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New Book Probes Reform Judaism's Identity Crisis

JANUARY 23, 2014

By: *Bryan Schwartzman*
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Rabbi Dana Evan Kaplan

The Reform movement may be the largest denomination in American Judaism, but it is facing an identity crisis.

That's the thesis of rabbi and author Dana Evan Kaplan's book, *The New Reform Judaism, Challenges and Reflections*, recently published by the Jewish Publication Society, an imprint of the University of Nebraska Press.

What's needed now, more than at any other time in the movement's two centuries of existence, Kaplan argues, is clarity on what it stands for on questions such as: What is the nature of God? Can one not believe in God or be a Buddhist and still be a Reform Jew? What are some practical do's and don'ts for liberal Jews in terms of Shabbat observance?

Kaplan will be talking about these and other ideas this weekend when he will be a scholar-in-residence at Old York Road Temple-Beth Am in Abington.

Kaplan contends that as it stands now, it is essentially up to Reform Jews to decide these issues for themselves. That, he said, makes for a movement that is potentially in danger of implosion. He points to the bitter divisions that have developed within several liberal Christian denominations as a warning for what could happen to Reform Judaism.

"We need to think much more deeply. I want Reform Judaism to be a religious movement that stands for something, not an ethnic club of people who eat bagels," said the 53-year-old Kaplan, religious leader of the United Congregation of Israelites in Kingston, Jamaica.

"We need to raise our demands," he added. "If you have no expectations of people, the results are very poor. A religion that is too vague and is too open is not going to succeed."

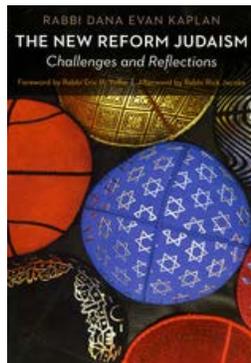
Kaplan has written several books on Reform Judaism. His latest was published on the heels of the results of the Pew Research Center's Survey on American Jewish Life. That study underscored the Reform movement as the dominant stream of American Judaism, with 35 percent identifying as Reform, compared with 18 percent who identify as Conservative.

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Proponents say the Reform movement has thrived because it has lowered the barrier to inclusion, while striking a balance between innovation and tradition.

But the survey also found that the movement is having trouble inspiring new generations of Jews. The data showed that 28 percent of Jews raised Reform no longer consider themselves Jewish by religion, compared to 17 percent of Conservative and 11 percent of Orthodox. More to Kaplan's point, just 43 percent of Reform Jews say being Jewish is very important to them, and only 16 percent say religion is very important in their lives.

The book also comes at a time when the influence of the major Jewish movements is waning and many observers are predicting a dramatic transformation of Jewish life in America. Some even predict an eventual merging of the non-Orthodox denominations.

The book has come out "just as the Reform movement needs to be taking a hard look at whether its big-tent Judaism is the wave of the future," said Barry Schwartz, a Reform rabbi and director of JPS. "Kaplan raises a challenging question: What are the borders, what are the parameters? Can we be all things to all people? He is raising some cautionary reflections."

Kaplan grew up in Manhattan and was raised in a Reform household. He got his undergraduate degree from Yeshiva University, an Orthodox institution, because, he said, he wanted a firmer grasp of Jewish texts. Throughout his career, he has balanced scholarship with the pulpit. Among his other books are *American Reform Judaism: An Introduction* and *Contemporary American Judaism: Transformation and Renewal*.

The new book offers a thorough overview of Reform's history, from the founding generation's near-total break from Jewish law and embrace of ethics and rationalism, to more recent attempts to reincorporate traditional rituals in a meaningful fashion.

"I'm an insider and an outsider," Kaplan said. "I'm a practicing Reform Jew, but I try to write in a self-critical manner. I'm not here as an apologist for Reform Judaism; I'm trying to say what is actually going on."

The book includes a foreword and afterword written by, respectively, the Union for Reform Judaism's past president, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, and its current leader, Rabbi Rick Jacobs. Both rabbis take some issue with Kaplan's thesis.

"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," wrote Yoffie. He added that it is his "conviction that all schools of Judaism, including Reform, unite more around shared practices than shared beliefs."

Rabbi Lance Sussman, religious leader of Reform Congregation Keneseth Israel in Elkins Park, is also a scholar who was critical of Kaplan's proscriptions for the Reform movement in a published review of one of Kaplan's previous books. Sussman will be one of the local rabbis sitting on a panel with Kaplan on Jan. 26.

While Kaplan and Sussman agree that Reform Judaism is facing a crisis, they differ on what should be done about it.

"Our numbers are increasingly shaky," Sussman said, adding that for years, Reform synagogues were bolstered by families leaving Conservative synagogues, but that is no longer happening.

He said that community, social action and spiritual innovation are what will inspire people, rather than a particular philosophy articulated by the movement's hierarchy. Noting that his congregants range from believers in the personal God of the Bible to atheists, Sussman said, "I don't want to say 'no' to any of them."

For his part, Kaplan is well aware that many of the movement's leaders don't share his views. "They feel that we can move forward without any agreeable theology. I don't see on what basis this will work," he said. "We need a focused theological approach. Otherwise, 'I believe this, you believe that, the other person doesn't really believe much of anything' — then you have a hodgepodge, you have

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chaos.”

IF YOU GO

Jan. 24-26

Rabbi Dana Evan Kaplan will be the scholar-in-residence at Old York Road Temple-Beth Am in Abington.

Kaplan will lead several sessions throughout the weekend about the future of Reform Judaism.

A Jan. 25 panel discussion will feature several local Reform rabbis.

For more information, call 215-886-8000 or go to oyrbetham.org.

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