

In Praise of Reform Theology

Opinion

By Dana Evan Kaplan

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Last month, I published an opinion article in these pages arguing that Reform Judaism's theology contributes to the sociological factors that are weakening the Reform movement in our open, pluralistic society. In my February 25 article, "[The Theological Roots of Reform Judaism's Woes](#)," I wrote that contemporary Reform Judaism's pluralistic theologies and focus on individual autonomy had made it difficult for Reform congregations to make demands upon their members. The result is that Reform laypeople are too often apathetic, and their synagogues are therefore unable to provide a vibrant shared religious experience.

I was surprised that many of the responses the article received were from Orthodox Jews suggesting that Reform Jews should jump ship and embrace Orthodoxy. This is a profound misunderstanding of my message. Indeed, the reason I feel that it is important to understand the sociological challenges created by a pluralistic theological approach to Judaism is precisely because of Reform Judaism's tremendous importance.

I believe that Judaism is the true religion, the best approximation that we can develop to understand and appreciate God and our world. Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, the founder of the Reform movement in America, wrote that "Israel's religion... is the true religion, because its doctrines are taken from the revelations of God in His works and words."

Reform Judaism is the best representation of our religion. The reason is simple: There have been serious intellectual challenges to religion in general, and the divine nature of the Bible in particular, over the past 300 years. Reform Judaism is well-suited to accept and integrate these scholarly studies that have been generally accepted as valid, including the documentary hypothesis which sees the Torah as consisting of at least four separate texts that were redacted over a long period.

Orthodox Jews, by contrast, tend to read the Torah with pre-critical naiveté, by which I mean that they take it for granted that the five books of Moses are exactly what their pious teachers have told them it is — a word-for-word and letter-for-letter text given by God to Moses at Mount Sinai. While this belief enables the Orthodox to create religious communities of deep commitment, it is intellectually untenable. Reform Judaism moves

us to a critical, scholarly understanding of the Hebrew Bible and then helps us emerge with multi-vocal perspectives suitable for a postmodern world.

Whereas Orthodoxy is organized around Halacha as a binding legal system, Reform Jews focus on ethical monotheism, the idea that there is one and only one God, and that God demands ethical behavior. Properly understood, liberal Judaism can help us live our lives ethically and joyfully. It can help us to understand how the ancient world molded our most cherished religious traditions and how we can approach complex contemporary social problems.

Can we make our faith both intense and intellectually honest at the same time? That is the central challenge for Reform Jews, a challenge inherent in any theology that stresses individual autonomy and critical thought. The key is to cultivate greater devotion to the values at the heart of Reform theology and build communities around a common and passionate commitment to these principles. This may mean moving away from the Reform movement's current big-tent approach and focusing more on building a committed core, but it can be done.

Rabbi Maurice Eisendrath explained, "God is a living God — not a God who revealed Himself and His word once and for all time at Sinai and speaks no more." We Reform Jews believe that God gave us the Torah and that the Torah contains timeless religious truths of tremendous importance, not only to Jews, but to the entire world. Every time we study Torah and incorporate its lessons into our lives, we are participating in the process of bringing God's revelation to human beings. That is Reform Judaism's mission, and it is a compelling one.

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