



THE BLOGS

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# Reform Judaism Can Help Modern Jews Understand the World

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The STAR Club of the United Congregation of Israelites, Kingston, Jamaica. Progressive Jews have tremendous dedication to Judaism, combining a scholarly approach to study with a postmodern sensibility to religion.

I was dismayed to see my words quoted out of context, indeed distorted beyond all recognition, by Leah Aharoni in a recent column (<https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/respose-to-elianna-yolkuts-open-Letter/#.UYe3ZJzkrAE.facebook>) which was in turn a response to an earlier column in

another newspaper (<http://www.haaretz.com/jewish-world/rabbis-round-table/an-open-letter-to-leah-aharoni-on-behalf-of-religious-freedom-in-israel.premium-1.518665>).

I am a proud Reform Jew and I write critically of my movement out of love for it. My primary goal is to strengthen Reform Judaism by encouraging others to think critically about our central tenets and how we could and should adapt them to the challenges of modern life and postmodern thought.

But the misinformed blogger writes, “Having to choose between vibrant, authentic, multi-dimensional Judaism [Orthodoxy] and what your rabbinical colleague Dana Evan Kaplan has described as a movement (<http://www.jewishideasdaily.com/6350/features/faith-and-matrimony/>) that has “no central theological positions that are advocated by our leaders and/or believed in by its followers,” employing strategies that “undermine[s] any claims Reform Judaism might have to represent a true and compelling ethical monotheistic faith” Israelis, even those not personally observant, have made their choice crystal clear.”

This long-winded sentence twists my intentions around to suggest that it makes sense to reject Reform Judaism and embrace Orthodoxy. While I have no beef with those who choose Orthodoxy of their own free will, I believe that Reform Judaism is the most rational – and compelling—choice for a Jew today.

I believe that Judaism is the closest that one can come to true religion. It is the best approximation that we can develop to understand and appreciate God and our world. Reform Judaism in turn is the best representation of our religion. Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, the founder of the Reform movement in America, wrote that “Israel’s religion... is the true religion, because its doctrines are taken from the revelations of God in His works and words.”

I am trying to work out how we can make our faith both emotionally intense and intellectually honest at the same time. This is not an easy thing to do and we are not yet certain how successful the Reform movement will be at meeting this central challenge. But we are sincerely and honestly trying to achieve this goal, which all those who care about Judaism should be working towards. Scoring cheap polemically points at the expense of intellectual honesty is not a contribution toward this discussion. Let me briefly outline a few of my thoughts.

Like most other Jews, we Reform Jews believe that Jews and Judaism are intertwined. Jews come from all over the world and have many different backgrounds, but most—at least until recently – believed and believe in Judaism as a religion. So while Judaism is not the religion of a single ethnic or racial group, the Jews are a people who have one religion, and that is Judaism.

But we do not understand “Judaism” in the same way that the Orthodox do. Until the dawn of the modern era, that Judaism was defined in rigid terms that corresponded to the medieval attitudes of the dominant Christians or Muslims, depending where the individual Jew lived. Medieval

Judaism accepted Jewish law as binding because God had given both the written and oral Torah to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai.

Jewish thinkers explained that Judaism believed in God, Torah, and Israel and that these three categories formed the native categories of the religion. God gave the Torah through Moses to Israel, referring to the Jewish people rather than the contemporary State of Israel. Israel was the chosen people and accepted upon themselves special obligations as a consequence of their selection.

These special obligations were incorporated into the corpus of Halacha, Jewish law. Jewish law included regulations governing all aspects of daily life, including not just aspects that we would see as “religious” but also activities ranging from how to wake up in the morning to what one could eat at dinner time.

This relatively homogenous medieval Judaic world began to fall apart as Jews were emancipated in European countries and as enlightenment philosophy began to influence more and more people.

Reform Judaism differs from the other streams of Judaism in the way that it looks at the authority of the Torah, its approach to legal reasoning, its strategies for promoting Judaism, and its view of the world.

There have been serious intellectual challenges to Judaism since the advent of the modern era. Reform Judaism is the form of Judaism best suited to integrate these scholarly insights that have been accepted as valid, including the most contemporary permutations of the documentary hypothesis which sees the Torah as consisting of at least four separate texts that were redacted over a long period.

Reform Jewish thinkers accept a wide variety of interpretations concerning how revelation occurred and what it means in today’s world. In contrast, traditionalists believe that the Torah is God’s will and that the commandments in the five books of Moses are binding on all Jews.

In terms of legal reasoning, Reform Judaism rejects Jewish law as binding. Elements of that law may continue to be practiced, but if and only if the particular ceremony provides spiritual meaning. The traditionalist accepts the divine authority of the Torah, including the eternal validity of the laws contained in it, and therefore imposes narrow parameters on legitimate legal reasoning.

The Reform movement believes that the Torah can and should be interpreted and reinterpreted to meet the needs of the contemporary Jew. The traditionalist vigorously rejects this relativistic approach, arguing that all Jews must obey the Torah as understood by the ancient sages in its entirety.

Reform Judaism sees the Jewish religion as a theological system that can help modern Jews to understand the world. The traditionalist believes that the religious structure of Judaism was established by God's explicit command. Judaism is not simply a modern social construct, but is literally the word of God. Most Reform Jews see the essential myths of Judaism as elaborate metaphors designed to help us to create and transmit a sense of "cosmos." This approach can be both spiritually uplifting and scholarly, allowing us to become close to God while being intellectually honest at the same time.



Confirmation Service at Temple B'nai Israel, Albany, Georgia. The author argues that Reform Judaism is not only legitimate but the form of Judaism most compatible with modern life and postmodern philosophy.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Dana Evan Kaplan is the rabbi of the United Congregation of Israelites in Kingston, Jamaica, and former rabbi of Temple B'nai Israel in Albany, Georgia. He is the author of *Contemporary American Judaism: Transformation and Renewal*, *The Cambridge Companion to American Judaism*, *American Reform Judaism: An Introduction* and the forthcoming *The New Reform Judaism*, to be published by the Jewish Publication Society.

*<http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/reform-judaism-can-help-modern-jews-understand-the-world/>*