

Dana Evan Kaplan, *American Reform Judaism: An Introduction* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 297 pp.

On the most basic level, Dana Evan Kaplan's new book has a message for anyone who hasn't stepped foot in a Reform synagogue in the past twenty years: This is not your dad's Reform Judaism! From Los Altos Hills, California, to Scarsdale, New York, from Atlanta, Georgia, to Brookline, Massachusetts, Reform synagogues have reinvented themselves and the movement as a whole. Empowered by Reform's elevation of autonomy to a grounding principle, rabbis, educators, and lay leaders have managed to combine commitments to tradition and progressivism, New Age spirituality, and Torah study to create an amalgam that would be impossible to fathom, let alone replicate, in the more traditional movements. But as Kaplan is careful to remind the reader, autonomy allows for great variation between, and even within, individual communities. It also frustrates attempts to promote unity or theological consistency.

Kaplan is an ideal guide to this new Reform Judaism. He grew up as a movement insider, who nevertheless had strong traditionalist influences in his life: a yeshiva day school education and a close relationship with tradition-minded maternal grandparents. Kaplan's early chapters competently sketch the history of Reform Judaism and the development of its belief system and statements of principles. The bulk of the book is devoted to a description of the transformation of the movement in recent years: changes in worship, the embrace of feminism, acceptance of gays and lesbians, outreach to intermarried couples, and the growth of Progressive Judaism in Israel.

The hero in the book is Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the movement's lay organization, the Union for Reform Judaism, since 1996. Kaplan gives Yoffie much of the credit for engineering the transformation, even as he allows that movement growth and ritual experimentation were well underway before his ascendancy. Using adverbs like "quickly" and "boldly" to describe Yoffie's implementation of new approaches to worship, education, and ritual Kaplan asserts that Yoffie was "the right person at the right time and place to take over the

leadership of a movement that had to either make dramatic changes or watch its fortunes fade rapidly.” (65) Yoffie is even given the last word in a four-page afterword, where he predictably compliments Kaplan on his “superb job” (259) and “compelling” (260) portrait.

Yoffie lobs one substantive criticism: Kaplan’s alarmism about a lack of theological coherence in the movement is misplaced, he argues, noting that the contentious 1999 Pittsburgh Platform, which forced Reform leaders to contend with the movement’s messy diversity, has been largely forgotten or ignored since its passage. American Jews, he reminds us, “are resolutely pragmatic and resistant to theological speculation, and always have been.” (262) In this respect, he could have added, they reflect the attitudes of Americans as a whole. Yoffie provides an insight that could have added some context and perspective to Kaplan’s treatment of the platform controversy.

But Kaplan is correct to argue that, for now, the lack of theological coherence will continue to resurface whenever the movement tries to define itself, as with the Central Conference of American Rabbis’ present effort to introduce a new prayer book. Given the transitional state of the movement, it might have been more prudent to delay the adoption of a new *siddur* until greater consensus is reached about theology and future direction. A revised edition of *Gates of Prayer* that included new service alternatives designed to respond to current worship trends, while retaining options that would appeal to more Classical Reform-oriented congregations, would have caused far less controversy while enshrining the movement’s commitment to diversity. One wonders about Kaplan’s prediction that congregations will eagerly accept the new prayer book, given the decidedly mixed reactions to earlier versions of the 1999 platform. The unenthusiastic response in many quarters to the experimental edition of the new *siddur*, which was piloted as Kaplan’s book went to press, might call this prediction into doubt.

To make too much out of Kaplan’s prognostication skills would be unfairly nit-picky. Unfortunately, the book suffers from more serious problems of intention. Kaplan’s target audience is unclear. Is he writing the book for the general public? Jewish insiders? Scholars? Kaplan’s breezy writing style makes the book engaging, and I would not hesitate

to assign it in introductory college or adult education courses. But the assumed level of knowledge (or occasional poor editing) may leave the uninitiated reader now and then frustrated. On the other hand, most of Kaplan's sources are materials that are in the general record, magazines, newspaper articles, and previously published monographs. His research is thorough and peppered with interesting tidbits, although few are likely to surprise long-time students of American Judaism.

Kaplan is at his most intriguing when he applies to his study of the Reform movement the sociological research of Dean Kelley, Rodney Stark, and Roger Finke, who examine the growth of conservative churches. As Kaplan explains, "high-cost religious demands actually strengthen a denomination... As a religious group gradually increases its demands on its members, people are sold on the idea that their participation and commitment are wanted and needed." (67) Like many mainline Protestant denominations, Reform Judaism has traditionally been a low-tension religious movement, making few demands on its members. Kaplan's insistence that Reform's future viability depends on its capacity to remake itself into a medium-tension movement, "demanding enough to command respect, but flexible enough to attract and retain a diverse and pluralistic membership," elevates his cheerleading for Yoffie and company, providing a rationale for Reform's "re'jew'vination" beyond personal taste. One wishes, however, that Kaplan had applied this argument in his chapter on education to make a more forceful argument in favor of Reform day schools. In order to exercise the autonomy that Reform prizes, knowledge is an essential prerequisite. Yet, as Hebrew Union College professor Michael Zeldin points out, the minimal number of teaching hours and inconsistent attendance records in most religious schools make it impossible to teach students "even the most rudimentary knowledge of Hebrew, an understanding of Jewish ideas, or a sense of their identities as Jews." (138) Kaplan's description of efforts to revitalize the religious school evokes the image of a doctor performing resuscitation on a terminal patient.

As for Kaplan's essentially optimistic outlook on the movement's future, one can only hope that he is correct. Kaplan repeatedly notes that according to the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, Reform has become the largest denomination in the United States. But as with Conservative Judaism in the midtwentieth century, one gets the sense that the seemingly encouraging numbers are soft and, thus, misleading. Kaplan would have painted a more realistic picture of the state of the movement had he provided an in-depth portrait of the attitudes and practices of those who self-identify as Reform. For example, only 43 percent of Reform Jews belong to a synagogue, a membership rate far lower than their Orthodox or Conservative counterparts. Even fewer Reform Jews provide their children with eight or more years of Jewish education. Rates of synagogue attendance are also embarrassingly low, with only 18 percent of Reform synagogue members attending services, on average, at least monthly. The statistics for non-members are even more alarming, with over 75 percent attending synagogue one to two times per year, or not at all.<sup>1</sup> These numbers provide an important and mostly absent context to the transformation he describes. They also suggest benchmarks by which to judge the level of success. Unfortunately, flaws in the 2000 survey may mean that we will need to wait another decade before we see the effects, if any, of Reform's transformation on the demography.

By no means is this observation meant to minimize the profound impact of the innovations on thousands of worshippers and dozens of synagogues. (Nor does it blunt a crucial difference between the Conservative movement of the 1960s and 1970s and the Reform movement today. As Marshall Sklare observed at the time, the Conservative movement was plagued by a lack of self-confidence.<sup>2</sup> The contemporary Reform movement suffers no such malady.) Even if levels of affiliation remain flat due to hemorrhaging of the marginally affiliated and disaffected, Reform seems to have succeeded in bringing new populations into the synagogue and fashioning a more intense religious experience for active members, old-timers as well as newcomers. Stemming if not reversing the assimilationist tide would be remarkable by itself. If this phenomenon is borne out in future surveys, Reform leaders may be justified in a joyous call of "*Dayenu!*"

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<sup>1</sup>For a full profile of the Reform movement based on the 1990 NJPS, see Bernard M. Lazerwitz and Ephraim Tabory, "A Religious and Social Profile of Reform Jews in the United States," in Dana Evan Kaplan, ed., *Contemporary Debates in American Reform Judaism: Conflicting Visions* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 19-38. As the citation suggests, Kaplan was well aware of these statistics when he wrote the book, but apparently believed that they were irrelevant to his story.

<sup>2</sup>Marshall Sklare, "The Conservative Movement: Achievements and Problems," in *Observing America's Jews* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 1993), 60-64.