

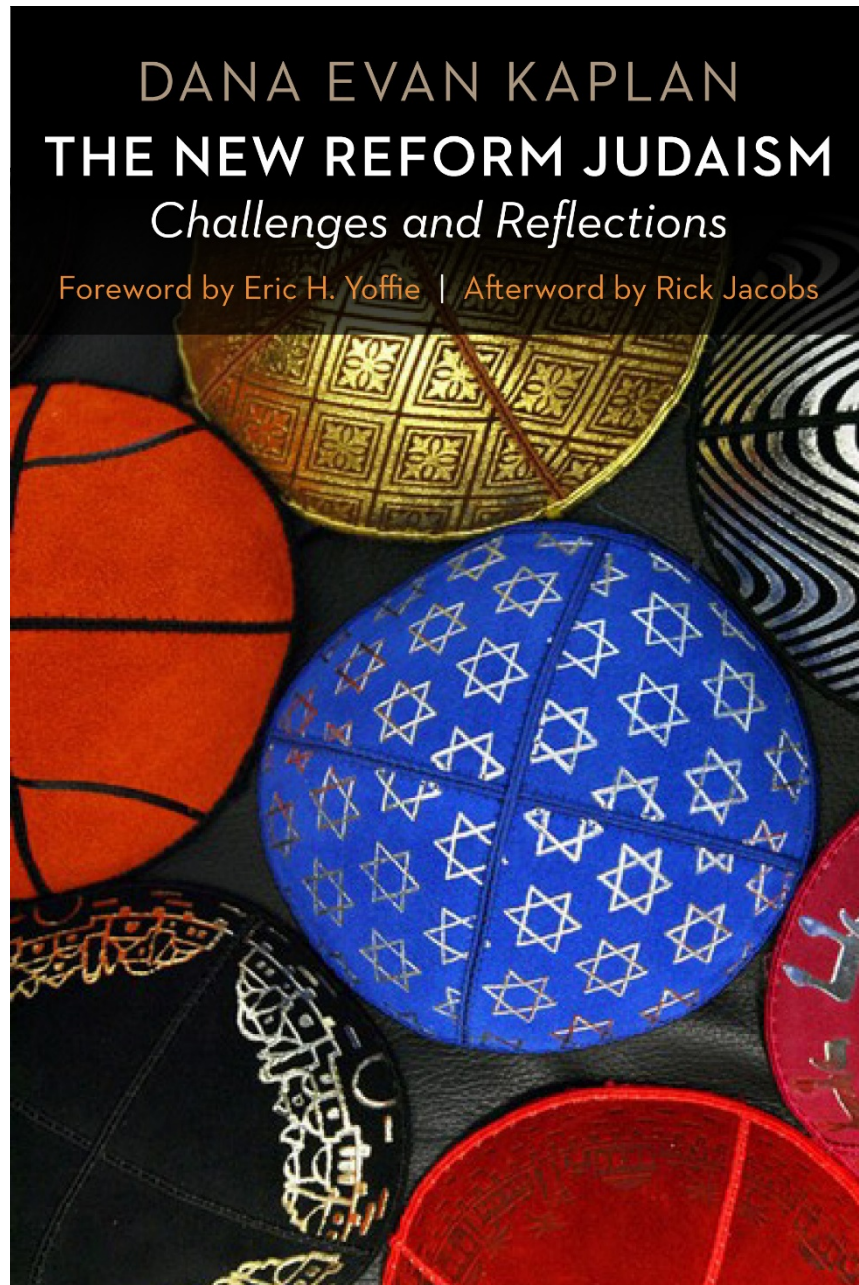
Group Study Guide

The New Reform Judaism: What Do We Believe and What Should We Be Doing?

Based on the book *The New Reform Judaism: Challenges and Reflections*

By Rabbi Dana Evan Kaplan

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This guide is intended for group study, but it can also be used by individuals on their own. There are 12 sessions, which can be combined to reduce 6, 8 or 10 sessions. Each session begins with a quote that relates to the substance of one chapter. This is followed with questions and group activities to stimulate discussion. There are no definitive conclusions; the most Jewish response to a question is frequently another question!

Quote Unquote presents a short text from the book and then with questions about what it means for us.

Talking Points are questions about the chapter, designed to get people talking about what the book says and their feelings and beliefs.

A **Group Activity** asks the reading group to discuss a broad topic together.

Session 1

Foreword by Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie

Quote Unquote

“As recently as fifteen years ago, there was much talk of the need for synagogues to have very sophisticated—that is, expensive—physical structures and staffing patterns because in a relatively wealthy Jewish community, young Jews would not affiliate with institutions that did not reflect the “quality” they expected in all dimensions of their lives. But today, exactly the opposite is true. In financially troubled times, young Jews are looking for congregations with modest structures, restrained budgets, and a focus on the spiritual; this is both a practical necessity and a reflection of different religious sensibilities.” Pages x-xi

Why has the trend swung so far, so quickly?

How much do economic and social trends affect religion?

How vulnerable is Reform Judaism to the negative impact of sociological changes?

Talking Points

Pages ix-xi

What are Rabbi Yoffie's central points? What are his positions on the most important issues facing Reform Judaism? How much does he really disagree (or agree) with the author?

Group Activity

Search for some of Rabbi's Yoffie's speeches online and debate his role in the development of Reform Judaism during his tenure as leader of the Union for Reform Judaism. What were his successes and failures? Why was he able to achieve certain goals (for example, transforming the worship experience), but not others (such as building a strong Saturday morning attendance)?

Session 2

Introduction: Understanding the New Reform Judaism

Quote Unquote

Pages 13-14

"At its theoretical best, Reform Judaism incorporates all of the intellectual challenges that have faced religion over the past few centuries, while at the same time embracing all of the spiritual trends that are so emotionally important to people. Reform Judaism therefore represents an intellectually truthful approach to religion that can meet the highest scholarly scrutiny while at the same time providing spiritual sustenance for religious seekers. The challenge is how the Reform movement can inculcate a belief in God and hence a commitment to perpetuating our approach to religious faith and Jewish identity without having a fundamentalist worldview."

Do you agree with this conclusion, which is found at the very end of the Introduction?

What do you see as the major challenge facing the Reform movement over the next 5, 10, or 50 years?

Talking Points

Pages 1-3

The author describes his own religious evolution. Do you think this personal background is useful for the reader interested in engaging with his arguments?

How does your own spiritual autobiography impact your involvement in Reform Judaism, if you are a Reform Jew, or in your own religious or philosophical tradition(s)?

Pages 11-12

Do you find the author's distinction between ritual and ceremony useful?

Group Activity

At the very beginning of this study group, it may be useful to discuss what we believe.

If you have a clear theology, does it lean toward the traditional view of God described in the books of Genesis and Exodus as omnipotent, "the still small voice of conscience within us" humanist conception, or something else?

How might your religious beliefs impact your attitudes toward Reform Judaism as a movement?

Session 3

Chapter 1: In Search of a Reform Jewish Theology

Quote Unquote

“Because the Reform movement is a theologically flexible and politically liberal American religious group, this dynamic creates opportunities— but it also presents real challenges. Foremost among these challenges is how to present Jewish religious belief in the absence of a consensus over what we believe.” Page 3

Do you share the author’s concern with the lack of theological consensus? Or do you agree with Rabbi Yoffie in his foreword?

Talking Points

Pages 15-19

What is your emotional response to the spiritual autobiography of Gail Greenfield? What is your impression of her story? In your view, can Greenfield’s religious path serve as a model for Reform Jewish theological commitment?

Pages 19-26

The author attempts to define the concept “Judaism.” Are you in agreement with his definition? Could you write your own?

Pages 26-32

The text describes what Reform Judaism is and how it can be explained. Is the author’s description accurate? Is it sufficient?

Pages 32-40

Are you able to put your beliefs about God into words? If not, is this because you do not know what you believe, or that you feel it is too personal to discuss publicly?

Pages 40-46

Is the concept of a binding religious covenant still applicable in the 21st century?

Pages 46-53

Do you believe in revelation? Is Judaism possible without such a belief?

Group Activity

Break into two groups and argue the question, "Would it be beneficial if the entire Reform movement could commit itself to a single theological system?" One group can argue yes and the other no. Then come together and debate.

Session 4

Chapter 2: A Brief History of the American Reform Movement

Quote Unquote

"The Reform movement faces many challenges in the coming years. Orthodoxy has been undergoing resurgence at the same time that the non-Orthodox have been experiencing the consequences of assimilation. The Reform movement will need to do a better job in creating attractive programs while developing a compelling religious vision that can motivate large numbers of American Jews. Specifically, the Reform movement will need to explain how it understands the relationship between God, Torah, and Israel in a nonhalachic context." Pages 97-98

The author has called for a dramatic reevaluation of the Reform movement's theology, what he calls here "a compelling religious vision." Do you think the Reform movement has such a vision at present? If so, what is it? If not, how can it be developed?

What other challenges does the Reform movement face?

Talking Points

Most books on Judaism begin with history and then move to theology. This book, in contrast, begins with theology and then moves to history.

Why does the author do that?

Which approach do you prefer and why?

Are there certain overarching themes that emerge from the history of the American Reform movement?

Do you see primarily continuity or discontinuity in the history of the Reform movement over the past 200 years?

Group Activity

Working as a group, pick five events that characterize the policies and priorities of the Reform movement over the past 200 years. Refer not only to chapter 2 but also to the book's timeline.

Session 5

Chapter 3: To Observe or Not to Observe?

Quote Unquote

"The core of the Jewish religion is eternal, but the details are subject to contemporary cultural influences. The Reform movement is still grappling with the degree that people can change or even reject ideas, laws, or practices that are written in the Torah. Some are concerned that the Torah has a permanence which is undermined if the specifics are not authoritative. Without the legal framework, how can Judaism maintain its structural integrity?" Page 53

The quote above summarizes the central dilemma outlined in this chapter. Explain how you would reconcile the need for religious integrity with our desire for religious evolution.

Talking Points

Should the chapter be titled “Rejecting the Authority of Jewish Law” rather than “Wrestling with the Authority of Jewish Law?”

Should the Reform movement be more or less concerned with the halachic process?

Do Reform Jews want or need greater religious guidance? Should there be more books describing the details of recommended Reform Jewish ceremonial observance?

Group Activity

Working as a group, develop recommended guidelines for Shabbat observance that hypothetically would then be sent out to all of the members of your congregation and distributed to visitors before services.

What principles would you embrace for determining what would be the recommended approach to observing the Sabbath? Would you, for example, follow Dennis Prager in urging people to play only Hebrew/ Jewish music in their cars on Friday night and Saturday?

Would you be willing to develop criteria for determining what types of commercial establishments should be visited on the Sabbath—recommending visits to bookstores and avoidance of banks, for example?

Or would you argue that Reform Jews should not be recommending any specific code of conduct, even if it is based on progressive principles and is completely voluntary?

Session 6

Chapter 4: A New Reform Revolution in Worship and Practice

Quote Unquote

“One of the problems with practicing Reform Judaism was that the movement did not prescribe specific ritual behavior. This had been discussed by the CCAR repeatedly since its founding in 1889, but no consensus had emerged and the CCAR was therefore unable to provide much direction. Without a clear message concerning what should and should not be done, most Reform Jews did very little. This quickly became the default religious setting for Reform Jews and Reform Judaism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. But by the 1930s, at the latest, sentiment reversed course.” Page 144

The author seems to argue that the Reform movement began trying to prescribe specific ritual behavior since the 1930s. Is this really what Rabbi Kaplan is suggesting? If so, is it true? If it is true, has it worked?

Talking Points

Pages 131-135

What was the end result of the debate over a new platform for the Reform movement? Did anything change? Was it worth the effort? Did the controversy harm the movement or did the publicity help attract new interest?

Pages 135-144

How do you understand the term “tradition?” Should there be different words to refer to different approaches to tradition, so that the same word is not used in mutually exclusive, contradictory ways?

Why do you think that so many Reform Jews are showing greater interest in “tradition?” Is it that society has changed, more Conservative Jews have joined Reform congregations, the influence of Israel, or a combination of factors?

Pages 144-148

Should the Reform movement insist on certain observances?

Page 148-157

Rabbi Yoffie proposed “a new Reform revolution” that would revitalize Reform worship and thereby keep the Reform movement viable. Has this effort failed? What could be done at this point, if anything?

Pages 157-164

How can new ceremonies be created? Can anyone make up any type of ceremony? Are there limitations of any kind?

Why is the “Misheberach” by Debbie Friedman so famous? Have Reform temples always included this prayer in services? If no, why not? What does its reintroduction indicate in your opinion?

Group Activity

Compare “A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism” published in 1999, described in this chapter, with the new vision of Reform Judaism being developed by the Union for Reform Judaism. See

<http://reformjudaismmag.org/Articles/index.cfm?id=3068>

The proposed text reads in full:

“Reform Judaism is the living expression of Torah and tradition in our modern lives. Reform Judaism welcomes all who seek Jewish connection to pursue the fullness of a life inspired by compassion and our Divine mission to do what is right and just.

In our sacred communities, Reform Jews make thoughtful and informed choices about how we put our values into action. We explore our spirituality, and we engage in reflection, critical study, and sacred acts in order to renew our living covenant with God and the Jewish people.

The organizations of the Reform Movement exist in partnership with one another to nurture individual Jews, to sustain our innovative and diverse communities, and to shape our shared destiny with Israel and fellow Jews around the world.”

What are the main similarities and differences?

What would you like to see being emphasized?

Session 7

Chapter 5: A New Reform Revolution in Values and Ethics

Quote Unquote

“While ritual observance can and has undergone tremendous change, the basic ethical and moral foundations of the religion supposedly remain intact. But here too, we see that little remains rigidly in place. In some cases, what was once seen as acceptable and even ethically superior is now seen as hierarchical and promoting suppression.” Page 11

Do ethics remain constant, or do they evolve?

How should Reform Judaism develop a methodology to respond to this contemporary challenge?

Talking Points

Pages 165-170

What is the connection between the story about Rabbi Sally Preisand and ethics?

Pages 170-175

Can you explain how the author sees Reform Jewish ethics? Do you agree?

Pages 175-185

Why is social justice so central to Reform Judaism? Should it be?

Pages 185-194

Why is the Reform movement not fully recognized as equal to Orthodoxy in the Jewish state? How should American Jews respond to this situation?

Pages 194-201

What is meant by the word “inclusivity?” Why is it important for a congregation to be inclusive? Are most Reform temples inclusive? Has this always been so?

Pages 201-208

Does the topic of environmentalism belong in a chapter on ethics? Why or why not?

Page 202

The Reform movement had to deal with the anthropocentrism that is emphasized in certain biblical and rabbinic texts in order to support the environmental cause. Why was that necessary?

Group Activity

Choose an ethical issue of concern, research how the Reform movement and other religious and social groups have looked at it, and debate how your group should develop a principled decision-making process for determining what the correct approach to it should be.

Session 8

Chapter 6: Who Is a (Reform) Jew?

Quote Unquote

“Whether one argues for more structure or greater freedom, most agree that Reform Judaism has a great deal of spiritual wisdom that can inspire Americans from many types of backgrounds. The Reform movement has pioneered Outreach, a campaign to educate interested non-Jews and offer them the possibility of converting to Judaism. Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie, the past president of the Union for

Reform Judaism, argues that Outreach represents a theological principle central to the Jewish mission to the world. Yoffie writes that the starting point for Outreach must be the same as for all of Jewish thought: “our unique destiny as a religious people, tied to God in a covenant that we trace back to Abraham and Sarah.” While some are born as Jews, and therefore “Judaism speaks the language of fate,” the Jewish religion “speaks as well the language of choice.”” Page 217

What is the meaning of outreach? Is it about bringing non-Jewish partners into the synagogue but not necessarily into Judaism, or is it about encouraging people of any background and any relationship status to consider embracing the Jewish religion?

Should Reform Jews proselytize? Would you be willing to help in such an effort?

Talking Points

Pages 209-212

Laurel Synder is an example of a person of mixed religious parentage who chose Judaism and has continued that pattern into her own marriage. Is this policy religiously legitimate and will it be sustainable sociologically?

Pages 212-217

How should Reform Judaism define “Who is a Jew?”

Page 217

The author writes that as a student, he “hit upon what seemed at the time to be the optimal solution—to encourage hundreds of thousands of non-Jewish Americans to convert to Judaism.” Why did this never become a priority in Reform Judaism?

Pages 217-227

Outline the history of conversion to Judaism. How important should this concept be in Reform Judaism? Is Judaism the religion of the Jewish people or a universal religion?

Pages 227-232

Is patrilineal descent justified by the Torah? Explain.

Did the Patrilineal Descent Resolution discourage conversion to Judaism?

Pages 232-237

Should non-Jews be regular attendees in a temple? Or should it be only for people in the process of converting?

Pages 237-241

What is Rabbi Jacobs' position on reaching out to the uninspired? Is it a sound policy?

Group Activity

Organize a campaign to bring in 50,000 new Jews by Choice (converts to Judaism) yearly into Reform Judaism through a public relations campaign as well as personal approaches.

Would such a campaign work? Do you think it would be consistent with the principles of Reform Judaism?

Session 9

Chapter 7: On the Boundaries of Reform

Quote Unquote

"According to Wade Clark Roof, American religious institutions across the spectrum are undergoing transformations in both form and style, "encouraged by a democratic, highly individualistic ethos and rapid social and cultural change." As a consequence, "boundaries separating one faith tradition from another that once seemed fixed are now often blurred; religious identities are malleable and multifaceted, often overlapping several traditions."" Page 269

What does this transformation mean for Reform Judaism? Are blurred boundaries good or bad?

Talking Points

Pages 242-245

Does the personal story of Moishe Rosen make you more sympathetic to his position that he is still a Jew?

Pages 245-252

Can a Jew for Jesus become a member of a Reform synagogue? Debate and discuss.

Pages 253-260

Can a JuBu become a member of a Reform synagogue? Debate and discuss.

Pages 260-267

Can a Humanistic Jew become a member of a Reform synagogue? Debate and discuss.

Pages 267-269

Is there a danger in the blurring of boundaries, or is it a good thing?

Page 269

Why is it Reform Judaism instead of Reformed Judaism?

Group Activity

If you were the committee responsible for deciding which groups could become part of the Reform movement, what would be your criteria? Which of these 3 groups would be eligible? What other groups would be welcomed?

Session 10

Chapter 8: Seeking the Spiritual

Quote Unquote

“Jews come from a nation of nomads, who follow a tribal religion with tribal roots. Being part of a tribe means that our behavior should “be grounded, not necessarily in what we want to do, but in what we ought to do.” In order to achieve that goal, Judaism has to return to a more primal form of religion. A tribal experience can create the dynamics where external rituals reinforce internal values such as generosity and compassion. “A raw, rowdy, barrel-chested reservoir of energy and exuberance” can help us build an interdependence that can revitalize “the desiccated Judaism of our own day.”” Page 306

Rabbi Niles Goldstein explains what he sees as the central problem facing contemporary Judaism and what the solution is. Explain his views and give your response to them.

Talking Points

Pages 270-273

Why is Patrick Aleph’s story relevant to Reform Judaism today?

Pages 273-286

Is the Reform movement keeping up with Chabad and Aish in its presence on the Web? If not, what can be done to correct this imbalance?

Is the Web really transforming religion, or just moving the same concepts and texts into a new medium?

Pages 286-291

Should meditation play a greater role in Reform services?

Pages 291-298

How can dance be incorporated into services when there are no professional dancers around?

Pages 298-306

Is adventure Judaism a fad or a valuable experiential component of modern Judaism?

Pages 306

Group Activity

List the various innovations available today and set out a strategy for rebuilding Temple ABC, a declining Reform congregation in a suburban area outside a major American city.

Session 11

Conclusion: The Promise of Reform Judaism

Quote Unquote

“Earlier in this book, I cited Rabbi Maurice Eisendrath: “God is a living God—not a God who revealed Himself and His word once and for all time at Sinai and speaks no more.” His words are key for understanding the crucial role that Reform Judaism has to play in the coming decades. We Reform Jews believe that God gave us the Torah and that the Torah contains timeless religious truths of tremendous importance, not only to Jews but to the entire world. Every time we study Torah and incorporate its lessons into our lives, we are participating in the process of bringing God’s revelation to us. That is Reform Judaism’s mission. It has been a compelling mission for over two hundred years and it remains a truly compelling one.” Pages 316-317

Do you believe that Reform Judaism has a mission?

Does this paragraph motivate you to action, or is the author living in a previous generation?

Talking Points

Pages 307-317

What are the author's closing thoughts?

Do you agree with all/some/none of them?

Group Activity

"Since a liberal theology leads to an emphasis on the autonomy of the individual, personal choice is inevitably promoted at the expense of the authority of God. In the absence of a strong theological basis for making religious demands, the members lose interest and wander off. This is what has happened in American Reform Judaism and in other non-Orthodox movements as well." Page 311

Rabbi Yoffie disagrees. He writes in his foreword:

"Rabbi Kaplan and I also have good-natured, long-standing differences on the role of theology in Reform Judaism. He believes, and argues in this book, that Reform needs to clarify its theology. 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. In addition, and more fundamentally, scholars of religion have long distinguished between orthodoxy (right belief) and orthopraxy (right practice), and it is my conviction that all schools of Judaism, including Reform, unite more around shared practices than shared beliefs." Page xi.

This is one of Rabbi Kaplan's central arguments in this book. Explain his position and argue in favor or against it.

Session 12

Afterword by Rabbi Rick Jacobs

Quote Unquote

“Rabbi Kaplan joins with many who proclaim this age to be postdenominational. Not long ago, people sought out denominational labels when searching for a synagogue. Today, many are less concerned with labels, seeking Jewish communities defined instead by values. Our people want, and deserve, communities that are engaging, dynamic, and nourishing. And the values matter: serious, open, inclusive, spiritual, passionate, and substantive. No denomination is an end in itself; the larger entity is the Jewish people. We need to ensure that the Reform movement’s expression of Judaism includes responsibility for and connection to those who do not identify with the Jewish community as it has traditionally been defined.”

Page 321

What is Rabbi Jacob’s arguing for here? In your view, can these goals be achieved?

Talking Points

Pages 319-321

What are Rabbi Jacob’s main points? What are his deeply held religious positions? Does he agree with the author’s interpretations of Reform Judaism?

Group Activity

Analyze and debate the policies and positions that Rabbi Jacobs has taken since becoming president of the Union for Reform Judaism. Has he been an advocate of a particular approach to Reform Judaism?

As a group, develop a series of recommendations to send to him, to help him to guide the movement over the next 3, 10 and 30 years.