

JEWISH AFFAIRS

Pesach 2015



Price R50,00 incl. VAT
Registered at the GPO
as a Newspaper
ISSN 0021 • 6313

THE NEW REFORM JUDAISM – CHALLENGES AND REFLECTIONS

Beverley May

JEWISH AFFAIRS □ Pesach 2015

The concept of reforming Reform Judaism is an intriguing reason to read this book.

Innovation, improvement and the search for the Next Big Thing are at the heart of modern society. Religions, on the other hand, have a reputation for resisting modernity and the changes that it brings. Chaim Potok wrote about these competing forces when, referencing Maimonides, said that his writings reflected “two essentially irreconcilable approaches at the very core of Judaism; one rational, facing outward toward the world and general culture, eager for all worthwhile knowledge, prepared to enter the market place of ideas. The other mystical, facing inward toward its own sources, possessed of its unalloyed vision of Jewish destiny, feeding off its inner strength and rejecting vehemently any small distortion of its vision of reality from civilizations alien to what it sees as the pure essence of Judaism” (*Wandering – History of the Jews*, Fawcett Books, New York, 1978). Alongside the challenges of a Jewish religious stream grappling with the need to change, this book also presents an opportunity to learn more than the fuzzy biosphere of hearsay can provide about what Reform Judaism is truly about.

The first sentence provides a succinct evaluation: “a practical approach to religious observance that acknowledges the need to bring one’s ritual practice into harmony with one’s actual religious beliefs.” Further clarification includes, “The Reform movement accepts that the Torah should be interpreted to meet the needs of contemporary Jews. This is not a new approach. The sages of the classical rabbinic tradition explicitly argued that the Torah was not in heaven and that God had given the responsibility for the interpretation of that Torah to human beings. Yet the Reform movement took this idea much further than traditionalists could because they were freed from the shackles of *Halacha*. Not having to follow thousands of detailed laws, Reform Jews could completely re-conceptualize what it meant to be a religious Jew and how Judaism could and should be practiced.”

In the Chapter entitled ‘In Search of a Reform Jewish Theology’, there is a section that deals with the problems associated with defining Judaism. This section should resonate across the board, irrespective of Jewish affiliation. The writer discusses the majority of classic definitions, skillfully describing how our culture, religion, history and ancestry all cohere into the definition of Judaism. This section also presents a picture of the diversity inherent in Judaism, “The diversity of Jewish belief systems multiplied by the middle of the Second Temple Period. Part of the fascination with the Dead Sea Scrolls is the alternative belief system or systems they reveal. Jews in the biblical era and particularly the Second Temple period apparently believed in all sorts of different things.”

In this way, the author lays down a foundation for the reader, clarifying the key tenets of this stream of Judaism and then moves on to the challenges that it faces.

The book approaches familiar, traditional challenges with forthrightness, none more so than inclusivity. All streams of Judaism grapple with this issue and Reform Jews have dealt with discrimination applied to some ritual obligations to ensure that no Jew should be limited in their religious practice in any way. This inclusivity has become the hallmark of the modern Reform movement. Women, gays, lesbians, bisexual and transgendered Jews are all given equal opportunity to practice their religion on equal terms with male, heterosexual, Jews. This being said, the book points out that in spite of this inclusive approach, it took until 1972 for the first woman Rabbi (Rabbi Sally Priesand) to be ordained in the Reform movement.

The author has spent time in South Africa and it was interesting to read his views on our particular community. With respect to kashrut, he explains that American Reform Jews were radical in their rejection of dietary laws, relative to other diaspora communities: “Progressive Jews in England, Australia, South Africa, New Zealand and other English-speaking countries generally live in Jewish communities where the majority of Jews affiliate with Orthodoxy. That does not mean that they themselves are practicing Orthodox Judaism, because most are not. Nevertheless, they support the Orthodox system of synagogue life and its insistence on the centrality of Jewish law, at least in public observances. Reform Jews in these countries are judged on this basis and as a result feel tremendous pressure to confirm as much as possible to communal norms.”

This is contrary to the state of affairs in the United States, as American Jews have a long history of accepting religious pluralism. The following statement from the Pittsburgh Platform (1885) codified the American Reform’s movement on *kashrut*: “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 entirely foreign to our present mental and spiritual state.” These laws “fail to impress the modern Jew with a spirit of priestly holiness; their observance in our days in apt rather to obstruct than to further modern spiritual elevation.” With reference to Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, the author says, “he and many others in the Reform movement felt that the emphasis needed to be shifted from pointless obsession with what goes into one’s mouth, to greater concern over the words that come out of one’s mouth.”

Rabbi Kaplan points out that many forgot that the laws regulating diet were rejected because they were believed to hinder rather than encourage spirituality. In the spirit of this courageous assessment of Reform Judaism, the author discusses the volte face on a blanket rejection of traditional food restrictions as the movement began to re-evaluate their attitudes towards *kashrut* and to reconsider long-abandoned practices.

In the chapter entitled ‘Marriage and Divorce’, the author discusses the importance of family life in Judaism and how both Orthodox and Reform streams have adapted to modern society. For example, the marriage ceremony used to include a betrothal period of about one year. Both movements have since dropped this requirement and both stages (betrothal and marriage) are included in the same wedding ceremony. Further innovation of the Reform ceremony, however, has been to move towards egalitarianism. The *ketubah* is an example. It includes “terms of what the couple promise each other rather than what the man promises the woman. Likewise, there is

an exchange of rings during the Reform wedding service.” The question of whether it was permissible to exchange rings was discussed as early as 1871 at the Augsburg Synod.

The same chapter discusses the fact that in Reform Judaism, “there is a more open approach that is accepting of different types of alternative lifestyles.” These include marriages between gay or lesbian couples. Kaplan explains that “in recent years, most Reform rabbis have come to accept the idea that sexual orientation is something we are born with or develops as a result of the complex interplay between a number of genetic, hormonal, and environmental influences at a young age.”

This discussion is followed, inevitably, by one on intermarriage: “All the innovations pioneered and the changes accepted pale in comparison to the subject of intermarriage. According to Jewish law, a Jew is only permitted to marry another Jew.” In the 1970s the Reform movement in America found that it had the highest rates of intermarried couples of all American Jewish denominations, partly because it was the least traditional and most tolerant. As a result in 1977, a demographer from Harvard, Elihu Bergman, extrapolated that the Jewish population in the United States would decline precipitously. This resulted in calls within the movement to reach out to unaffiliated and intermarried Jews in order to influence the “religious direction of intermarried couples, potentially influencing many to gravitate toward affiliation within a Reform temple.” As a result the movement continued to encourage conversion to Judaism and also welcomed intermarried couples in which the non-Jewish partner had not converted.

Jewish divorce and the application of egalitarian principles is dealt with next in the chapter, where the Reform movement’s determination to find fairness in traditional law around divorce is again highlighted. These changes have swept away the difficulties experienced by a woman whose husband refuses to grant her a *get*. Such a woman becomes *agunah* (a chained woman), and is prohibited from remarrying or even having sex with another man, because she is still married. Any children that result from subsequent relationships are considered *mamzerim*. “The Reform movement rejects this idea because the child would suffer from the sins of his or her parents.”

Perennial questions around Jewish identity are dealt with in this book through the lens of Progressive Judaism. The author discusses the dilemma in American Jewry, explaining that because American Jews feel accepted in American society, they no longer feel that they are in exile. They have moved on from the belief that, post-World War II, their primary goal was the survival of the Jewish community. As a result, the primary cause supported by the American community was the State of Israel: “American Jews gave generously to any charity that represented an Israeli institution.” Kaplan explains how this has changed: “But what resonated for those old enough to remember the news reports of Nazi atrocities or the miraculous victory of Israel over the Arab armies in June 1967 does not necessarily move those who were born after 1980. This has created a generation gap that threatens to undermine Jewish communal institutions, including those of the Reform movement.”

Innovation is a marker of Progressive Jewry, and this book delves into some of the changes that have been implemented in line with the technological advances of the last century. Since 2009, American Reform Jewry has formally endeavoured to use the potential presented by modern

technology to reach its members. There is a recognition in this discussion that some fear that it will “lure Jews away from the old ways of connecting that require us to be in the same physical space” and that “the pessimists fear that it will become a substitute for in-the-flesh contact, and that if people start getting their needs met in the virtual world, they will have no need for the real world.” In introducing these ideas at the 2009 URJ (Union for Reform Judaism) Biennial conference in Toronto, Rabbi Eric Yoffie assured 3000 delegates that “from the time of Ezra, we Jews have always adapted to our environment and taken advantage of the latest technologies.” He used the example set when Jews moved from using stone tablets to parchment to paper, saying that “we will move with equal ease to the electronic word.” He also reminded those present that “the web does what Judaism has always aspired to do: it opens up the vast treasury of Jewish knowledge to everyone.” In line with this thinking, Rabbi Robert Barr, founder of Congregation Beth Adam in Cincinnati, developed the first progressive online synagogue. In the first four months they had 6200 visitors from forty-nine states and sixty countries. Some of these visitors are members of Beth Adam who live in Cincinnati but are unable to come to services on a particular week. Others used to live in the region but would like to keep in touch with the congregation in spite of having moved away. There are also elderly users of the online synagogue who find it preferable to the physical difficulty of attending shul in the traditional way.

The scope of the book extends to the politics of the Reform movement with special attention to the American movement. This chapter (2) provides insights into Jewish leadership.

The World Union for Progressive Judaism is the international umbrella organization of the Reform, Liberal, Progressive and Reconstructionist movements, serving 1200 congregations with 1.8 million members in more than 45 countries. In December 2011, the President of the Union at the time, Rabbi Rick Jacobs, is quoted in the book as saying, “we are poised at one of the most critical and dramatic crossroads in all of Jewish history. If we stay put and leave things as they are we will have failed the test of Jewish leadership. But we are not going to stay put. We are the Reform Movement and we’re going to get MOVING. We’re going to MOVE forward with strength and creativity.” He also set three priorities for his presidency; catalysing congregational change, engaging the next generation and extending the circles of responsibility.

In conclusion, the picture presented by this book is of a courageous movement determined to thrive in modern society, maintaining its traditions and, most importantly, the moral values inherited from its forefathers.

The New Reform Judaism – Challenges and Reflections by Rabbi Dana Evan Kaplan, The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, 2013

Bev May serves on the Cape Council of the SA Jewish Board of Deputies. She has an MBA from UCT, specializing in economics and finance, and has been running her own investment business in Cape Town since 2000. She completed her Progressive Jewish conversion in 2004.