

Book Review: American Reform Judaism: An Introduction

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Author: Sana Evan Kaplan

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American Reform Judaism: An Introduction is an overview of the history, controversies, challenges, and reformation of Reform Judaism in America. Professor Kaplan begins his exploration of Reform Judaism with a brief history of the movement from its inception in Germany to its American form. Professor Kaplan explains that he is focusing upon the American form of Reform Judaism because of Reform's "stress on autonomy – both of the individual and of the congregation – Reform Judaism has manifested itself differently in various countries. Nevertheless, Reform communities throughout the world share certain characteristics." (8)

As explained in the book, Classical Reform Judaism was the inheritor of the Enlightenment of Western Europe and America. There was a full-scale rejection of much of the traditions of Judaism (what later became known as Orthodox Judaism) and set a course of spirituality that spoke to those Jews who wished to remain connected to Judaism but also experience modern society in all of its glory. Reform Judaism in the American context developed along the same lines as that of Europe however, the individuality and societal/geographic movement of Americans led to some differences between European Progressive Judaism and American Reform Judaism.

According to the Declaration of Principles (1885) Reform Judaism accepted as binding "only the moral laws and maintain[s] only such ceremonies as elevate and sanctify our lives, but reject[s] all such as are not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization." (44) The idea was to have a living Judaism that was connected to the world of the Bible and the Jewish forefathers and foremothers but was also able to adapt to the changing American society. The Columbus Platform of 1937 was created to "stimulate an apathetic and possibly alienated constituency." (49) Professor Kaplan argues that this Platform was designed as an attempt to reinvigorate American Reform Judaism by allowing for "a degree of religious pluralism" (50) but the pluralism was also later defined as only being legitimate within certain boundaries.

Professor Kaplan goes on to explain that in the 1990s there was a resurgence of spirituality and the emphasis on studying traditional texts. A new generation was helping to transform and reinvigorate Reform Judaism and the Classical Reform Judaism of yesteryear was falling by the wayside. While there was still room for those who wished to worship in the Classical Reform ways the new generation was clamoring for more spiritual, exciting ways to worship. In addition to the push for reformation there was also the difficulty of a lack of rabbis, cantors, and other Jewish professionals plaguing the Reform Movement. The siddur, Professor Kaplan argues, is

the chief means of transmitting Jewish ideas and ideals within the Reform Movement. Accordingly, as the makeup of the Reform synagogues changed the liturgy, siddur, and services began to change. There was also a resurgence in the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony.

Professor Kaplan utilizes an entire chapter to speak about the Reform Movement's struggle for recognition in the State of Israel. It was the founders' idea that Orthodoxy would eventually become a small minority within the State of Israel and the Reform Movement had anticipated this outcome. The Orthodox has a stranglehold on religious life in the modern State and as a result the Reform Movement has had many difficulties gaining any foothold within the State. While there is some movement of recognition for non-Orthodox Judaism within Israel it has been a very difficult battle. Regardless, it is the Reform Movement's tradition to have a strong, vibrant support system for the State of Israel.

Education within Reform Judaism has mostly focused upon Hebrew school/Sunday school for children up to bar/bat mitzvah age. There has been a push for students to continue their Hebrew school education through confirmation age but this has not always been accepted practice as Professor Kaplan attests to. Reform Judaism at its inception was adverse to "day schools" but that seems to be changing. There are now Reform Jewish day schools opened across America where children are able to learn the secular subjects they need for life in the dominant culture as well as Jewish subjects they need for life in the Jewish culture and religion. In addition, Professor Kaplan notes that there are also additional classes that place emphasis on adult education and mixed parent-child educational programs.

One of the major issues facing Reform Judaism is intermarriage. As a result there is a concerted effort to have outreach programs aimed at bringing the non-Jewish spouse closer to Judaism with the goal of having him or her convert. Part of these outreach programs are also intended on bringing unaffiliated people (Gentiles and Jews) into Judaism. This, as Kaplan points out, is not necessarily a high priority for many within Reform Judaism. In addition to these outreach goals there was also the movement toward redefining "who is a Jew" within the Movement. In 1983 the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) adopted a resolution stating that if one parent (mother or father) was Jewish then their children were "under presumption of Jewish descent. ... [In addition such] children needed to be raised as Jews, not simply born to a Jewish parent." (172)

Two other major moves by Reform Judaism established a more open and welcoming atmosphere within the Jewish world: the equality of women and the acceptance of gays and lesbians. Egalitarianism was always a staple of Reform/Progressive Judaism but in reality the rabbis, cantors, and other leaders were all men. This changed in 1972 when Sally Priesand became the first female rabbi ordained in America. Since this time the leadership of the Movement has changed and there is now real egalitarianism within Reform Judaism. The acceptance of gays and lesbians was slower to come as Professor Kaplan explains. It was not until the 1960s that there was a possibility of openness to accepting openly gay/lesbian members of synagogues and

it was not until the 1980s that the issue came to the forefront of the Movement. It is now not unusual for an openly gay/lesbian person to become a rabbi or other leader within a synagogue nor is it unusual to have a congregation that caters to gays/lesbians affiliated with the Reform Movement.

Professor Kaplan closes his book with some words about the future of Reform Judaism. While it is true that Reform Judaism is the largest movement within Judaism, there is still the difficulties of attracting (and retaining) committed Reform Jews. There is also the difficulty facing Reform/Progressive Judaism and its acceptance within the modern State of Israel. The 1999 Pittsburgh Platform only shows the contention between those who are of the Classical Reform mindset and those who are willing to embrace a more modern and somewhat traditional Reform Judaism. Professor Kaplan however leaves the reader with some optimism and hope for the continued success of Reform Judaism.

For anyone who is interested in a history of American Reform Judaism as well as its theological trends, *American Reform Judaism* is a useful and interesting book.

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