

Gilbert S. Rosenthal

A Comprehensive Overview

A Book Review of:

American Reform Judaism, by Dana Evan Kaplan. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003, 297 pp., no price stated

The Reform movement in Judaism is rapidly closing in on its 200th anniversary. From humble and unimposing beginnings in Germany, and from one single synagogue in Charleston, South Carolina, Reform has now swept to first place in the standing of American Jewish religious movements, with 900 congregations, over a million-and-a-half members, and over 1,800 rabbis in the Central Conference of American Rabbis. The most recent convention of the Union for Reform Judaism (formerly The Union of American Hebrew Congregations), held in Minneapolis, attracted over 4,600 delegates; its campuses in Cincinnati, New York, Los Angeles, and Jerusalem are beehives of activity; its Religious Actions Center in Washington hums with social action programs. About 39 percent of American Jews list themselves as Reform, according to the 2000 population study. In a word, Reform is here to stay, notwithstanding the jibes of its Orthodox critics.

There have been several valuable histories of the Reform movement: the early classic by David Philipson; the multi-volume set by Gunther Plaut; the scholarly presentation of Michael Meyer. But Rabbi Dana Evan Kaplan, who teaches at the University of Missouri in Kansas City, brings the story up to date in his new study, *American Reform Judaism*. He tells the tale in a breezy, conversational, and popular style utilizing texts, letters, official pronouncements, and private interviews that will engage and enlighten the reader. Kaplan surveys the history of the movement from its inception, discusses the various platforms and pronouncements, starting from the landmark Pittsburgh Platform of 1885 up to the 1999 Statement of Principles, and describes the various leaders, the personalities, and the social and religious dynamics that impact the movement. He notes that the liberal theology of Reform makes it difficult to create the type of committed religious community that can perpetuate commitment from decade to decade. Consequently, "Reform must constantly market itself to its congregants and unaffiliated." This lack of "strong and compelling theology forms the weak underbelly of

the movement”; its openness attracts “consumers” rather than altruistic service.

Kaplan briefly documents the trend toward greater traditionalism in Reform, especially since the 1930s but most particularly in the past 25 years or so. This return to tradition is evident in the greater emphasis on Hebrew, and the restoration of Zion to the liturgy and theology of the movement, the increased respect for traditions such as kashrut and yarmulkes—items that were banished from the Reform lexicon and were all but taboo not very long ago. He is excited by Union for Reform Judaism’s president Eric Yoffie’s call for “rejuvenation” of the Reform movement and for a revolution in its liturgy, as well as his insistence on greater knowledge of Hebrew.

Paradoxically, at the very moment of Reform’s increasing rapprochement with tradition, it has chartered an even more liberal and untraditional course in several areas. Under the dynamic leadership of the late president of the Union for Reform Judaism, Alexander Schindler, the Reform movement has moved inexorably away from traditional norms in marriage, conversion, and Jewish identity. During Schindler’s administration, women were ordained as rabbis and certified as cantors. Patrilineal descent was accepted officially by the movement in defining Jewish identity. As part of the Schindler outreach, non-Jewish spouses were accepted into membership and children who were not halachically Jewish were admitted into the religious schools. Schindler also pressed for the acceptance of gays and lesbians into temple membership, and even more radically, into the Hebrew Union College for ordination. It was not long before the Central Conference of American Rabbis, followed by the Union for Reform Judaism, began to urge civil unions for gays and lesbians, and by 1996, the Reform rabbis were endorsing “commitment ceremonies” presided over by rabbis. The hope, suggests Kaplan, is that the “gays and lesbians can bring renewed energy to the Reform movement,” as women have over the past 20-30 years.

Kaplan summarizes the core principles of the Reform movement as a rejection of the binding authority of halachah (Jewish law), a belief in ongoing revelation rather than a one-time event, the emphasis of the ethical over the ritual aspect of religion, and the supremacy of individual autonomy to decide what ritual practice is or is not meaningful, for “that is at heart what the Reform movement stands for.” This last point is both the greatest strength and weakness of the movement: it allows such wide latitude that it embraces all kinds of Jews (and part-

Jews); but it also makes for “widespread inconsistencies and contradictions,” as the author readily concedes.

The author is at his best in sketching the recent trends, accomplishments, and controversies that have animated the Reform movement. His chapters on the “Reform revolution” of the past 25 years or so are enlightening and readable. The revolution in Reform synagogue services and liturgy showcases Reform at its best: creative, dynamic, ever searching for “more spirituality that can provide existential meaning.” Noting that “the single most vital commitment of principle is pluralism,” Kaplan suggests that “by providing a variety of theological expressions for the increasingly diverse clientele of the growing Reform movement,” Reform is capacious enough to embrace a wide panoply of Jews. At the same time, he admits that this approach makes the setting of standards all but impossible, so that the movement’s strongest point is paradoxically its weakest.

Kaplan excels in the final chapters that sketch Reform of today and its future prospects. He notes the enormous effort to export Reform to Israel, despite fierce opposition of the entrenched Orthodox groups. He believes strongly that its campaign to establish a viable and dynamic presence in Israel will have tremendous implications for the future of the entire movement. He takes heart in the achievements of informal educational projects such as Eisner Camp and NFTY (National Federation of Temple Youth), readily admitting that the religious schools have proved to be inadequate. He revels in the enormous contribution women have made to the movement as lay leaders, rabbis (since 1972), and cantors, so that today, “there is complete egalitarianism in all areas of ritual observance.” Women have not yet risen to the heights of congregational leadership as rabbis or lay leaders, but Kaplan is convinced that major changes are taking place and female leadership is at last asserting itself at the top echelons.

In analyzing what the author calls “The Battle over the Future,” Kaplan closely dissects the controversy ignited by the 1999 Principles for Reform Judaism, which generated passion on all sides. The classic Reformers decried the ten principles as a return to Orthodox ritual; the partisans of the new platform insisted that it is the way Reform must go in the twenty-first century. After numerous drafts, the final version was so watered down, suggests the author, as to resemble little more than an update of the Centenary Perspective of 1976. The debate over the principles reflects the fact that “Reform is moving in two directions at

the same time,” toward greater involvement in tradition while embracing all newcomers and life-styles. While Kaplan endorses Schindler’s plea for “passion and commitment” he insists that “the beauty of Reform Judaism is that it allows the group to evolve consciously in response to events”; that “personalism has replaced covenant, voluntarism has superseded mitzvah” because individualism in lieu of commandments is the American way.

But in my view, this last principle is Reform’s major shortcoming. Is the American way to be the determining factor in Jewish commitment? Is the Zeitgeist the final arbiter of the road we Jews are to follow? If it had been in the past, we would have gone the way of paganism, or Christianity, or Islam long ago. Always, we stubbornly rebuffed current fads and trends and insisted that we would swim against the tide and not with it. We could have embraced pagan practices of the dominant religions and benefited thereby; we could have accepted the sexual mores of our contemporaries, whether homosexuality or sacred prostitution. But we rejected these as contrary to the fundamental tenets of Judaism. This has been our greatest bulwark against assimilation and disintegration. There is something greater than modernity, namely, eternity, insisted Solomon Schechter. We opted for eternity, and we are still here. Additionally, while Reform’s flexibility in accepting all comers into synagogues and religious schools irrespective of personal status has swelled the ranks, enabling it to become the largest Jewish religious movement in America, what will happen down the road when these non-halachic Jews seek marriage with other Jews? We will no longer be one people, I fear, but a jumble of tribes such as existed in the days of the Judges.

Kaplan has certainly dealt with thorny issues in a popular and eminently readable way. He is sometimes repetitive; his six-page treatment of sexual peccadilloes in the Reform ranks seems quite unnecessary to me. But he is frank and candid in confronting the great challenge facing Reform (and all movements, for that matter). That challenge was well formulated by Alexander Schindler who observed, “All too often we choose nothing at all,” as he urged us to “perceive Judaism as a serious religious enterprise.” Dana Kaplan’s introduction to Reform Judaism should serve us well for years to come in striving toward that goal. •

Gilbert S. Rosenthal, a rabbi, is executive director of the National Council of Synagogues. His latest book is *Contemporary Judaism* (Human Sciences Press).