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**REFORM JEWISH THEOLOGY AND
THE SOCIOLOGY OF LIBERAL RELIGION
IN AMERICA: THE PLATFORMS AS
RESPONSE TO THE PERCEPTION OF
SOCIORELIGIOUS CRISIS**

INTRODUCTION

When people think of theology, many tend to think of a finished product, the inherited baggage of a religious tradition. They think of the collection of traditional beliefs and practices that have been passed down from one generation to another and then to a third, to a fourth, and so on. Theology *is* that. But it is a process as well as a product. It is a process of reflecting critically upon the way that people of a particular religious tradition should live out their faith. It involves the serious examination of the origins, development, and meaning of the elements that make up the tradition. It also asks how that tradition needs to be expressed and reshaped in the contemporary world.¹

This last goal is the determination of how the tradition needs to express itself in the context and particular circumstances of the present age and how it can reshape itself, if necessary, to speak to the modern man and woman. This was certainly one of the main goals of each of the Platforms that the American Reform movement has adopted over the past 115 years. This paper will argue that in the period before the adoption of each of the Platforms, there was a conscious awareness that the Reform movement and/or the entire American Jewish community was in a socioreligious crisis. Each of the Platforms was intended more consciously or less consciously to be part of a theological response to that crisis. As support for this argument, this paper will give a perspective on the theory of the sociology of religion in America. It will explain that sociologists have been able to demonstrate that a theologically strong basis is essential for a revitalization of any American religious movement. As a consequence, there will inevitably be very little latitude available to the liberal religious movements. In other words, because of the nature of liberal religion in America, attempts to use platforms to build a strong theology that can serve as the basis for a revitalization of

Reform Jewish congregations in the United States will ultimately be unsuccessful.

THE “FREE RIDER” PROBLEM INHERENT IN LIBERAL THEOLOGY

Before turning attention to the theological statements in the specific platforms of the Reform movement, it will be helpful to briefly outline the thought of Rodney Stark of the University of Washington.² Stark has popularized ideas first developed by Dean Kelley and later by Laurence R. Iannaccone and others.³ Together they represent a school of sociologists of religion that includes Roger Finke, Charles Y. Glock, James McCann, and William Sims Bainbridge.⁴ Stark argues that “religious organizations can thrive only to the extent that they have a theology that can comfort souls and motivate sacrifice.”⁵ This theory suggests that a more fundamentalist approach to religion is far more compelling to the American congregant. As religious denominations such as the Presbyterians and the Methodists have moved toward a more “refined” or “liberal” theology, they have experienced a precipitous decline in both their numbers of members and their numbers of participants at church services and other religious activities. When theology is “shorn of mystery, miracle, and mysticism—when an active supernatural realm is replaced by abstractions concerning virtue,” then, Stark argues, the religious denomination lacks the theological strength to strongly motivate people to build a strong and vibrant religious community.⁶ Aware that they are presenting a radically new argument, Finke and Stark state that “we are using an underlying model of religious history that is the exact opposite based on progress through theological refinement. We shall present compelling evidence that theological refinement is the kind of progress that results in organizational bankruptcy.”⁷

Implicit in the writings of this school is the assumption that unless an American religious movement is based on a theology that represents God as demanding specific behaviors at specific times, there is no way to permanently break the cycle of apathy that leads to low attendance, which in turn creates more apathy.⁸ While some congregations will, of course, be successful at creating innovative programs that meet the needs of a large group for a time, over the long haul there is no substitute, according to this view, for a compelling God. Without such a God, the congregations will inevitably develop a “free rider problem.” Using rational-choice theories of behavior, these scholars argue that the more the individual sacrifices on behalf of their religion, the more benefits they actually receive in return. Individuals will evaluate religion the same way they evaluate all other matters of choice. That is, they will

evaluate the cost as well as the benefits, including the opportunity costs that arise when one action can be undertaken only by foregoing other actions. In the end they will “consume” those “religious goods” that maximize net benefits.

The liberalizing of a theology leads to greater emphasis on the autonomy of the individual, which is inevitably promoted at the expense of the authority of God. This theological shift will quickly escalate the problem of free riders. As Michael Hechter argues, “truly rational actors will not join to pursue common ends when, without participating, they can reap the benefit of other people’s activity in obtaining them. If every member of the relevant group can share in the benefits . . . then the rational thing is to free ride . . . rather than to help obtain the corporate interests.”⁹

In such a situation “insufficient collective goods” are created because too few contribute, and too few contribute because there is not a compelling theological need to contribute. Everyone in the organization suffers, but those who participate most actively give the most of themselves will suffer most. Therefore it shouldn’t surprise us if people who develop a strong interest in Judaism find Reform temples emotionally unsatisfying and move on to Conservative or even Orthodox congregations. Orthodox Jewish theology is, of course, based on the belief in a compelling God who demands the observance of a large number of specific commandments. This may seem to have a very high cost, and it does. But for those willing to make that commitment it also has a very high benefit. Such individuals will find themselves in a group of like-minded people willing to make a strong commitment to their God and to their community. And one flows from the other. Although they may not be conscious of it, their intimate involvement in their congregation and community is based on the theological assumptions that are the basis for their approach to religion.

The Reform movement is much more vulnerable to the free rider problem than is the Orthodox. Because religion involves collective action, all religious organizations are susceptible to “exploitation” by free riders. But in the Reform movement the stress on the autonomy of the individual makes it virtually impossible to develop a theology that can compel. This is the very core of liberal religion, and it has many advantages. But it makes the Reform movement vulnerable as well. The description of the free rider problem in a liberal church parallels the situation in many American Reform congregations:

One need not look far to find examples of anemic congregations plagued by free rider problems . . . a visit to the nearest liberal Protestant church usually will suffice to discover “members” who draw upon the group for weddings, funerals, and (perhaps) holiday celebrations, but who provide little or nothing in return. Even if they do make substantial financial contributions, they weaken

the group's ability to create collective religious goods because their inactivity devalues the compensators and reduces the "average" level of commitment.¹⁰

It would seem that if a religion has a God who compels specific behaviors, this increased cost would make a religion less attractive; that is, of course, true for many people. But for those who are attracted to a God who does compel, the costly demands that result actually strengthen their religious group by mitigating free-rider problems and increasing the production of "collective religious goods." The costly demands of a compelling God create a barrier to group entry. Under such circumstances potential members cannot reap the benefits of membership without first incurring substantial costs. If a person wants to take part in the organization, he or she must accept the beliefs and with those beliefs the idea that God demands that they make sacrifices for their faith. Thus a new member qualifies for membership by accepting the demanding nature of a compelling God, by accepting the many sacrifices that the required observances will entail, and by implicitly accepting the fact that they may actually be stigmatized by the broader society on account of their religious beliefs and practices. The high cost of membership actually screens out those people whose participation and commitment would very likely be low and who would therefore create a drain on the "spiritual goods" that the collective is trying to create. This drain is the problem that most of the mainline Protestant denominations in the United States have faced over the past thirty years. Up to this point, they have been unable to develop and implement a successful response.

Benton Johnson and his co-authors asked the question: why have mainline Protestant churches been in decline? And they answered the question by stating that "The underlying problem of the mainline churches . . . is the weakening of the spiritual conviction required to generate the enthusiasm and energy needed to sustain a vigorous communal life." As to how those churches might begin to address the spiritual inertia and numerical decline, they state that "If the mainline churches want to regain their vitality, their first step must be to address theological issues head-on."¹¹

This paper argues that the same theological avoidance that is causing severe commitment problems for the liberal Protestant denominations is also a very serious problem for synagogues in general and Reform congregations in particular. Conservative rabbi Michael Goldberg has written that most American Jews, regardless of movement, have lost theological focus and are in that category of low participation and commitment. Therefore,

Vibrant, lively community eludes many American Jews because even as they look for it, they carry with them the infection that kills community in contem-

porary American life: a culture of consumerism based on individual preference. Despite their vaunted theological differences, American Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Reform Jews all practice the same kind of Judaism—consumer Judaism. For the only thing their synagogues require for membership is the payment of monetary dues. Such synagogues are like religious 7-11s.

Michael Goldberg then describes how religious consumerism works:

When American Jews get a craving for something sweet and gooey—a bar or bat mitzvah, a wedding, a baby naming, they drop in, plunk down their money, savor their choice, and then drive away, until the craving overcomes them again. The “members” of such synagogues are essentially nothing more than consumers exercising their individual preferences in the marketplace. As for the congregational board of directors, they basically operate as a management team, keeping tabs on market share and income. And the rabbi? He or she takes the role of counter help, whose job it is to keep the individual customers satisfied so they keep coming back to this particular franchise outlet rather than to that other religious Stop ‘N Shop down the street.¹²

The Reform Platforms attempted to respond to this sociological dynamic. The following analysis attempts to describe this process and explain the dynamics behind each initiative.

THE PLATFORMS AS ATTEMPTS TO REACT TO SOCIORELIGIOUS CRISIS

The Reform movement adopted Platforms in 1885, 1937, 1976, and 1999.¹³ In the author’s view, each is attempting to respond to the free rider problem, which is a direct consequence of the liberal theology of the American Reform movement and its stress on the autonomy of the individual. Each of the Platforms was a response to the perception that the Reform movement and the entire American Jewish community were in crisis. Today’s crisis resulted from the publicity given to the 52-percent intermarriage rate found by the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS).¹⁴ Each of the previous Platforms likewise came after a period of crisis. Let us look briefly at each case.

THE PITTSBURGH PLATFORM OF 1885

It may surprise many people to find out that the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform came after a period of crisis.¹⁵ Many believe that the framers of that Platform had tremendous confidence in the Reform movement that they had built as an entity and were optimistic in the future of Reform Judaism as a religion. They also are seen as extremely optimistic about the inevitable progression of Western civilization as a whole. That is true, but it is not the whole story. Although Kaufmann Kohler had

confidence in the integrity of his theological approach to Judaism, he was far less sanguine about whether his congregants were lining up behind him.¹⁶ As readers may recall, the traditional accounts of the period describe how Kohler called the conference and developed the Platform in order to respond to ideological challenges from the left and from the right. On the right, Kohler was trying to explain the theological premises behind Reform Judaism that differentiated it from the better from the much more traditional approach of Alexander Kohut. Kohut and Kohler had engaged in a series of debates before the Pittsburgh Conference, giving Kohler the opportunity to think through his theological justifications for his religious positions.¹⁷ On the left, Kohler was trying to differentiate Reform Judaism from Felix Adler's Ethical Culture movement. Here Kohler tried to prove that there was an important role in his theology for the continued perpetuation of the Jewish people. He relied on the concept of the Mission of Israel to justify the continued existence of the Jews.

Another major impetus, not usually stressed, is Kohler's perception of a pervasive and endemic religious decline in Reform congregations throughout the United States.¹⁸ Kohler had long been concerned with the low level of interest shown by Reform congregants in the temples that he served in Detroit, Chicago, and New York. He was, in fact, very concerned that the logical consequence of radical reform might in some way be contributing to or at least exacerbating the sense that Jews were showing less and less interest in religious activities and even in the social aspects of congregational life.

In 1879 the president of the Chicago Sinai Congregation, Morris Selz, delivered a report that was unusual for its bluntness but reflected a situation that was common throughout the United States at that time:

[t]his congregation has during the past year not undertaken or accomplished any one thing or act, which could entitle it to any special credit or praise at this present meeting. . . . We claim to be the principal congregation in the Western country and we are thus classed, but we deserve it not. We own a temple erected by your liberality in days gone by, to-day we would not build it; we would be unwilling to bring a sacrifice. Service is held as stated but we do not attend. . . . We have a minister of whom we are justly proud [Kaufmann Kohler], but he preaches before empty benches. No doubt we lack inspirations; we are indifferent. And our children? Will they follow our examples, and if possible improve upon our evil ways, and still we remain indifferent. . . . In this manner we have brought religious matters to a standstill and have transformed our grand Temple in[to] a grand vacuum.¹⁹

Kohler hoped to use the Pittsburgh Platform not just as a theological stage but in order to make practical recommendations for the reversal of the apathy he felt so strongly. This is very clear in the preconference paper in which Kohler concentrated not only on theological issues but also on practical policies for building the Reform movement

in America. Kohler hoped that, through a combination of a coherent unified theology and what he called a “Jewish mission” to work with Jews, the apathy of many Reform congregations could be reversed. Kohler argued that there was an immediate need to increase the religious commitment of the congregants and that any strategy that might achieve this goal was worth consideration and implementation on a trial basis. Yet he understood that the strategy had to be based upon a coherent and consistent theology. He succeeded with the Pittsburgh Platform in building a theologically consistent document that helped the Reform movement establish a set of standards for ritual as well as for ethical behavior. Those standards may have been extremely non-traditional, such as the prohibition of head coverings in the Classical Reform synagogue, but they were standards nevertheless.²⁰

THE COLUMBUS PLATFORM OF 1937

It should not be necessary to describe in detail the events of the 1930s nor to explain that this was a period of crisis for American Jews, as well as for Jews throughout the world. It is important to stress, however, that the Reform movement had long been having terrible troubles maintaining any sense of positive momentum. As Michael Meyer wrote during the interwar period:

Reform Judaism . . . had great difficulty fostering enthusiasm for its cause. For all of its rabbis' efforts to be relevant, for all their pronouncements on social justice, it could not—and some of its adherents would not—shake its image as a genteel, upper-class institution that demanded little from its affiliates. . . . Rabbis spoke repeatedly of anemia, indifference, paralyzing apathy. And except for the most talented among them, they often spoke to half-empty synagogues.²¹

During the Depression years, congregational memberships dropped at many temples due to the economic crisis. For example, at Congregation Emanu-El in New York City, membership dropped 44 percent between 1930 and 1942, from 1,652 to 874 units. Although Emanu-El's membership dropped more than most because of their insistence on payment of dues, whereas many congregations allowed those who had trouble paying to remain as members, there was nevertheless a substantial loss of membership nationwide. Although Hebrew Union College had recently raised a substantial endowment, which had been invested in ways that did not lose value when the stock market fell, the other national organizations of the Reform movement had serious institutional and financial difficulties.²²

Despite these problems, the Reform movement presented an image of consistency and stability due in large measure to the continued influence of the Pittsburgh Platform, which represented Classical Re-

form Judaism as a unified belief system with a coherent theology and a set ritual. Yet by the 1930s this sense of uniform practice based on a consistent theology was in the process of breaking down.

Most historians remember the 1937 Columbus Platform as the decisive moment when the Reform movement shifted its position on Zionism in a very dramatic fashion. But another equally important change was the development and acceptance of pluralistic beliefs and practices. There was an increasingly strong sense of the need to allow different types of people with different types of needs and even different types of beliefs to find a place under what could be referred to anachronistically as the “big tent” of the Reform movement. But it created a serious problem in that the acceptance of pluralistic practices made it very difficult to maintain a consistent theology. At the 1935 Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) conference, Louis Binstock of Temple Sinai in New Orleans argued that it was unacceptable that some Reform congregations had Friday night and Saturday morning services, while others had Saturday morning and Sunday morning services, and still other congregations had Friday night and Sunday morning services. Further, he said, it was shocking that various rabbis were teaching completely different approaches to Sabbath and holiday observances. It was therefore inevitable that Reform congregants in different parts of the country would grow up with dramatically different and even contradictory ideas about what religion was, in general, and particularly about what Judaism believed. Binstock argued that the increasing diversity of the Reform movement in 1935 was not a positive factor for the movement. At best it tended to puzzle many congregants, and at its worst it destroyed respect for Judaism as a tradition and as a religion. Binstock argued that:

I do feel that Reform Judaism must declare itself positively; decree definite dogmas of affirmation or denial . . . furnish a clear chart of religious principles and truths by which we must steer safely and surely in the present storm-tossed sea of religious strife.²³

In the subsequent debate, Samuel Cohon argued that although he did not want Reform Judaism to accept dogmas *per se*, he nevertheless felt it was critical that there be a clear formulation of the principles of Judaism. This would make it possible for people to understand what Judaism stood for and how they could observe their religion. Cohon called for a “crystallization of thought as to what is primary and what is secondary” among the theological principles of Reform Judaism.²⁴ The following year, in 1936, Cohon presented a report of the Commission on the Guiding Principles of Judaism, which stated that:

The time has come for us in this age of chaos to take our Judaism seriously and instruct our people in the way they should follow and the things they should

do. We should teach them that we believe in God, in Israel and in Torah, and show them how to revive prayer, ceremonies and other observances, whereby we can strengthen our lives.²⁵

Cohon argued that Reform congregants needed guidance at a time of chaos, by which he meant the rapidly changing religious environment as well as the difficult economic and political environment in the country and in the world at the time. And he believed that if Reform rabbis were unable or unwilling to provide firm direction in terms of religious belief and practice, there would be a further degeneration in the religious lives of the Reform community. This was a point very similar to that made by Kaufmann Kohler in 1885, one of Kohler's reasons for pushing the Pittsburgh Platform.

THE 1976 SAN FRANCISCO CENTENARY PERSPECTIVE

In the period before the 1976 San Francisco statement there was a perception that the Reform movement was having troubles. Eugene Borowitz, the primary author of the Centenary Perspective, wrote:

As Reform Judaism entered the 1970s there was a general feeling that the movement needed to rethink its directions. The tremendous enthusiasm generated by the rapid expansion of the number of Reform congregations in the 1950s and '60s had passed. The integration of American Jewry into the society had largely been accomplished, but the style of synagogue life that resulted, which seemed so fresh a few years previous, in the '70s, seemed somewhat stale and in need of invigoration.²⁶

Michael Meyer put it even more bluntly. In his masterful study of the Reform movement, in a section entitled "Malaise," he writes:

In the late 1960s severe self-doubt and anxiety about the future displaced the ebullience that had characterized American Reform Judaism since the war. Divided and uncertain of its course, it long remained in a state of crisis.

... by the end of the sixties, stagnation was settling in. Only a handful of new congregations joined each year; membership lists in existing congregations either remained static or slightly declined; a few temples had no choice but to merge in order to remain viable. Religious schools now shrank in size as the "baby-boom" generation passed on to college. Temple youth groups likewise suffered from the demographic decline, as well as from the rebelliousness and pervasive sense of a "generation gap" that made teenagers want to distance themselves from institutions associated with their parents.²⁷

The Centenary Perspective was written at a time when not only was the Reform movement suffering from demographic problems, but the theological currents of the sixties and early seventies had made it increasingly difficult to speak about God with confidence. The statement was written at a time when many American Jews were just beginning to

grapple with the theological implications of the Holocaust, and some were influenced by the “death of God” theology and Richard Rubinstein’s Judaic presentation of that theology. When the Perspective refers to “our uncertain historical situation,” it makes clear that the statement was written in a time period in which theological as well as social assumptions were being questioned and the confidence that many people had in the future had already been weakened if not destroyed.

One can sense a tremendous hesitancy in the section of the statement dealing with God. The San Francisco Perspective uses the traditional categories of God, the people, Israel, and Torah, and adds others, including a section on religious practice, the state of Israel, and the Diaspora, but it is ambiguous and ambivalent about what the Reform movement actually believes about the Divine.

In talking about God, the Perspective states that: “The affirmation of God has always been essential to our people’s will to survive.”²⁸ This is a very unusual way to begin a positive statement about belief in God, because it says nothing about belief in God; rather, it says that the consequence of that belief has been a strengthening of the Jewish people’s will to survive and presumably their success at doing so. It puts the stress entirely on the consequences of the belief rather than on the belief itself.

The next sentence continues to avoid a direct theological statement: “In our struggle through the centuries to preserve our faith, we have experienced and conceived of God in many ways.”²⁹ Again the stress is on the struggle of the Jewish people to survive. Although it uses the terminology “to preserve our faith,” rather than to survive as a people, the stress is still on the survival of the people rather than on the faith itself, because during this struggle over many centuries “we have experienced and conceived of God in many ways.” How can Reform Jews see belief in God as the central purpose of their struggle to survive through many centuries if, over the centuries, they have seen God in so many ways? It seems highly unlikely that Jews before the emancipation and the enlightenment saw God in many ways. Pre-modern society was very homogenous in almost every way, including that of theology. Whereas many pre-modern Jews may not have thought a great deal about God in theological terms, it seems an exaggeration to state that Jews conceived of God in many ways through the centuries. During the last two centuries? Yes! But before that? Not likely.

The third sentence in the section on God further avoids a direct statement about God. “The trials of our own time and the challenges of modern culture have made steady belief and clear understanding difficult for some.”³⁰ While this may be a true statement, it seems to be hardly a ringing affirmation of the Jewish belief in and commitment to God.

The next statement attempts to partially show that commitment: “Nevertheless, we ground our lives, personally and communally, on

God's reality and remain open to new experiences and conceptions of the Divine."³¹ But here, too, it says nothing about a belief in God or God's nature. Rather, it states only that Reform Jews ground their lives on the fact that God is a reality. But the document hasn't discussed anything about the nature of that reality. And of course this was done intentionally, because there was no consensus on what that nature was.

In the final sentence of this very short paragraph, the term mystery is used not once but twice. "Amid the mystery we call life, we affirm that human beings, created in God's image, share in God's eternity despite the mystery we call death."³² The final statement was the strongest that could be made under the circumstances, but it did not provide the clear theological direction that could provide a basis for a strengthened religious commitment throughout the movement.

The Reform movement had moved a long way from the theological uniformity of the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform. By the 1970s there was full acceptance of a wide range of traditions, customs, and practices to the point that it would have been ridiculous to suggest that one official standard was uniformly accepted and required for a Reform service of any type. Behind this diversity of ritual expression was acceptance of the idea that there was not *one* Reform theology. Rather Reform Judaism represented many different ways of thinking about God and the relationship between God and the Jewish people. Eugene Borowitz says this explicitly in his book *Liberal Judaism*, which was published by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC) in 1984. He asks the question: "Who is a good Jew?" And answers by stating very clearly that: "I consider nothing more fundamental to being a good Jew than belief in God."³³ But then he goes on to suggest that there are many different ways of looking at God, and that many of them can be valid and religiously authentic for a believing Jew. He explains that: "With our religious and communal authority largely replaced by the insistence of modern Jews on thinking for themselves, no one can easily claim the authority to overrule competing views." Concerning how Jews may view God, Borowitz goes on to write that:

With our new appreciation of pluralism, we have also gained greater appreciation of the extraordinary openness with which Judaism has allowed people to talk of God. "My" good Jew believes in God but not necessarily in my view of God. We have numerous differing interpretations of what God might mean for a contemporary Jew. . . . I am saying that we Jews have been and remain fundamentally a religion, not that we are very dogmatic about it.³⁴

THE SITUATION TODAY

Today the American Jewish community is trying to develop strategies to respond to the crisis of assimilation that has hit the community's consciousness with strong force since the publication of the results of the 1990 NJPS. The Reform movement is the Jewish denomination most directly affected by intermarriage, which is one but not the only by-product of the assimilation of the Jews into American society.

Reform leaders are aware not only that the American Jewish community is in crisis but that the Reform movement has had difficulty overcoming the challenges facing it. Recently Eric Yoffie, the president of the UAHC, published a very blunt article in *Reform Judaism* magazine. He stated that the Reform movement has a decade at most to successfully reach those on the periphery of the community, or it risks losing a large segment of that community forever. Richard Levy, immediate past president of the CCAR, understood the problem as early as 1969, and he is on record as having written that:

The American Reform synagogue is in trouble. It has generally defaulted on all three of its traditional functions—as a house of prayer (*Bet Tefilah*); as a house of study (*Bet Midrash*); and as a house of meeting (*Bet Knesset*). There are few Reform synagogues where prayer is a regular and significant event for the majority of members; even fewer where there is serious study of Jewish literature and ideas, either alone or in conjunction with secular study; and as Reform congregations grow in size, “meeting,” in any sense beyond occasional social affairs where few members know each other, has become equally rare.³⁵

Reform Judaism today faces the same problem that has been both its strength and its weakness since its origin almost 200 years ago, the question of how a liberal religious movement can set standards, if indeed it can at all. Standards would give Reform Judaism more structure and give congregants a clear vision of what it means in concrete terms to be a Reform Jew. But without a clear theology that can posit in an unequivocal way the existence of a commanding God, there is no compelling reason for Reform Jews to accept any system of standards as binding upon them.

Jack Wertheimer has commented that

For much of its history, the Reform movement established limits and did not hesitate to prohibit traditional Jewish practices that it considered outdated. Today, Reform is open to change in both directions—toward a more radical break with traditional practices and toward an unprecedented openness to traditional teachings.

And he puts his finger on the reason for this when he says that:

This eclecticism has been made possible by a rethinking of the Reform position. Whereas Reform was formerly a movement that on principal said no to

some aspects of Jewish tradition, it is now a movement that is open to all Jewish possibilities, whether traditional or innovative.³⁶

What guides the decision-making process in the Reform movement today is the key word *autonomy*, which is built to allow each individual as well as each congregation to choose whatever Jewish religious expressions are meaningful to them.³⁷ This pluralistic approach to practice makes it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to express a coherent theology, which was precisely why Classical Reform Judaism did not encourage or even allow a variety of ritual approaches but rather insisted on a conformity of ritual, at least in the synagogue.

Walter Jacob has argued very forcefully that the richness and fullness of Jewish religious life has been lost in many cases in the Reform context because congregants have perhaps unintentionally used the ideal of autonomy as an excuse to neglect 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 religious tradition. “No one can fault this ideal but it has not worked. We need direction, standards—a system of mitzvot (observances)—and Halacha as we go beyond guidance to governance.”³⁸

Unfortunately a platform such as the one that was accepted at the 1999 Pittsburgh CCAR conference, which begins the section on God with the statement: “*We affirm the reality and unity of God, even as we may differ in our understanding of the Divine Presence in our lives,*” is not going to provide the theological basis on which to build any sense of obligation, except in its broadest sense. It cannot possibly be a strong enough theological basis to justify commitment to ritual observance as a system that could break the free rider problem cycle that plagues the Reform movement. This is not a direct criticism of the final document, which is an inevitable result of the liberal theology and the liberal social perspective central to the American Reform movement today. As the baby boomers become the parents of the children in Reform religious schools and the bulk of congregational membership, the movement *needs* to take into account the fact that baby boomers grew up “in a post-60s culture that emphasizes choice, knowing and understanding oneself, the importance of personal autonomy, and fulfilling one’s potential—all contributing to a highly subjective approach to religion.”³⁹

Knowing and understanding oneself is considered the most important priority of one’s early years. Personal autonomy has become an absolutely sacrosanct belief. Fulfilling one’s potential is regarded as the ultimate goal of life. This baby boomer mentality has helped the liberal religious movements move toward an even more pluralistic model that allows for all sorts of approaches to the spiritual quest. By trying to of-

fer everything to everyone, the Reform movement is trying to appeal to as many Jews and potential Jews as possible. The movement is, therefore, attempting to minimize the number of former Jews who are in the process of wandering off, never to return—a number that will be very substantial even in the best-case scenario. But the movement should be aware that the only way it can offer such a pluralistic model of Jewish religious life is to rely on a theology that is, in itself, so pluralistic that it will be difficult, if not impossible, to discern a clear and unequivocal theological message. And if most Reform congregants have little idea what the movement's religious beliefs are, it will be very difficult for them to pass on those beliefs to their children and grandchildren. As ethnicity continues to wane, this lack of theological clarity will become a more and more serious problem for American Reform Judaism.

The Reform movement has adopted many of the values of the baby boomer generation, just as they adopted the values that they experienced in American society in earlier generations. This means that Reform Judaism has certain significant weaknesses as well as many vital strengths. The movement will have to work to maximize those strengths and minimize the weaknesses without compromising the Reform commitment to autonomy and choice. Under these circumstances, it will not be possible to develop a strong enough theological statement to dramatically change the social dynamics in Reform congregations. The free rider problem will continue to plague the movement, a consequence of the liberal theological perspective of American Reform Judaism.

Eric Yoffie argues that, in the current religious and cultural environment, concrete programming must precede theological statements. Writing before the adoption of the 1999 Pittsburgh Platform, Yoffie expressed skepticism that any platform or statement of principles would be able to solve the problems facing the Reform movement. As he stated in his closing remarks to the UAHC Board of Trustees meeting:

By nature, I am not inclined to be sympathetic to platforms or to principles of the kind that we have before us. I wonder about the effort required for their production and tend to be skeptical of the impact that they have on our lives. I am reminded of Franz Rosenzweig's remark that German liberal Judaism produced so many wonderful principles and so few actual consequences.

Yoffie argues that the great need of the hour is to involve Reform Jews in "Jewish doing." He states that Reform Jews need to be immersed in Torah study and in Jewish ritual activity of all sorts. In this way, they can search "for a uniquely Reform way of approaching these ancient commitments." Yoffie suggests that Judaism today is over-verbalized and under-experienced.

Defining our essence right now is less important than encouraging the everyday doing of Jewish tasks in a way that is appropriate for liberal Jews. Once the

doing has been established and facts on the ground have been created, we can then devise—with great care—a theology built on an examination of those tasks and their meaning.⁴⁰

This may be the best advice that the American Reform movement will receive. Nevertheless, their liberal theoretical and practical positions have created in the Reform movement a theological vagueness that puts them in a vulnerable sociological position and may cause severe problems for that denomination and the entire American Jewish community in the years to come.⁴¹

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NOTES

1. Brennan R. Hill, Paul Knitter, and William Madges, *Faith, Religion and Theology: A Contemporary Introduction* (Mystic [CT], 1991), p. 251.

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5. Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America: 1776 to 1990* (New Brunswick, 1992), p. 5.

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8. On Stark as a sociologist of American religious history, see David G. Hackett, “Rodney Stark and the Sociology of American Religious History,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (1990), pp. 372–76. For a more critical view, see Philip K. Goff, “Spiritual Enrichment and the Bull Market: Balancing the Books of American Religious History,” *Religious Studies Review*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (1996), pp. 106–12). Goff writes that despite the fact that Finke and Stark write well, their book *The Churching of America* “is so wrought with problems that readers will invariably distrust the occasions when Finke and Stark are on the mark” (p. 107).

9. Michael Hechter, *Principles of Group Solidarity* (Berkeley, 1987), p. 27.

10. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton, 1996), p. 175. See the recent essays on this book: reviewers Willi Braun, Burton Mack, and Randall Collins, introduction by Russell T. McCutcheon, “A Symposium on Rodney Stark’s *The Rise of Christianity*,” *Religious Studies Review*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (1999), pp. 127–39.

11. Benton Johnson, Dean R. Hoge, and Donald A. Luidens, “Mainline Churches: The Real Reason for Decline,” *First Things*, No. 31 (1993), p. 18.

12. Michael Goldberg, *Why Should Jews Survive? Looking Past the Holocaust toward a Jewish Future* (New York, 1995), pp. 136–37.

13. There were earlier statements of principle as well. Isaac Mayer Wise and Isaac Leeser agreed on certain religious principles at the Cleveland Conference of 1855, and a small group of radical reformers held a meeting in Philadelphia in 1869. The author hopes to analyze these documents as well as others in future research.

It should be pointed out that the 1885 Platform was written before the founding of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) in 1889. In the first *Yearbook*, the CCAR reprinted earlier statements and platforms, including that of the Pittsburgh Platform, but no vote was ever taken on it.

14. Barry A. Kosmin, et al., *Highlights of the CJF 1990 National Jewish Population Survey* (New York, 1991). For an interesting collection of articles by sociologists drawing on the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, see David M. Gordis and Dorit P. Gary, eds., *American Jewry: Portrait and Prognosis* (West Orange, 1997). Also see Sidney Goldstein, "Profile of American Jewry: Insights from the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey," *American Jewish Yearbook*, Vol. 92 (New York, 1992).

15. On the Pittsburgh Platform, see Walter Jacob, ed., *The Changing World of Reform Judaism: The Pittsburgh Platform in Retrospect* (Pittsburgh, 1985). Also see the review of this collection by Jonathan D. Sarna, "New Light on the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885," *American Jewish History*, Vol. 76, No. 3 (1987), pp. 358–68.

16. Kohler wrote a number of books, including his masterpiece *Jewish Theology, Systematically and Historically Considered* (New York, 1918). Many of his essays have been collected in *Hebrew Union College and Other Addresses* (Cincinnati, 1916); *Studies, Addresses, and Personal Papers* (New York, 1931); and *A Living Faith*, ed. Samuel S. Cohon (Cincinnati, 1948).

17. Kohler's lectures were published as *Backwards or Forwards?* (New York, 1885).

18. David Kaufman, *Shul with a Pool: The "Synagogue-Center" in American Jewish History* (Hanover, 1999), p. 13.

19. Morris Selz, The American Jewish Archives, Manuscript Collection 56, 2/4.

20. Jacob Neusner, "When Reform Judaism Was Judaism," in Dana Evan Kaplan, ed., *Conflicting Visions: Contemporary Debates on American Reform Judaism* (New York, forthcoming).

21. Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism*, (New York, 1988), p. 297. This book is the classic account of the Reform movement.

22. On Hebrew Union College, see Samuel E. Karff, ed., *Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion at One Hundred Years* (Cincinnati, 1976).

23. Louis Binstock, "Dogma and Judaism," *CCAR Yearbook*, Vol. 35 (1935), p. 266.

24. Samuel Cohon's writings include *What We Jews Believe* (Cincinnati, 1931) and *Judaism—A Way of Life* (Cincinnati, 1948). For an overview of his views of the Reform movement, see his "Reform Judaism in America," *Judaism*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (1954), pp. 333–53. On his perspective on the theology of the Reform movement of the time and how he felt it should change, see his analysis of the Union Prayer Book, "The Theology of the UPB," *CCAR Yearbook*, Vol. 38 (1938), pp. 246–94. For an excellent overview of Cohon, see Meyer, "Samuel S. Cohon: Reformer of Reform Judaism," *Judaism*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (1966), pp. 319–28.

25. Cohon, "Report on the Guiding Principles of Reform Judaism," *CCAR Yearbook*, Vol. 36 (1936), p. 104.

26. Eugene B. Borowitz, *Reform Judaism Today*, Book One: *Reform in the Process of Change* (New York, 1983), p. xii.

27. Meyer, p. 369.

28. *Reform Judaism—A Centenary Perspective* (1976), printed in its entirety in Meyer, *Response to Modernity*, pp. 391–94. [The Perspective can also be found on the web page of the CCAR; www.ccarnet.org.]

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.

33. Borowitz, *Liberal Judaism* (New York, 1984), pp. 129–31.

34. Ibid, p. 130.

35. Richard N. Levy, “The Reform Synagogue: Plight and Possibility,” in Jacob Neusner, ed., *Understanding American Judaism: Toward a Description of a Modern Religion*, vol. 2 of *Sectors of American Judaism: Reform, Orthodoxy, Conservatism, and Reconstructionism* (New York, 1975), p. 64. The entire article appears on pages 63–83. Originally published in *Judaism*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (1969), pp. 159–76.

36. Jack Wertheimer, *A People Divided: Judaism in Contemporary America* (New York, 1993), p. 96.

37. The only restriction would be that it doesn’t cross over certain “red lines” such as introducing overtly Christian elements. This would be objectionable primarily because it would be perceived of as crossing the boundary out of Jewish identity. It would also be theologically inconsistent, but that would be far less likely to bother the congregational leadership.

38. Walter Jacob, “Standards Now,” *Reform Judaism*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (1992), p. 64. Jacob has continued the work of his predecessor at Congregation Rodef Shalom, Solomon Freehof, who had published a number of collections of Reform Responsa literature. See Walter Jacob, ed., *American Reform Responsa* (New York, 1983); and *Contemporary American Reform Responsa* (New York, 1987).

39. Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (San Francisco, 1993), p. 30.

40. Eric Yoffie, “Thoughts On the Ten Principles: Closing Remarks to the Board of Trustees” (presented at the UAHC Board of Trustees meeting, Memphis, Tenn., 5 December 1998 [UAHC Report, “Remarks from the President,” p. 6]).

41. Robin D. Perrin, “American Religion in the Post-Aquarian Age: Values and Demographic factors in Church Growth and Decline,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (1989), pp. 75–89.