

The Theological Roots of Reform Judaism's Woes

Opinion

By Dana Evan Kaplan

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For a brief moment, no longer than a decade, we Reform Jews have enjoyed repeating that we had become the largest American Jewish denomination. We reveled in the bad news emerging from the Conservative movement, as the children of many longtime members of Conservative synagogues joined Reform congregations, frequently after intermarrying. But today our triumphalism is gone.

As [the Forward reported last week](#), all of the non-Orthodox movements are in a desperate battle to reorganize to meet the challenges of a harsher environment. A group of prominent Reform rabbis is challenging our movement's congregational umbrella body, the Union for Reform Judaism. Their move comes against a backdrop of uncertainty over the movement's future, amid a widespread sense that our own numbers have begun to decline.

The problems facing the non-Orthodox movements, however, go far beyond organizational structure. While the organizational malaise is real and certainly serious, the root of the problem facing liberal Judaism is theological.

The current state of the Reform movement illustrates the problems facing liberal Judaism more broadly. The pluralistic theologies of Reform Judaism make it difficult to reach consensus on what we Reform Jews believe on any given issue. The liberal approach to observance makes it impossible to set and maintain high expectations in terms of communal participation. Without an omnipotent God who can compel believers to practice a prescribed pattern of behavior, religious consumerism becomes the movement's dominant ethos. As members focus on what they want rather than what they can contribute, it becomes increasingly difficult to build committed religious communities.

While Classical Reform Judaism emphasized the clear theological formulations of ethical monotheism and the mission of Israel, the neo-Reform approach, which became dominant beginning with the Columbus Platform of 1937, allowed for a greater degree of religious pluralism. This was a good thing in that it permitted divergent religious subgroups to practice Jewish ceremony in the manner that they found most meaningful. But it also weakened the central theological core that had constituted the essence of Reform Judaism.

By 1975, there was so much theological disagreement that the committee responsible for putting together the movement's official prayer book, "Gates of Prayer," had to create 10 different Friday night services, eight of which reflected alternative and sometimes contradictory theological perspectives. For example, while Service 1 spoke of the all-powerful God who reigns in the heavens above, Service 2 described the Divine presence as the still, small voice of conscience within each human being. What we believe has an impact on how we behave in religious communities. The sociologist Rodney Stark has popularized the thesis that religious groups need a strict theology in order to make serious demands on their adherents and that these demands, in turn, make a religion more compelling.

Since a liberal theology leads to an emphasis on the autonomy of the individual, personal choice is inevitably promoted at the expense of the authority of God. In the absence of a strong theological basis for making religious demands, the members lose interest and wander off. This is what has happened in American Reform Judaism and in other non-Orthodox movements as well.

One might think that most people would prefer a congregation that allows each member to find his or her own comfort level rather than one that requires all sorts of obligations, theological as well as ritualistic. That is not necessarily true.

Yes, many potential members are deterred by high upfront demands. But for those who join, the commitment is much greater. Since most of the members in a demanding congregation are deeply committed and religiously active, the collective religious experience is much more fulfilling.

As the Reform movement has increasingly emphasized religious autonomy and the importance of choosing what each person finds spiritually meaningful, it has become impossible to compel members to come to services regularly, study Torah seriously and contribute to the vibrant well-being of their congregation. Instead, they are allowed to come twice a year and call on the rabbi whenever they need a life cycle ceremony.

There is a devil's bargain being made between an often self-satisfied leadership and a mostly apathetic laity. Many Reform synagogues have large numbers on the books but few active participants. This unhealthy situation cannot continue indefinitely. We are now seeing the consequences of the benign neglect that has been plaguing Reform Judaism for many years.

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