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Reform's Distracting War Over Politics

By **Dana Evan Kaplan**

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The nomination of Rabbi Rick Jacobs as president of the Union for Reform Judaism has unintentionally started what could become a divisive and even destructive internal conflict within the Reform movement. Rabbi Jacobs's association with what are perceived to be left-wing organizations have Reform Jews with conservative or even moderate political views on Israel fearing that their movement is suddenly veering away from them.

What has set off the emotional and even hostile debate was an ad placed at the end of April by a group of Reform Jews calling itself Jews Against Divisive Leadership. The ad, placed in the Los Angeles Jewish Journal (and, subsequently, the Forward), criticized the selection, calling Rabbi Jacobs someone who "does not represent the pro-Israel policies cherished by Reform Jews." They cited three facts: that he serves on J Street's rabbinic cabinet, that he is on the board of the New Israel Fund and that he joined the Sheikh Jarrah demonstrations in Jerusalem. "We call on the Union for Reform Judaism to reconsider this divisive appointment. Do not drive mainstream Zionist Jews out of the Reform movement."

Three prominent rabbis, leaders of Hebrew Union College — Jewish Institute of Religion, wrote a sharply worded critique in the same Jewish Journal issue in which the ad appeared, accusing the ad signers of multiple and extremely serious offenses against civility and propriety, and warning that "by setting the battle lines in the way they are currently doing, Rabbi Jacobs's critics are sailing in very dangerous waters."

Remember that the search committee decided on Rabbi Jacobs because they saw in him a leader who could bring the Reform movement into the 21st century. Both sides of this growing debate would do well to remember that there are, after all, bigger issues at stake for a denomination whose numbers have been quickly dwindling. We need to reconsider our core religious messages. We need to emphasize observance — however we decide to define Reform ritual and ceremony. And we need to do this urgently, before an entire generation slips away from us. This also means that we can't afford a costly debate over what is essentially an irrelevant issue from an organizational point of view.

Like many Reform Jews, I see myself as a moderate — supportive neither of wild messianic expansionism nor of naive bi-national utopianism — and I, too, was surprised that the leadership did not anticipate that Rabbi Jacobs's views would be polarizing. We had always believed that the national organization would try to find consensus positions that would make everyone comfortable.

Therefore, Rabbi Jacobs's challenge at this moment is to find outlets for reassuring all Reform Jews that our voices will continue to be heard. Those with middle-of-the-road or moderately conservative positions on Israel don't want to feel like a barely tolerated minority. Rabbi Eric Yoffie, the outgoing URJ president, performed wonderfully in this regard. He came from an impeccably liberal background but he repeatedly emphasized the terrible security threats facing Israel. When J Street invited him to speak, he went, showing a sensitivity to those on the left. But he spoke bluntly about those dangers, causing some in the audience to boo him. As far as I was concerned, it was the perfect balance.

How Israel deals with its Arab neighbors as well as its Arab citizens is not the primary concern of the Reform movement. We are a religious movement devoted to God and Torah as well as Israel. We are having great difficulties in nurturing the next generation, losing many of them following their bar and bat mitzvahs at age 13. Startling numbers may be leaving our religion entirely, becoming ethnic Jews with no religion and then eventually — in the next generation if not in this one — Christians, Buddhists or even Muslims.

Rabbi Jacobs must move the focus away from a divisive debate over internal Israeli policy and get us back on track, doing what he was hired to do: revitalize the movement. And we, Reform Jews, need to stop fighting among ourselves and address the urgent challenges before us.

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The views and opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect those of the Forward.