

**Dana Evan Kaplan**  
*American Reform Judaism: An Introduction.*

New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003. 297 pp.

Of all Jewish groups and denominations, Reform Judaism has self-consciously built the most effective mechanisms for adjusting itself to developments in the general culture. In principle, Reform Judaism is not committed to observing Jewish law (halakhah) and does not look to poskim, rabbinical sages, to dictate to the laity how to interpret the Jewish tradition. Consequently, deciding on changes and implementing them have been central elements of the Reform movement all through its history. Since its inception in America in the mid-19th century, American Reform Judaism has gone through huge changes in response to the cultural, moral, and intellectual developments that have taken place in America and elsewhere. In the latter decades of the 20th century, while retaining their commitment to a progressive outlook on social and cultural issues, Reform Jews have reversed previous decisions -- bringing back into the synagogue Jewish rituals and symbols that the founding fathers of Reform Judaism had considered obsolete.

Dana Kaplan's excellent book, *American Reform Judaism: An Introduction*, analyzes the changes that the American Reform movement has witnessed in the past two generations. He masterfully explains the Reform movement's move in both directions: on the one hand, embracing tradition and, on the other, promoting progressive issues. Kaplan convincingly argues that there is no real contradiction between the two trends. Both result from the changes that the movement has undergone since the 1960s.

Kaplan starts the narrative with "classical" Reform Judaism, its history, theology, and institutions. The reformers of the late 19th century and early decades of the 20th century transformed the traditional synagogue and rewrote the prayer books. Giving up on much day-to-day Jewish observance, they built a socially progressive yet patriarchal and solidly middle-class movement that seemed to suit the needs of the American Jewish elite at that time. Striving for respectability and conformity characterized other movements in American Judaism until the 1960s. But with the emergence of the counterculture in the 1960s and 1970s, the old paradigm was challenged as American Jewish baby boomers sought more spiritual meaning in their lives. A growing demand for less formality and more spirituality has transformed the Reform temples, which have introduced more traditional rituals and symbols. Such religious objects as kipot, talitot, and shofarot have made their way back

into the sanctuary. Today, for example, it is not uncommon for Reform rabbis to wear kippot on a regular basis, and while Reform congregations have not become strictly kosher, they have, as a rule, refrained from allowing overtly nonkosher food in the synagogue building and in other Reform institutions and gatherings. In addition, Reform communities were affected first by the establishment of the state of Israel and later by the Six-Day War, both of which intensified identification with Zionism and the Jewish state. As a consequence of these changes, classical Reform Judaism underwent serious erosion, although, as Kaplan points out, it has not disappeared and is still an influential minority within the Reform movement.

At the same time, the Reform movement, together with the fledgling Reconstructionist movement, persisted in its commitment to social progress, adjusting itself to new cultural trends such as women's liberation. It was already in the early days of the movement that Reform temples introduced mixed seating, encouraged girls to study in Sunday school toward confirmation, and allowed women to be admitted to Hebrew Union College. But roles of religious leadership were not yet open to female members. The situation changed in the early 1970s, when the first women were ordained as Reform rabbis. This aroused no storm among the Reform, in contrast to the Conservative movement, where long and heated deliberations over the ordination of women went on for more than a decade, ending with a schism (pp. 186-208). The first American woman rabbi, Sally Preisand, was ordained at the Hebrew Union College in 1972, paving the way for the ordination of more than 150 women since then. Likewise, the Reform movement accommodated itself to gay liberation, allowing homosexuals and lesbians full privileges in membership and leadership roles. Since the 1980s, Hebrew Union College has ordained openly gay and lesbian rabbis and has welcomed gay congregations into the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (pp. 209-232). In the early 2000s, the Central Conference of American Rabbis gave its members license to officiate in gay and lesbian commitment ceremonies. Confronting the growing number of interfaith marriages, the Reform movement has also opened its doors to interfaith couples and their offspring. Reform congregations were the first to allow families with only one Jewish spouse to join as members. In 1983, the movement decided to recognize children of mixed marriages as Jewish, even when their mothers were not Jewish, provided that they were brought up as Jews. The tolerant atmosphere in Reform congregations has also made it possible for non-Jews to explore the Jewish tradition, which has led to a growing number of "Jews by choice." Consequently, the Reform movement has decided to invest in outreach activity and in educational pro-

grams for new Jews (pp. 155-185). Thus, the ethnic component of Reform congregations changed between the 1970s and the beginning of the 21st century, as a growing percentage of participants in Reform services were not born Jewish.

Kaplan offers a sophisticated and nuanced analysis of the Reform movement of our generation and its issues. The author, who is both a pulpit rabbi and an academician, has the ability to view the movement from more than one angle. He writes critically, exposing at times discord and crises, and offers a balanced picture that presents both the movement's achievements and its shortcomings. In spite of the numerical growth the Reform movement has witnessed in the past decades and its evident ability to reshape itself to changing realities, Kaplan voices skepticism over the movement's actual achievements. While he points to its ability to meet the needs of its individual members and to build a pluralistic and inclusive movement, Kaplan sees setbacks and limitations to a progressive religious movement in which members have full autonomy to pick and choose elements of the tradition as they see fit. He finds the rank and file of the movement to be lacking in passion and commitment. Many, if not most, Reform Jews do not attend synagogue on a regular basis, and there is a disparity between the concerns of the rabbinical leadership and those of the ordinary members (pp. 233-253).

Kaplan should be commended for his comparative approach, which places the developments in the American Reform movement within the larger context of changes in American religion and culture during the era (pp. 44-78). He is familiar with all the ins and outs of the movement, its leaders and institutions, and their standing on theological and social issues. He has taken part in Reform gatherings and has interviewed leaders and activists. His familiarity with the developments he writes about allows him to present detailed descriptions of behind-the-scenes struggles, which add color to the narrative. American Reform Judaism is also well-written and well-organized. Kaplan's writing is clear and direct, intended not only for scholars but also for community leaders and interested laypersons.

The book is accompanied by a foreword by Arthur Hertzberg, a leading American Jewish intellectual, and an afterword by Eric Yoffie, a leader of the Reform movement. Hertzberg's essay, while insightful, has little to do with the theme of the book, whereas Yoffie's intelligent afterword reads more like a laudatory book review. American Reform Judaism is such a fine work, makes such an important contribution, and reads so well, that there is no need for these two literary maids of honor.

Such minor flaws notwithstanding, this is a highly welcome

volume. It will doubtless be included on reading lists of books on contemporary Judaism and on religion in America. *American Reform Judaism* is a comprehensive, informed, nuanced, and well-written study of the largest movement in American Judaism, and it should serve as a definitive volume on the subject for many years to come.

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