

The role of women, the ordination of women, and gender roles

Women have been taking on a far greater role in American religious life over the past 30 years than they were allowed to in previous generations. This trend has been a direct consequence of the Feminist movement and has had a dramatic impact on every aspect of American life. Reform Judaism has been able to respond quickly and actively to the changing sex role expectations and has allowed women to assume responsibility for all aspects of the religious and communal life of individual congregations and the movement as a whole.

In 1972, Sally J. Priesand became the first woman to be ordained a Reform rabbi at HUC-JIR. This was a highly revolutionary breakthrough, because even though Reform had been committed to egalitarianism essentially from its origins, in practical terms it had always found reasons to maintain a male-only policy in the rabbinate. Since Priesand's ordination, a great many women have entered the rabbinate, with close to 50 percent of Reform rabbinical classes now comprised of women. Despite the fact that so many women are becoming rabbis, it is as yet unclear whether they will be accepted at the higher ranks of the movement and whether they will be willing to make the sacrifices necessary to rise through the movement's hierarchy.

Gay and lesbian marriages

One of the most controversial areas the Reform movement has considered in the 1990s is the role of gays and lesbians in the synagogue. In 1987, the UAHC passed a resolution affirming its commitment to welcoming gay and lesbian Jews into its congregations and encouraging gay and lesbian involvement and participation in all aspects of synagogue life. In 1990, the CCAR adopted a position paper encouraging rabbis to treat gays and lesbians with full respect and to integrate everyone into their congregations regardless of sexual orientation.

The CCAR position paper acknowledged, however, the need to continue a dialogue regarding the religious status of monogamous gay and lesbian relationships. Specifically, the CCAR was still grappling with what type of ceremony is appropriate and what the religious meaning of that rite would be. There was the possibility of having a commitment ceremony, but there was also the potential for sanctioning a full marriage ceremony involving *kiddushin*, completely equivalent to the marriage ceremony performed for heterosexual couples.

In April 1996 the CCAR passed a resolution supporting the rights of gay and lesbian couples to a civil marriage. Much attention was focused on Hawaii, which appeared at the time to be the first state that might pass a law allowing gay and lesbian civil marriage. At the UAHC biennial, October 29 to November 2, 1997, in Dallas, Texas, the UAHC passed a resolution supporting secular efforts to promote legislation that would provide through civil marriage equal opportunity for gays and lesbians and encouraged the UAHC constituent congregations to honor monogamous gay and lesbian domestic relationships.

The 1999 Pittsburgh Platform

Since the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885 and Columbus Platform of 1937, discussed above, and until the late 1990s, only one other American Reform platform was prepared, a centenary perspective, written by Eugene Borowitz and adopted in San Francisco in 1976. This statement moved Reform closer to tradition as well as to Jewish peoplehood even as it stressed the movement's tremendous diversity.

Borowitz is one of the most seminal thinkers in the Reform movement, regarded as its leading theologian in the United States. Interestingly, he uses the term *Liberal Judaism* as the title of one of his more influential books, thus connecting contemporary Reform thought to its German origins.²⁴ He describes Judaism by drawing an analogy to personal relationships rather in terms of universal ethics, peoplehood, or law. Borowitz identifies the "root Jewish religious experiences of our time as the absoluteness of value and Jewish particularity, with God as their ground." He then creates a theory on non-Orthodox Jewish duty based on the Jewish self's intimate involvement with God, with the Jewish people today, its tradition, and its messianic hope, and thus with a self fully individual, yet primarily shaped by its Jewish relationships covenant."²⁵

Borowitz and the others working on the 1976 document agreed that if a statement could not make affirmations of what it was that the Reform movement stood for, then it was better to abandon the whole effort rather than issue a paper that was hopelessly equivocal. Nevertheless, the resulting document stresses the movement's diversity. It is a strong statement of support by the Reform movement for the State of Israel and for the first time talks about Reform Jews' religious obligations, although it does not use the word *mitzvah*. The San Francisco centenary perspective does talk in much greater detail than ever before about the tension between Reform Jews' commitment to the Jewish people and their responsibilities to humanity as a whole.

In 1998, the CCAR President Richard Levy proposed a new platform to be voted on at the Pittsburgh Conference in May 1999, justifying the need for such a statement on the grounds that the religious world of the Reform Jew had changed so much since the 1976 statement. The cover story of the Winter, 1998, issue of *Reform Judaism* was titled, "Is It Time to Chart a New Course for Reform Judaism?" There Levy explained that it had been more than one hundred and ten years since the publication of the original Pittsburgh platform and that it was time to "chart a new course for our movement in the twenty-first century, just as the first Pittsburgh meeting defined Reform for much of the twentieth century. Strange as it might seem, despite the moderating influences of Columbus and the centenary perspective, the Pittsburgh platform of the nineteenth century continues to influence how we Reform Jews relate to Jewish tradition." The magazine also printed a draft of Levy's ten principles, which had also been sent to all the rabbis in the CCAR for their comments.²⁶

Levy further argued that whereas the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform had argued that "the views and habits of modern civilization" should determine which

Jewish ceremonies are appropriate for the Reform Jew to observe, today there is a much greater desire on the part of many Reform Jews to "build more and more *mitzvot* into their lives." This was really the key theme of the new platform, especially in its first draft. Levy encouraged Reform Jews to consider observing more and more *mitzvot*, including those that had long been considered completely outside of the spectrum of normative Reform practice, such as *mikvah* and *tefillin*.

When *Reform Judaism* published the third draft of what was then called the "Ten Principles for Reform Judaism," along with a photo of Richard Levy wearing *tallit* and *yarmulke*, it unleashed a torrent of emotions. On the one hand, many people applauded the tone and substance of the proposed platform; on the other, many were distressed and saddened by what they felt was an abrogation of the historical positions of the Reform movement. In response to the large volume of comments, Levy, working with other CCAR leaders, produced a fourth draft, discussed at the December 1998, UAHF board meeting. At that meeting the feeling developed that it might indeed be possible to reach consensus on a new platform, based on the much more moderate tone of the fourth draft. A number of issues still caused certain members difficulty, among them the "challenge and practicality of urging the reading and speaking of Hebrew," the fact that the platform encouraged American Jewish immigration to Israel, and so forth.

Some of the responses to the article were quite harsh. As one woman from Mequon, Wisconsin, wrote, "Abandonment, hurt, outrage, violation, betrayal. These are just a few of the first words that came to mind after I read Rabbi Richard Levy's proposal. I ask Rabbi Levy: How much further does the Reform movement want to take the religion and faith away from their congregants?"²⁷ Another reader stated sarcastically, "It was quite a surprise to read the contents of Rabbi Levy's article. . . I did have to check the cover to make sure it said winter 1998 and not winter 1698."²⁸ Others were very enthusiastic and, at the CCAR conference in Pittsburgh, "A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism" was adopted in a majority vote by the rabbis present. Rabbi Paul J. Menitoff, executive vice president of the CCAR, stated, "On the eve of a new century, when so many individuals are striving for religious meaning, moral purpose and a sense of community, it is important that we have a modern set of principles that define and invite commentary on Reform Jewish belief and practice."²⁹

Religious standards and the movement toward tradition

Reform Judaism today faces the same problem that has been both its strength and its weakness since its origins about two hundred years ago, the question of how a liberal religious movement sets standards, if indeed it can at all. Standards would give Reform Judaism more structure and allow people a clear vision of what being a Reform Jew means. Yet the movement has been very careful not to do anything that might indicate that it is moving toward fixed halakhic standards, even as it wants to move much more in the direction of tradition.

Rabbi Walter Jacob, the rabbi emeritus of Rodef Shalom Congregation in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and a former president of the CCAR, writes in favor of standards. He argues that in many cases the richness and fullness of Jewish religious life has been lost in the Reform context because people have used the ideal of autonomy as an excuse to neglect an active involvement in their religion. Jacob argues that the theory of Reform Judaism was very noble in that it intended for people to exercise their autonomy in selecting the most uplifting elements of the Reform religious tradition: "No one can fault this ideal, but it has not worked. We need direction, standards – a system of mitzvot (ethical observances) – and halacha as we go beyond guidance to governance."

Indeed, the Reform movement over the last number of years has made an amazing turnaround in terms of embracing a much greater degree of tradition than would have been thought possible just a generation ago. Many classical Reform congregations that prohibited men from wearing yarmulkes now allow it and find an increasing percentage choosing to do so; many of the newer suburban Reform congregations find it the norm rather than the exception. The amount of Hebrew used in the service has increased dramatically, and many congregations are now observing two days of Rosh Hashanah instead of one. Many congregations are holding Saturday-morning services for the first time and almost all are marking bar and bat mitzvahs in addition to confirmation. Even the study of Talmud has become far more popular. Many other formerly abandoned rituals, such as ritual immersion in a *mikvah*, have been brought back with new religious or spiritual justifications. Although by no means all Reform Jews are practicing these rituals, substantial numbers of the elite and significant numbers of congregants, particularly in more progressive locations, are starting to investigate previously abandoned practices.

Parallel to the move toward tradition has been a move away from formalism and decorum toward informality and warmth. This has created a more "spiritual" religious ambience that contrasts dramatically with the "awe inspiring" atmosphere of classical Reform worship. Balfour Brickner, the rabbi emeritus at the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue in New York, said, "We are no longer God's most frozen people. Orderliness and strict dramatic decorum have finally given way to warmth."

Looking to the future

In a speech to Reform leaders at the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue in New York in April 1999, Eric Yoffe, President of the UAHC, admitted that the Reform Movement's twenty-year outreach program had not yet reached its potential. "We have not accomplished all that we should have," he said. "Let me say one final time to all those who ask that we change our direction: There will be no retreat in the Reform Movement from the principles or practice of outreach. North American Jews of all stripes want energetic outreach to intermarried Jews and Jews-by-choice in order to save them for the Jewish people."³⁰

Yoffie is responding to the inreach-outreach debate in which a number of other community leaders have called on all segments of the Jewish community to devote the community's resources to inreach, that is, to reinforcing Jewish identity among those already moderately committed. Yoffie argues the reverse, that the Reform Movement intends to continue devoting substantial resources to trying to reach out to those already unaffiliated.

Among other things, Yoffie spoke of how many in the Reform movement had failed to urge non-Jewish spouses in Reform-affiliated intermarried couples to convert. He also admitted that the movement had failed to help Reform synagogue nursery school programs develop as much Jewish content as possible. "We provide no curricular assistance, no teacher training, no forum for exchange of ideas and problems. Incredibly, we have ignored an institution which . . . is best positioned to serve the young intermarried and unaffiliated population." Yoffie also stated that the Reform movement continued to be plagued by the problem of how to set standards for intermarried couples and their participation in Reform congregations. He argued that ". . . some Reform Jews still find it difficult to acknowledge that any limitation is consistent with Reform belief. A lowest-common-denominator/no-one-must-ever-be-hurt Judaism is not and has never been what outreach is about." On the other hand, Yoffie stated, "If the need for boundaries is our primary message, and if confronting others with endless demands is the thrust of our program, then we are lost and Judaism is doomed."

Notes

- 1 For historical background on the World Union for Progressive Judaism, see Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (New York and Oxford, 1988), pp. 335-52.
- 2 *Reform Judaism News*, Spring 1999, no. 12, pp. 1-2.
- 3 See Jacob R. Marcus, *Israel Jacobson: The Founder of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (Cincinnati, 1971).
- 4 On the Frankfurt group, see Michael A. Meyer, "Alienated Intellectuals in the Camp of Religious Reform: The Frankfurt Reform Freunde, 1842-1845," in *AJS Review*, vol. 6 (1981), pp. 61-86.
- 5 For background on American Judaism, see Jacob Neusner, *Introduction to American Judaism: What the Books Say, What the People Do* (Minneapolis, 1994); Marc Lee Raphael, *Profiles in American Judaism: The Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, and Reconstructionist Traditions in Historical Perspective* (San Francisco, 1986); and Jack Wertheimer, *A People Divided: Judaism in Contemporary America* (Hanover and London, 1997).
- 6 Lance J. Sussman, "Introduction," in Kerry M. Olitzky, Lance J. Sussman, and Malcolm H. Stern, eds., *Reform Judaism in America: A Biographical Dictionary and Sourcebook* (Westport, 1993), p. xv.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. xix.
- 8 On Congregation Beth Elohim, see Robert Liberles, "Conflict Over Reforms: The Case of Congregation Beth Elohim, Charleston, South Carolina," in Jack Wertheimer,

- ed., *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed* (Hanover and London, 1989), pp. 274–96.
- 9 Gary Phillip Zola, *Isaac Harby of Charleston, 1788–1828: Jewish Reformer and Intellectual* (Tuscaloosa and London, 1994).
- 10 This argument has been made by Hasia R. Diner, *A Time for Gathering: The Second Migration 1820–1880* (Baltimore and London, 1992), pp. 49–56.
- 11 Leon Jick, *The Americanization of the Synagogue, 1820–1870* (Hanover and London, 1992).
- 12 On German Jewish immigration to America, see Abraham Barkai, *Branching Out: German-Jewish Immigration to the United States, 1820–1914* (New York and London, 1994).
- 13 On Wise, see James G. Heller, *Isaac M. Wise: His Life, Work and Thought* (New York, 1965); and Setton D. Temkin, *Isaac Mayer Wise: Shaping American Judaism* (Oxford, 1992).
- 14 Wise and Lilienthal both led congregations in Cincinnati, where they worked together closely. On Lilienthal's congregation, see Jonathan D. Sarna and Karla Goldman, "From Synagogue-Community to Citadel of Reform: The History of K. K. Bene Israel (Rockdale Temple) in Cincinnati, Ohio," in James P. Wind and James W. Lewis, eds., *American Congregations* (Chicago and London, 1994), vol. 1, pp. 159–220; see also Karla Goldman, "In Search of an American Judaism: Rivalry and Reform in the Growth of Two Cincinnati Synagogues," in Jeffrey S. Gurock and Marc Lee Raphael, eds., *An Inventory of Promises: Essays on American Jewish History in Honor of Moses Rischin* (Brooklyn, 1995), pp. 137–50.
- 15 On liturgical developments in American Reform, see Eric L. Friedland, *Were Our Mouths Filled with Song* (Cincinnati, 1997).
- 16 Michael A. Meyer, "Thank You, Moritz Loth: A 125-Year UAHRC Retrospective," in *Reform Judaism*, Fall 1998, pp. 30–9.
- 17 See, for example, Aryeh Rubinstein, "Isaac Mayer Wise: A New Appraisal," in *Jewish Social Studies* (Winter–Spring 1977), vol. 39, nos. 1–2, pp. 53–74. Rubinstein concludes that "Wise's conservative pronouncements were only lip-service, while his rationalist, Deist-like statements represented his true opinions... What makes Wise so complex is that his opportunism impelled him to cover his tracks" (p. 74).
- 18 Walter Jacob, ed., *The Changing World of Reform Judaism: The Pittsburgh Platform in Retrospect* (Pittsburgh, 1985). The Proceedings of the Conference appear on pp. 91–123.
- 19 On Felix Adler, see Benny Kraut, *From Reform Judaism to Ethical Culture: The Religious Evolution of Felix Adler* (Cincinnati, 1979).
- 20 Walter Jacob, "Prophetic Judaism: The History of a Term," in *Journal of Reform Judaism*, Spring 1979, pp. 33–46.
- 21 For an overview of this period, see Henry L. Feingold, *A Time for Searching: Entering the Mainstream 1920–1945* (Baltimore and London, 1992).
- 22 For a survey of this period, see Edward S. Shapiro, *A Time for Healing: American Jews since World War II* (Baltimore and London, 1992).
- 23 See Maurice N. Eisendrath, *Can Faith Survive? The Thoughts and Afterthoughts of an American Rabbi* (New York, 1964).
- 24 Eugene B. Borowitz, *Liberal Judaism* (New York, 1984).
- 25 Oltzky, Sussman and Stern eds., *Reform Judaism in America*, p. 23.

- 26 Aron Hirt-Manheimer, "Interview - Is It Time to Chart a New Course for Reform Judaism? Interview of Rabbi Richard Levy," in *Reform Judaism*, Winter 1998, pp. 10-22, 54.
- 27 Beth Sampson Bauer, letter to the editor, "Is It Time to Chart a New Course for Reform Judaism? Reactions," p. 4.
- 28 Henry A. Fribourg, "Is It Time to Chart a new Course for Reform Judaism? Reactions," p. 8.
- 29 CCAR, press release, "North America's Reform Rabbis Adopt New Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism," May 26, 1999.
- 30 Eric J. Greenberg, "Yoffie Renews Call for Outreach," in *New York Jewish Week*, April 23, 1999, p. 23.

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