

After Autonomy

The New Reform Judaism: Challenges and Reflections

BY DANA EVAN KAPLAN

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Reviewed by JEREMY ROZANSKY

BURIED WITHIN last fall's "Portrait of Jewish Americans"—the Pew survey that launched a thousand think-pieces—were some startling insights into America's largest Jewish denomination: Reform Judaism. With more adherents than the other major denominations combined, Reform also has the highest retention: Those raised Reform are less likely to leave the Reform fold than those raised Orthodox or Conservative are likely to leave their respective denominations.

Of course, demographic vitality is all relative, and demographic vitality says little about moral or spiritual vitality. The Pew survey goes on to report that a mere 17 percent of Reform Jews attend religious services at least once a month. Only half of Reform Jewish adults fasted on Yom Kippur. Nor do Reform Jews engage in conventional rituals at home: Only 1 in 10 "usually" lights Shabbat candles.

So despite the apparent durability, prevalence, and influence of Reform Judaism, it is not at all clear what it means to *be* a Reform Jew. What Jewish activities does

he participate in? How do they condition his conscience and guide his behavior? Do they satiate his search for meaning in the world? What does he believe?

A recent book by Rabbi Dana Evan Kaplan, a Reform rabbi who has published widely on Judaism and the broader American Jewish scene, tries to capture the condition of today's Reform Judaism. Part history and part sociological sketch, *The New Reform Judaism* focuses on the denomination's origins and history, its recent debates and concerns, its many organizational initiatives, and its boundaries and eccentricities.

But this meandering account describes no discernible essence of Reform Judaism. It's rare that Kaplan interprets the broader meaning of the activities and disputes that he profiles. It's even rarer that he discusses the ordinary Reform Jew—preferring, instead, to profile the arguments and initiatives of elites and central institutions. For those of us interested in the future of American Jewish life, and, more specifically, for those who, like me, have felt moved by the joyous notes of Reform Judaism and who are intellectually impressed with the scholarship and moral clarity of its heritage, the book maddeningly skates around the core question: What sort of soulcraft is today's Reform Judaism engaged in?

Kaplan offers a compelling, if conventional, narrative of Reform's founding in the 19th century as a response to certain societal and intellectual transformations. First, the post-Napoleonic emancipation of the Jews disassociated peoplehood

from religion; citizens of the same state could hold different private beliefs. For Judaism to acclimate to these new conditions, the early Reformers sought to emphasize the private sphere of Judaism (its theology and ethics) and de-emphasize the public sphere (its laws and ceremonies). So that Judaism would be respected, these mostly German Reformers adapted Jewish music and architecture to resemble German Protestantism.

The second sweeping change was the invention of scholarly biblical criticism. Hypotheses about the human origins of the Bible gave Reformers the rationale to discard the vast, biblically rooted body of Jewish law. If laws were created by people, they could be radically amended by people. What was eternal to Judaism was not the revelation on Sinai but rather the ever-changing "genius" of the Jewish people. Though Kaplan never mentions the German philosopher Hegel, his thought had a marked influence on the Reformers and their American followers. The Hegelian philosophy of history holds that societies develop like children, becoming steadily more aware of the truth; and just as with children, we can only judge a society relative to its stage in the grand historical process. The first great statement of principles from Reform Judaism, drafted in 1885, reflected this idea, arguing that the "Mosaic and rabbinical laws...originated in ages and under the influence of ideas entirely foreign to our present mental and spiritual state." The age-old laws would therefore be an obstacle to "spiritual elevation" in the modern world.

Instead, spiritual elevation would be found in a watery, universalist theology that placed a heavy emphasis on, in Kaplan's words, "just and fair human relations." The biblical Latter Prophets, especially their more universalist passages, were the prized heritage of early, "Classical"

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Reform. Most of the great turn-of-the-century Reform rabbis gained their reputation not as legal scholars but as modern-day Isaiahs and Jeremiahs, sermonizing against the idolatries of the Gilded Age and for Progressive social reform.

The Classical Reform era lasted until about the middle of the 20th century, when it started being gradually replaced by what is called Contemporary Reform. The “new” Reform Judaism includes a proliferation of diverse ideas about God (so much so that the *siddur* of the mid-’70s included 10 different Shabbat evening services, each with English readings reflecting different conceptions of God). Simultaneously, Reform Jews seemed to “return to the tradition” by selectively re-embracing old customs. There was more Hebrew in the synagogue, more prayer garb, a burgeoning interest in mysticism.

Kaplan chronicles much of this evolution by looking at the top-down initiatives of Reform’s governing body (once the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and now the Union for Reform Judaism [URJ]). Some of these are indeed significant social changes, such as ordaining women or declaring that the child of intermarriage who is actively Jewish need not convert. But most of the initiatives focus on re-engaging marginal Reform Jews with Shabbat, or with spirituality, or simply improving Jewish literacy. These initiatives have inconclusive results, or at least Kaplan draws no conclusions.

While theology and practice have undergone a massive shift, Reform ethics has simply increased its range of concerns, adding feminism, gay rights, and environmentalism over the past half-century. The concern for a just and fair society has been institutionalized in a Washington-based lobbying organization, the Religious Action

Center. To Kaplan, this change is perfectly natural and appropriate. He never wrestles with the difference between sermonizing and policymaking. The utopianism of a sermon can innocently rebalance the conscience of a congregation, but such utopianism—especially when hardened with assorted pieties—is misguided and dangerous when it inspires legislators who must work in a world of trade-offs.

Mercifully, Reform Judaism is not all political action; in fact, it is probably less political than it once was (while Conservative Judaism has grown far more political). Much of the intellectual efforts of Contemporary Reform Judaism are devoted to reconciling ancient Jewish practices with what Kaplan calls “contemporary values.” This is not the same as a progressive Jewish law. Kaplan correctly recognizes that if Reform Judaism did embrace “progressive *halacha*,” such edicts would be mostly ignored by laymen, leading to a religious chasm between the rabbis and the average Reform Jew. Instead, Reform Judaism resembles a rule-free arena with many experiments and few boundaries. New efforts at liturgical ceremony are manifold, some of which—like Debbie Friedman’s now standard “*Mi Shebeirach*” song—are really quite lovely and meaningful, despite having flimsy theological foundations. Kaplan also describes a new interest in meditation, a Jewish adaptation of the Native American “vision quest,” “shulcasting,” and entirely online congregations. There are still a few boundaries: Individuals cannot regard Jesus as the Messiah, and congregations cannot strip Judaism of its theism.

In his inaugural address, the new president of the URJ, Rabbi Rick Jacobs, proclaimed, “Ours is the Judaism of autonomy, inclusiveness, creativity, passion, rel-

evance, and depth.” Other Jewish denominations certainly have passion, relevance, and depth (otherwise they wouldn’t exist), and other Jewish denominations, like Reform, are inclusive and creative, but always up to a point. As the present-day thicket of unique theologies, experiments with ritual, sociopolitical dogmas, and apathy illustrates, what’s unique to Reform is its embrace of autonomy—its rejection of *law*.

Kaplan is, at times, uneasy with autonomy. He worries that autonomy risks making “Reform Judaism...the religion of the least, the refuge of those seeking to justify not doing anything.” But ultimately, he comes down on autonomy’s side: He seems to think “fundamentalism” is autonomy’s opposite and would be worse. In order to give some guidance to Reform Jews, Kaplan wants to “cultivate greater devotion to the values at the heart of Reform theology,” articulating the principles of a life well lived while letting individual Reform Jews make their own way. As to the tricky work of setting limits on how an autonomous Reform Jew can believe or behave and remain a Reform Jew, Kaplan asks for a “sophisticated ‘discourse of disagreement;’” whatever that means.

A doctrine of autonomy doesn’t just leave a religion with fewer regular congregants, but with a hollow core. It is a precondition of liberal democracy that one always has a choice of religious practice. If one chooses a religious life of choice, then what is one really choosing? Religions must teach us how to choose; they must engage in soulcraft.

Kaplan’s idea of religious instruction is not soulcraft. It’s more like programming an automaton. He seems to think human beings can be made to understand which principles to strive for and will act in pursuit of those “values.” But as creatures, we are not so forward-

looking. We are mired in day-to-day life. We have little time (or ability) to extrapolate concrete decisions from abstract principles. Instead, how we believe and behave is the product of daily alterations, habits born of ritual, experience, and the many people we are necessarily dependent on. We are never truly autonomous.

Perhaps Kaplan intuits the basic impossibility of a religion of autonomy, perhaps not. Either way, *The New Reform Judaism* demonstrates some

of the good and some of the troublesome consequences of it. The task for the next generation of Reform thinkers, those who are inheriting a movement that is both incomprehensibly eclectic and institutionally well established, will be to think about the space between autonomy and what Kaplan derides as “fundamentalism” and, in so doing, cast light on the many soul-nourishing obligations consistent with the world the Enlightenment gave us. ▶

time, the Mishnah was taught only as part of the Talmud. Maimonides treated it as an independent text.

Maimonides integrated various philosophical topics into his *Commentary on the Mishnah*, and Halbertal offers a particularly insightful examination of how Maimonides reconciled the tension between virtue-based ethics and duty-based ethics.

The commentary was a stunning achievement, but it pales in comparison to his comprehensive code, the *Mishneh Torah*.

In that work, Maimonides took the Byzantine labyrinth of Talmudic law and transformed it into a model of clarity and order. Halbertal demonstrates how, in fundamentally reorganizing the Jewish legal tradition, Maimonides fashioned new areas of Jewish law, thought, and spirituality such as “The Laws of the Foundations of the Torah,” wherein he ruled that Jews should study science in order to arrive at the love and fear of God.

Halbertal also highlights the parallel that Maimonides drew between the composition of the Mishnah in the second century C.E. and Maimonides’s masterwork in the 12th century: “Just as the Mishnah of Rabbi Judah the Prince was a dramatic literary reaction to halacha’s first geopolitical crisis, *Mishneh Torah* was a literary and halachic reaction to the second, even more intense crisis.” The dispersion of the Jewish people following the Roman conquest of Israel led to Rabbi Judah’s writing of the Mishnah, which laid the foundation for rabbinic Judaism and made it possible for the faith and the people to survive without a temple or a homeland. The geopolitical crisis to which Maimonides responded began with the Islamic conquest and culminated with the dispersal of Andalusian Jewry.

His more radical interpreters claim the code was intended to render the Talmud irrelevant and lay

Moses II

Maimonides: Life and Thought

BY MOSHE HALBERTAL
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Reviewed by ARYEH TEPPER

OVER the past decade, more than eight centuries after the death of Maimonides, popular biographies and studies dedicated to the great Jewish philosopher, jurist, physician, and community leader, born Moses ben-Maimon, have been coming fast and furious. Three such works have appeared in English in the past eight years, and they are now joined by Moshe Halbertal’s *Maimonides: Life and Thought*. A scholar of Jewish law and thought who is now a professor at New York University, Halbertal examines the Rambam’s life as well

as *Commentary on the Mishnah*, the *Mishneh Torah*, and the *Guide of the Perplexed*.

Halbertal claims that Maimonides’s monumental self-confidence and acute historical consciousness formed in him a profound sense of mission. Born into a period of devastation for the Jews living in al-Andalus on the Iberian peninsula, Maimonides sought to make use of the crisis in order to revolutionize both the legal and the intellectual-spiritual dimensions of the Jewish tradition. He did this, Halbertal reminds us, as he fled from Muslim fundamentalists across North Africa and without institutional backing or any claim to divine revelation—relying only “on his own great ability, his prodigious halachic and philosophical learning, his linguistic and literary Midas touch.”

Halbertal traces the development of his subject’s career, beginning with his first major work, the *Commentary on the Mishnah*. It is overshadowed by his latter efforts, but, as Halbertal points out, writing a commentary on the foundational document of rabbinic Judaism and the very core of Talmudic discourse was a literary innovation of the first order. In the leading academies of the

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