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Proposed New Principles Can Stimulate a Beneficial Debate about Reform Judaism

The Reform movement's Central Conference of American Rabbis recently decided to refer to a task force the changes in the Reform movement's basic principles proposed by CCAR president Rabbi Richard Levy, instead of voting on them at the CCAR's conference in May.

This decision follows the circulation of at least four drafts of Levy's proposals. Those proposals sparked much controversy and comment within the movement, including an article by Jay R. Brickman, rabbi emeritus of Congregation Sinai, in the Dec. 25 Chronicle.

Levy had argued that the May convention would have been an appropriate time to chart a new course for the Reform movement for the 21st century, just as the Pittsburgh conference of 1885 to a large degree defined what Reform Judaism was for the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries.

Levy contended that the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform continues to exert a strong influence over how Reform Jews view their religion, and that changing this approach could be beneficial.

The Pittsburgh Platform had stated that all mitzvot dealing with diet, dress and priestly purity are altogether foreign to the present spiritual state of American Jews.

Levy contended that the same spirit still leads many Reform Jews to feel that contemporary attitudes should determine the nature of American Reform religious life.

Levy, in contrast, would like to see people at least feel that they can embrace a great deal more of Jewish tradition if they can find spiritual meaning in traditional Jewish ritual practices.

Can Learn from Christianity

Brickman wrote that the Reform movement should not adopt Levy's proposals, which favor more traditional practices and principles.

As I understand him, Brickman is only seeking to ensure that there will remain a place in the Reform movement for Jews who feel more comfortable with classical Reform Judaism.

Brickman wrote that he understands that Levy will reformulate his principles so that more traditional practices will be encouraged as options and will be considered within the spectrum of Reform practice.

“I have no objection to such a formulation provided it is not slanted in such a way as to suggest that those who are more traditional in their beliefs and practices are better Jews,” he wrote.

Today, many Reform congregations are moving toward the greater use of Hebrew, the re-embracing of certain traditions in the synagogue service, the reconsideration of practices related to dietary laws, the wearing of skull-caps, and so forth.

Brickman wants to ensure that those with pure classical Reform principles and practices will not feel ostracized and no longer part of a Reform movement exhibiting these trends. He is right to desire this.

But Brickman also wrote that one of the reasons Protestantism thrives in our country is that it offers a variety of options. This may be partially true.

However, demographers have pointed to a dramatic and consistent decline in the mainline Protestant churches over an extended period. Most of the recent growth of American Christianity has been in the non-denominational churches which have successfully blended a fundamentalist theology with a contemporary liturgical presentation.

We Jews need to study what works – and what doesn't work – for Christianity and see how it can be applied in a Jewish religious context.

There are many differences between Judaism and Christianity theologically and between Jews and Christians sociologically.

But there are many potentially important lessons – ranging from what works architecturally to how to include small children without disturbing the adults – which can and should be studied and applied.

More Tradition, Not Less

If we seek to counter the destructive forces of assimilation, we need an intense and committed form of religion. In a contemporary Jewish context, in my opinion, that would mean more tradition, not less.

It would mean encouraging Jews to reconsider their particularistic identity as Jews alongside their universalistic ethical principles. It would mean encouraging the nurturing of spirituality through increased concern with prayer in all its dimensions.

And it would commit Reform Jews to studying and learning about their religion in a manner consistent with the importance of Judaism for a fully committed Jew.

With American society changing so quickly, Reform congregation cannot afford to maintain the exact same perspective and programming for 50 and 60 years without serious periodic reviews to discern whether they are appearing to become less and less relevant to people's daily concerns.

I believe Levy's proposals are good for the Reform movement. Not because they should be accepted as they stand in any of the first four drafts or at all.

Rather because they have started a debate over the nature of Reform Judaism which may help each of us look at our beloved religion in a new way. This can be very beneficial to Reform Judaism and American Judaism as a whole.