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A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism: The American Reform Movement's Most Recent Debate

Abstract

The Reform movement of American Judaism has, according to most estimates, become the largest denomination in the American Jewish community. Unlike the situation in Australia where Orthodoxy continues to be the dominant Jewish denomination, in the United States Reform Judaism has become the most influential Jewish religious group in terms of both substance and numbers. As in the past 150 years, the movement continues to evolve, leaving an impact on its religious policies. This included both its stated beliefs as well as its policies on religious practices. While much controversy has resulted from rabbinic decisions on practical policies, such as patrilineal descent and gay marriage, much of the rabbinic leadership was keenly interested in developing theological statements that would reflect their current beliefs. Beginning in 1997, Rabbi Richard Levy, President of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), became interested in producing another platform or statement of principles. During the drafting of the new platform, there was much discussion among members of two main factions of the movement: those who wanted to maintain a more formal form of Jewish practice known as Classical Reform, and the Neo-Reformers who actively sought the addition of traditional ritual into Reform practices. The first drafts of the platform had wording concerning the more traditional aspects of Judaism, generating the controversy that ensued, and while many believe that the traditional aspects were eliminated to a great degree, the final document that was adopted retained many of the traditional aspects first brought into it.

Introduction

The American Reform movement, which has a membership close to 1.5 million members, claims to be the largest liberal denomination in the United States. American Reform Jews are organized into the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC), which has close to 875 congregations. Local Reform synagogues are part of the national structure that includes the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR), the CCAR, and UAHC. The UAHC is a constituent of the World Union for Progressive Judaism (WUPJ), and in fact is the largest constituent organization of the WUPJ. Together, all of these institutions assist in developing and strengthening its Reform constituents around the world; there are Reform and Progressive Jews throughout Europe, Australia, South Africa, South America, and Asia (No author: WUPJ Official Publication). As well as supporting the establishment of new Reform congregations, the WUPJ supports the Israeli movement for Progressive Judaism and Arzenu, the International Federation of Reform and Progressive Religious Zionists. (Meyer, 1988: 348) The WUPJ was founded in London in

1926 as an international organization to promote Reform Judaism—its ideas, practices and organizations—around the world, and is now headquartered in Jerusalem.

The CCAR adopted their new *A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism*, popularly known as the “1999 Pittsburgh Platform,” in May 1999 during its 110th Annual Convention in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Despite the popular perception that a “platform” had been passed, this was not semantically accurate. There was a conscious decision made to call the document a statement of principles rather than a platform because a statement of principles would indicate where the movement stood today, whereas a platform would indicate where the movement was going in the future, and this was something that many of the rabbinic leaders wanted to avoid. Furthermore, there was a perception that platforms were more appropriate to political parties and that a religious group such as the CCAR would be better served by a statement of principles rather than a formal platform. However, for the purposes of this article, the author will use the word “platform” interchangeably with “statement of principles” for the sake of brevity.

In *A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism* were principles that had caused much consternation in the months prior to the passing of it, and the controversy was of interest not only in the American Reform movement, but also in the entire American Jewish community. Noteworthy to this effect was the publication of a front-page article concerning the *A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism* by *The New York Times* on the day immediately following the end of the conference (*The New York Times*, 1999: 1). Other periodicals as well reported on the importance of this document, largely because of the earlier controversy of traditionalism surrounding it, and there were various interpretations of this document put forth by the media because it questioned the meaning of the final vote. From one point of view, it was seen as a victory for the resurgence of traditionalism, but the neo-traditionalists saw it as less than they had expected and more of a compromise with those who had maintained ties to Classical Reform Judaism. The debate brought home the fact that congregants within Reform Judaism are as diverse as its numbers. Regional factors certainly play a role, but the personal religious backgrounds of the congregants are probably a more important factor. In addition, the history of the development of the different congregations also varies with several different topologies of congregations developing, each of which has its own approach to religious belief and practice. The scope of Reform Judaism is a wide continuum and while most Reform Jews practice their Judaism with a certain amount of ritual, many are virtually non-practicing Jews. At the other end of the spectrum are Reform Jews whose religious practice can be considered very traditional.

American Reform Judaism stresses personal autonomy, and because of this, when American society changes, so does Reform Judaism—within the rabbinate and the laity—as a matter of course. Studying Reform Jews and Judaism in the United States provides valuable information about other American Jewish denominations. In addition, it provides the information necessary to make a comparison with non-Orthodox movements in other parts of the world, including Australia. The author will set forth ideas about the current trends in

the Reform movement today, and the roles they played during the diligent efforts put forth on the new *A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism*.

The Recent History of the Modern American Reform Crisis

In 1990 the National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) discovered that even though the Conservative movement had been the leading American Jewish denomination since the 1950s or even earlier, more American Jews than ever before were saying they considered themselves to be Reform (Kosmin, Goldstein, et. al, 1991) and the numbers of Reform Jews were then greater than those of the Conservative movement. The 1990 NJPS report was a very controversial analysis in many ways and much of the analysis depended on how one counted the data. This was true in terms of the determination of 52% intermarriage rate and it was also true in terms of determining how many Jews affiliated with each of the Jewish denominations. A particular problem was whether the demographers should count people's denominational preference, or whether they should count people's denominational membership. By relying on people's religious preference, this increased the numbers of Reform Jews at the expense of the Conservative movement. But many of those who declared themselves to be Reform did not belong to a Reform temple and even among those who did belong, a high percentage of them were almost completely inactive. Nevertheless, the Reform movement fulfilled the needs of many American Jews and was seen as an attractive denominational home for many of those who had weak Hebrew skills, were looking for a non-judgmental environment, had intermarried, were gay or lesbian couples, and had been unaffiliated. Much of Reform Judaism's growth was attributable to its outreach efforts toward unaffiliated American Jews.

The NJPS survey discovered that between 1985 and 1990, 52% of all American Jews had intermarried with people from other religious backgrounds, and these spouses had not converted to Judaism (Kosmin, Goldstein, et. al., 1991). It is believed that the rising rate of intermarriages can be traced directly to the fact that Jews as people and Judaism as a religious concept were now accepted in the general American society. Since Jews no longer had acceptance issues, they had assimilated to a great degree, and this assimilation and acculturation brought with it the incredible intermarriage rate discovered in 1990. As so many Jews are marrying outside of Judaism, the Reform movement for them has become the best option for them and their families to practice Judaism because of its intrinsic autonomy and social equality (Goldscheider, 1997: 31-47).

The Historical Roots

We find this same set of dynamics taking place early in the 19th Century when legal emancipation for the Jews and other minorities was taking place throughout Central and Western European countries. Those early reformers who began their new movement away from traditionalism took on the task of presenting a new kind of Judaism so that the numbers of Jews who were leaving behind their spiritual tradition would have an alternative to the strong aspects of the established traditional Judaism being practiced at that time, as it

had for nearly nineteen centuries (Diner, 1992: 49-56). At that time, many Central European Jews were either converting to Christianity or walking away from religious practice altogether. Legal emancipation allowed them to integrate into the political, economic and social life of their communities and nations, and many were becoming citizens in their country of birth for the first time. Living in European societies that were becoming more volunteeristic, Central European Jews had choices of how they could live and work. They were no longer bound by the long-time ghettoization that had become endemic in their societies prior to the Emancipation. The early reformers had the task of finding a way for those liberated Jews to maintain a semblance of a Jewish religious identity in the midst of this chaos of freedom on the eve of the worldwide Industrial Revolution. To many, their Jewish identities represented an encumbrance to their lives. Conversion to Christianity, albeit in many cases nominal, could enable them to move into professions hitherto closed to them, and would enable their children and grandchildren to have better lives living in a social status that would have been closed to them as Jews.

These Jews were living in a time of real renaissance and in an atmosphere of volunteerism many chose to move away from their Jewish particularism. Israeli sociologist Charles Liebman has defined volunteerism within the framework of Judaism as the devaluation or complete absence of the concept of *Mitzvah*, the religious concept of the divine commandments as established by God in the Torah. Liebman says:

The individual is urged, encouraged, cajoled into performing certain acts of a ceremonial nature and is constantly reassured that what one does is legitimate if that is what one chooses to do. Personal choice is endowed with spiritual sanctity and is in all cases (contrary to past tradition) considered more virtuous than performing an act out of one's sense of obedience to God. (Liebman, 1999: 311)

Today, American Reform leaders have found that in using the concept of volunteerism, it is the only way in which they can encourage the Reform laity to observe at least some of the ritual observances in their daily lives. And they believe that if they are to preserve a Jewish concept at all in the liberal Jewish theological movements, observance of some kind must take place. It is essential to place importance on ritual observance if non-Orthodox Jews are to preserve their rich Jewish inheritance of 4,000 years in a meaningful sense that can be passed down from generation to generation.

Coming forward to the present day, one must understand the importance of Reform Judaism not only in the context of the world Jewish community itself, but also as its place within contemporary societies. Since the early days of the Reform movement, we have discovered that liberal Judaism thrives in societies that are essentially open and accepting of not only Jews but of all its variety of people and social norms, and where Jews have full participation in their respective societies. But in those countries where Jews are segregated from other people, liberal Judaism does not flourish as well.

The Adaptationist American Jew

Although there are pockets of Orthodox Jews who have chosen to limit their acceptance of the norms of general American society, the majority of American Jews have to changing American mores and conditions of their society. Reform Judaism is primarily the denomination that is most able to adapt to changing conditions since its basic premise is that of adjustment and freedom to change with the times. Because of this, liberal, acculturated and assimilated American Jewry looks to it as the denomination that has the most to offer in terms of religious practice. In Reform Judaism it is the congregant who makes the religious decisions for his or her own life. Individual congregants decide how much ritual they will use in their daily lives, and they decide which of the *Mitzvot*, if any, they will perform or by which they will abide. But for many centuries, Jews accepted the dictate that they must perform as many of the commandments as possible all of the time.

The Ten Commandments are the foremost and best-known commandments given to Moses on Mount Sinai, but there are an additional 603 commandments (although not any one person can abide by all of them because of their specific limitations), and they are either positive (activities you should do) or negative (activities you should not do). Under the foundation for human social behavior, all Jews—and for that matter all people—accede to many of the 613 commandments laid down within the framework of the Mosaic Law. In our modern society most people, whether they are Jewish or not and whether they are aware of it or not, perform many of these commandments in the course of their daily lives. Accepting and loving only one God in one's life, honoring one's parents and the elderly, offering hospitality to guests in one's home and giving charity to the poor, marrying and raising families, visiting the sick and comforting the bereaved, maintaining fair practices in business dealings with others, judging others fairly, returning stolen goods, and treating others as one would accord to oneself are all examples of positive commandments. When one chooses not to murder another person, not to make false testimony against another person, not to steal from another, not to take God's name in vain, not to commit adultery or incest, not to use harsh words with another person or shame another, one is acting under some of the negative (prohibitive) commandments. Thus, although Reform Jews may choose not to comply with the bulk of the 613 commandments as valid in their personal lives and in the choices they make, they are essentially living their lives in accordance with a great many of those commandments. The basis for this decision on their part is that the early Reform thinkers differentiated between ethical and ritual commandments. Ethical commandments were considered divinely given and remained obligatory for eternity. Ritual commandments, such as the keeping of kosher, were not regarded as divinely given but rather were seen as practices that were appropriate for a certain time and place. Since the social and religious context had changed so much, those practices were seen as no longer binding. And so while the differences between Reform Jews and the Orthodoxy may be vast in practice and tradition, within Reform Judaism there has always been a certain amount of observance of the *Mitzvot*, although this varies from person to person.

Classical Reform Judaism

In the 1870s Classical Reform Judaism was developed to provide structure to Sabbath services and its main features were the minimizing of ritual with special emphasis on universalism (Sorin, 1997: 21-33). It was the dominant form of Reform Judaism in the United States until the 1930s, and its leaders hoped early on that it would become the general expression of American Judaism. However, beginning in 1881 there was a vast Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe to the United States, and many of these immigrants, even those who were not observant, disliked the Reform synagogue; they believed its modern atmosphere and practices were not authentic within the historical Jewish tradition.

The 1885 Pittsburgh Platform embodied the basic tenets of the Classical Reform period and the following quote from the Platform demonstrates this:

We hold that all such mosaic and rabbinical laws as regulate diet, priestly purity and dress originated in ages and under the influence of ideas altogether foreign to our present mental and spiritual state. They fail to impress the modern Jew with a spirit of priestly holiness; their observance in our days is apt rather to obstruct than to further modern spiritual elevation (Jacob, 1985: 105).

Because of the distaste for American Reform Judaism by the Eastern European immigrants, the movement remained a small denomination during the period covering the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, and members of American Reform congregations were mostly American born Jews of Central European backgrounds, many of whom had become quite affluent. Rabbis in the Reform synagogues were preaching their universalistic messages, and continued to minimize traditional practices.

Beginning in the 1930s, however, some of the Reform leaders began to sense a call for a return to some traditional aspects of Judaism. When the Nazi Party in Germany came to power in 1933, it became difficult for Jews worldwide to believe that Jew and Gentile could go on working together for a better world in universal brotherhood. It became apparent throughout the mid-1930s that the world Jewish community would need its own homeland, and although Zionism had been discussed in the decades prior to this time, discussions about it grew in importance within the Reform movement and the movement's original negative stance toward political Zionism changed in the 1930s to neutrality, leaning in the direction of support. Reform leaders realized that a homeland would be needed for the millions of Jews who faced persecution and possible violence, even though at that time they had no idea of the enormity of the tragedy that would encompass European Jewry during the Holocaust in the years from 1933 to 1945. Reform leaders saw the importance of building a homeland not only because of the events taking place in Europe but because many Eastern European Jews had come into the movement, and many of them identified themselves strongly with world Jewry in very ethnic terms. Increasing numbers of Reform rabbis now working within the movement had come from Eastern European backgrounds as well, and throughout the movement, Judaism was being presented as a form of Ethical Monotheism, which was a

hallmark of Classical Reform. Ethical Monotheism stressed that the belief in one God should lead to high ethical behavior. It was very much attached to the idea of a prophetic Judaism that should and would motivate Jews to fight for the rights of oppressed peoples. At the same time the Reform movement began stressing that the American Jewish community had a responsibility to help the European Jews under fire from the forces of Hitler's Third Reich. This is when the pendulum of Classical Reform Judaism swung away from its universalistic approach and moved toward the middle in its outlook (Meyer, 1988: 296-334).

Reform Judaism Today in the Individualistic American Society

Although there are many challenges the Reform movement must address in the coming years, there is one central question that must be asked: Can liberal Judaism thrive in an individualistic society? Because of the basic nature of the liberal American society, volunteeristic options abound, and most Reform congregations find themselves in a situation where *Shabbat* services are attended by small numbers of its congregants on any given Friday night. Worse, the vast majority of the membership ignores educational programs produced in many Reform synagogues. The small numbers are accepted as the norm in most congregations, and it is seen as concrete evidence that Reform Jews do not consider synagogue attendance as obligatory in any way. This is true as well in some American Orthodox congregation as well, but American Jewry cannot continue to construe this behavior as normative religious behavior and still be able to perpetuate Jewish a vibrant Jewish communal life. While on the surface it may seem that with the autonomous features of the Reform movement, congregants have the right to forego *Shabbat* services—and they do as an inherent right as Reform Jews—but in the end, the spiritual health of the congregation will suffer.

Simultaneously with the issue of fewer numbers of congregants involved in congregational life is the perceived impression that the status and influence of the Reform rabbinate is lower than it was during the preceding decades. While the theological focus of the movement has ebbed, the therapeutic benefits of one's congregational membership have grown. While the Reform movement has seen its membership numbers growing, it has made a lateral move from that of a theological house to a social service agency for its congregants. Since the focus of the Reform synagogue is no longer primarily theological, it is at risk of losing its membership whenever social trends change, and even though within certain areas of the Reform movement there is much religious energy at work, apathy among many congregants continues not only to tear down the health of most Reform synagogues, it also leads to alienation and disaffiliation among those whose interest in Judaism has moved into a more pragmatic phase, that of a Jewish civil religion.

Most American Reform Jews today grew up in the 1950s through the 1970s, and a Jewish civil religion more appropriately fits their needs. American sociologists such as Robert Bellah and Jonathan Woosner have written about civil religion in American society (Bellah, et. al., 1996) (Woosner, 1986: 63-103). Jonathan Woosner applied the concept of

civil religion to American Judaism, and wrote that American civil Judaism affirms seven major tenets in Judaism: (1) The unity of the Jewish people, (2) Jewish mutual responsibility, (3) The importance of Jewish survival in a threatening world, (4) The centrality of the State of Israel, (5) The enduring value of Jewish tradition, (6) The importance of charity and social justice, and (7) The importance of American-ness (Woocher, 1986: 63-103). But even an American civil religion cannot be sustained in the face of apathy, and as American society changes, so has it (Woocher, 1999: 21). An American Jewish civil religion cannot be used as the sole basis for Jewish identity because of its inherent distance from Jewish tradition, and it is difficult to pass on such an identity to the next generation and the next one after that (Susser and Liebman, 1999: 61-89). Many younger Reform Jews are not compelled to attach themselves to the ideas of the civil religion. Indeed, why should they? Even though many young Jews have come from families of mixed loyalties, traditional and non-traditional, these traditions have been left behind in the ensuing decades, and they now have less commitment to continue with their families' historical connections.

Replacing this historical loyalty is a new "spirituality"—rather than a religiosity—and many American Jews today pursue this for the existential meaning they find in it (Roof, 1994). Many believe that their synagogues have not adequately nurtured their spiritual lives, that their leaders have hoped instead that religious commitment to one's historical faith would be sufficient. As a consequence, many American Jews are "bored" with their *Shabbat* services and flatly uninterested in becoming involved in other synagogue activities (Goldberg, 1995: 136-141). Other Reform Jews, however, are hoping their synagogues will assist them in rediscovering the Jewish ethnic identity they seek, and the Reform movement is trying to fill the void of both of these types of congregants. Nevertheless there seems to be more of a focus on meeting the needs of the spiritual seeker, rather than the ethnic identifier. And there is a perception that there has been a void in providing spiritually satisfying religious messages and experiences that could fulfill the searcher of religious truth. To fill this void, the UAHC is providing workshops such as those presented recently at the UAHC Biennial Conference held in December 1999 at Orlando, Florida. The workshops most heavily attended were those with the following titles: "God and Theology", "Reform Worship in the 21st Century", and "Can We Pray What We Don't Believe?" An especially interesting topic was "Torah and Observance in the 'Principles of Reform Judaism'," which covered the *A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism*, the subject of so much recent debate throughout the movement. Issues of spirituality and spiritual search were the key focuses among those who attended this UAHC conference (Cohen, 1999: 14).

The Demographic Crisis in the American Jewish Community Today

There have been several writers, academic and popular, who in recent years have been discussing a serious decline in the American Jewish community in their writings. They have portrayed the crisis in American Jewry in terms of Jews vanishing from the synagogues, never to return, and in terms of self-destruction (Dershowitz, 1997), (Abrams, 1997), (Goldberg,

1995), (Susser and Liebman, 1999). And in 1991 Rabbi Irving 'Yitz' Greenberg, a modern Orthodox rabbi, who for many years has spoken out on issues within American Judaism, wrote a very strong article for *The Jerusalem Report* shortly after the publication of the results of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey. He titled his article: "For Whom the Shofar Blows" (Greenberg, 1991: 60). Writing about the rapidly growing crisis developing in American Jewish life, he quoted from Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*, in which Rambam wrote that the sound of the *shofar* should serve as a wake-up call to tell people: "Sleepers, arouse yourself from your slumber." Among his many criticisms for all American Jewish denominations, Greenberg wrote:

Another group that should be having sleepless nights is American Reform. The good news for Reform is that the study shows that it's taken over as the Number One denominational choice of American Jews, especially among young, fourth generation American Jews. The bad news is the reasons for the upsurge. Poorly educated children of Conservative Jews find even the limited Hebrew in that denomination's liturgy too much for them, so they switch to a service entirely in English, or with only nominal Hebrew. Many respondents define themselves as belonging to a denomination based on their image of it without acting on their definition. So many call themselves Reform without joining a Reform temple, or following any Jewish practice. Reform's "success" bodes ill for the next generation (Greenberg, 1991: 60).

These sentiments were discussed over and over throughout the 1990s. The 1990 NJPS—whether its analysis was entirely accurate or not—had precipitated a debate over the future of American Judaism. Although the Reform movement was not the only segment of the community to be criticized and to criticize itself, as an important segment of the overall community, it shared in the general chest-pounding. Furthermore, the perception that the Reform movement was the most "cutting edge" of the major denominations increased the importance of analyzing general trends in the context of its impact on the Reform movement. The perception developed that the gap between those who were committed and those who were not was widening and the Jewish community risked breaking into two, a relatively small group of highly committed Jews of various approaches and a much larger group of people of Jewish background with no Judaic loyalty or interest. Rabbi Eric Yoffie, the President of the UAHC, spoke very bluntly on this issue at the UAHC biennial in Dallas in October 1997:

Never in our history has the gap between the serious and non-serious Reform Jew been so great. Alongside those who take seriously the reality of God and God's imminence in Torah are those for whom the vision of the sacred has all but died in their souls. They are the majority, even in our synagogues (Yoffie, 1998: 18).

Speaking to a few thousand lay leaders of the Reform movement, Yoffie stressed the fact that he believed that this was a critical period in American Jewish history and that now is the time

to decide if the Reform Judaic heritage will be allowed to wither, or if Reform Jews will nurture it so that it can be passed on to the next generation of young Jews. He emphatically declared that the Reform movement has only a decade to “respond to the spiritual emergency that threatens to engulf us” (Yoffie, 1998: 18).

That the leader of the Reform movement, the denomination that had just achieved the status of being the largest in America, would admit to a crisis “that threatens to engulf us” is indeed an astonishing and frank admission. It lends credence to the fears of demographic dangers that face the American Jewish community. Yoffie has stated that he hopes Reform leaders will be able to persuade the people in their congregations to seriously study their Judaism. Toward this end he has initiated a Jewish literacy campaign. Yoffie acknowledges that he fears that if the laity does not involve themselves in serious Jewish study, Judaism in this country will continue to decline. He believes that the lack of Jewish knowledge is the key to the apathy and present-day decline because in past centuries serious study of the religious texts had always been the key to religious dedication. Yoffie has, however, stressed that in his view, concrete change in study and practice must precede the development of a new theoretical outline of Reform Jewish theology. He therefore was not entirely in support of putting a great deal of energy into the writing and passing of a statement of principles. Rather, he argued that the bulk of the movement’s energy should be devoted to developing concrete programs that could encourage Reform Jews to study more and practice specific rituals with greater intensity and frequency. Nevertheless, the CCAR leadership moved forward with their plans to develop and vote on a new statement of religious principles.

The Process of Developing *A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism*

A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism was developed in an extensive process over an 18-month period and culminated in a vote that occurred at Rodef Shalom Congregation in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania at 11:30 a.m. on May 26, 1999, when the CCAR met for their annual conference. With a vote of 324-68, with nine abstentions, in favor of the adoption of the new document, *A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism* was accepted. This ballot process was the culmination of more than a year of passionate and sometimes rancorous debate among members of the CCAR, as well as the Reform laity. The process began early in 1998 when CCAR President Rabbi Richard N. Levy proposed an initial draft of the statement of principles which advocated that Reform Jews consider the possibility of beginning traditional ritual practices, with the end of possibly adopting those ritual practices into their daily lives. Of course, when the draft was published, it caused a firestorm in community after community because many American Reform Jews had never been involved in these traditional ritual practices in the context of their Reform belief system. They were accustomed to viewing Reform Judaism as a religious system that stressed the ethical commandments. Levy’s language and interest in promoting ritual observance was alien to everything that they had perceived as being normative Reform practice. While many had already begun moving in Levy’s direction and found his statement to be both refreshing and encouraging, others saw it as deeply disturbing.

A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism is the fourth statement of beliefs to be passed by the American Reform rabbinate in its 150-year history. Ironically, the first platform was adopted in Pittsburgh in 1885 at the same congregation that hosted the 1999 Conference. Written by Kaufmann Kohler, it, too, was considered to be a response to the religious apathy of his times. The 1937 Columbus Platform, drafted primarily by Samuel Cohon as an attempt to encourage religious standards, was the second Reform statement of beliefs. The third declaration of Reform beliefs was presented in 1976 as the San Francisco Centenary Perspective, as a response to the self-doubt so apparent in the 1970s.

The controversy over the writing of *A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism* raged throughout the American Reform movement and the proposed document went through six drafts. As different drafts were written, much of the wording relating to specific ritual acts was deleted in order to mollify the 20-25% of the movement's members who still considered themselves Classical Reform Jews. Suggestions that Reform Jews might consider honoring kosher dietary laws, using the *Mikveh* and wearing *tefillin* was appalling to some Reform Jews. Such ideas were seen as attacks on one's autonomous lifestyle and one's nominal religious life.

In the Winter 1998 edition of *Reform Judaism*, the official magazine published by the Reform movement, the third draft the "Ten Principles for Reform Judaism," [early name for *A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism*] was published (Levy, 1998). On the cover of the magazine was a photograph of Richard Levy wearing his *tallit* and *yarmulke*. People's reactions to the magazine's cover, whether positive or negative, were highly charged (Bauer, 1999: 4). Many people praised the tenor of the proposed platform, while others were distressed at the proposed abrogation of positions long held by the Reform movement, and *Reform Judaism* received and published letters attacking Rabbi Levy personally. Thus was the beginning of the raging debate over the new directions the Reform movement should take. Because there was such intensity and depth in the response to this draft, Levy and other CCAR and UAHC leaders wrote a fourth draft, and this was discussed at length at the December 1998 UAHC Board meeting. For the most part this draft was accepted by most of the UAHC Board, although some of the issues were still objectionable to some of its members. Soon, however, the matter righted itself. In the words of Judge D. Davidson, a member of the UAHC Board, we see a general consensus: "The issue generated a lot of apprehension, some heat, and even some dismay, but after hearing Rabbi Richard Levy's very personal and very open presentation yesterday, the apprehension is largely dissipated and most of the heat is gone" (Davidson, 1999: 17). Shortly before the 1999 Pittsburgh Conference in May, an announcement was made that no vote would be taken at the Conference, but the Executive Committee of the CCAR reversed this decision, and a new announcement was sent to all Reform rabbis, saying that the latest platform draft would be put to a ballot during the May Conference. The leaders of the CCAR were unified in their support of Richard Levy and his new platform. They urged that it be adopted to show that the Reform movement was moving forward with a platform that would serve as an incentive for further examination and dialogue. There were those who thought these were weak

arguments for the adoption of a platform, but at the Conference itself there were few in attendance who had serious misgivings about it. Much of this was due to the momentum that had been created and the expectation that the culmination of such a long process required the passing of some sort of a final document. Dissenting voices such as those of Rabbi Lance Sussman of Temple Concord of Binghamton, New York, were essentially ignored.

Setting Limits and Stretching Boundaries

Setting limits and stretching boundaries seems like a dichotomy of ideas, but that is exactly what the Reform movement is attempting to do at one and the same time. It is trying to establish what kind of religious identity boundaries it should incorporate, without compromising another strong hallmark of Reform Judaism: inclusivity. Inclusivity has become the buzzword in the Reform movement. Almost every Reform congregation stresses its commitment to this concept. The feeling is widespread that for congregations to thrive in the new century, it is essential that they be open to all, including intermarrieds, gays and lesbians, Jews by choice, the unaffiliated, and so forth. Being inclusive implies accepting all while remaining non-judgmental. While it may seem obvious to many Australian readers that any religious tradition must be by definition judgmental, American Jews have so merged American liberal values into their Jewish identity, many would not accept this viewpoint. Sylvia Barack Fishman has argued that a process of “coalescence” has occurred, in which the ethnic identity construction of American Jews has become increasingly fluid. As a consequence, American Jews are no longer aware of the former dissonance between Judaic values and American liberal expectations (Fishman: 2000).

For intermarried couples and their children, the Reform movement is the foremost choice for worship and other activities because it is the only large non-Halachic American Jewish denomination that can accept such families as they are. *Halacha* is defined as Jewish law, and under Jewish law in the traditional sense, intermarried families would have to become Jewish and follow the dictates of *Halacha*, and many of them would not choose to accept this way of life. However, there has not been a standardized Reform response to the results of the 1990 NJPS, where, as was stated in the beginning of this article, it was found that 52% of all American Jews from 1985-1990 had intermarried non-Jews who had not converted. Several decades ago the Reform rabbinate and laity had generally accepted the principle of patrilineal descent, which means that children of a Jewish father can be considered Jewish. Under *Halacha*, only children born of a Jewish mother can be considered Jewish. So strong was the idea of patrilineal descent in the Reform movement, it adopted in 1983 its resolution known as *The Status of Children of Mixed Marriages*, also known as the patrilineal descent resolution (CCAR: 1983). This CCAR resolution provided the basis for incorporation of intermarried couples into the Reform Jewish community, since its wording stressed that if one parent were Jewish, the child is “under presumption of Jewish descent” (CCAR: 1983). Liberal and conservative Reform Jews have found this resolution satisfactory, since it has expanded the boundaries of who can be considered Jewish in an

intermarried situation. The added wording that requires the children of intermarried parents to be raised as Jews is a new concept, adopted for the purposes of this resolution, but it firms up the parameters under which such a child can be considered Jewish, even though this requirement is not found in *Halacha*. Under *Halacha* a Jewish child does not have to be raised as Jewish, but under the Reform resolution, this is an essential component of the child's status. The resolution brought equality to the status of both the father and mother regardless of who is Jewish. Since it was adopted, the resolution has generally been well received as a necessary and predictable move for effective outreach (Yoffie, 2000).

A high percentage of younger couples in most Reform synagogues are intermarried now, and many of the non-Jewish spouses have not converted to Judaism. The complete dynamics of having such couples actively or inactively participating in the synagogue have yet to be revealed, but in many congregations these couples are exceptionally active. This has become a positive trend in Reform synagogues across the country, but it has brought questions and concerns with it. Because of these concerns, the Reform movement has tried to guide congregations that might be struggling with issues relating to the integration of substantial numbers of non-Jews into their congregations. In 1990 the UAHC published a guide for Reform synagogues entitled, *Defining the Role of the Non-Jew in The Synagogue: A Resource for Congregations* (UAHC, 1990) in its effort to apprise congregations of some of the implications of this new trend. In the early years of this development, most intermarried couples who joined the synagogues were involved in Judaism as a religious practice. In recent years, however, this has changed to some degree, since many non-Jewish spouses have decided not to convert to Judaism, and the congregation is left with questions on how to deal with issues of ritual practice in the synagogue. Although different schools of thought have become apparent during this time, the important principles of inclusivity and autonomy has allowed each congregation to decide its own policy concerning what ritual practices can be performed by unconverted gentiles, while other questions have arisen. Can they be full congregants in their own right, or do they have to be part of the membership unit with their spouse and children? Can they participate in a *Shabbat* service, and if so, how much can they participate? Can they sit on the board of directors? Can they teach in the synagogue?

Conclusion

The American Jewish community has become splintered into two main religious factions, orthodox and non-orthodox. In the midst of this the Reform movement continues to forge ahead in its quest to provide Judaic teachings that will not only nurture the souls of its laity, but also provide structure within a formidable individualistic society, so that a viable religious alternative can be preserved for generations to come in our continuously changing world.

The differences between the Reform and Orthodox movements are deep and wide, particularly in social matters, such as whether private school vouchers are legitimate, whether abortions can be performed and under what conditions, the role of women in religious

practice, the issues surrounding gay and lesbian marriages under Jewish law, and the issue of capital punishment (Soloveitchik, 1999: 320-376). In the Orthodox world social issues such as these are argued and decided within the framework of the commandments of Torah. But the Reform Jewish community commonly uses autonomy as its final arbiter in any discussion of social matters, and popular words in use that substantiate this difference are pluralism, egalitarianism, feminism, and inclusiveness (Umansky, 1995: 267-283).

There is a demographic crisis in the American Reform community and its rabbinical leadership is well aware of it. To begin reversing this, the lay community of UAHC has placed much emphasis on its twofold strategy of extending outreach to the unaffiliated Jews in our communities and those people not accepted in the past, while striving to reinforce the commitment of Reform Jews to the practice of Jewish religious ritual as a means of building and sustaining religious commitment.

American cultural norms continue to influence American Jews and this contributes to the ongoing acculturation and assimilation that has contributed so heavily to the paralyzing apathy among American Jews (Heilman, 1995). With the adoption of *A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism*, the Reform movement under strong leadership has shown that it is determined to continue to search for solutions for the widespread apathy, even through the honest investigation into more traditional practices. From an ideological point of view it remains religiously important to study and practice Judaic tradition. To continue with the Classical Reform tradition is not a genuine expression of Judaism for today's Reform Jews nor is it spiritually fulfilling for those who need more substance in their lives if their lives are to have authentic meaning.

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