

Rabbi/Author Dana Evan Kaplan Interview

I call Dana Evan Kaplan Wednesday morning, August 31, 2005. He wrote *American Reform Judaism: An Introduction* and edited *Platforms and Prayer Books: Theological and Liturgical Perspectives on Reform Judaism*, *Theological and Liturgical Perspectives on Reform Judaism, Contemporary Debates in American Reform Judaism: Conflicting Visions*, and *The Cambridge Companion to American Judaism*.

Here's a symposium in *Judaism* magazine about Dana's book *American Reform Judaism*.

Luke: "Rabbi, how are you?"

Dana: "Luke, you can call me Dana."

Luke: "Why are you Reform?"

Dana: "I was raised by two parents born Jewish, which at the time was the standard. They weren't really sure what they were. We lived in [Manhattan] New York and the nearest synagogue was Reform. It was kinda an accident. On the other hand, they sent me to the Orthodox Ramaz day school through sixth grade. You can still see a lot of the residual impact of that.

"I'm very Reform in that I like autonomy and pluralism. I like the religious ideals of Reform Judaism. It strikes me as more consistent with scholarship and today's spirit of the age. On the other hand, I miss the intensity of Orthodoxy. To see people who really devote themselves to it is something hard to find in the Reform movement. But I'm not drawn to Orthodox practice and I don't believe in Orthodoxy."

Luke: "Could you give me some specifics about your observance? Do you keep kosher? Count the omer? How often do you don tefillin?"

Dana: "I don't usually eat pork or shellfish. I do not usually don tefillin. I have a mezuzah on my doorpost, but only the front door."

Dana describes himself as pragmatic in ideology and left-of-center in practice.

Luke: "Why did you become a rabbi?"

Dana: "Because I wanted to learn more about Judaism and share it with others. I thought that doing a PhD in Jewish history and getting a rabbinic degree would be a good balance [he got these degrees in Israel the early 90s].

"I had some idea about staying in Israel. Within a short time, I realized the Reform movement there was under siege and was a small minority movement and highly stigmatized by the majority of Israelis. What Israel's Reform movement needed was native-born Israelis who could convince other Israelis that Reform Judaism wasn't an absurd American import. Every time I opened my mouth, I reconfirmed the prejudices that existed there that the only one who would be committed to Reform Judaism would be an American.

"I sent out letters to American congregations for summer internships but at that time, there wasn't too much interest. Someone suggested the southern hemisphere. I sent a number of letters to South Africa and Australia. I went to Australia to Brisbane to Temple Shalom (about 60 families) in the middle of 1992. It had been founded by an Australian who had intermarried and an American couple who had been Conservative in Minnesota and a guy from India. They bought a little house and put up some stained glass windows. They hadn't even had a student rabbi for several years.

"It was exciting. I was able to generate a tremendous amount of interest even from the Orthodox community. There were two other synagogues -- the Catherine Street synagogue [that I attended in 2000] in the downtown, which was a British United Synagogue-style Jewish establishment of Brisbane, and an Eastern European [Chabad] on Schoonders Street. Now there's also a liberal group on Saint Lucia near the University of Queensland called the Kadimah Progressive Jewish Congregation of South-East Queensland.

"In many ways, Australia is the furthest outpost of the Jewish world and Brisbane is the furthest outpost of Australian Judaism. There wasn't that much familiarity with some of the innovations taking place elsewhere.

"I was there for four months. Then I came back for another four months serving Temple Shalom in Surfers Paradise and Temple Shalom in Brisbane on alternate weeks. Whenever you have a congregation named Temple Shalom, which means peace, always be careful. Apparently the

two congregations had gotten into quite a fight when Temple Shalom of Surfers Paradise had started and taken that name.

“The Brisbane congregation was mostly young couples and the congregation in Surfers Paradise was mostly retirees, many of whom were originally from Britain. There’s virtually no cooperation between the two congregations.

“In 1994, I graduated from rabbinical school and took a job in August at Temple Israel of Cape Town, South Africa, right at the end of apartheid.”

Luke: You are interested in Judaism in different parts of the world?

Dana: “Originally in my book American Reform Judaism, I had several chapters on Reform Judaism around the world. As we started editing the book, it became clear that the dynamics in these communities were very different from what would be found in the United States.

“I remember in South Africa having lunch with a member of one of the Orthodox synagogues. He looked at me and said, ‘You Reform people are terrible.’ He goes on and on about how Orthodoxy is the right way and Reform is the wrong way. The waitress comes over and he orders a pizza with pepperoni and shrimp and I don’t even know some of the things on that pizza.

“I said, ‘You’ve just finished lambasting me for not being Orthodox and here you are ordering such a pizza. He said, ‘What I do in my private life is nobody’s business, but when I go into the synagogue, I pray the way that my father prayed and my grandfather prayed. I do it the right way. You Reform change everything.’

“The whole concept of American Reform Judaism is that you try to bring Judaism into the way you live [rather than living a bifurcated life], not serving as a museum for the way Judaism may have been hundreds of years ago.

“In Reform, the idea is to do away with this hypocrisy. When intermarriage became a major issue, it was Rabbi Alexander Schindler who made some bold speeches and said we have to change. ‘We’ve always accepted that people could convert to Judaism but now we have many non-Jews who are married to Jews and don’t want to convert to Judaism. What do we do with them?’ He proposed outreach which would start with conver-

sion but would move down there so that if you don't want to convert, we'll accept your family as they are and accept your children as Jewish through patrilineal descent."

Luke: "Ordaining gay and lesbian rabbis seems to be a fait accompli in Reform?"

Dana: "Yes. I haven't heard of any problems with the non-acceptance of gay or lesbian clergy. The first transgendered rabbinics student started a couple of years ago on the Los Angeles campus -- Reuben Zellman. This is a person who started off as a woman and has now transgendered into a male identity."

Luke: Which movement represents the majority of America's Jews?

Dana: "It used to be that the Conservative movement was the broad tent that almost everybody in the American Jewish community could fit in no matter what your views or practices. That's no longer true. It's the Reform movement. It's in the interest of the URL (Union for Reform Judaism, renamed from UAHC - Union of American Hebrew Congregations) to be as inclusive as possible. There's nothing to be gained making statements attacking bisexuals, gun owners or people who oppose abortion, although in all three cases the Reform movement has a policy against that."

Luke: "There's little sense of sin being taught in Reform Judaism."

Dana: "This is not only in Reform Judaism. If you look at Alan Wolfe's recent book, *The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Live Our Faith*, he argues that American religion over the past 30 years has done away with the concept of sin. American religious leaders have found that Americans want a feel-good religion that emphasizes what religion can do for me. How can religion make me feel better? How can religion teach me how to be happy? How can religion enrich my life? They don't want to be scolded and threatened."

Luke: What is the central thesis of your book *American Reform Judaism*?

Dana: "For decades, the movement was dominated by Classical Reform, a form of practice that emphasized the belief in ethical monotheism and rejected most traditional practices. But over the last several decades, this rigorous if nontraditional form of Judaism became, for many, an excuse

to do little and care less. The Reform movement became a “low tension” religious group, which sociologist Rodney Stark explains is a religious body whose beliefs and practices do not dramatically set it apart from its environment. In contrast, a “high tension” religious group has beliefs and practices that conflict with the surrounding ethos. The Reform movement’s traditional open-door policy allowed people not only to come in without any concrete expression of commitment, but also to stay without any active participation. The book explains how the movement “rejuvenated” itself in the 1990s up until today.”

Lawrence Grossman writes in *Judaism* magazine:

As a guide to contemporary Reform, *American Reform Judaism* is a worthy sequel to *Response to Modernity*, Michael Meyer’s magisterial history of the worldwide 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 past 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 the view from the seminar room.

Dana: “Correct. Having studied in an Orthodox school, I can’t help but evaluate Reform, in part, based on my early experiences with Judaism. I continue to see a lack of real commitment and dedication outside of a small circle. If you go to the URJ Biennial, they have about 6,000 people who all know the songs and are all tripping over themselves to not come late to services. The dedication and enthusiasm is unbelievable. But these are the leaders of the congregations who, instead of taking a vacation in Nassau, go to a Biennial in some freezing place. If you look at this elite, you are very optimistic about the future of Reform Judaism.

“I do a lot of scholar-in-residence weekends across the country. I’ve been to all sorts of Reform synagogues and there’s a consistent 5-10% of people who are interested and the vast majority of the congregants in every synagogue who are passive and uninterested other than life cycle events (such as births, bar/bat mitzvahs, weddings, deaths).”

Luke: “After you lay out the evidence, in the final paragraphs of your chapters, you always push a note of optimism in there.”

Dana chuckles. “We Jews are optimists. I didn’t want to be too pessimistic. I wanted the book to be read by a wide audience, including many typical congregants in Reform synagogues, and I didn’t want them to

come away all depressed and nihilistic.

“I take things that aren’t always terribly promising and put the best spin on them that I can.

“The Reform has excellent leadership, a large laity and vital lay leadership. My book is meant to point out that underneath the superficial success there lies the potential for a meltdown, which could come suddenly, because the vast majority of Reform Jews have a superficial commitment.

“Things have changed tremendously in Reform. If you had attended a Reform service in 1930, you would’ve found a service that was formal with heavy organ music and people sitting stiffly and the rabbi would’ve been seen as a priest doing the ritual items for the congregation. The rabbi would’ve been the only one to speak Hebrew, the only one to lift and read from the Torah. The bimah (pulpit) would’ve been high up. The choir would’ve been in a loft where you wouldn’t be able to see them.

“I remember when I was working in a synagogue in Wisconsin, a woman in her 80s was telling me about Rabbi Samuel Hirshberg, who was the rabbi there when she was a child. She always saw him way up on the bima, this man in big robes and way up high, and she thought he was God.

“One day at religious school, they didn’t call it Hebrew school because they didn’t speak Hebrew, she saw the rabbi walking down the hallway in the opposite direction. In those days, he wouldn’t greet a little kid. Her mouth dropped open. It was like bumping into God in the hallway.

“Today we have a low bima. The division between the congregation and where the rituals are performed is minimized or eliminated. The choir has come down and is involved in participatory music. The goal is not so much to perform for the congregation but to encourage the congregation to join. Things are more casual. The way people dress reflects that. Children are more welcome. This parallels changes in American religion generally.

“For the first time in history, Judaism is in direct competition with Christianity over the same people. You have a large number of people in flux who could embrace Judaism, Reform Judaism in particular.”

Luke: "There weren't big debates in Reform over patrilineal descent or ordaining gay rabbis. Those issues are settled. What are the religious disputes within Reform? They seem to be more over liturgy."

Dana: "The conflicts facing Reform have more to do with personalities and strategies and geography and finance. They're not ideological. We're in a post-ideological age."

Luke: "I think apathy is the reason we don't hear more dissent within Reform about such things as ordination of gay rabbis and patrilineal descent."

Dana: "Which, if you're part of the elite pushing a particular position, has its advantages."

"The Religious Action Center of Washington D.C. is a political lobbying group led successfully by Rabbi David Saperstein. It's been a model for other movements in Judaism and other religions. But many of the issues it pushes are very liberal and not supported by everyone in the Reform movement. But this is apparently ok. In my congregation in Georgia, we have a number of people who support gun rights. They can be loyal to the Union for Reform Judaism and ignore Rabbi Saperstein's center."

Dana agrees with this observation by Orthodox Rabbi Tzvi Hersh Weinreb in Judaism magazine:

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.

Luke: Is your book mostly about Reform rabbis or do you study the average Reform Jew?

Dana: "I'm not doing a sociological study of Reform. I'm looking at the leaders and what they're saying and what impact that has."

Luke: "I find it difficult to believe that Reform laity are going to engage in ideological battles."

Dana: "That's not necessarily a disadvantage."

Luke: I got a kick out of Jewish Renewal Rabbi Arthur Waskow's response to your book. He said you are whispering what you should be shouting.

Dana: "Rabbi Waskow sees Reform Judaism as hopelessly parve (neither meat nor milk). He's right but that's the way it is. His recommendations are not going to be helpful because his "Down-To-Earth" Judaic philosophy, attractive as it may be to the core of Aleph: Alliance for Jewish Renewal and the Shalom Center, does not resonate with amcha in the Reform movement."

Luke: Are you worried about the future of American Judaism?

Dana: "Yes. Despite my desire to be optimistic, there are troubling signs. Just look at the new demographic survey-the 2001 NJPS. The next several years will be crucial. As Rabbi Eric Yoffie stated at the 1997 biennial:

'This is the single most momentous hour in the history of our movement. We must now decide if our Reform heritage will be permitted to wither, or if it will be handed over to generations to come. We have a few years, a decade at most, to respond to the spiritual emergency that threatens to engulf us.' Our time is almost up."