

# Judaism

## Reform Judaism

**FOUNDED:** Early 19th century CE

**RELIGION AS A PERCENTAGE**

**OF WORLD POPULATION:**

0.02 percent

**OVERVIEW** Reform Judaism is a movement that supports modifying traditional Jewish law and practice to make it consistent with contemporary social and cultural conditions. Reform Jews accept the core beliefs of Judaism: that God is the creator of the world and everything in it and that the Torah (the written Jewish law), inspired by God, is foundational to Jewish life. What differentiates Reform Judaism from other Jewish sects is a commitment to the idea that Jewish law and practices continue to evolve, necessitating changes over time. The movement is further identified by its emphasis on social action and the promotion of peace, justice, and ethical living.

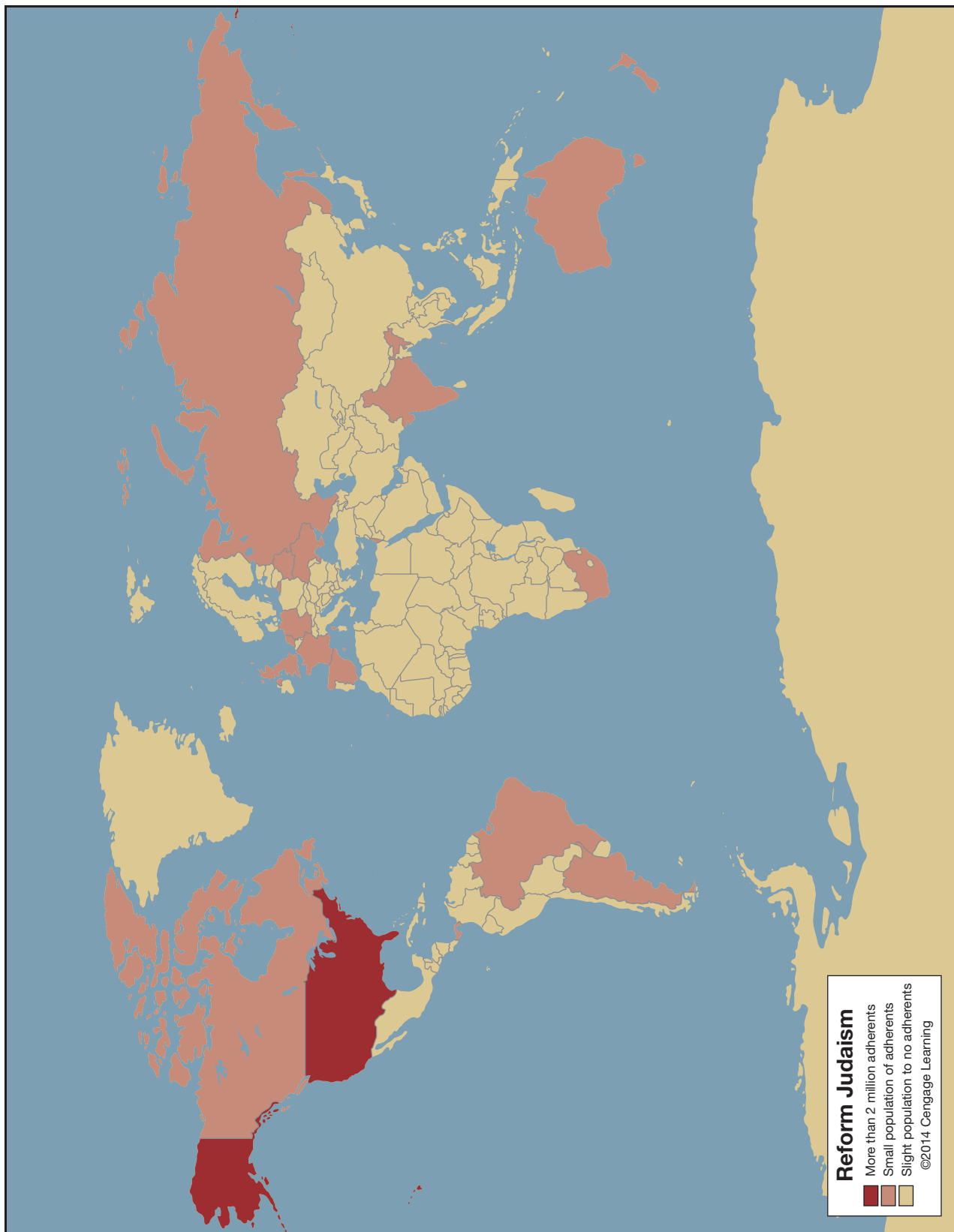
The movement began in the early 19th century, when Jewish reformers, responding to political and other changes in western and central Europe, began altering the Jewish worship service. Over time rabbis and laypeople sympathetic to these changes coalesced as a distinct group, and by the middle of the century had developed a set of ideological principles distinct from traditional Jewish doctrine. This Reform movement spread throughout most of western Europe, and by the end of the 19th century had become a prominent feature of American Judaism.

There are approximately 1.5 million Reform Jews worldwide. Reform Jews are a minority of the Jewish population in most countries, but they are a growing presence in Israel and the former Soviet Union, and form the largest Jewish denomination in the United States. About a third of American Jews affiliated with a synagogue belong to a Reform synagogue. Contemporary Reform Judaism is marked by its policy of inclusion. Reform synagogues embrace all who wish to worship, including converts to Judaism and families of mixed faith. The movement has openly embraced gay and lesbian members and was the first Jewish movement to ordain female rabbis.

**HISTORY** Influenced by the ideals of the Enlightenment—a philosophical movement of the 17th and 18th centuries that focused on rationalism in regard to religious, social, and political ideas—and by promises of political and social freedom, the first reformers were German Jews seeking to live as both Jews and members of the larger society. They aimed to introduce modern aesthetics and strict decorum into the traditionally informal and jumbled Jewish worship service.

By the early 1840s a trained Reform rabbinic leadership emerged in central Europe. Reform conferences in Brunswick in 1844, Frankfurt in 1845, and Breslau in 1846 gave rabbis an opportunity to clarify their beliefs and discuss ways to derive innovative practices from those beliefs. Despite the shadow of anti-Semitism and the threat of forced conversion to Christianity, the movement continued to grow in Germany and much of central Europe throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries.

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The Reform movement in the United States developed in a much freer and more pluralistic atmosphere. From its beginnings in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1824, American Reform Judaism grew rapidly, especially after the large migration of German Jews to the United States in the late 1840s. During the 1870s and 1880s German immigrant Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise (1819–1900) founded the central institutions that formed the organizational basis of American Reform Judaism. *The Union Prayer Book*, which would be used by Reform congregations well into the 20th century, was first published in 1892.

The 20th century saw a massive influx of Jewish immigrants to the United States. Although many of these immigrants were at first resistant to the Reform movement, over time the movement began to gain ground, particularly with immigrants from eastern Europe. The century also saw important changes to Reform Judaism and its practice. During the 1920s and 1930s the rise in global anti-Semitism prompted the Central Conference of American Rabbis to adopt *Guiding Principles of Reform Judaism* (1937), or the Columbus Platform, which outlined the movement's principles. The declaration reflects the growing influence of Zionism (a movement in favor of the state of Israel), affirming "the obligation of all Jewry to aid in [Israel's] upbuilding as a Jewish homeland." After World War II the leadership of renowned archeologist Nelson Glueck (1900–1971), who became president of Hebrew Union College in 1947, drew people to the movement and helped it to expand.

Following the turbulent social changes of the 1960s, which saw the American civil rights movement and organized opposition to the Vietnam War, movements in which Reform Jews were active participants, many in the Reform community began to feel the need for a new prayer book that would be more reflective of the challenges of the modern world. In 1975 *The Union Prayer Book* was replaced with *The Gates of Prayer*, which included some services written in contemporary English, as well as more gender neutral language. Not all congregations abandoned *The Union Prayer Book*, however, due in part to the immense size of the new text, as well as what some saw as a lack of cohesion. *The Gates of Prayer* was supplemented in 1978 with *The Gates of Repentance*. In 1983, due largely to the leadership of Alexander M. Schindler (1947–), then president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the Central Conference of American Rabbis adopted the Resolution on Patrilineal Descent, which embraced as Jewish all children of a Jewish parent

(whether mother or father) who are raised exclusively as Jews. The resolution represented an evolving interpretation of traditional Jewish law, in which Jewishness depends on matrilineage.

By the early 21st century many Reform congregations were embracing traditional elements of Jewish worship, such as the wearing of the yarmulke (skullcap) in the synagogue and at home. Originally eliminated from Reform practice, the wearing of the yarmulke in Reform synagogues remains optional and has been adopted by women as well as men. Many congregations have also begun to embrace a more informal style of worship marked by upbeat music and even dancing. Another evolution of the Reform book of prayer came in 2007 with *Mishkan T'filah* ("Dwelling Place for Prayer"), which has been widely adopted by Reform congregations.

**CENTRAL DOCTRINES** Distinguishing Reform from other branches of Judaism is the belief that Jewish practices have evolved over time and should continue to do so. Most Reform Jews agree that God did not reveal the Torah to Moses at one definitive moment. Rather the Torah and the vast corpus of Jewish literature developed gradually, reflecting changes in the social and cultural life of the Jewish people.

Reform Judaism and Conservative Judaism have common roots—the reaction of Jews to social and political forces in 19th-century Europe. The Reform branch, however, does not believe that Jewish law (including, for example, its dietary restrictions) is binding. Reform Jews have also emphasized the ethical component of Judaism over ritual practices, and Reform institutions have given lay Jews more authority in determining the legitimacy of various religious practices and principles.

**MORAL CODE OF CONDUCT** Reform Jews have emphasized the central role that ethics should play in a religious system. The prophets of the Bible, such as Micah, Isaiah, and Hosea, placed emphasis on social responsibility, and Reform Jews see the prophets as a model for their religious duty to teach the world an ethical vision for society.

By the late 20th century the Reform movement had embraced many liberal notions of what is moral and ethical. In the United States the Reform branch differs most prominently from Conservative Judaism in its acceptance of intermarriage (between Jews and non-Jews), gay and lesbian marriage, and the ordination of gay rabbis. The Reform movement has also developed an



*This sign, displayed on May 26, 2009, shows a Jewish person's support for gay marriage. In the United States, Reform Jews support gay marriage. © PINHOLE PHOTOGRAPHIC/ALAMY.*

ethical code on other issues, such as sexuality, proper business practices, and civic responsibility.

**SACRED BOOKS** The Reform movement has emphasized the importance of the Hebrew Bible (including the Torah) over the Talmud (comprising rabbinic discussions of Jewish law and practice). Early reformers felt the Talmud was overemphasized in traditional Jewish education, and Reform Jews view the Bible as having a more universal significance than the Talmud. The Reform movement has produced numerous prayer books for use in the home and the synagogue.

**SACRED SYMBOLS** Reform Jews have maintained traditional Jewish symbols, such as the menorah (candelabra used in Jewish worship), but have sometimes interpreted them in a dramatically different way. They may see the Torah, the most sacred Jewish symbol, as an emblem of human freedom, whereas an Orthodox Jew may see it as representing the eternal commitment to Jewish law. Because the Reform movement stresses the autonomy of the individual, Reform Jews may interpret religious symbols in their own way.

**EARLY AND MODERN LEADERS** Israel Jacobson (1768–1828), one of the earliest figures of the Reform movement, established the first Reform prayer chapel in

1810 in the German state of Westphalia. He made changes in Jewish worship and education, setting the pattern for lay-led innovations. Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise emigrated from Bohemia to the United States in 1846 and built the American Reform movement. A populist who wholeheartedly embraced the use of English (rather than the more usual German) in Reform congregations, Wise founded the central institutions of American Reform Judaism, wrote a popular prayer book, and established a Jewish newspaper.

Rabbi Alexander M. Schindler (1925–2000), president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC) from 1973 to 1996, was known for his assertive support of civil rights, world peace, nuclear disarmament, assistance for the poor, a ban on the death penalty, feminism, gay rights, and outreach to intermarried couples. Rabbi Eric Yoffie (1947– ), who served as president of the UAHC from 1996 to 2012, advocates a “Reform revolution” that would involve more intensive Jewish education, greater liturgical innovation, and a reinvigoration of worship. Rabbi Richard Jacobs (1956– ) became president of the UAHC in 2012. He is committed to environmental issues and social justice and is an advocate for an Israel that remains true to democratic and liberal values and that can one day coexist peacefully with Palestine.



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**MAJOR THEOLOGIANS AND AUTHORS** Among early Reform theologians, Rabbi Abraham Geiger (1810–1874) and Rabbi David Einhorn (1809–1879) stand out. Geiger was a leading pulpit rabbi and scholar in mid-19th-century Germany. He believed that a critical understanding of Jewish history and an appreciation of the moral genius in Judaism should serve as the basis of a new Judaism shorn of archaic practices. Einhorn, who emigrated from Germany to the United States in 1854, was considered the leader of the radical wing of American Reform Judaism. His writings, which argued for a universal moral sensibility and a theologically unswerving attitude, conflicted with the more pragmatic program of his contemporary, Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, who emphasized responding effectively to changing social trends. Over time Wise's views proved the more popular.

Rabbi Eugene Borowitz (1924– ), a leading Reform Jewish theologian in the United States, has emphasized the responsibility of the individual Jew to engage with Jewish tradition in an open, critical manner. Rabbi David Saperstein (1947– ) is one of the most visible figures of contemporary Reform Judaism. His leadership of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism led to his recognition by *Newsweek* magazine as the most influential rabbi in the United States in 2009.

**ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE** The World Union for Progressive Judaism is an organizational body serving Reform and other congregations in more than 40 countries. The three central institutions of American Reform Judaism are the Union for Reform Judaism (representing more than 900 Reform congregations), the Central Conference of American Rabbis, and the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (the largest Reform rabbinical school in the world, with campuses in Cincinnati, New York City, Los Angeles, and Jerusalem). The Leo Baeck College in London also trains Reform rabbis.

**HOUSES OF WORSHIP AND HOLY PLACES** Originally Jews named their houses of worship synagogues to distinguish them from the original Temple in Jerusalem, destroyed by the Romans in the year 70 CE. Reform Jews, however, traditionally called their houses of worship “temples,” indicating that these structures replaced the original Temple as their center for prayer and that they did not aspire to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple or to return to live in Israel even in a future messianic time. The contemporary Reform movement sees the local

### The Platforms of Reform Judaism

The Central Conference of American Rabbis has issued four platforms that define the principles of American Reform Judaism and reflect its ongoing mediation between tradition and modernity. The following are excerpts from these four platforms:

The Pittsburgh Platform (1885): “We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community, and therefore expect neither a return to Palestine, nor . . . the restoration of any of the laws concerning the Jewish state.”

The Columbus Platform (1937): “Judaism as a way of life requires . . . the retention and development of such customs, symbols and ceremonies as possess inspirational value.”

Centenary Platform (1976): “The widespread threats to freedom, the . . . explosion of new knowledge and of ever more powerful technologies, and the spiritual emptiness of much of Western culture have taught us to . . . reassert what remains perennially valid in Judaism's teaching.”

The Pittsburgh Statement of Principles (1999): “We believe that we must . . . actively encourage those who are seeking a spiritual home to find it in Judaism.”

temple as a place for worship, study, and fellowship and uses “temple” and “synagogue” synonymously.

**WHAT IS SACRED** While the Torah and other religious articles have a degree of holiness, Reform Judaism discourages overly emphasizing symbols or places. The most sacred act is the study of the Torah, but all actions that do not violate human dignity are considered sacred and significant.

**HOLIDAYS AND FESTIVALS** Reform Jews observe all the major Jewish holidays but shorten the length of Rosh Hashanah and Passover by a day. They also omit the festive seder meal on the second night of Passover. Reform Jews are not required to follow many of the

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*A view inside a temple that serves a reform congregation in New York City. © POKKU/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM.*

traditional restrictions on behavior during Jewish holidays, such as not driving in cars and not writing.

**MODE OF DRESS** Reform Jews dress like non-Jews as part of the movement's commitment to integrating into the host society (maintaining a distinctive religion, but not at the expense of social segregation).

**DIETARY PRACTICES** Reform Jews do not generally observe kashruth, the strict Jewish dietary laws. Some abstain from certain types of foods that are regarded as particularly nonkosher, such as pork and shellfish. Most Reform synagogues prohibit the serving of such foods at temple-sponsored events and may also require the traditional separation of milk and meat so that everyone can eat freely regardless of their level of observance.

**RITUALS** The Reform synagogue holds services on Friday nights, and sometimes on Saturday mornings, in celebration of the Sabbath. The largest services are on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. The style of ritual in Reform congregations has changed since the mid-20th century from formal to participatory. Many contemporary Reform Jews have reembraced ritual practice, but because they are looking for spiritual meaning rather than a faithfulness to God's command, they do so selectively.

**rites of passage** Reform Jews commemorate all the traditional Jewish rites of passage, but the Reform movement's flexibility allows members to individually design their rites to meet their spiritual needs.

Reformers have also developed new rituals, believing that if a new ceremony is meaningful, there is no reason not to introduce it into practice. One nontraditional ritual is the passing of the Torah at many Reform bar mitzvahs (Jewish coming-of-age ceremonies). The grandparents hold the Torah and then hand it to the parents, who pass it to the 13-year-old, symbolizing the desire to pass Jewish family traditions from generation to generation.

**MEMBERSHIP** The Reform movement has adopted an active outreach program to families in which at least one of the parents is Jewish. Reform Jews also welcome non-Jewish religious seekers. Reform congregations in the United States have become increasingly multicultural, with significant numbers of African American, Hispanic, and Asian members. Although historically membership in a synagogue required conversion to Judaism, people have increasingly become active in Reform congregations without formally converting. Still, most Reform rabbis encourage conversion for the sake of strengthening Jewish life and families. Reform Judaism has a sizable presence on the Internet, where Web sites such as [reformjudaism.org](http://reformjudaism.org) and the Union for Reform Judaism (<http://urj.org//index.cfm?>) offer information for members as well as those interested in converting to the faith. The women's group Women of Reform Judaism also maintains a Web site (<http://www.wrj.org/default.aspx>) through which it communicates with members and encourages service through its many programs.

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**RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE** Reform Judaism is a very tolerant denomination and has been a leader in interfaith dialogue. Interfaith dialogue was greatly advanced by Rabbi Eric Yoffie during his tenure as president of the URJ. In 2005 Yoffie became the first Jew to address the Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Despite his many disagreements with the Religious Right, Yoffie broke new ground in 2006 when he spoke at Liberty University, an evangelical school known for its conservatism. The next year he reached out to the Islamic Society of North America, becoming the first major Jewish leader to speak at the organization's convention. As in other branches of Judaism, Reform Jews believe righteous individuals of all faiths can go to heaven. Therefore, it is not necessary to convert to Judaism in order to obtain salvation.

**SOCIAL JUSTICE** For Reform Jews practice is more important than belief, and ethics are more important than ritual. The early reformers believed deeply in working with their Christian neighbors to make the world more livable, peaceful, and just; this belief was central to their religious worldview. Reform Judaism has often been called “Prophetic Judaism” because of the movement's strong identification with the ethical and moral vision of the biblical prophets, who emphasized social responsibility. The Reform movement maintains a political-action office in Washington, D.C., and provides a variety of resources to synagogues that want to engage in social-action projects.

The social advocacy associated with Reform Judaism takes many forms. The movement's teaching on economic justice is based in the Torah and its commandment to care for and advocate on the behalf of the poor. Reform Jews are active in outreach programs that provide relief from hunger and homelessness. Religious beliefs also ground the movement's support of labor unions, fair wages, and economic justice. Political activists have been especially outspoken regarding proposed budget cuts to programs such as welfare and food stamps that disproportionately affect the poorest members of society. Reform Judaism also emphasizes the duty of humans to protect the earth and its resources for future generations. The movement therefore promotes sustainable living and conservation.

**SOCIAL LIFE** Most Reform Jews would agree that an ideal family consists of two loving partners—in a monogamous, religiously sanctified union—and their children. While sanctioning the traditional Jewish view

### Rabbi Eric Yoffie

In the 16 years that he spent as president of the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ), Rabbi Eric Yoffie established himself as one of America's foremost Jewish leaders. Yoffie was born in 1947. He spent his early years in Worcester, Massachusetts, where he was active in the North American Federation of Temple Youth. He graduated from Brandeis University in 1969. In 1974 he earned his rabbinical ordination from Hebrew Union College. After briefly serving congregations in New York and North Carolina, he became director of the URJ's Midwest Council in 1980. He rose to the role of vice president in 1992 and president in 1996.

As president of the URJ, Yoffie called for Reform Jews to engage in lifelong study of Jewish texts. He was also outspoken on issues of social justice, championing the rights of members of the gay and lesbian community, promoting gun control, and opposing capital punishment. He reached out to Christians and Muslims to promote interfaith dialogue and encouraged Israel to be more tolerant of religious pluralism. He notably declined to meet with Israeli President Moshe Katsav in 2006 after the president refused to address him as rabbi because of his Reform rather than Orthodox affiliation.

Since retiring as president of the URJ in 2012, Yoffie has published widely on issues of religion and social justice. His work has appeared in such periodicals as the *Huffington Post* and *Jerusalem Post*.

that having and raising children is a sacred obligation, the Reform movement has opposed the “family-centered” agenda typically associated with the Religious Right.

**CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES** Women were regarded as equal to men from the beginning of the Reform movement. Religious roles remained traditionally gender based for much of the 20th century, but since the 1970s women have read prayers, served on synagogue boards, and become rabbis and cantors.

The American Reform movement is unequivocally committed to supporting full social and legal equality for



gays and lesbians, and it has appointed a considerable number as rabbis and cantors. Many Reform rabbis officiate at same-sex commitment ceremonies. Following the June 2013 Supreme Court decision in *Windsor v. United States*—in which the Court struck down a section of the Defense of Marriage Act, ruling that it is unconstitutional to limit the interpretation of “marriage” and “spouse” to apply exclusively to heterosexual unions—a group of prominent rabbis including Rabbi Rick Jacobs (1956– ), Rabbi Steve Fox, Rabbi Marla Feldman, and Rabbi David Saperstein (1947– ) issued a statement lauding the decision as a “significant victory for the protection of Americans’ civil rights.” They continued that they were looking forward to a day when “full civil marriage equality is the law throughout the country.”

Reform Judaism has consistently upheld the right of women to choose to have an abortion and the duty of parents and schools to teach children about safe sex and birth control. The movement opposes the death penalty, favors protecting the environment, and supports gun-control legislation.

In 2003 the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion admitted its first transgender rabbinical student without controversy. Intermarried students are now being considered for admission, a change that would be a radical break from traditional Jewish practices.

**CULTURAL IMPACT** The Reform movement has had a significant impact on the cultural life of many countries, especially the United States. This influence is reflected by its representation in literature, which commonly includes Reform Jews, synagogues, and rabbis, and in films and television shows, often featuring Reform synagogues or weddings ceremonies involving Reform rabbis.

*Dana Evan Kaplan and Evan Moffic*  
Revised by *Dana Evan Kaplan*

*See Also* Vol. I: *Judaism*

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