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THE NEW REFORM JUDAISM

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REFORM JUDAISM

Challenges and Reflections

RABBI DANA EVAN KAPLAN

Foreword by Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie

Afterword by Rabbi Rick Jacobs



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Set in Lyon Text by Laura Wellington.

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To the United Congregation of Israelites, my congregation who worships in the Sha'are Shalom Synagogue in Kingston, Jamaica—a wonderful, diverse group of Jews striving to build a modern Caribbean Judaism. May we together succeed in creating a vibrant progressive Jewish community that is scholarly, spiritual, and based on indigenous models of religious expression.

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Foreword

RABBI ERIC H. YOFFIE

Dana Evan Kaplan has become the chronicler of contemporary Reform Judaism. In this fascinating book, he takes us on a journey through the complexities of a modern liberal faith that is now confronting a period of great upheaval in American religious life—an upheaval that impacts all Jews and all religious Americans.

As Kaplan demonstrates, Reform was born in Europe as a revolutionary religious movement and soon made its way to America. Here, it discarded the theological certainties of what we now call Orthodox Judaism, and in the process set aside the heavy obligations of personal religious observance that flow from traditional belief. Committed to modernity, rational thought, and the fundamental congruence of religion and science, Reform embraced the principle of progressive revelation. This embrace turned out to be a complicated matter. A revelation that is more ongoing than fixed is liberating for both the individual and the community, but it is also unsettling. It makes the Reform revolution a permanent one, and imposes the onerous burden of informed choice on every Reform Jew, in every era.

While this volume is organized thematically rather than historically, it nonetheless gives us a complete picture of the Reform experience in America. It takes us from American Reform's early commitment to the centrality of ethical action and belief to today's far more complex reality, in which ethical principles are still important but are only one element among many in a profoundly pluralistic community. Kaplan

navigates this journey wisely and astutely. He recognizes the vibrant, dynamic character of Reform but is never an apologist, and he lays out weaknesses and challenges with an admirable forthrightness.

Rabbi Kaplan is at his best in describing the difficult task of defining boundaries for modern Reform Judaism and in relating the various ways in which young Jews today, inside and outside the Reform movement, struggle to express their religious yearnings and find spiritual meaning in their lives. These chapters remind us of how difficult it is to reach these young people through established institutions, how important it is to do so, and how, at least in some instances, Reform Judaism has begun the process.

It is interesting to note that at the installation of Rabbi Rick Jacobs as president of the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) in June 2012, the Shabbat *mincha* service included dance, meditation, and a visiting gospel choir, along with a specific commitment by Rabbi Jacobs to develop technology as a tool of outreach and to work with Reform congregations in connecting with young Jews who are outside the ambit of mainstream synagogues. Clearly, the new URJ president is thinking along the lines that Rabbi Kaplan proposes.

In a fast-changing, unpredictable religious environment, Rabbi Kaplan avoids sweeping judgments about what the future holds for American Reform Judaism. He appropriately makes no attempt to tie everything together in a neat package. At the same time, the conclusions he does reach are sensible and compelling. He observes, for example, that the “physicality” of both local congregations and the national Reform movement will be reduced in coming years. In his words, Reform Judaism in the years ahead will be “lighter on its feet.” This is a significant observation and one that has not yet been fully absorbed by Reform leaders.

As recently as fifteen years ago, there was much talk of the need for synagogues to have very sophisticated—that is, expensive—physical structures and staffing patterns because in a relatively wealthy Jewish community, young Jews would not affiliate with institutions that did not reflect the “quality” they expected in all dimensions of their lives. But today, exactly the opposite is true. In financially troubled times, young

Jews are looking for congregations with modest structures, restrained budgets, and a focus on the spiritual; this is both a practical necessity and a reflection of different religious sensibilities.

I don't agree with Rabbi Kaplan on everything. He talks of a "postdenominational future," while I avoid that term. In my view, denominations will be substantially restructured but still important. I think that Professor Lawrence Hoffman has it right when he writes that "only denominations can argue our way to a viable vision of religion for the vast mass of Americans who yearn for a form of religion that is not Orthodox but is equally authentic and equally deep."

Rabbi Kaplan and I also have good-natured, long-standing differences on the role of theology in Reform Judaism. He believes, and argues in this book, that Reform needs to clarify its theology. I argue that the diverse, big-tent movement he describes so brilliantly is precisely what makes it virtually impossible for Reform Judaism to produce a coherent theology. In addition, and more fundamentally, scholars of religion have long distinguished between orthodoxy (right belief) and orthopraxy (right practice), and it is my conviction that all schools of Judaism, including Reform, unite more around shared practices than shared beliefs.

Still, these are quibbles. This is a wonderful book, and a serious one. It implicitly asks—does Reform Judaism pay a price for its revolutionary approach to Judaism and its full-throated embrace of modernity and the autonomy of the individual? And the answer Rabbi Kaplan provides to that question is yes. It does pay a price, and a heavy one. It sacrifices the sense of obligation and discipline that are to be found elsewhere in Jewish life. But it offers in its place Jewish creativity, dynamism, and a broad and essential inclusivity, not to mention a reading of Torah and tradition that is both thoughtful and exciting. This is a Judaism that, if Rabbi Kaplan's direction is followed, holds out the hope of drawing young people to its ranks—young people who hunger for a Judaism that will aid them in their spiritual search, will marry modernity to tradition, and will compete, fully and unequivocally, in the marketplace of big ideas.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my congregation, the United Congregation of Israelites, for their encouragement of my research and writing, which culminated in the publication of the book that you have in your hands. They are a warm and caring community who has been wonderful to me and I appreciate it greatly.

Thanks, too, to my academic colleagues at the United Theological College of the University of the West Indies, who have extended a warm welcome to me since my arrival in September 2011.

I thank Rabbi Barry L. Schwartz, director of the Jewish Publication Society. We met at a Central Conference of American Rabbis meeting, and Barry immediately took an interest in this project. His enthusiasm was infectious and his feedback invaluable. I also thank JPS managing editor Carol Hopping for her ideas on how to best present the ideas in this book and Lona Dearmont for her copyediting expertise. Also thanks to Joeth Zucco, senior project editor at the University of Nebraska Press. I am honored that this book is one of the first to be produced jointly by the Jewish Publication Society and the University of Nebraska Press.

Karen Allen helped me tremendously in the preparation of the manuscript, debating points academic and practical of all types with me. Andrew Griffin provided top-rate technical advice to keep my computers running smoothly. My thanks to Jenna Bender, Mattie Blanton, Tracy Wallace, Danielle Gibson, Sunshine Denney, April Douglas, and everyone who helped me in the technical preparation of this manuscript. Thank you, Matthew Semler, for helping with documents from the

American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati. My appreciation to Joan “Samantha” Ewan for being an inspiration of sincerity and loving-kindness.

And I thank those who read sections and commented on them. I have noted their contributions in the endnotes where appropriate.

I want to thank Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie, president emeritus of the Union of Reform Judaism (URJ), for his foreword to this book, and Rabbi Rick Jacobs, president of the URJ, for his afterword.

Many of the biblical translations are from *The Contemporary Torah: A Gender-Sensitive Adaptation of the JPS Translation*, edited by David E. S. Stein; consulting editors, Adele Berlin, Ellen Frankel, and Carol L. Meyers (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2006).

My hope is that this book can help people of all backgrounds to understand the underpinnings of the beliefs and practices of Reform Judaism.

THE NEW REFORM JUDAISM

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Introduction

Understanding the New Reform Judaism

Reform Judaism is a practical approach to religious observance that acknowledges the need to bring one's ritual practice into harmony with one's actual religious beliefs. In the pages that follow, I present some of the critical issues—both concrete and abstract—facing the Reform movement, and I provide context so that you can better grasp the complicating factors that go into the debates over the Reform understanding of tradition.

I am a Reform rabbi leading a congregation in Kingston, Jamaica. As a rabbi who has worked in congregations for most of my career, I have had to deal with the realities of Reform Jewish life. That means that my perspective is perhaps less “academic” than scholars who have spent their entire lives within the hallowed walls of academia.

Like many American-born Jews of their generation, my parents were not raised with any clear denominational orientation. But when they married in 1957, they chose Rabbi Edward Klein of the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue to perform the wedding ceremony in Manhattan. After we moved further uptown, they joined Congregation Rodeph Sholom on West Eighty-Third Street. Both of these congregations were Reform and, I guess, my parents were pretty comfortable with the general Reform approach to religious practice.

My parents had decided to send both myself and my sister to Ramaz School, a modern Orthodox day school on Eighty-Second Street and Eighty-Fifth Street. At the time, there were only two Jewish day schools

in Manhattan, and Ramaz was regarded as the more liberal of the two. “Liberal” might not be the most accurate description, but at least as I remember it, they seemed to avoid teaching religious beliefs almost entirely. What they did teach was Zionism. They repeatedly emphasized how Israel was our country and we should make every effort to immigrate to the Jewish homeland. Surprisingly, their arguments were entirely secular, at least in my memory, emphasizing how we were a people and should have the right of national self-determination like other peoples. But while the school did not emphasize religion, it certainly stressed Hebrew language.

For several years, our membership in Reform temples coexisted peacefully with our enrolment in an Orthodox day school. But as my bar mitzvah grew near, I became increasingly concerned with both content and aesthetics. I participated in the Reform youth organization NFTY for a while, even going on a few weekend retreats with them, but I was dismayed by how little the other participants seemed to know about Judaism. When we would have a youth service, the counselors would call me up for the Torah *aliyah* because it appeared that I was the only one out of two or three hundred who could read the blessings in Hebrew (I do not recall there being any transliteration available, but I could be wrong).

Also, I was disconcerted by what I saw as the passivity of the congregation. I expected adults to know enough about their own worship service to be able to respond at appropriate times, and yet it seemed that most of those we saw in the sanctuary had no idea what to do and barely an idea where they were. My discomfort increased after my parents enrolled me officially in the Rodeph Sholom bar mitzvah program. One week, as we settled into our seats in the large sanctuary right before a Friday night service, the organ began playing what seemed to me to resemble a piece intended for a church funeral. I looked so distressed that my mother leaned over and asked, “Do you want to leave?” I nodded vigorously, and that put an end to my bar mitzvah plans at the temple. We signed up the next week at the Jewish Center, a modern Orthodox synagogue on West Eighty-Sixth Street led by Rabbi Leo Jung and Rabbi Norman Lamm.

This move did not mean that I believed in Orthodoxy; in fact, I have spent decades trying to reconcile my desire for an intense form of religious practice with a scholarly theoretical framework. In my senior year in high school, we had friends in Connecticut whose daughter had married a yeshiva *bocher* studying in Mir Yeshiva in Brooklyn. I went down to spend a week there and, although it was a fascinating experience, found their theology to be entirely unconvincing. Over the next several years, I slowly made my way back to Reform Judaism.

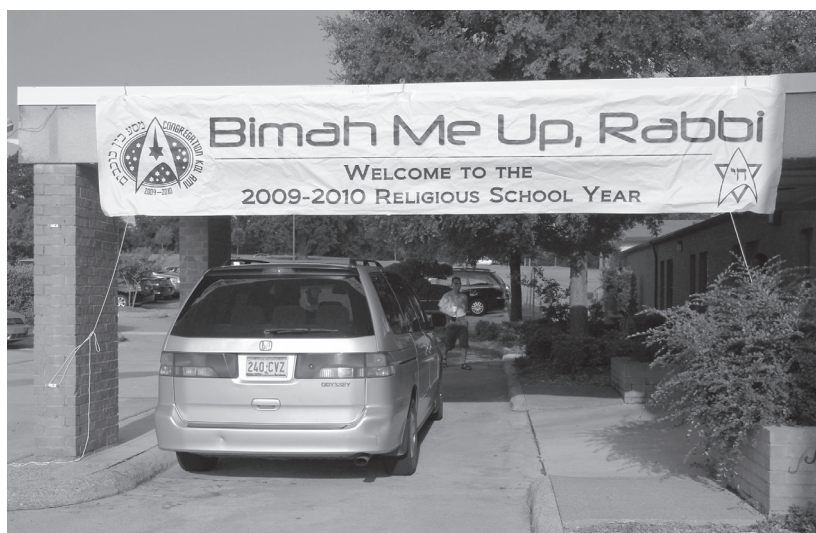
I tell you this short version of my spiritual autobiography in order to give you a bit of insight into where I come from. Every author has his or her biases, and I think it is advantageous to state them up front. It is clear to me that, while I would like to believe that my intellectual positions are drawn strictly from my scholarly arguments, much of what I say has its origins in my childhood religious experiences. Nevertheless, I believe that there is much validity to my central argument that the Reform movement needs to find a way to present a clear and compelling theology if it is to thrive in the American religious marketplace.

Opportunities and Challenges

Because the Reform movement is a theologically flexible and politically liberal American religious group, this dynamic creates opportunities—but it also presents real challenges. Foremost among these challenges is how to present Jewish religious belief in the absence of a consensus over what we believe.

Reform Judaism presents us with challenges because there is no central decision-making body that has authority to make policies that are obligatory and binding. This is because of the nature of Reform Jewish thought. Reform Jews are free to consider different ideas and make personal religious decisions based on what they find spiritually meaningful. Since people find a variety of things religiously meaningful, there is no way to build a consensus on what should be required. The very mention of the words “requirement” and “obligatory” send many Reform Jews screaming to the hills.

While this book includes a chapter on the history of Reform Judaism in America, it is not a history text. There’s just enough historical back-



1. A banner hanging from the portico of Congregation Kol Ami in Flower Mound, Texas. Rabbi Geoffrey W. Dennis explains, “Beyond cute, the chief virtue of the ‘Bimah Me Up’ photo is that it is emblematic of many of the forces at work in contemporary Judaism: embrace of popular culture, marketing techniques, and technology in presenting Judaism to an Americanized target audience.” *Photo by Michael Fripp.*

ground to enable you to make sense of the challenges that I present. In order to understand the patrilineal descent resolution, for example, it is helpful to know who Rabbi Alexander M. Schindler is. To appreciate how earlier Reform thinkers understood kashrut, or Shabbat, one needs to know something about the development of Classical Reform in the nineteenth century, and so on (see chapter 2).

The Reform movement accepts that the Torah should be interpreted to meet the needs of contemporary Jews. This is not a new approach. The sages of the classical rabbinic tradition explicitly argued that the Torah was not in heaven and that God had given the responsibility for the interpretation of that Torah to human beings. Yet the Reform movement took this idea much further than traditionalists could because they were freed from the shackles of halacha (traditional Jewish law). Not having to follow thousands of detailed laws, Reform Jews could completely reconceptualize what it meant to be a religious Jew and how Judaism could and should be practiced.

Reform Judaism rejects the concept of Jewish law as obligatory on all Jews. While selected practices may be spiritually meaningful to many, others can obstruct rather than promote contemporary religiosity. Yet there is no consensus on how to evaluate a given practice. Indeed, there is no accepted methodology for analyzing traditional texts and drawing any sort of authoritative conclusions from it. Rather, the movement evolves in response to social trends, influenced by both its leaders and its laity. While Reform Judaism has explicit principles—even if they continually evolve and therefore elude precise definition—they are complicated by the “facts on the ground.”

Understanding the Reform decision-making process is especially important for a movement that has few set rules and permeable boundaries. Because of the flexible nature of the Reform approach to Judaism, policies do not remain static. Definitions evolve. This makes it hard to characterize Reform Judaism, easily leading to misinterpretations. But in order to explain what Reform Judaism is, we need to first speak of Judaism. If we have to explain the concept of “Judaism” in just a few words, how can we define it?

We could start with the following: Judaism is the religion of the Jewish people, based on ideas and concepts embodied in the Hebrew Bible and the rabbinic writings. According to Jewish tradition, the covenant between God and Abraham marks the beginning of a special relationship between God and the Jewish people. While the very earliest biblical sources may show faint residues of monolatry and/or henotheistic beliefs, Judaism has long ago definitively rejected polytheism.

Judaism is the mother religion of the Abrahamic faiths, the main monotheistic religions. In contrast to many other faiths, its central authority is vested in sacred texts and traditions rather than an authoritative religious leader or a clerical chief. In the ancient world, the high priest in the Holy Temple served as a central ritual leader, but the destruction of the Temple forced the sages to radically redesign the architecture of Jewish practice. Many of the rituals that had been performed in the Temple now had to be reconceived so that they could be practiced in new forms in either the synagogue or the home.

This revolutionary adaptation served the Jewish people well for

roughly eighteen hundred years—until the emancipation, which radically changed the legal status of Jews in western society. Jews were now freed from the ghettos of Europe and given full rights as free citizens, at least in theory. This presented an entirely new situation, which Reform Judaism is attempting to address. If Judaism does not require the observance of every law written down in the Shulchan Aruch, then what is Judaism?

Contrary to the argument advanced by influential Reform thinkers of earlier generations—that there is an “essence” of Judaism—I do not think there is a single belief or practice that can be said to constitute the central and unique core of the Jewish religion. Following Michael L. Satlow’s line of reasoning, I prefer to see Judaism as “a family of communities” that share a common sense of identity and participate in a discourse on a specific set of authoritative texts and ritual practices.

This definition is called a polythetic understanding, drawing its theoretical framework from a biological model. One of the benefits of this polythetic understanding is that it balances the ethnic and religious aspects of Jewish identity, which is frequently a weak point in any definition of Judaism. It is also an approach that fits in well with Reform Judaism because it allows for a flexible system of identification that does not rely on any one belief or any specific set of ritual practices.

From Scholarship to Social Justice

Reform Judaism itself has changed dramatically over the course of its two-hundred-year history. While the early, Classical Reform formulation had a clear theology and uniform ritual, the movement has become, and continues to grow, more pluralistic. Today it is an extremely diverse and inclusive religious movement. Reform Judaism has become an American religious movement and as such is subject to the vicissitudes of the American religious environment, including the American religious marketplace.

Until the end of the 1950s and even later, the Reform movement embraced a generally traditional theology, accompanied by a radical departure from Jewish observance. This shifted in the mid-1960s, when some Reform thinkers advocated radical new conceptions of the Divine,

including some that were seen as rejecting a personal God and all that that implies. By the 1970s there were several competing conceptions of God that manifested themselves in the new prayer book of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (the rabbinic arm of the movement), published in 1975. This prayer book, *The Gates of Prayer*, had no less than ten separate Friday night services, the first eight of which reflected different theologies in the English parts of the service. The existence of multiple conceptions of God led to the drastic broadening of what was theologically acceptable in a Reform context.

Reform Jews strive to be theologically inclusive. Nevertheless, their starting point is the same stories in the Torah as explained in the classical rabbinic tradition. Like other Jews, Reform Jews believe that God made a covenant with Abraham that was renewed by Isaac and Jacob and later Moses. As outlined in the Hebrew Bible, God promises that if the Jews uphold their end of the contract, that God will bestow blessings on the children of Israel. According to some of the more liberal theologians, it is possible that Abraham experienced an internal vision rather than participating in an actual encounter with God.

God may be a philosophical concept rather than an all-powerful divine being. Or, if we follow the more traditional thinkers, God may indeed be omniscient and all-powerful. In Reform Judaism, one's religious beliefs are flexible. The decisive factor is what is spiritually meaningful for each individual. The Reform movement seeks to be a theological "big tent" into which almost everyone can fit.

This was not always the case. As recently as the Hebrew Union College presidency of Rabbi Julian Morgenstern (up to 1947), there was a consensus in the Reform movement that religious beliefs would be mediated by scholarship. That is to say, if historians or archaeologists discovered evidence that something was true or false, it would be incorporated into the Reform understanding of religion. Because of the influence of the cultural revolution of the 1960s and various other factors, personal spiritual meaning has become a greater force in religion. As a consequence, many Reform Jews may believe things that are not supported by scholarship and that no longer necessarily matters. Similarly, if a religious concept is supported by historical precedent but has

no resonance in the culture, then the fact that it is historically accurate carries little weight.

The early Reform thinkers emphasized their belief in the mission of Israel, the Jewish duty to testify to the ethical dimensions implicit in the belief in one God. The Jewish people, according to this way of thinking, had a unique role in helping to bring ethical monotheism to the world. The belief in one God created the religious authority that was the basis for a single ethical system, binding on all human beings. Preached in its most advanced form by the biblical prophets, the belief in ethical monotheism required Reform Jews to cry out against injustice of any type. Yet the early Reform thinkers read the prophets selectively. Specifically, they ignored the national aspect of prophetic teachings, focusing almost entirely on individual ethics and the need to advocate for social justice. For several decades, the Reform movement focused on social justice as the primary vehicle for expressing ethical commitment. By the late 1940s Reform Judaism began to be closely associated with liberal politics. The connection between the two became so intertwined that for many, being a Reform Jew meant being a political liberal.

By the early 1950s the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and the Central Conference of American Rabbis were actively advocating for peace and justice. But despite all the rhetoric, there was a large gap between theory and practice. The movement passed resolutions filled with lofty expressions about what was then called *brotherhood*, while most synagogue members remained passive and largely apathetic.

Definitions and Boundaries

There are obvious difficulties that emerge from a flexible approach to religious definitions. Not only is it hard to define who is a Jew, it is also hard to delineate acceptable theological limits. Where do we draw our lines? How do we reconcile our enduring traditions with contemporary challenges? Since Reform Judaism rejects the concept that Jewish law is a central component of divine revelation, halacha is not binding. This allows Reform Jews to engage in ongoing dialogue with God as part of progressive revelation. But what does this mean in practice?

In the Reform movement we also need to be careful how we define

the boundaries of what constitutes legitimate Reform Judaism. Being pluralists, we are not accustomed to identifying someone or something as authentic as compared to someone or something that is not. But as boundaries separating the different religions in the United States continue to blur, and as religious identities become increasingly multifaceted, the Reform movement will need to take a clear look at where those boundaries should be drawn.

To give you a good sense of this dilemma of boundaries, I have chosen three case studies of problematic, potentially syncretistic religious approaches (so-called Messianic Judaism, Humanistic Judaism, and Jewbuisim) and look at how the Reform movement has so far reacted to them (see chapter 7). Surprisingly, many of the scholars within the movement have taken a hard line, recommending all three groups be excluded from the Reform consensus. I would argue that we need to be inclusive of people with sincere non-Judaic beliefs and deep connections with Judaism while at the same time avoiding the excessive introduction of foreign religious influences. The question is how does a nonhalachic movement determine what is just too radical to be acceptable?

The Reform movement has no universally accepted methodology for predetermining how to evaluate any particular religious issue. Many Reform Jews were resistant to any proposal that might replace the halachic system they had rejected. So there is no central authority, neither a Reform chief rabbi nor a Reform halachic system. Not only is there no mechanism for enforcement, there is not even any accepted system for determining religious policies. The best that can be achieved is ongoing discussion, which hopefully will eventually lead to consensus. Since no one has the power to force their position on others, the persuasive abilities that can be marshaled in support of a given point carry a great deal of weight.

Some believe that the Reform movement can utilize halacha in a non-binding approach that emphasizes Jewish law as religious teaching rather than authoritative legally binding rules. The Central Conference of American Rabbis created a committee that focused on issuing responsa literature, *teshuvot*, to various questions submitted to it, and these position papers have been useful for providing rabbis and congregations

with a great deal of information on controversial issues and problematic questions. I contend, however, that if taken as authoritative, the concept of progressive halacha can become contrary to the entire spirit of Reform Judaism. The Reform leadership needs to be careful not to emulate the Conservative model of a quasi-halachic movement that ended up with a tremendous gulf between what should be and what is.

The earliest Reform rabbis critiqued halacha, justifying reforms from within the parameters of the Jewish legal system. This approach soon gave way to an emphasis on minor cosmetic changes that made religious services and Jewish practice generally more respectable. By the 1840s there was a critical mass of Reform-oriented rabbis in central Europe who met together three times to discuss how to develop policies on various religious questions. A consensus developed that human beings had played a significant role in the composition of the written Torah and the development of the oral law. This allowed the Reformers to introduce additional changes.

God remained an inspiration for these central religious texts, but the sages were no longer seen as having transmitted direct divine oral instructions that could not be altered in any way. The sacred texts of the Jewish tradition remained religiously important, but the specific information in them was no longer necessarily authoritative. We no longer had to follow all of the laws as set forth in the Torah and Talmud without questioning their continued relevance. Rather, Reform Jews were granted greater latitude in interpreting Jewish tradition. In recent decades, we have expanded this notion of religious autonomy, encouraging individuals to apply their own religious sensibility to various practices, accepting some as religiously meaningful while altering or even rejecting others on various grounds.

Deciding what religious practices to observe places the Reform Jew in a difficult quandary because the final decision lies squarely on his or her shoulders. Each person needs to decide what he or she is commanded to do and what they are not commanded to do. This religious autonomy creates the risk that Reform Judaism will become the religion of the least, the refuge of those seeking to justify not doing anything. This is not a new problem, but with the rapid shifts in social trends, ex-

acerbated by the new social media, the reductionist tendency in Reform Judaism may lead to rapid alienation.

The rejection of the binding nature of Jewish law has implications for every aspect of religious life. While ritual observance can and has undergone tremendous change, the basic ethical and moral foundations of the religion supposedly remain intact. But here too, we see that little remains rigidly in place. In some cases, what was once seen as acceptable and even ethically superior is now seen as hierarchical and promoting suppression.

The Return to Tradition

Coupled with this new ethical vision, Reform Judaism has been “returning to tradition.” This phrase has caused a great deal of confusion because the concept of “tradition” is understood in various and even sometimes contradictory ways. On one hand, there seems to be a constant stream of articles in the media about how Reform Judaism is becoming more “traditional.” And on the other, the movement has energetically promoted new definitions of Jewish identity, including patrilineal descent (see chapter 6). Many Reform Jews are embracing previously jettisoned ceremonial practices, but at the same time, they are open to postmodern understandings that allow them to embrace radically different and even conflicting needs. How is one to reconcile these seemingly irreconcilable differences?

A significant percentage of Reform Jews have come to the realization that they need to be actively involved in “Jewish doing” in order to feel the type of spiritual connection they yearn for. While Classical Reform had stressed the theological, neo-Reform places greater emphasis on what has been interchangeably referred to as “ritual” or “ceremony.” I differentiate between these two terms, defining ritual as stylized, repetitive, religious behavior that is seen as being directly commanded by God. Not only must it be done, but it needs to be performed in a specific manner and at a specific time. Ritual is efficacious, meaning that God may perform acts of whatever nature in direct response.

In contrast, ceremony is the human effort to give concrete representation to abstract religious concepts. Participants do not believe that



2. Ainsley Henriques, a leader of the United Congregation of Israelites in Kingston, Jamaica, explains a bit about the history and architecture of the Sha'are Shalom Synagogue to members of the public who attended a free reggae concert in the building as part of the “Kingston on the Edge” arts festival. Many Jewish congregations are opening their buildings to the general public to participate in the cultural exchange that is growing as invisible social barriers fade away. *Photo by Dana Evan Kaplan.*

they are directly being commanded by God, and therefore they may alter the acts that are to be done, as well as the order and timing. The purpose of the ceremony is to help people connect with their spiritual selves, however that is defined, rather than to please God in objective terms that can be checked by referring to biblical or talmudic texts.

There is also an intermediate category we could call “Reform rite,” where God commands but does not require us to perform elaborate, multisequential behaviors in a formulaic manner. God retains a divine

commanding voice, but the specifics of how to interpret that voice, as well as the details of how to put those commandments into practical application, are left open.

While new approaches have a great deal of potential value, some of these proposed changes seem to be in conflict with long-established expectations. Societal innovation is moving at a much quicker pace than institutional policy setting. While many congregations continue to struggle to engage worshipers on even an elementary level, individuals are creating new religious models that serve their personal spiritual needs and that are frequently outside the realm of the synagogue community.

Looking toward the Future

In the final chapter I tell of the ongoing search for spirituality among Reform Jews. A friend who read a draft of it said that almost everything in the chapter could apply to non-Orthodox Jews of any background. This is absolutely true. While most of the specifics come out of a Reform context and involve Reform Jews, the activities themselves are trends that impact the entire mainstream American Jewish community, and indeed many other Americans as well. Whether we are talking about virtual religion or spirituality through the arts or wilderness Judaism, there is nothing inherently “Reform” about these activities. We are living in a postdenominational world, and this widespread cultural trendsetting is part of that phenomenon.

Reform Judaism is a bold experiment that is just over two hundred years old, a relatively short amount of time in the context of Jewish history. No one knows how successful the movement will ultimately be. The trend toward postdenominationalism makes it harder to justify having a Reform movement that is distinct from the Conservative movement, Reconstructionism, Jewish renewal, and even Jewish humanism. Nevertheless, I believe it is critical for the future of Judaism in America for the Reform movement to remain strong.

At its theoretical best, Reform Judaism incorporates all of the intellectual challenges that have faced religion over the past few centuries, while at the same time embracing all of the spiritual trends that are so emotionally important to people. Reform Judaism therefore represents

an intellectually truthful approach to religion that can meet the highest scholarly scrutiny while at the same time providing spiritual sustenance for religious seekers. The challenge is how the Reform movement can inculcate a belief in God and hence a commitment to perpetuating our approach to religious faith and Jewish identity without having a fundamentalist worldview.