reform Judaism is the identified patient of the American Jewish community, Kaplan's timely book may well be the encouragement we need—all of us, not just Reform Jews—to recognize the seriousness of the issues we face, and the imperative to enter into a community-wide conversation that seeks to uncover, address, and heal the disruptions that impede the healthy functioning of our American Jewish family.

Shout Rather Than Whisper: A Jewish Renewal Perspective on Reform

ARTHUR WASKOW

THE BOOK—DESPITE THE CRITICISMS OF RABBI YOFFIE AT the end and of Rabbi Hertzberg at the beginning—is correct in its hints at what the Reform movement needs, but far too timid in saying so. In order to make any difference at all to the shambling incoherence of today’s Reform impulses, it should have shouted what it merely whispered.

The Reform movement needs BOTH a new theology and a new halakha—a new code of Jewish ethical and ritual action, a new Jewish life-path.

The new theology needs to take account of the very existence of the Reform movement as a response to Modernity—and it needs to propose a vision of God calling forth Reform into a wisdom that goes beyond Modernity.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Reform surrendered a great deal of Jewish tradition because it seemed irrational or unethical—and it was often right. Now, in the return to ritual, it is trying to recover what was mythically true and enriching even though not rational in the petty sense. But it is going back to decorate itself with old patterns from the past, not going forward to incorporate the wisdom of Modernity into the great mythic truths of the tradition.

In this way, the return to ritual has become saccharine frosting on the dangers of Modernity, rather than a thoroughgoing reexamination of what is destructive as well as what is nourishing in Modernity. Reform has not looked hard into the Modern face that produced the Holocaust, the H-bomb, the burning of the Amazon rain forest, the shattering of neighborhoods and indigenous cultures and families, while recognizing the values of women’s equality, the democratic process, the possibility of a holistic and synthesizing scientific method.

Nor has it asked the most basic question: Where was God in the emergence of Modernity? What was Godly and Godlike—indeed, God’s Own Self—in the

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great burst of new power in human hands to control the earth and reshape society? In this great leap forward in the God-given ability to Control, what happened to the God-given ability to Commune?

And now, as the evolution of Modernity unfolds, how can we make present the God Who needs to be embodied in the Pausing/ Loving/ Communing Shabbat side of this dance of God?

Only if Reform asks those questions of itself and of the world can it shape a new Jewish life path imbued with Spirit, as Rabbi Yoffie wants to do. The tasks of theology and praxis must proceed hand in hand, or otherwise dainty additions in ritual and ad-hoc ethical improvements will meet only the short-range, short-sighted desires of the public, rather than their long-range needs to live and flourish on this wounded planet.

I would urge the Reform movement to move forward toward the creation of a new halakha—not just a new set of disconnected specific mitzvot, but a new fabric of Jewish communal behavior in the world—that is grounded in a new understanding of God’s Call to our generation:

A halakha, for instance, that requires Jewish business leaders to act responsibly toward the environment, and is prepared to call them to account if they violate Jewish communal ethics.

A ritual observance of Tu B’Shvat, for example, that through direct nonviolent action challenges efforts to destroy an ancient forest or poison a river.

An obligation to add to our ways of observing Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur a commitment to invite the children of Abraham and Hagar through Ishmael back into our broader family by welcoming Palestinians and other Muslims to speak as part of the High Holy Day services.

A halakhic decision that parents will not allow their 16-year-olds to drive a car until they have learned not only the technologies and laws necessary for the state-issued driver’s license, but the ethics necessary to be given a “Jewish driver’s license,” suitable to take control of a machine that is a one-ton weapon, a target for other’s road rage, a belching source of the poisons that will scorch the planet, and a portable bedroom—all rolled into one.

A halakhic commitment that if a Jewish marriage comes to an end, it do so not only with a secular divorce and not with a traditional formulaic *get*, but with a deeply spiritual, egalitarian, and practical version of the *get*. The Reform movement up till now has rejected the need for a *get* altogether, accepting the authority of a secular divorce. But a new kind of *get* would end a marriage with a level of spirituality, egalitarianism, and business-like practicality equal to

the levels of those qualities that a sensitive and *seycheldik* Reform rabbi would bring to initiating the marriage under the *Huppah*.

A halakhic commitment that any rabbi who is ready to officiate at a wedding of a man and woman must also be prepared to officiate at the wedding of two men, or two women.

A halakhic commitment to eco-kosher eating and consuming—so that no synagogue could serve vegetables grown by drenching the earth in pesticides, or serve Kiddush wine in plastic cups, or use unrecycled paper for its weekly bulletin, or welcome an SUV into its parking lot. A halakhic commitment that as part of the observance of Sukkot, households and congregations not only build a sukkah, but spend time and money on support for the homeless;

A halakhic commitment to bring the spiritual meaning of Shabbat—the need for a sacred rhythm of work and rest, Doing and Being—not only into our own Jewish lives but also into a public society that has become addicted to Doing, Making, Producing, Consuming until it poisons the very nature of Making into a mockery where H-bombs, global scorching, the burning of the Amazon forest, all become emblems of grotesque “productivity.”

The very idea of halakha pushes many buttons of Reformists who have been imbued with individualism as an absolute good. Once when I talked about the possibility of an eco-kosher code of purchase and consumption to a Reform congregation, I had the word fascism thrown in my face.

But this is exactly the challenge posed by a version of Modernity-run-amok that brooks no limits to individual choice. Would it be fascist to limit individual choices to own assault rifles, or are they eco-treyf? How do we decide where an SUV and a Kalashnikov belong on a scale of danger to the community?

I have seen that there is indeed an emerging generation of Reform rabbis and congregational *Yidden* who are not caught in the false choice between modern individualism and scientific reductionism, on the one hand, versus ancient tradition with its patriarchal theology and law, on the other hand—but that can go forward to renew the meaning of communal halakha and joyful ritual in a new key.

But this generation is itself becoming stuck, caught in the comfortable affluence of much of its membership, and in some cases their enormous wealth. This is a false veneer, in a world threatened by climate catastrophe and by the efforts of some elements in world-wide Islam and some elements of the present U.S. government to bring about an endlessly destructive Muslim-American

war. But it takes a vision of the Spirit to call people beyond their momentary comfort into challenging the addictions that will destroy us.

To do this, Reform Jews along with others will have to look again at our understanding of God. For this path of renewing halakha and ritual poses the question: From where would come such new understandings of the Jewish path in the world?

One hundred fifty years ago, Reform had the courage to see that the God Who at the Burning Bush took the Name “Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh,” “I Will be Who I Will Be,” was calling for a new form of Judaism. But Reform has become caught in the triumph of Modernity, rather than seeking to transcend it. Rather than seeing in it elements of Pharaoh that once more demand we draw on the God whose very Name is “Becoming.”

That Name of God empowered Moses to become the leader of a liberation, teaching two nations that they and history could become different from the entrenched past. We need to ask again today what changes in the world are so vital as to call forth a new halakha, and therefore what the content of a new halakha would be—what a future of freedom requires.

In the smoke that rises from the burning Amazon forest, in the groans arising from millions starving in the midst of unimaginably fruitful technologies, in the gunshots by which our children are killing our children, in the deaths of thousands in the Twin Towers of Manhattan and even more thousands near the chemical plant of Bhopal, India, we can hear again the moaning of Mitzrayyim, the slaves in Egypt—the groaning that awoke a God to become.

The God Who is once again in the process of Becoming is once again demanding that we Jews also Become, by freeing ourselves from Mitzrayyim, all the Narrow Places of our past—whether Pittsburgh or Poland.

Response

DANA EVAN KAPLAN

MY BOOK FOCUSES ON DESCRIBING THE CHANGES OF contemporary American Reform Judaism since Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie declared “a new Reform revolution” at the Union of American Congregation general assembly in Orlando, Florida in December 1999. He argued that the Reform movement needed to make synagogue worship the foremost concern. Services in too many congregations had become “tedious, predictable, and dull.” More often than not, the Torah reading was “lifeless,” and the music was “dirge-like.” Rabbi Yoffie pointed out that whereas 40 percent of Americans observe worship each week, only ten percent of Jews do. He called on the movement to transform synagogue worship into an innovative, but still traditional, experience. The book focuses on the leaders, institutions, and trends that are central to this “revolution,” and tries to analyze how effective it has been so far.

American Reform Judaism details this worship revolution, which has created a new enthusiasm among many Reform Jews for prayer and song. I describe how the movement has reorganized the entire approach to education, launched a successful Outreach campaign to bring in intermarried couples, accepted egalitarianism as one of its fundamental guiding principles, and embraced gay and lesbian rights. The results have been impressive, bringing new life to what had been a dull and aging movement. These responses have situated my study and the Reform movement in postmodern American life. Many of their comments indicate the possibility that my description also suggests new directions for Reform. My comments on their findings may also sketch the contemporary condition of liberal Judaism in America.

Dr. Grossman is correct in his observation that American Reform Judaism tends to juxtapose instances of optimism with spurts of pessimism. The main thesis of the book is that liberal religion generally and Reform Judaism

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specifically is very vulnerable. Despite the impressive growth in numbers and the apparent vitality of the movement, I warn that there is no concrete religious motive driving this resurgence of activity. Many people have become active in Reform temples because they want a warm and caring congregation, and/or because they are looking for a well-run but non-judgmental religious school for their children. But short-term success does not guarantee long term growth. As Professor Wertheimer points out, the Conservative movement grew in the post World War II era because it met the needs of a changing American Jewish population. Later, it began to decline. If the Reform movement cannot convince its followers that they should believe in something, it is hard to imagine that they and their children and grandchildren will stick with it. They may move on off into the great American religious wilderness, or they may embrace a version of Judaism that better provides them with clear answers to the universal question, "What do we believe?"

As Professor Wertheimer points out, the Conservative movement has been declining numerically. In 2001, only 26.5 percent of America's Jews identified with the Conservative movement. Even more shocking, as many as three quarters of those raised in the Conservative movement are not affiliated with it as adults. Several of the respondents suggest that the Reform movement may follow the same path. It will experience a period of effervescence, and then begin to lose the attention and loyalty of those raised in its temples.

Dr. Grossman is also correct when he writes that the Reform movement has gone way beyond just denying the authority of Jewish law, and has become a full-fledged postmodern religious movement that erases all boundaries of status, class, education, and even gender. Postmodernism threatens traditional religion by suggesting that there may not be any objective standard of judgment. Since the Reform movement has been moving away from any normative set of beliefs and practices for a long time, it may be the postmodern denomination par excellence. Since we cannot discriminate true from false, or right from wrong, everything becomes a question of what generates a spiritual feeling.

Movement leaders are aware that this can be a problem. Rabbi Janet Marder, the president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, writes in the current CCAR newsletter that ". . . we have failed to inculcate among Reform Jews an understanding of religion that is rooted in humility rather than narcissism." Rabbi Marder argues that Judaic ritual should ideally connect us with a tradition that is infinitely older, deeper, and vaster than ourselves. It should be a discipline to which we subject ourselves and which would then mold our character in positive ways that meet sacred ideals. But contemporary

American culture stresses the need to fulfill our personal whims, and religion has tended to focus on the service of ourselves rather than of God.

Rabbi Ellenson points out that both he and I—and indeed everyone on this panel—are both insiders and outsiders. An insider has a religious commitment to the group that he or she is studying and seeks to promote the interest of that belief system, and its religious organizations. It is true that much of my perspective has been molded as a result of working as a congregational rabbi as well as a scholar of American Judaism. I did explain in my preface that I could not possibly claim to be an outsider. I studied at the Hebrew Union College and have served as a Reform rabbi in a number of places in the United States, as well as in South Africa, Australia, and Israel. I have been fortunate to have had wonderful support from my congregation, Temple B'nai Israel, in Albany, Georgia.

My work has benefited from my personal religious upbringing and experience. I grew up in a Reform family, but I attended an Orthodox day school from kindergarten through sixth grade. While I cherish the religious autonomy of Reform Judaism, I have always sought out the intensity that I experienced in Orthodoxy. I have been disappointed. Rabbi Ellenson also has had both Reform and Orthodox experiences, and he may share my sense of feeling torn between two worlds.

Both Rabbi Ellenson and Professor Wertheimer mention my reliance upon written documents. *American Reform Judaism* is intended to be a book about the intellectual, institutional, and political aspects of the movement. In order to achieve this goal, I studied the writings and speeches of the institutional and intellectual leaders. I also described general trends including how congregants as a group seemed to respond to various initiatives. Professor Wertheimer, Rabbi Weinreb, and Rabbi Hirsh all criticize me for writing a study of the leaders rather than the entirety of the movement, suggesting that my book blurs or even ignores the distinction between folk and elite religion.

I don't think it is true that I ignore the average Reform congregant, but the book is not intended as a sociological study of Reform congregants. What emerges clearly from some of the responses is that it is not enough to understand what the leadership of the Reform movement believes and practices. Indeed, only 43 percent of those who self-identify as Reform actually belong to Reform temples. Professor Wertheimer's criticism indicates that he wants me to have written a different book. He has had the opportunity to oversee a series of very well-executed sociological studies of the Conservative movement, which were published in *Jews in the Center: Conservative Synagogues and*

their Members. That book involved a team of scholars working with a generous grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts over the course of several years. I could not possibly replicate those efforts. His recommendation that there needs to be more research done on “the Reform *amcha*” similar to what he has done on the Conservative movement is well-taken.

Professor Wertheimer wrote me that “My motive was not only to address your book but also the Reform leadership, which as I noted, was once far more interested in self-study than it is today. Why do we know the least about the largest of the movements? Orthodoxy and Conservative Jews have been scrutinized; even the tiny Reconstructionist movement did a survey of its members, but not the Reform movement. Harsh or not, I believe the questions I pose in my last paragraph are critical for evaluating the current state of the Reform movement and the larger community.”

Professor Leonard Saxe of the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University is currently studying the 2000–2001 NJPS with an eye on what it can tell us about American Reform Jews. He comments that, “I should note that it’s been tough to get support for doing studies of Reform Jews—from either the URJ or by prominent Reform Jews. Perhaps the clearest rejection I received was from one Reform Jewish leader. He told me at one point that he/the movement was interested in ‘teaching Torah, not collecting statistics.’ I told him that I thought it was regrettable—that he and his congregational counterparts were teaching Torah to a very small fraction of those who claimed to be Reform (and whom the movement counts in each of its press releases).” Another scholar, Dr. Bruce A. Phillips of HUC-JIR in Los Angeles, is currently studying the 2000-2001 NJPS in terms of what it shows about Reform Jewish identity.

Many of the respondents comment on my argument that the Reform movement needs a coherent theology. The goal of the Reform movement is to help contemporary American Jews to affirm their Judaism in meaningful ways, while at the same time, participating fully in an openly pluralistic society. In order to do that, they need to have a clear vision of their religious faith and what their God demands of them.

Some argue that communal leaders need to avoid becoming strait-jacketed into a narrow theological viewpoint. Rabbi Ellenson is correct that Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise was successful precisely because of his ideological flexibility. By saying different things to different people at the same time, he was able to build the broad coalition necessary to establish the institutions of the Reform movement. This same ideological flexibility has proved useful in

a variety of contexts and time frames. Despite my comments that the Reform movement lacks a clearly formulated and compelling ideology, the movement has grown and continues to grow.

I guess that I take it for granted that the Reform movement needs to be flexible. I point out the problem inherent in that flexibility, not because I believe that we should become ideologically rigid, but because I want to make people aware of the potential dangers of our admirable and necessary flexibility. I favor change, and I believe that change is necessary. But I argue that the lack of standards poses a long-term threat.

One of the central arguments in the book is that Reform Judaism cannot thrive if it remains a low-tension religious movement. In my study, I draw on the views of sociologist Rodney Stark and his school, which applies rational choice theory to religious actions. Rational choice theory considers individual behavior to function between structural constraints and individual preferences. The structure determines the constraints under which individuals can act. Within these constraints, people can choose various directions. Rational choice theory suggests that they will choose what is most rational. In terms of religion, it would seem logical that people would choose low-cost, low-demand religious denominations that allow them the most freedom. These “low tension” denominations should logically be the strongest. But this turns out not to be the case, since high-cost, high-tension religious groups can actually be stronger because they increase the production of “collective religious commodities.”

I agree with Rabbi Ellenson that being too rigid ideologically can make it harder to build a religious movement, especially in the free-wheeling United States of America. My point was not to urge ideological conformity, but rather to warn against theological anarchy. Especially with the decline of Jewish ethnicity that has been recorded in recent surveys, it becomes even more important to have something that can unify Reform Jews. If virtually every type of belief is condoned, then how is a child growing up in a Reform temple to make sense of the mixed messages that he or she is receiving? It would seem that children are only going to want to affiliate with their denomination of birth at a later stage of life if they come away from their childhood experience with a clear sense of what their temple believes in and a conviction that they want to perpetuate that belief system.

Rabbi Hirsh states that *American Reform Judaism* focuses almost exclusively on the Reform movement. He argues that what is happening in Reform Judaism can only be understood in the broader context of American Judaism

and religion. He calls the Reform movement “the identified patient,” the member who can be used to identify the problems of the entire family. He would have liked a book that described the Reform movement in a much broader context. My book, however, was intended to describe and analyze the Reform movement alone. The book is broad in the sense that it covers virtually every contemporary trend that affects the Reform movement. But I consciously and deliberately attempt to avoid too many direct comparisons. Writing an expansive comparative study is an important task, but I felt that first it was necessary to describe the state of Reform Judaism. I now plan to write a book on contemporary American Judaism as a whole. Just this past Friday, Columbia University Press emailed me that their faculty board had approved my new book proposal, tentatively entitled *The Reinvention of Judaism*.

Rabbi Hirsh felt that I should have addressed the humanistic challenge that the Reconstructionist movement poses. He feels that when I talk about trying to make it clear to Reform Jews what their God demands of them, that I am making “a literally incoherent statement.” He explains that “if modernity forces us to confront anything, it is that ‘God’ doesn’t demand anything of us. Our ancestors thought God demanded something, and said so, but we now know those are human words and human laws, and I would argue that the Reform/your attempt to put a theology at the center of a solution fails to reckon with (as Mordecai Kaplan would say!) the reality that outside of a certain type of Orthodox Judaism, for non-Orthodox Jews to say ‘God demands/God commands’ is to perpetuate a literary fiction. That is where, in my opinion, Reconstructionism has an alternative to offer: not what ‘God demands’ but what does the Jewish community offer, how does Jewish living help sanctify, how can Jewish religion help me deepen my self-awareness and sense of responsibility? In other words, we need a vision of Jewish living, not Jewish theology.” I completely disagree. In my book, I discuss, in great detail, the sociological theory behind “church growth,” which describes how there needs to be a strong theological justification to motivate religious followers.

Orthodox respondents suggest that the problems that the Reform movement is facing are inherent in our way of life. They believe that God requires us to observe Halakha, and this would mold our lives in every way. Orthodox Jews tend to focus on the particulars of Jewish observance. While Reform Jews see detailed ritual regulations as trivial, Orthodox Jews see each small Halakha as contributing toward the building of a strong and committed faith. If we kept kosher—strictly—we would not be able to wander away from our community. If we refrained from driving to synagogue on Shabbat, then we would not

be able to settle in remote corners of our towns and cities, but rather, would have to find a place to live within easy walking distance of a shul. In short, our problems are a direct consequence of our beliefs and practices.

But sometimes Orthodox leaders think that the Reform movement is moving towards Orthodoxy when it is not. This is because Reform, in Professor Wertheimer's words, is moving in two directions at the same time. A classic example can be found in the opening comments of *Tradition*, the journal published by the Rabbinical Council of America, a centrist Orthodox group. *Tradition* editor Rabbi Emanuel Feldman had heard about the new Reform Platform in 1999, and he commented that Reform "seems to have begun, very quietly, to emulate the ways of the Orthodox." While he noted a number of trends that struck him as highly undesirable, he expressed hope that the Reform movement might turn towards the observance of mitzvot rather than the "mindless mantras du jour." But just as his article was being completed on a hopeful note, the 2000 CCAR Conference, held in Charlotte, North Carolina, recommended rabbinic officiation at gay and lesbian unions. Rabbi Feldman was incensed, "My hope has now been shown to have been credulous and naive." Rather than moving toward Torah and mitzvot, "Reform has now lurched into a morass from which it will be difficult to extricate itself" (Emanuel Feldman, "Reform of Reform? A Talmudic Reading," *Tradition* Vol. 34 No. 2 (Summer 2000): 8.

Rabbi Tzvi Hersh Weinreb tries to avoid this type of polemic. He is gentle and friendly, eschewing harsh invective. This makes his commentary all the more useful and interesting. He contrasts Reform rhetoric about pluralism with the institutional uniformity and ideological conformity of the actual movement. Professor Wertheimer also alludes to the possibility that the Reform movement may not be as tolerant and broad-minded behind closed doors as it is in its official publications. Both are correct to a certain degree. The Reform movement is an American religious movement and has the institutional organization appropriate for this type of religious group. Orthodoxy is composed of a far more diverse group of groups who have retained a far greater degree of autonomy than anything imaginable in the Reform movement. When the Reform movement talks about autonomy and individuality, it is referring to the right and indeed the obligation of the individual to choose what is religiously meaningful for him or her.

Rabbi Weinreb is correct in his analysis that Orthodoxy is a grassroots up movement whereas reform is a top-down movement. Rabbi Yoffie stresses that the Reform movement is a well-balanced partnership between the profes-

sional rabbinic leadership and the lay leaders. This is true, but Orthodoxy has a much more knowledgeable and dedicated membership base beyond the 5 or 10 percent who serve as lay leaders. Here is one place where the two movements differ enormously.

Yet throughout his reading of *American Reform Judaism*, Rabbi Weinreb was continually thinking about how a similar book on Orthodoxy would be constructed. He states that it could not be written in the same manner, organized around several central themes. There is too much diversity in Orthodoxy to allow for such an approach. Orthodoxy doesn't have the same central institutions nor the same set of theological principles. He notes that a book on Orthodoxy would stress the central role of the family. His comment tells us that more research should be done on the Reform Jewish family and the impact that family dynamics have on religious beliefs and behavior. Most of the anecdotal reports that I assembled in the course of writing the book were negative. One father of grown children told me that none of his children had any interest in Judaism. "It's my own fault, really. We never did anything in the home and when I took them to Sunday school, I dropped them off and went to play tennis." But some Reform families do have a rich religious life in the home.

Even more intriguing was Rabbi Weinreb's contrasting of the inner religious sense of obligation felt by the typical Orthodox Jew with the lack of such an internal demand or pressure felt by most Reform Jews. I am sure that many Reform rabbis would disagree with me, but I would tend to agree with his analysis. We spend most of our time trying to analyze the social reality of the day in order to try to adjust our programming to attract congregants' interest. The final product is less our understanding of contemporary Judaism and more our strategy for reaching out to the disaffected and uninterested.

Hanging over his entire analysis is the specter of patrilineal descent. When I was growing up in Waterbury, Connecticut, the Reform Temple Israel was composed mostly of German Jews and their descendents. I only knew one family in which the mother was not born Jewish and she had converted. Today, that Reform congregation no longer exists. Instead, there is a new Reform Temple in a suburb which is composed almost entirely of intermarried couples. The Orthodox do not and will not recognize the children of non-Jewish mothers—or even of non-Jewish born female non-Orthodox converts to Judaism—and therefore do not recognize an increasing percentage of Reform Jews as Jewish. I was glad Rabbi Weinreb included a number of commonalities that exist between Orthodox and Reform, although even here the differences far outweigh the

similarities. Our conceptions of bar mitzvah, for example, are so different as to make our mutual commitments to the ceremony almost meaningless.

One comparison that Rabbi Weinreb did not make was the differing emotional attachment to the State of Israel. The 2000–2001 NJPS has a startling statistic—only 22 percent of Reform Jews feel emotionally attached to Israel. Orthodox Jews, on the other hand, remain deeply committed and connected to Eretz Yisroel.

Rabbi Waskow compliments me (I think) for whispering the truth about what Reform Judaism needs. He emphasizes that the Reform movement must construct both a new theology and a new code of Jewish ethical and ritual action. I understand what Rabbi Waskow is suggesting. There are countless Friday nights when I look out over the small number of passive congregants just sitting there, and I try to come up with something—anything—that could rouse them out of their stupor. Reform Judaism definitely needs more energy, more excitement. The “Reform Revolution” is a response to this need.

I very much wanted a representative of Jewish Renewal on this panel because I felt that they were on the cutting edge of American Jewish spiritual life, and see themselves as non-denominational or post-denominational. Jewish Renewal emerged out of the Havurah movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which attempted to create a living liturgy to speak to the politically idealistic spiritual seeker. I wondered whether the Reform movement was so wrapped up in petty organizational issues that it was missing the spiritual rebirth going on outside of its denominational walls. But after reading his essay, I found his ideas to be thoroughly unrealistic for Reform Jews.

Rabbi Waskow urges the Reform movement to create a new halakha, a new set of directives that would be grounded in God’s call to our generation. He lists a series of values that would form the central core of such a new Reform halakha. I don’t need to point out the obvious—most Reform Jews would resist any attempt to legislate what they can and cannot do. While some will sympathize with many (but probably not all!) of his goals, few would choose to join him. That’s why the Jewish Renewal movement is, while very vibrant, relatively small.

I continue to believe that the Reform movement needs to develop and communicate a clear theology and a straightforward set of ritual expectations. I say this, not because I am a traditionalist, but rather simply because I think that the current muddle is just that no matter how we may dress it up.

It is necessary to reject moribund tradition. We, the keepers of our religious heritage, need the boldness to create new ways of connecting with

God. But the solution that Rabbi Waskow suggests is much too radical to have any real chance of success in the Reform movement. Rabbi Waskow was saddened to hear my pessimistic response. “I hope your view that Reform cannot undertake the kind of change I call for is incorrect, since I think without it Reform (and by the same token most of US Jewry) will play no significant role in the crucial actions that not only Jews but the human race need to take to avoid catastrophe.”

The future course of Reform Judaism, as Dr. Grossman states, will have much to say about the fate of Jews in the United States. As the 2000–2001 NJPS shows, there are increasing numbers of Jews who do not identify their religion as Judaism. Only a minority of intermarried families are raising their family as Jewish and many of those individuals raised as Jewish do not practice Judaism once they become adults. Some, however, continue to identify as Jews by ethnicity. Fewer Jews identify as being part of a denomination, but this does not appear to herald the beginning of a thriving non-denominational or post-denominational Judaism. Rather, it seems to indicate a profound alienation from all forms of Jewish religion. On the other hand, the increasing numbers of Christians married to Jews as well as those of mixed Jewish-Christian ancestry who are joining synagogues suggest that religious syncretism may increase.

The diversity of American Jewish life has led to varied responses to our religious and cultural changes. Where we are now tells us a great deal about the future of liberal religion in America.