

BOOK REVIEWS

Forman leaves us with an ultimate charge to spur us onward in the adventure to “pursue Judaism in a ‘Big Way,’ that the Torah, our ‘way of life,’ will guide you, as it is written:

The Torah is a tree of life to those who cling to it,
And, whoever holds to it is happy.
Its Ways are Ways of pleasantness,
And all its paths are peace.

Proverbs 3:17–18” (p. 296).

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Contemporary Debates in American Reform Judaism: Conflicting Visions, edited by Dana Evan Kaplan (New York: Routledge Press, 2001) 274 pp.

In his engaging new anthology, Dana Kaplan proposes to take a “hard look at the Reform movement today in the United States of America.” Kaplan’s contributors do precisely that. Kaplan divides the essays into five topic sections, *Where We Are Today*, *Legitimacy and Authenticity*, *Personal Status*, *Gender*, and *Visions for the Future*. And while the quality of the essays vary, the overall result is nonetheless well worth the reader’s effort.

Kaplan chooses his contributors well, including numerous illustrious contemporary thinkers, both from inside and outside the Reform movement. The collection also benefits from essays by less familiar but capable academics who offer fresh perspectives, as well as from Reform rabbis and laypeople who thoughtfully report the view from the ground. The list also contains some surprises. This writer, for example, was unaware that Jacob Neusner grew up in a Reform congregation!

The starting point for the book is sociological. The opening essay, by Bernard Lazerwitz and Ephraim Tabory, is both painful and helpful. It offers extensive analysis of Reform Jewish behavior patterns in comparison to other religious Jews, providing a valuable descriptive framework for evaluating the various prescriptive proposals that come in the following pages.

The most piquant section of the book is no doubt the one assessing the legacy of Classical Reform, especially the essays by Jacob Neusner and Arnold Jacob Wolf. Neusner offers a spirited defense

of the Classic Reform vision, which he finds more coherent and compelling than the current neo-traditionalism. Many have heard and some have been offended by Wolf's critical assessment of our Reform forbearers, but his argument is worth seeing in print. Unsettling as it is, his observation that even engaged Reform Jews no longer bother to read Kohler, Hirsch, and Morganstern is demonstrably true. Their writings do not even feature significantly in the curriculum at HUC, the institution they shaped and fostered. Sadly, Neusner's article is marred by the presence of yet another patented Neusnerian screed against a fellow academic, in this case Susanna Heschel. Whatever the merits of his issue with Heschel's new book, the tone of his criticism is over the top.

The proposals offered in the concluding *Visions for the Future* section are also valuable. However, suggestions for the future of Reform are peppered throughout the volume. As befits a book with both "debates" and "conflicting" in the title, the prescriptions are frequently at odds. Nowhere is that more evident than in the side-by-side essays by two former presidents of HUC, Alfred Gottschalk and Sheldon Zimmerman. Yet in a stereotypically Reform reaction, this reader finds the differing visions, both here and in the earlier pages, to be invigorating.

This volume contains many other compelling articles. As a rabbi in a new western shul, I found Joel Levine's article, "Why People in the Sunbelt Join a Synagogue," to be invaluable. In an article written before his death, Alexander Schindler, z"l, repeats his case for a more missionary attitude within Reform toward the "unchurched." Even three decades after he first proposed it, the argument has lost none of its power.

A few essays lose their way. For instance, the message of Lewis Friedland's essay, "Reform Judaism and Modern American Community" remains unclear to this reader. The piece seems so closely bound to Arnold Eisen's *Taking Hold of Torah* that it may be necessary to read Arnold's book to fully appreciate what Friedland is trying to say. Jay Brickman, in his "Full Churches, Empty Synagogues," comes to the defense of Classical Reform worship. Yet paradoxically, he devotes extensive space to critiquing contemporary rabbinical sermons, even though sermons remain the one rubric of Classical Reform worship to which virtually all neo-traditionalists still cling. He then goes on to advise that Reform look to contemporary Protestant worship for new models, apparently overlooking the fact that the most successful contemporary Christian churches are the

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very ones that include such things as the "strange and unsettling" movement in prayer he finds so objectionable in contemporary Jewish worship.

The most problematic piece in the collection is Hinda Seif's "Where Kosher Means Organic and Union Label," an essay about bi-sexual Jewish women in the Bay Area. Aside from a vague tie-in offered in the introductory paragraph, Reform Judaism is never mentioned again in the article. Since the article fails to make any case whatsoever as to why the Reform movement should be interested in this group of interviewees who are happily constructing their own Jewish paradigms, this reader is left puzzled as to how this article is germane to the book's purpose.

In the end, of course, this book is really a snapshot of our movement at the turn of the Western millennium. In that sense it is not really an "enduring book," nor do I think it was meant to be. Kaplan describes his book as an attempt to "fill a lacuna" on the current condition of a "fascinating and quickly changing religious entity." He has succeeded well in filling that lacuna with both useful information and thoughtful ideas. I recommend that everyone interested in the present and the future of Reform Judaism familiarize themselves with this book.

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Women and American Judaism: Historical Perspectives, edited by Pamela S. Nadell and Jonathan D. Sarna (Hanover, N.H.: Brandeis/University Press of New England, 2001), 322 pp.

In their introduction to this anthology of historical essays, Pamela Nadell and Jonathan Sarna refer to historian Anne Braude's statement, "Women's history IS religious history" (p. 1) and then wonder rhetorically if women's history is also the history of American Judaism. The essays in their book proclaim a resounding "yes." After reading the book, one wonders how American Jewish History could have been understood properly without the voices of the women who lived it.

The editors explain that their goal is to show how women expressed their changing commitments in differing environments: