

Response

DANA EVAN KAPLAN

My book focuses on describing the changes of contemporary American Reform Judaism since Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie declared “a new Reform revolution” at the Union of American Congregation general assembly in Orlando, Florida in December 1999. He argued that the Reform movement needed to make synagogue worship the foremost concern. Services in too many congregations had become “tedious, predictable, and dull.” More often than not, the Torah reading was “lifeless,” and the music was “dirge-like.” Rabbi Yoffie pointed out that whereas 40 percent of Americans observe worship each week, only ten percent of Jews do. He called on the movement to transform synagogue worship into an innovative, but still traditional, experience. The book focuses on the leaders, institutions, and trends that are central to this “revolution,” and tries to analyze how effective it has been so far.

American Reform Judaism details this worship revolution, which has created a new enthusiasm among many Reform Jews for prayer and song. I describe how the movement has reorganized the entire approach to education, launched a successful Outreach campaign to bring in intermarried couples, accepted egalitarianism as one of its fundamental guiding principles, and embraced gay and lesbian rights. The results have been impressive, bringing new life to what had been a dull and aging movement. These responses have situated my study and the Reform movement in postmodern American life. Many of their comments indicate the possibility that my description also suggests new directions for Reform. My comments on their findings may also sketch the contemporary condition of liberal Judaism in America.

Dr. Grossman is correct in his observation that American Reform Judaism tends to juxtapose instances of optimism with spurts of pessimism. The main thesis of the book is that liberal religion generally and Reform Judaism specifically is very vulnerable. Despite the impressive growth in numbers and the apparent vitality of the movement, I warn that there is no concrete religious motive driving this resurgence of activity. Many people have become active in Reform temples because they want a warm and caring congregation, and/or because they are looking for a well-run but non-judgmental religious school for their children. But short-term success does not guarantee long term growth. As Professor Wertheimer points out, the Conservative movement grew in the post World War II era because it met the needs of a changing American Jewish population. Later, it began to decline. If the Reform movement cannot convince its followers that they should believe in something, it is hard to imagine that they and their children and grandchildren will stick with it. They may move on off into the great American religious wilderness, or they may embrace a version of Judaism that better provides them with clear answers to the universal question, “What do we believe?”

As Professor Wertheimer points out, the Conservative movement has been declining numerically. In 2001, only 26.5 percent of America’s Jews identified with the Conservative movement. Even more shocking, as many as three quarters of those raised in the Conservative movement are not affiliated with it as adults. Several of the respondents suggest that the Reform movement may follow the same path. It will experience a period of effervescence, and then begin to lose the attention and loyalty of those raised in its temples.

Dr. Grossman is also correct when he writes that the Reform movement has gone way beyond just denying the authority of Jewish law, and has become a full-fledged postmodern religious movement that erases all boundaries of status, class, education, and even gender. Postmodernism threatens traditional religion by suggesting that there may not be any objective standard of judgment. Since the Reform movement has been moving away from any normative set of beliefs and practices for a long time, it may

be the postmodern denomination par excellence. Since we cannot discriminate true from false, or right from wrong, everything becomes a question of what generates a spiritual feeling.

Movement leaders are aware that this can be a problem. Rabbi Janet Marder, the president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, writes in the current CCAR newsletter that “. . . we have failed to inculcate among Reform Jews an understanding of religion that is rooted in humility rather than narcissism.” Rabbi Marder argues that Judaic ritual should ideally connect us with a tradition that is infinitely older, deeper, and vaster than ourselves. It should be a discipline to which we subject ourselves and which would then mold our character in positive ways that meet sacred ideals. But contemporary American culture stresses the need to fulfill our personal whims, and religion has tended to focus on the service of ourselves rather than of God.

Rabbi Ellenson points out that both he and I—and indeed everyone on this panel—are both insiders and outsiders. An insider has a religious commitment to the group that he or she is studying and seeks to promote the interest of that belief system, and its religious organizations. It is true that much of my perspective has been molded as a result of working as a congregational rabbi as well as a scholar of American Judaism. I did explain in my preface that I could not possibly claim to be an outsider. I studied at the Hebrew Union College and have served as a Reform rabbi in a number of places in the United States, as well as in South Africa, Australia, and Israel. I have been fortunate to have had wonderful support from my congregation, Temple B’nai Israel, in Albany, Georgia.

My work has benefited from my personal religious upbringing and experience. I grew up in a Reform family, but I attended an Orthodox day school from kindergarten through sixth grade. While I cherish the religious autonomy of Reform Judaism, I have always sought out the intensity that I experienced in Orthodoxy. I have been disappointed. Rabbi Ellenson also has had both Reform and Orthodox experiences, and he may share my sense of feeling torn between two worlds.

Both Rabbi Ellenson and Professor Wertheimer mention my reliance upon written documents. *American Reform Judaism* is intended to be a book about the intellectual, institutional, and political aspects of the movement. In order to achieve this goal, I studied the writings and speeches of the institutional and intellectual leaders. I also described general trends including how congregants as a group seemed to respond to various initiatives. Professor Wertheimer, Rabbi Weinreb, and Rabbi Hirsh all criticize me for writing a study of the leaders rather than the entirety of the movement, suggesting that my book blurs or even ignores the distinction between folk and elite religion.

I don’t think it is true that I ignore the average Reform congregant, but the book is not intended as a sociological study of Reform congregants. What emerges clearly from some of the responses is that it is not enough to understand what the leadership of the Reform movement believes and practices. Indeed, only 43 percent of those who self-identify as Reform actually belong to Reform temples. Professor Wertheimer’s criticism indicates that he wants me to have written a different book. He has had the opportunity to oversee a series of very well-executed sociological studies of the Conservative movement, which were published in *Jews in the Center: Conservative Synagogues and their Members*. That book involved a team of scholars working with a generous grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts over the course of several years. I could not possibly replicate those efforts. His recommendation that there needs to be more research done on “the Reform amcha” similar to what he has done on the Conservative movement is well-taken.

Professor Wertheimer wrote me that “My motive was not only to address your book but also the Reform leadership, which as I noted, was once far more interested in self-study than it is today. Why do we know the least about the largest of the movements? Orthodoxy and Conservative Jews have been scrutinized; even the tiny Reconstructionist movement did a survey of its members, but not the Reform movement. Harsh or not, I believe the questions I pose in my last paragraph are critical for evaluating the current state of the Reform movement and the larger community.”

Professor Leonard Saxe of the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University is currently studying the 2000–2001 NJPS with an eye on what it can tell us about American Reform Jews. He comments that, “I should note that it’s been tough to get support for doing studies of Reform Jews—from either the URJ or by prominent Reform Jews. Perhaps the clearest rejection I received was from one Reform Jewish leader. He told me at one point that he/the movement was interested in ‘teaching Torah, not collecting statistics.’ I told him that I thought it was regrettable—that he and his congregational counterparts were teaching Torah to a very small fraction of those who claimed to be Reform (and whom the movement counts in each of its press releases).” Another scholar, Dr. Bruce A. Phillips of HUC-JIR in Los Angeles, is currently studying the 2000–2001 NJPS in terms of what it shows about Reform Jewish identity.

Many of the respondents comment on my argument that the Reform movement needs a coherent theology. The goal of the Reform movement is to help contemporary American Jews to affirm their Judaism in meaningful ways, while at the same time, participating fully in an openly pluralistic society. In order to do that, they need to have a clear vision of their religious faith and what their God demands of them.

Some argue that communal leaders need to avoid becoming strait-jacketed into a narrow theological viewpoint. Rabbi Ellenson is correct that Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise was successful precisely because of his ideological flexibility. By saying different things to different people at the same time, he was able to build the broad coalition necessary to establish the institutions of the Reform movement. This same ideological flexibility has proved useful in a variety of contexts and time frames. Despite my comments that the Reform movement lacks a clearly formulated and compelling ideology, the movement has grown and continues to grow.

I guess that I take it for granted that the Reform movement needs to be flexible. I point out the problem inherent in that flexibility, not because I believe that we should become ideologically rigid, but because I want to make people aware of the potential dangers of our admirable and necessary flexibility. I favor change, and I believe that change is necessary. But I argue that the lack of standards poses a long-term threat.

One of the central arguments in the book is that Reform Judaism cannot thrive if it remains a low-tension religious movement. In my study, I draw on the views of sociologist Rodney Stark and his school, which applies rational choice theory to religious actions. Rational choice theory considers individual behavior to function between structural constraints and individual preferences. The structure determines the constraints under which individuals can act. Within these constraints, people can choose various directions. Rational choice theory suggests that they will choose what is most rational. In terms of religion, it would seem logical that people would choose low-cost, low-demand religious denominations that allow them the most freedom. These “low tension” denominations should logically be the strongest. But this turns out not to be the case, since high-cost, high-tension religious groups can actually be stronger because they increase the production of “collective religious commodities.”

I agree with Rabbi Ellenson that being too rigid ideologically can make it harder to build a religious movement, especially in the free-wheeling United States of America. My point was not to urge ideological conformity, but rather to warn against theological anarchy. Especially with the decline of Jewish ethnicity that has been recorded in recent surveys, it becomes even more important to have something that can unify Reform Jews. If virtually every type of belief is condoned, then how is a child growing up in a Reform temple to make sense of the mixed messages that he or she is receiving? It would seem that children are only going to want to affiliate with their denomination of birth at a later stage of life if they come away from their childhood experience with a clear sense of what their temple believes in and a conviction that they want to perpetuate that belief system.

Rabbi Hirsh states that *American Reform Judaism* focuses almost exclusively on the Reform

movement. He argues that what is happening in Reform Judaism can only be understood in the broader context of American Judaism and religion. He calls the Reform movement “the identified patient,” the member who can be used to identify the problems of the entire family. He would have liked a book that described the Reform movement in a much broader context. My book, however, was intended to describe and analyze the Reform movement alone. The book is broad in the sense that it covers virtually every contemporary trend that affects the Reform movement. But I consciously and deliberately attempt to avoid too many direct comparisons. Writing an expansive comparative study is an important task, but I felt that first it was necessary to describe the state of Reform Judaism. I now plan to write a book on contemporary American Judaism as a whole. Just this past Friday, Columbia University Press emailed me that their faculty board had approved my new book proposal, tentatively entitled *The Reinvention of Judaism*.

Rabbi Hirsh felt that I should have addressed the humanistic challenge that the Reconstructionist movement poses. He feels that when I talk about trying to make it clear to Reform Jews what their God demands of them, that I am making “a literally incoherent statement.” He explains that “if modernity forces us to confront anything, it is that ‘God’ doesn’t demand anything of us. Our ancestors thought God demanded something, and said so, but we now know those are human words and human laws, and I would argue that the Reform/your attempt to put a theology at the center of a solution fails to reckon with (as Mordecai Kaplan would say!) the reality that outside of a certain type of Orthodox Judaism, for non-Orthodox Jews to say ‘God demands/God commands’ is to perpetuate a literary fiction. That is where, in my opinion, Reconstructionism has an alternative to offer: not what ‘God demands’ but what does the Jewish community offer, how does Jewish living help sanctify, how can Jewish religion help me deepen my self-awareness and sense of responsibility? In other words, we need a vision of Jewish living, not Jewish theology.” I completely disagree. In my book, I discuss, in great detail, the sociological theory behind “church growth,” which describes how there needs to be a strong theological justification to motivate religious followers.

Orthodox respondents suggest that the problems that the Reform movement is facing are inherent in our way of life. They believe that God requires us to observe Halakha, and this would mold our lives in every way. Orthodox Jews tend to focus on the particulars of Jewish observance. While Reform Jews see detailed ritual regulations as trivial, Orthodox Jews see each small Halakha as contributing toward the building of a strong and committed faith. If we kept kosher—strictly—we would not be able to wander away from our community. If we refrained from driving to synagogue on Shabbat, then we would not be able to settle in remote corners of our towns and cities, but rather, would have to find a place to live within easy walking distance of a shul. In short, our problems are a direct consequence of our beliefs and practices.

But sometimes Orthodox leaders think that the Reform movement is moving towards Orthodoxy when it is not. This is because Reform, in Professor Wertheimer’s words, is moving in two directions at the same time. A classic example can be found in the opening comments of *Tradition*, the journal published by the Rabbinical Council of America, a centrist Orthodox group. *Tradition* editor Rabbi Emanuel Feldman had heard about the new Reform Platform in 1999, and he commented that Reform “seems to have begun, very quietly, to emulate the ways of the Orthodox.” While he noted a number of trends that struck him as highly undesirable, he expressed hope that the Reform movement might turn towards the observance of mitzvot rather than the “mindless mantras du jour.” But just as his article was being completed on a hopeful note, the 2000 CCAR Conference, held in Charlotte, North Carolina, recommended rabbinic officiation at gay and lesbian unions. Rabbi Feldman was incensed, “My hope has now been shown to have been credulous and naive.” Rather than moving toward Torah and mitzvot, “Reform has now lurched into a morass from which it will be difficult to extricate itself” (Emanuel Feldman, “Reform of Reform? A Talmudic Reading,” *Tradition* Vol. 34 No. 2 (Summer 2000): 8.

Rabbi Tzvi Hersh Weinreb tries to avoid this type of polemic. He is gentle and friendly, eschewing harsh invective. This makes his commentary all the more useful and interesting. He contrasts Reform rhetoric about pluralism with the institutional uniformity and ideological conformity of the actual movement. Professor Wertheimer also alludes to the possibility that the Reform movement may not be as tolerant and broad-minded behind closed doors as it is in its official publications. Both are correct to a certain degree. The Reform movement is an American religious movement and has the institutional organization appropriate for this type of religious group. Orthodoxy is composed of a far more diverse group of groups who have retained a far greater degree of autonomy than anything imaginable in the Reform movement. When the Reform movement talks about autonomy and individuality, it is referring to the right and indeed the obligation of the individual to choose what is religiously meaningful for him or her.

Rabbi Weinreb is correct in his analysis that Orthodoxy is a grassroots up movement whereas reform is a top-down movement. Rabbi Yoffie stresses that the Reform movement is a well-balanced partnership between the professional rabbinic leadership and the lay leaders. This is true, but Orthodoxy has a much more knowledgeable and dedicated membership base beyond the 5 or 10 percent who serve as lay leaders. Here is one place where the two movements differ enormously.

Yet throughout his reading of *American Reform Judaism*, Rabbi Weinreb was continually thinking about how a similar book on Orthodoxy would be constructed. He states that it could not be written in the same manner, organized around several central themes. There is too much diversity in Orthodoxy to allow for such an approach. Orthodoxy doesn't have the same central institutions nor the same set of theological principles. He notes that a book on Orthodoxy would stress the central role of the family. His comment tells us that more research should be done on the Reform Jewish family and the impact that family dynamics have on religious beliefs and behavior. Most of the anecdotal reports that I assembled in the course of writing the book were negative. One father of grown children told me that none of his children had any interest in Judaism. "It's my own fault, really. We never did anything in the home and when I took them to Sunday school, I dropped them off and went to play tennis." But some Reform families do have a rich religious life in the home.

Even more intriguing was Rabbi Weinreb's contrasting of the inner religious sense of obligation felt by the typical Orthodox Jew with the lack of such an internal demand or pressure felt by most Reform Jews. I am sure that many Reform rabbis would disagree with me, but I would tend to agree with his analysis. We spend most of our time trying to analyze the social reality of the day in order to try to adjust our programming to attract congregants' interest. The final product is less our understanding of contemporary Judaism and more our strategy for reaching out to the disaffected and uninterested.

Hanging over his entire analysis is the specter of patrilineal descent. When I was growing up in Waterbury, Connecticut, the Reform Temple Israel was composed mostly of German Jews and their descendents. I only knew one family in which the mother was not born Jewish and she had converted. Today, that Reform congregation no longer exists. Instead, there is a new Reform Temple in a suburb which is composed almost entirely of intermarried couples. The Orthodox do not and will not recognize the children of non-Jewish mothers—or even of non-Jewish born female non-Orthodox converts to Judaism—and therefore do not recognize an increasing percentage of Reform Jews as Jewish. I was glad Rabbi Weinreb included a number of commonalities that exist between Orthodox and Reform, although even here the differences far outweigh the similarities. Our conceptions of bar mitzvah, for example, are so different as to make our mutual commitments to the ceremony almost meaningless.

One comparison that Rabbi Weinreb did not make was the differing emotional attachment to the State of Israel. The 2000–2001 NJPS has a startling statistic—only 22 percent of Reform Jews feel emotionally attached to Israel. Orthodox Jews, on the other hand, remain deeply committed and connected to Eretz Yisroel.

Rabbi Waskow compliments me (I think) for whispering the truth about what Reform Judaism needs.

He emphasizes that the Reform movement must construct both a new theology and a new code of Jewish ethical and ritual action. I understand what Rabbi Waskow is suggesting. There are countless Friday nights when I look out over the small number of passive congregants just sitting there, and I try to come up with something—anything—that could rouse them out of their stupor. Reform Judaism definitely needs more energy, more excitement. The “Reform Revolution” is a response to this need.

I very much wanted a representative of Jewish Renewal on this panel because I felt that they were on the cutting edge of American Jewish spiritual life, and see themselves as non-denominational or post-denominational. Jewish Renewal emerged out of the Havurah movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which attempted to create a living liturgy to speak to the politically idealistic spiritual seeker. I wondered whether the Reform movement was so wrapped up in petty organizational issues that it was missing the spiritual rebirth going on outside of its denominational walls. But after reading his essay, I found his ideas to be thoroughly unrealistic for Reform Jews.

Rabbi Waskow urges the Reform movement to create a new halakha, a new set of directives that would be grounded in God’s call to our generation. He lists a series of values that would form the central core of such a new Reform halakha. I don’t need to point out the obvious—most Reform Jews would resist any attempt to legislate what they can and cannot do. While some will sympathize with many (but probably not all!) of his goals, few would choose to join him. That’s why the Jewish Renewal movement is, while very vibrant, relatively small.

I continue to believe that the Reform movement needs to develop and communicate a clear theology and a straightforward set of ritual expectations. I say this, not because I am a traditionalist, but rather simply because I think that the current muddle is just that no matter how we may dress it up.

It is necessary to reject moribund tradition. We, the keepers of our religious heritage, need the boldness to create new ways of connecting with God. But the solution that Rabbi Waskow suggests is much too radical to have any real chance of success in the Reform movement. Rabbi Waskow was saddened to hear my pessimistic response. “I hope your view that Reform cannot undertake the kind of change I call for is incorrect, since I think without it Reform (and by the same token most of US Jewry) will play no significant role in the crucial actions that not only Jews but the human race need to take to avoid catastrophe.”

The future course of Reform Judaism, as Dr. Grossman states, will have much to say about the fate of Jews in the United States. As the 2000–2001 NJPS shows, there are increasing numbers of Jews who do not identify their religion as Judaism. Only a minority of intermarried families are raising their family as Jewish and many of those individuals raised as Jewish do not practice Judaism once they become adults. Some, however, continue to identify as Jews by ethnicity. Fewer Jews identify as being part of a denomination, but this does not appear to herald the beginning of a thriving non-denominational or post-denominational Judaism. Rather, it seems to indicate a profound alienation from all forms of Jewish religion. On the other hand, the increasing numbers of Christians married to Jews as well as those of mixed Jewish-Christian ancestry who are joining synagogues suggest that religious syncretism may increase.

The diversity of American Jewish life has led to varied responses to our religious and cultural changes. Where we are now tells us a great deal about the future of liberal religion in America.

Dana Evan Kaplan is the rabbi of Temple B’nai Israel in Albany, Georgia and a visiting research scholar at the Sue and Leonard Miller Center for Contemporary Jewish Studies at the University of Miami. In addition to *American Reform Judaism*, his books include *Contemporary Debates in American Reform Judaism: Conflicting Visions* (Routledge, 2001), *Platforms and Prayer Books: Theological and Liturgical Perspectives on Reform Judaism* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), and *The Cambridge Companion to American Judaism* (forthcoming in May 2005). He is currently writing a book on contemporary American Judaism to be published by Columbia University Press.