

# The Blackwell Companion to Judaism

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## CHAPTER 17

# Reform Judaism

Dana Evan Kaplan

Reform Judaism, sometimes called Progressive Judaism or Liberal Judaism, adapts its beliefs and practices to the norms of modern society. In the late 1990s, there were about 1.5 million Reform Jews worldwide. More than one million of those live in the United States and Canada; the rest live in a variety of countries, including France, Great Britain, Australia, South Africa, South America, and Asia. The international umbrella organization for Reform Jews around the world is the World Union for Progressive Judaism (WUPJ). The largest constituent organization of the WUPJ is the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC), with about 875 organizations.

Founded in London in 1926 and subsequently located in New York and then Jerusalem, where it is housed today, the World Union for Progressive Judaism promotes Reform Judaism, its practices, ideas, and organizations, around the world. It includes not only the American Reform movement but the American Reconstructionist one as well and also encompasses movements in countries in which the word “reform” is not used or is even looked down upon, often replaced with the term Progressive. The World Union works to maintain and strengthen existing Progressive congregations and to build new ones. It supports the Israeli movement for Progressive Judaism and ARZENU, the international federation of Reform and Progressive religious Zionists.

### **Reform Judaism around the World**

The WUPJ has affiliates in about thirty-five countries on six continents.<sup>1</sup> In Great Britain there is both the Reform movement, which is somewhat more traditional and larger, and the Liberal movement, which was traditionally closer to Classical Reform in the United States. In recent years, the two movements

have become much more similar. They share a rabbinical school, Leo Baeck College, which trains rabbis not only for Great Britain but for all of Europe and beyond.

Despite the dramatic decline in the Jewish population of Great Britain over the last generation due to assimilation, intermarriage, and emigration, the Liberal movement and to an even greater degree the Reform movement have managed to keep their strength. While their numbers are not growing, their influence in and percentage of the community are increasing. Indeed, a number of congregations are moving ahead with major development plans, including Radlett and Bushey, Maidenhead, Wimbledon, and South West Essex Settlement.<sup>2</sup> Two new Progressive day schools are opening, and the Sternberg Centre provides a focus for Progressive religious and cultural activities, including an active interfaith dialogue program.

In Australia as in England, the predominant mentality regards Orthodoxy as the only authentic form of Judaism, despite the fact that many of those who belong to Orthodox synagogues do not observe the mitzvot in a halakhic fashion. This is a problem for the Progressive movement, because it is difficult to convince people to view Reform as religiously authentic. Many if not most of those who do join do so because a problem in personal status – a question regarding whether or not they are Jewish by traditional standards – prevents them from joining an Orthodox synagogue. In Australia in 1999, there were fifteen Progressive congregations belonging to the Australian and New Zealand Union for Progressive Judaism, which represented eight thousand adult members. They had two day schools, a Reform Zionist youth movement called Netzer, and a Reform Zionist movement called Arzi. They are changing the name of their Union to reflect the increasing participation of a number of congregations in Asia, in such places as Hong Kong and Singapore.

In South Africa, the number of congregations is decreasing because of, the continued emigration from that country of whites in general and Jews in particular. Congregation Bet David in Sandton, an affluent northern suburb of Johannesburg; Temple Emanuel in Parktown, Johannesburg; and Temple Israel in Cape Town are viable congregations. Many of the other Reform congregations in Pretoria, Durban, Port Elizabeth, and East London are declining dramatically, and several others in smaller towns have closed completely. South African Jews, like the Australians, tend to prefer non-observant Orthodoxy and to view Reform as lacking religious legitimacy and authenticity. Unlike in Australia, however, the Reform movement in South Africa never established day schools, which is perhaps the single most important factor in the precipitous decline in what was once a very significant movement. At its peak the Reform movement may have represented 20 percent of the 118,000 Jews in South Africa. Today Reform represents less than 10 percent of the approximately 80,000 Jews left.

The two biggest growth regions for the WUPJ are the former Soviet Union and Germany. In the former Soviet Union, numerous congregations have been established in such countries as Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Estonia. Russia alone now has fifteen congregations in places such as Moscow and St. Petersburg

as well as lesser-known places such as Saltykovka and Bryansk. In the Ukraine there are ten congregations, one in Kiev and the others in smaller cities. The first Russian rabbi, Misha Tillman, graduated from Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC–JIR) in Cincinnati but decided to stay in the United States and is serving a Russian-speaking congregation in the Chicago area. A number of other Russians are being trained for the rabbinate at the Leo Baeck College and at HUC–JIR in Jerusalem. A recent American graduate, David Wilfond, has volunteered to serve in Russia for a two-year period and has done a great deal of work in building up congregations throughout the former Soviet Union.

This is in many ways pioneer work, because it involves developing not only religious congregations but entire Jewish communities, which, under Communism, were not allowed to function freely. Of course, there is much emigration from the former Soviet Union, and this has a tremendous impact on the ability of the Reform movement as well as every other Jewish organization to build institutions as well as programming.

The other country in which there has been a dramatic rise in the number of Reform congregations is Germany. Today there are thirteen congregations in cities such as Berlin, Cologne, Munich, and Frankfurt, as well as smaller cities. In Germany, as elsewhere in Europe, the Orthodox establishment is dominant, which has made it difficult for the Progressive movement. However, in recent years, increasing numbers of people have turned to the Reform movement for two reasons: their increasingly assimilated life-styles make Orthodoxy more distant from their mentality, and the resulting intermarriage has put many in a situation in which they are not recognized by the Orthodox authorities. Many of the Jews in these congregations are from the former Soviet Union, which has been the major source of the increase in the Jewish community of Germany.

The revival of Jewish life in Germany is an emotionally charged trend for Jews throughout the world. Before World War II, of course, Germany had a distinguished Jewish community of about 500,000, including a very strong and intellectually vibrant Reform community. After the Holocaust, it was felt by many that Jewish life in Germany was untenable. With the passage of time and the arrival of tens of thousands of refugees from the former Soviet Union, Jewish life in Germany is growing again, and the Reform movement has been able to develop despite the sometimes vicious opposition of the Orthodox establishment. There are also Reform communities in other German-speaking countries such as Switzerland and Austria. These communities contain a mixture of people who lived in these countries before World War II, or their descendants, and people who have moved to those countries from the United States or elsewhere for business or personal reasons.

France has the largest Jewish community in all of Europe, with estimates ranging between 600,000 and 700,000. Until recently it was completely dominated by the Orthodox, despite very high levels of assimilation and intermarriage. The two main Reform congregations in Paris were, because of religious and political differences, unable or unwilling to work together. Recently there has

been growth, and there are now eight congregations in the country and others in French-speaking Switzerland. Movement leaders have expressed the conviction that with additional French-speaking rabbis the movement could grow exponentially. This may be the next big growth area for the Reform movement.

There are Reform congregations in South America, particularly in Brazil, but in countries such as Mexico and Argentina the Conservative movement was first to establish a non-Orthodox presence and has successfully built networks of congregations. Therefore, there are no Reform congregations in Mexico and only one very new one, Emanuel, in Buenos Aires, Argentina. There are, however, Reform congregations in Costa Rica, Guatemala, Curaçao, and Panama.

It should be pointed out that, with the exception of Great Britain, these are small movements. None is of sufficient size to support a rabbinical school, and in most of the countries they represent a minority of the established Jewish community. It is in the United States and to a lesser degree in Canada that Reform Judaism has developed most extensively.

## **The Origins of Reform Judaism**

Reform Judaism was the first of the modern responses to the emancipation of the Jews and the intellectual atmosphere of enlightenment that developed in eighteenth-century central Europe. Because of its stress on autonomy, both of the individual and of the congregation, Reform Judaism has manifested itself differently in different places, and yet there are certain characteristics that all Reform communities share in common. At base, Reform believes in the legitimacy of change, rejecting the idea that the written and oral Torah were given by God word for word, letter for letter, and belief by belief, which would preclude conscious changes of any sort. Rather, Reform accepts that human conceptions of the divine are, in fact, human, so that both belief and practice legitimately may evolve in the face of scientific, social, ethical, and other human developments.

The first Reform Jews were Germans seeking to find a middle course between conversion to Christianity, on the one hand, and the inherited halakhic Judaism, on the other. They hoped that by introducing an atmosphere of modern aesthetics and much stricter decorum, they could make worship services far more attractive to apathetic German Jews, who may have even contemplated conversion to Christianity. The liturgy was abbreviated, and a vernacular sermon was added. A mixed male–female chorus sang, accompanied by the organ, and German prayers were introduced alongside the Hebrew ones. Israel Jacobson, regarded by many as the founder of Reform Judaism, introduced a Reform service in his school chapel in Seesen in 1810 and later in his home in Berlin in 1815.<sup>3</sup> The Hamburg Temple, which was founded in 1818, was the first Reform synagogue with a full-service calendar.

Most of the early German reformers hoped that they could justify their mainly aesthetic reforms on the basis of halakhic analysis. They therefore made great

efforts to write responsa trying to show that the halakhah in fact permitted such things as reciting prayers in English, the use of an organ, and similar changes.

By the early 1840s, a trained Rabbinic leadership began to assert itself in central Europe. Abraham Geiger was called to the Breslau Jewish community in 1839 and developed into the most distinguished intellectual defender of Reform Judaism. In 1844, 1845, and 1846, Reform rabbinical conferences were held in Brunswick, Frankfurt, and Breslau, respectively. At the 1845 conference, a debate on the use of Hebrew in the service led Rabbi Zacharias Frankel to walk out. This is seen as the origin of the historical school, which later became known as the Conservative movement. Despite the fact that most of the rabbis at these conferences were quite a bit more Reform than Frankel, they understood that they had to operate within the broader Jewish community and thus maintained a strong connection with traditional rituals and observances. On the other hand, perhaps because of this need to compromise on a great many practices, a number of radical Reform rabbis, in particular Samuel Holdheim, made anti-traditional statements; even Geiger himself has been quoted over and over again as appearing to have a strong emotional aversion to circumcision. Still, their practice, on the whole, remained far more traditional than their rhetoric, and the vast majority of Reform rabbis worked to remain a part of the broader Jewish community, not fully accepting the Radical Reform groups in Berlin and Frankfurt.<sup>4</sup>

### **Reform comes to the United States<sup>5</sup>**

The Reform movement was the first Jewish religious movement in the United States to organize itself on a denominational basis, pioneering what Lance Sussman refers to as a “tripartite polity” that was subsequently adopted by the other major denominations of American Judaism.<sup>6</sup> That is, within Reform Judaism, there are three types of organizations, each with its own “turf”: the congregational organization, today represented nationally by the Union of American Hebrew congregations (UAHC); the rabbinical schools, represented by the Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC–JIR); and the rabbinate, represented by the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR).

Sussman further says that American Reform Judaism can be divided into six periods: its early development, 1824–65; Classical Reform, 1865–1900; the period of Progressivism, 1900–20; the period of reorientation in response to anti-Semitism and Zionism, 1920–45; Reform during the suburbanization period, 1945–65; and contemporary Reform, 1965 to the present.<sup>7</sup>

The first attempt at Reform Judaism in the United States began in 1824, when forty-seven members of Congregation Beth Elohim in Charleston, South Carolina, requested that their congregation consider a number of minor ritual reforms, including the introduction of some English prayers during Sabbath worship. The congregational board rejected the request, and, on November 21, 1824, a small group of members founded a new congregation, called the

Reformed Society of Israelites. This attempt at building a Reform congregation failed, in part due to the death of its leader, an interesting Sephardic intellectual named Isaac Harby,<sup>8</sup> and the original Reform group disbanded in 1833. Despite this setback, Congregation Beth Elohim itself soon after moved toward Reform, under the leadership of its *hazzan*, Gustavus Poznanski.<sup>9</sup>

Whereas the Charleston Reform community was an isolated phenomenon, by the 1830s large numbers of central European Jews were arriving in the United States. These were referred to as German Jews, although their geographic origins were quite a bit wider.<sup>10</sup> This emigration increased the Jewish population of the United States from around 3,000 in 1820 to about 15,000 in 1840 and to 150,000 in 1860. Although earlier historians have assumed that these "German Jews" brought Reform Judaism with them from Germany, Leon Jick has demonstrated that mostly Jews from small towns far removed from Reform's influence in Germany emigrated to the United States. Rather than bringing Reform with them, in response to the American social and religious environment, these traditional Jews slowly developed their own version of what became known as Reform Judaism.<sup>11</sup>

A number of intellectually oriented Reform *verein* (a small religious group) were ideologically committed to Reform Judaism, such as the Har Sinai Verein, which was founded in 1842 in Baltimore, and Emanu-El, which was founded in New York in 1845. These groups were committed to Reform Judaism in an ideological manner and were very much in contact with their Reform co-religionists in Germany.<sup>12</sup> The vast majority of what became Reform synagogues, however, were far more concerned than the *verein* with the realities of everyday life in America and adjusting to that life while maintaining some sort of attachment to their traditional religion.

## **Isaac Mayer Wise and Other Early Leaders**

Isaac Mayer Wise, who arrived from Bohemia in 1846, became the most important leader of nineteenth-century American Reform Judaism.<sup>13</sup> Although advised to become a peddler, Wise was encouraged by Rabbi Max Lilienthal to consider the pulpit rabbinate. Lilienthal sent Wise in his stead to dedicate a number of synagogues, which led to an opportunity for Wise to begin serving as rabbi in Albany, New York.<sup>14</sup>

Wise was offered a life contract to become the rabbi of Congregation Bnei Jeshurun in Cincinnati, which became his base for building what became the American Reform movement. It bears noting that, from the beginning, Wise did not intend to build a new denomination. At every opportunity he strove, rather, for unity, hoping and believing that through compromise and sheer charisma he could unify all or almost all American Jews under the banner of American Judaism. This would be a moderate form of Judaism, with some ritual reforms but a good deal of tradition as well.<sup>15</sup> Wise established a newspaper, *The*



*Israelite*, which later became *The American Israelite*; edited a Siddur called *Minhag America*; and eventually founded the Hebrew Union College in 1875 and the Central Conference of American Rabbis in 1889. He was also instrumental in inspiring one of his lay leaders, Moritz Loth, to establish the Union of American Hebrew Congregations in July 1873,<sup>16</sup> which thirty-four congregations joined, most of which were from the Midwest or the South. By the end of the 1870s, one hundred and eighteen congregations belonged to the UAHC, more than half of all identified synagogues in the United States.

Wise represented a pragmatic and moderate stream of American Reform Judaism. Although some scholars have pointed to the numerous inconsistencies in his written positions,<sup>17</sup> what must be emphasized is that Wise was primarily an institution builder who used ideology as a tool for compromise and consensus. To take his words at face value and to express shock and dismay at the inconsistencies and outright contradictions is really to miss the brilliance of his activities as an institutional leader who succeeded in building an entire American religious movement under very difficult circumstances.

Despite this brilliance, Wise was considered an uneducated and unworthy colleague by some of the German Reform rabbis who arrived in the 1850s and 1860s with Ph.D.s from prestigious central European universities. Primary among them was David Einhorn, who arrived shortly before the 1855 Cleveland Conference. At that conference, Wise attempted to build a coalition with Isaac Leeser and other traditionalists by agreeing to two principles that accepted the validity of the Talmud and its applicability to American Jewish practice and belief. Einhorn wrote a number of scathing attacks on Wise for abrogating Reform theology and turning a consistent and principled approach to modern Judaism into a jumble of beliefs that made no sense. Einhorn served Har Sinai in Baltimore from 1855 until he was forced to flee because of his brave and principled stand against slavery. He went on to serve congregations in Philadelphia and New York. His sons-in-law, Kaufmann Kohler and Emil Hirsch, carried on his tradition of principled radical reform, although Kohler and Hirsch differed from each other as well in a number of significant ways.

## **Classical Reform**

From the late 1860s or 1870s, the Reform movement matured and developed into a much more Americanized form of worship and religion. This was due to the fact that Americanization proceeded very quickly among second- and later third-generation German Jews. These Americanized children of German Jewish emigrants saw the tremendous influence that liberal religion had on their Protestant neighbors and wanted to develop a form of Judaism that would serve as a Jewish equivalent to Presbyterianism, Episcopalianism, and, especially, Unitarianism.

The best known statement of what Classical Reform Judaism believed appears in the Pittsburgh Platform.<sup>18</sup> The platform attempted, on the one hand, to define Reform Judaism as a more rational and modern religion than the much more traditional Judaism being expounded by Alexander Kohut, whose series of debates with Kohler earlier in 1885 had attracted wide attention in synagogues and the press. Kohler wanted to write down in a more formal manner what, in his mind, distinguished Reform from traditional Judaism.

On the other hand, Kohler felt it essential to explain what was Jewish about Reform Judaism; this was a reaction against the Society for Ethical Culture, founded by Felix Adler, the son of Samuel Adler, the rabbi at Congregation Emanu-El in New York.<sup>19</sup> Adler had returned from Rabbinic studies in Germany advocating a form of ethics placed in a universalistic framework. This Society was very attractive to many formerly Reform Jews who were looking for a way to express their conviction that ethics were important and yet were interested in loosening or breaking their particularistic ties with Jewish ethnic identity. In this case, particularism means an approach that concentrates on the Jews as a coherent group, in contrast to universalism, in which the primary emphasis is on humanity as a whole. Kohler responded aggressively to Adler and his fledgling movement, finding it essential to reaffirm Reform's commitment to Jewish particularism, expressed in the religious idea of the mission of Israel.

Classical Reform stressed that Jews no longer lived in ghettos but in a free society. Because this equality was so new, the dream of working, living, and striving together with Christian neighbors to help to make the world a better place, a place of justice and peace, was a central part of the Reform vision. The prophetic mandate to work tirelessly for the rights of the downtrodden was emphasized, and the term "prophetic Judaism" was used to describe a Reform vision of following the dictates of the prophets to make the world a better place.<sup>20</sup> Reform rabbis spoke often of ethical monotheism, in which the Jewish belief in one God was combined with rational thought and modern innovations in scientific knowledge. The "Mission of Israel" was to help spread ethical monotheism throughout the world.

## **Reform in the Twentieth Century**

A steady trickle of immigration of Eastern European Jews turned into a flood beginning around 1881, and the American Jewish population had increased from 250,000 in 1880 to one million by 1900 to 3.5 million by 1920. Since these immigrants were almost all from eastern Europe, where there had been no full emancipation and almost no Reform movement, very few joined the Reform movement. This was partly a matter of the newcomers' not liking the Reform service and also due to the fact that many Reform Jews maintained a haughty and sometimes arrogant attitude toward the immigrants,

preferring not to remember that their own parents or grandparents had arrived in the United States only forty to sixty years earlier in almost the exact same circumstances.

During those years, the Reform movement grew very slowly relative to the increase in the American Jewish population. There were only ninety-nine congregations consisting of 9,800 units in 1900 and two hundred congregations with 23,000 units in 1920. Thus, the Reform movement went from being the single most important voice of the Jewish American community to being a small minority. Although the elite nature of many Reform Jews meant that they retained a high profile, they were swamped by the huge number of eastern European organizations and ideologies.

Under the influence of the immigrant Jewish masses, the Reform movement began very slowly to move back toward a more traditional approach to Jewish thought and practice. By the 1920s and especially the 1930s, this trend became very clear with the rise of Adolph Hitler in Germany and the dramatic increase in anti-Semitism in the United States itself. Policies that had seemed rational and level-headed just a few decades earlier appeared naive and foolhardy. The Pittsburgh Platform, for example, argued that Jews should remain together solely as a religious group in order to fulfill their mission of bringing ethical monotheism to the world. By the 1930s, with the rise in anti-Semitism, it was clear that many perceived Jews as an alien group and that Jewish physical survival was much more the issue than theology or ideology. In 1937, the CCAR thus adopted the Columbus Platform, which was openly Zionist and the culmination of a revolutionary shift in the ideology of the American Reform movement that would encourage a greater diversity of opinion and a multiplicity of approaches.<sup>21</sup> The platform urged Jews to rededicate themselves to the “timeless aims and ideals of our faith,” it placed greater stress on tradition, and it encouraged the use of Hebrew as well as other traditions that “possess inspirational value.” In the context of the political events of the 1930s and the increasingly serious crisis facing European Jewry, the movement thus encouraged a feeling of solidarity with Jews around the world.

Abba Hillel Silver, one of the most important rabbis during the inter-war period, was a significant leader of American Zionism. After serving as a rabbi in Wheeling, West Virginia, he became rabbi of the Temple in Cleveland, Ohio; from this pulpit he worked tirelessly for Zionism and the hope of establishing a Jewish state. With Stephen S. Wise, Silver formed the American Zionist Emergency Council, which lobbied the US Congress on behalf of the cause of Zionism. Silver was the leader who announced to the United Nations that Israel had declared itself an independent state. He was a candidate to become the first president of Israel, a position given to Chaim Weizmann.

In 1922, Stephen Wise established the Jewish Institute of Religion (JIR) in New York City. He felt a new rabbinical seminary was necessary because Hebrew Union College was not sufficiently Zionist. JIR was to serve *Klal Yisrael*, the totality of the Jewish people. Despite this philosophy, worship services at JIR were very non-traditional. Partially as a result of this, upon graduating, the

majority of its students took Reform pulpits, with some going to Conservative congregations, and almost none becoming Orthodox rabbis. In 1950, JIR merged with HUC.

Following World War II, a large number of American Jews abandoned city centers for the burgeoning suburbs.<sup>22</sup> The Conservative movement benefited most from this suburbanization, for it appealed to the now-Americanized eastern European emigrants and their children, being substantially more traditional than the Reform movement while allowing far greater flexibility than Orthodoxy. But Reform benefited from suburbanization as well. In 1940, there were 265 congregations with 59,000 units in the UAHC; by 1955, there were 520 congregations and 255,000 units.

During this time, the American Reform movement was led by Maurice Eisendrath,<sup>23</sup> who became executive director of the UAHC in 1943 and its president in 1946, and by Nelson Glueck, who became head of the HUC in 1947. Eisendrath moved the national headquarters of the UAHC from Cincinnati to New York, where he built an entire building on Fifth Avenue across the street from Central Park and next to Congregation Emanu-El, which he called the House of Living Judaism. This was the headquarters of the Reform movement until it was sold under the presidency of Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie in 1998. Glueck, a world-famous archeologist who appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine, was able to oversee the merger of HUC with the Jewish Institute of Religion. Glueck also established a third Reform branch in Los Angeles in 1954 and a fourth campus, in Jerusalem, in 1963.

In the 1960s, many American Reform Jews became involved in the US civil rights struggles as well as in opposition to the war in Viet Nam. The Six-Day War of 1967 in Israel galvanized all of American Jewry and increased the loyalty of Reform Jews to the Jewish state, as did the 1973 Yom Kippur War, in which Israel's survival was in doubt for a short time. This new period in American Jewish life and attitudes called for a rethinking of the ideologies expressed in the Reform liturgy. In response, in 1971, under its new executive vice president, Rabbi Joseph Glaser, the CCAR began a campaign to develop a new liturgy, which culminated in 1975 with the publication of *Gates of Prayer*. This was the first completely rewritten prayer book used in American Reform synagogues since the publication of the earliest version of the Union Prayer Book in the late nineteenth century. In 1978, *Gates of Repentance*, a completely reworked high holiday prayer book, was published.

Alexander M. Schindler, who succeeded Maurice Eisendrath, served as UAHC president from 1973 to 1995, becoming the most recognized Reform leader and perhaps the leading spokesman for all of American Jewry. He was known for his assertive support of the movement's social action and social justice agenda and became identified with the full liberal agenda of the 1970s and 1980s, including civil rights, world peace, nuclear disarmament, a "Marshall Plan" for the poor, opposition to the death penalty, and women's and gay rights. During Schindler's presidency, the UAHC grew from 400 congregations in 1973 to about 875 in 1995.

## Outreach

Schindler is perhaps best remembered for two issues, his outreach to intermarried couples and his advocacy of patrilineal descent. At a meeting of the UAHC's board of trustees in Houston in December 1978, Schindler issued a public call to the Reform movement to reach out to the non-Jewish spouses of Jewish partners in interfaith marriages. Even more surprising, he urged that the Jewish religion be made available to unchurched gentiles. This call passively to proselytize those with no connections to the Jewish community was controversial, as it appeared to be a dramatic departure from two thousand years of Jewish religious policy. Some of his critics argued that this might encourage Christian groups to launch opposing campaigns within the Jewish community. Despite the attention this suggestion garnered, little was done in the succeeding years actually to proselytize unchurched gentiles, though much was done to develop outreach programs to interfaith couples. In this same period, Reform adopted the controversial policy that children of intermarriages, even if the mother was not Jewish, would be considered Jewish so long as they were raised as Jews, including involvement in the synagogue and participation in life-cycle events. In the late 1990s, even as this approach remains a consensus position in the Reform movement, there is increasing belief that the so-called patrilineal descent resolution was adopted too hastily and that its wording has led to considerable misunderstanding.

## The 1990s: American Reform in Transition

Eric H. Yoffie was installed as president of the UAHC on June 8, 1996. He inherited a movement that had grown in numbers and yet was viewed as having fundamental weaknesses that had to be addressed. In particular, he recognized that the level of knowledge among most of the laity was extremely low, and he therefore initiated a Jewish literacy campaign that encouraged synagogue board members to read four books on Jewish concerns a year, books that were selected for their content and variety. Soon this program was expanded to the entire movement, with each quarterly edition of the movement's magazine, *Reform Judaism*, featuring two books recommended for reading.

Another weak area was the youth movement. Yoffie, admitting that the movement was a shadow of what it had been in earlier decades, proposed appointing full-time youth coordinators to each of the UAHC's thirteen regions to oversee the rebuilding of the National Federation of Temple Youth (NFTY) youth group system. Yoffie is a strong and energetic leader who has done much to confront the weaknesses of the movement and to develop initiatives to meet the many challenges facing American Reform Judaism today.

## Current Issues

### *Reform in Israel*

The position of Reform Judaism in Israel had always been tenuous. Even before the Mandate period in Palestine, there was an Orthodox rabbinate that controlled much of Jewish religious life in the Holy Land. From the establishment of the state, the government of Israel accepted the “status quo” concerning religious authority and practice and avoided transforming the relationship between religion and state. Adding to the problem, most of the emigrants to Israel had come from countries without a pluralistic and democratic societal background and therefore had no experience or awareness of pluralistic approaches to Judaism. There were only a few Reform congregations founded before the rise of the state in 1948, and the Israeli movement for Progressive Judaism was slow to develop congregations even in comparison to the Conservative movement. By the end of the 1980s, about eighteen Reform congregations existed in the entire state, as opposed to forty Conservative and hundreds and hundreds of traditional ones. Orthodoxy remains the official state religion. Orthodox rabbis are supported by the ministry of Religious Affairs; Orthodox synagogues are built and maintained by that same body. Local religious councils are run almost exclusively by Orthodox representatives, who distribute huge sums of money.

During the 1990s, the Reform movement’s Israel Religious Action Center, headed by Rabbi Uri Regev, led a sustained legal battle to gain recognition for the Reform movement in Israel. Two key issues were the right of non-Orthodox and specifically Reform candidates to run for and be seated on local religious councils and the right of Reform rabbis to perform conversions in Israel that are recognized at least by the state if not by the Chief Rabbinate. The world Reform and Conservative movements, and especially American Reform and Conservative Jews, began to place far greater pressure on the State of Israel than ever before.

Partially in response to this, the Ne’eman Commission was established. It attempted to bring together representatives of the different movements to devise a workable solution to the conversion crisis, giving the Reform and Conservative movements much greater input in the conversion process without compromising the halakhic standards that the Orthodox deem sacrosanct. The Commission was unable to achieve a workable solution, although, despite the lack of agreement, a jointly taught conversion school was created. What is significant, however, is that, for the first time, the world’s non-Orthodox communities were able and willing to use their influence to push for the religious rights of their movements in the State of Israel. This is a battle that will continue into the next decade and probably beyond.

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*The role of women, the ordination of women, and gender roles*

Women have been taking on a far greater role in American religious life over the past 30 years than they were allowed to in previous generations. This trend has been a direct consequence of the Feminist movement and has had a dramatic impact on every aspect of American life. Reform Judaism has been able to respond quickly and actively to the changing sex role expectations and has allowed women to assume responsibility for all aspects of the religious and communal life of individual congregations and the movement as a whole.

In 1972, Sally J. Priesand became the first woman to be ordained a Reform rabbi at HUC-JIR. This was a highly revolutionary breakthrough, because even though Reform had been committed to egalitarianism essentially from its origins, in practical terms it had always found reasons to maintain a male-only policy in the rabbinate. Since Priesand's ordination, a great many women have entered the rabbinate, with close to 50 percent of Reform rabbinical classes now comprised of women. Despite the fact that so many women are becoming rabbis, it is as yet unclear whether they will be accepted at the higher ranks of the movement and whether they will be willing to make the sacrifices necessary to rise through the movement's hierarchy.

*Gay and lesbian marriages*

One of the most controversial areas the Reform movement has considered in the 1990s is the role of gays and lesbians in the synagogue. In 1987, the UAHC passed a resolution affirming its commitment to welcoming gay and lesbian Jews into its congregations and encouraging gay and lesbian involvement and participation in all aspects of synagogue life. In 1990, the CCAR adopted a position paper encouraging rabbis to treat gays and lesbians with full respect and to integrate everyone into their congregations regardless of sexual orientation.

The CCAR position paper acknowledged, however, the need to continue a dialogue regarding the religious status of monogamous gay and lesbian relationships. Specifically, the CCAR was still grappling with what type of ceremony is appropriate and what the religious meaning of that rite would be. There was the possibility of having a commitment ceremony, but there was also the potential for sanctioning a full marriage ceremony involving *kiddushin*, completely equivalent to the marriage ceremony performed for heterosexual couples.

In April 1996 the CCAR passed a resolution supporting the rights of gay and lesbian couples to a civil marriage. Much attention was focused on Hawaii, which appeared at the time to be the first state that might pass a law allowing gay and lesbian civil marriage. At the UAHC biennial, October 29 to November 2, 1997, in Dallas, Texas, the UAHC passed a resolution supporting secular efforts to promote legislation that would provide through civil marriage equal opportunity for gays and lesbians and encouraged the UAHC constituent congregations to honor monogamous gay and lesbian domestic relationships.

*The 1999 Pittsburgh Platform*

Since the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885 and Columbus Platform of 1937, discussed above, and until the late 1990s, only one other American Reform platform was prepared, a centenary perspective, written by Eugene Borowitz and adopted in San Francisco in 1976. This statement moved Reform closer to tradition as well as to Jewish peoplehood even as it stressed the movement's tremendous diversity.

Borowitz is one of the most seminal thinkers in the Reform movement, regarded as its leading theologian in the United States. Interestingly, he uses the term *Liberal Judaism* as the title of one of his more influential books, thus connecting contemporary Reform thought to its German origins.<sup>24</sup> He describes Judaism by drawing an analogy to personal relationships rather in terms of universal ethics, peoplehood, or law. Borowitz identifies the "root Jewish religious experiences of our time as the absoluteness of value and Jewish particularity, with God as their ground." He then creates a theory on non-Orthodox Jewish duty based on the Jewish self's intimate involvement with God, with the Jewish people today, its tradition, and its messianic hope, and thus with a self fully individual, yet primarily shaped by its Jewish relationships covenant."<sup>25</sup>

Borowitz and the others working on the 1976 document agreed that if a statement could not make affirmations of what it was that the Reform movement stood for, then it was better to abandon the whole effort rather than issue a paper that was hopelessly equivocal. Nevertheless, the resulting document stresses the movement's diversity. It is a strong statement of support by the Reform movement for the State of Israel and for the first time talks about Reform Jews' religious obligations, although it does not use the word *mitzvah*. The San Francisco centenary perspective does talk in much greater detail than ever before about the tension between Reform Jews' commitment to the Jewish people and their responsibilities to humanity as a whole.

In 1998, the CCAR President Richard Levy proposed a new platform to be voted on at the Pittsburgh Conference in May 1999, justifying the need for such a statement on the grounds that the religious world of the Reform Jew had changed so much since the 1976 statement. The cover story of the Winter, 1998, issue of *Reform Judaism* was titled, "Is It Time to Chart a New Course for Reform Judaism?" There Levy explained that it had been more than one hundred and ten years since the publication of the original Pittsburgh platform and that it was time to "chart a new course for our movement in the twenty-first century, just as the first Pittsburgh meeting defined Reform for much of the twentieth century. Strange as it might seem, despite the moderating influences of Columbus and the centenary perspective, the Pittsburgh platform of the nineteenth century continues to influence how we Reform Jews relate to Jewish tradition." The magazine also printed a draft of Levy's ten principles, which had also been sent to all the rabbis in the CCAR for their comments.<sup>26</sup>

Levy further argued that whereas the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform had argued that "the views and habits of modern civilization" should determine which



Jewish ceremonies are appropriate for the Reform Jew to observe, today there is a much greater desire on the part of many Reform Jews to “build more and more *mitzvot* into their lives.” This was really the key theme of the new platform, especially in its first draft. Levy encouraged Reform Jews to consider observing more and more *mitzvot*, including those that had long been considered completely outside of the spectrum of normative Reform practice, such as *mikvah* and *tefillin*.

When *Reform Judaism* published the third draft of what was then called the “Ten Principles for Reform Judaism,” along with a photo of Richard Levy wearing *tallit* and *yarmulke*, it unleashed a torrent of emotions. On the one hand, many people applauded the tone and substance of the proposed platform; on the other, many were distressed and saddened by what they felt was an abrogation of the historical positions of the Reform movement. In response to the large volume of comments, Levy, working with other CCAR leaders, produced a fourth draft, discussed at the December 1998, UAHC board meeting. At that meeting the feeling developed that it might indeed be possible to reach consensus on a new platform, based on the much more moderate tone of the fourth draft. A number of issues still caused certain members difficulty, among them the “challenge and practicality of urging the reading and speaking of Hebrew,” the fact that the platform encouraged American Jewish immigration to Israel, and so forth.

Some of the responses to the article were quite harsh. As one woman from Mequon, Wisconsin, wrote, “Abandonment, hurt, outrage, violation, betrayal. These are just a few of the first words that came to mind after I read Rabbi Richard Levy’s proposal. I ask Rabbi Levy: How much further does the Reform movement want to take the religion and faith away from their congregants?”<sup>27</sup> Another reader stated sarcastically, “It was quite a surprise to read the contents of Rabbi Levy’s article. . . . I did have to check the cover to make sure it said winter 1998 and not winter 1698.”<sup>28</sup> Others were very enthusiastic and, at the CCAR conference in Pittsburgh, “A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism” was adopted in a majority vote by the rabbis present. Rabbi Paul J. Menitoff, executive vice president of the CCAR, stated, “On the eve of a new century, when so many individuals are striving for religious meaning, moral purpose and a sense of community, it is important that we have a modern set of principles that define and invite commentary on Reform Jewish belief and practice.”<sup>29</sup>

### *Religious standards and the movement toward tradition*

Reform Judaism today faces the same problem that has been both its strength and its weakness since its origins about two hundred years ago, the question of how a liberal religious movement sets standards, if indeed it can at all. Standards would give Reform Judaism more structure and allow people a clear vision of what being a Reform Jew means. Yet the movement has been very careful not to do anything that might indicate that it is moving toward fixed halakhic standards, even as it wants to move much more in the direction of tradition.

Rabbi Walter Jacob, the rabbi emeritus of Rodef Shalom Congregation in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and a former president of the CCAR, writes in favor of standards. He argues that in many cases the richness and fullness of Jewish religious life has been lost in the Reform context because people have used the ideal of autonomy as an excuse to neglect an active involvement in their religion. Jacob argues that the theory of Reform Judaism was very noble in that it intended for people to exercise their autonomy in selecting the most uplifting elements of the Reform religious tradition: “No one can fault this ideal, but it has not worked. We need direction, standards – a system of mitzvot (ethical observances) – and halacha as we go beyond guidance to governance.”

Indeed, the Reform movement over the last number of years has made an amazing turnabout in terms of embracing a much greater degree of tradition than would have been thought possible just a generation ago. Many classical Reform congregations that prohibited men from wearing yarmulkes now allow it and find an increasing percentage choosing to do so; many of the newer suburban Reform congregations find it the norm rather than the exception. The amount of Hebrew used in the service has increased dramatically, and many congregations are now observing two days of Rosh Hashanah instead of one. Many congregations are holding Saturday-morning services for the first time and almost all are marking bar and bat mitzvahs in addition to confirmation. Even the study of Talmud has become far more popular. Many other formerly abandoned rituals, such as ritual immersion in a *mikvah*, have been brought back with new religious or spiritual justifications. Although by no means all Reform Jews are practicing these rituals, substantial numbers of the elite and significant numbers of congregants, particularly in more progressive locations, are starting to investigate previously abandoned practices.

Parallel to the move toward tradition has been a move away from formalism and decorum toward informality and warmth. This has created a more “spiritual” religious ambience that contrasts dramatically with the “awe inspiring” atmosphere of classical Reform worship. Balfour Brickner, the rabbi emeritus at the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue in New York, said, “We are no longer God’s most frozen people. Orderliness and strict dramatic decorum have finally given way to warmth.”

### *Looking to the future*

In a speech to Reform leaders at the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue in New York in April 1999, Eric Yoffie, President of the UAHC, admitted that the Reform Movement’s twenty-year outreach program had not yet reached its potential. “We have not accomplished all that we should have,” he said. “Let me say one final time to all those who ask that we change our direction: There will be no retreat in the Reform Movement from the principles or practice of outreach. North American Jews of all stripes want energetic outreach to intermarried Jews and Jews-by-choice in order to save them for the Jewish people.”<sup>30</sup>

Yoffie is responding to the inreach–outreach debate in which a number of other community leaders have called on all segments of the Jewish community to devote the community’s resources to inreach, that is, to reinforcing Jewish identity among those already moderately committed. Yoffie argues the reverse, that the Reform Movement intends to continue devoting substantial resources to trying to reach out to those already unaffiliated.

Among other things, Yoffie spoke of how many in the Reform movement had failed to urge non-Jewish spouses in Reform-affiliated intermarried couples to convert. He also admitted that the movement had failed to help Reform synagogue nursery school programs develop as much Jewish content as possible. “We provide no curricular assistance, no teacher training, no forum for exchange of ideas and problems. Incredibly, we have ignored an institution which . . . is best positioned to serve the young intermarried and unaffiliated population.” Yoffie also stated that the Reform movement continued to be plagued by the problem of how to set standards for intermarried couples and their participation in Reform congregations. He argued that “. . . some Reform Jews still find it difficult to acknowledge that any limitation is consistent with Reform belief. A lowest-common-denominator/no-one-must-ever-be-hurt Judaism is not and has never been what outreach is about.” On the other hand, Yoffie stated, “If the need for boundaries is our primary message, and if confronting others with endless demands is the thrust of our program, then we are lost and Judaism is doomed.”

## Notes

- 1 For historical background on the World Union for Progressive Judaism, see Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (New York and Oxford, 1988), pp. 335–52.
- 2 *Reform Judaism News*, Spring 1999, no. 12, pp. 1–2.
- 3 See Jacob R. Marcus, *Israel Jacobson: The Founder of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (Cincinnati, 1971).
- 4 On the Frankfurt group, see Michael A. Meyer, “Alienated Intellectuals in the Camp of Religious Reform: The Frankfort Reform Freunde, 1842–1845,” in *AJS Review*, vol. 6 (1981), pp. 61–86.
- 5 For background on American Judaism, see Jacob Neusner, *Introduction to American Judaism: What the Books Say, What the People Do* (Minneapolis, 1994); Marc Lee Raphael, *Profiles in American Judaism: The Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, and Reconstructionist Traditions in Historical Perspective* (San Francisco, 1986); and Jack Wertheimer, *A People Divided: Judaism in Contemporary America* (Hanover and London, 1997).
- 6 Lance J. Sussman, “Introduction,” in Kerry M. Olitzky, Lance J. Sussman, and Malcolm H. Stern, eds., *Reform Judaism in America: A Biographical Dictionary and Sourcebook* (Westport, 1993), p. xv.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. xix.
- 8 On Congregation Beth Elohim, see Robert Liberles, “Conflict Over Reforms: The Case of Congregation Beth Elohim, Charleston, South Carolina,” in Jack Wertheimer,

- ed., *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed* (Hanover and London, 1989), pp. 274–96.
- 9 Gary Phillip Zola, *Isaac Harby of Charleston, 1788–1828: Jewish Reformer and Intellectual* (Tuscaloosa and London, 1994).
  - 10 This argument has been made by Hasia R. Diner, *A Time for Gathering: The Second Migration 1820–1880* (Baltimore and London, 1992), pp. 49–56.
  - 11 Leon Jick, *The Americanization of the Synagogue, 1820–1870* (Hanover and London, 1992).
  - 12 On German Jewish immigration to America, see Avraham Barkai, *Branching Out: German-Jewish Immigration to the United States, 1820–1914* (New York and London, 1994).
  - 13 On Wise, see James G. Heller, *Isaac M. Wise: His Life, Work and Thought* (New York, 1965); and Sefton D. Temkin, *Isaac Mayer Wise: Shaping American Judaism* (Oxford, 1992).
  - 14 Wise and Lilienthal both led congregations in Cincinnati, where they worked together closely. On Lilienthal's congregation, see Jonathan D. Sarna and Karla Goldman, "From Synagogue-Community to Citadel of Reform: The History of K. K. Bene Israel (Rockdale Temple) in Cincinnati, Ohio," in James P. Wind and James W. Lewis, eds., *American Congregations* (Chicago and London, 1994), vol. 1, pp. 159–220; see also Karla Goldman, "In Search of an American Judaism: Rivalry and Reform in the Growth of Two Cincinnati Synagogues," in Jeffrey S. Gurock and Marc Lee Raphael, eds., *An Inventory of Promises: Essays on American Jewish History in Honor of Moses Rischin* (Brooklyn, 1995), pp. 137–50.
  - 15 On liturgical developments in American Reform, see Eric L. Friedland, *Were Our Mouths Filled with Song* (Cincinnati, 1997).
  - 16 Michael A. Meyer, "Thank You, Moritz Loth: A 125-Year UAHC Retrospective," in *Reform Judaism*, Fall 1998, pp. 30–9.
  - 17 See, for example, Aryeh Rubinstein, "Isaac Mayer Wise: A New Appraisal," in *Jewish Social Studies* (Winter–Spring 1977), vol. 39, nos. 1–2, pp. 53–74. Rubinstein concludes that "Wise's conservative pronouncements were only lip-service, while his rationalist, Deist-like statements represented his true opinions. . . . What makes Wise so complex is that his opportunism impelled him to cover his tracks" (p. 74).
  - 18 Walter Jacob, ed., *The Changing World of Reform Judaism: The Pittsburgh Platform in Retrospect* (Pittsburgh, 1985). The Proceedings of the Conference appear on pp. 91–123.
  - 19 On Felix Adler, see Benny Kraut, *From Reform Judaism to Ethical Culture: The Religious Evolution of Felix Adler* (Cincinnati, 1979).
  - 20 Walter Jacob, "Prophetic Judaism: The History of a Term," in *Journal of Reform Judaism*, Spring 1979, pp. 33–46.
  - 21 For an overview of this period, see Henry L. Feingold, *A Time for Searching: Entering the Mainstream 1920–1945* (Baltimore and London, 1992).
  - 22 For a survey of this period, see Edward S. Shapiro, *A Time for Healing: American Jews since World War II* (Baltimore and London, 1992).
  - 23 See Maurice N. Eisendrath, *Can Faith Survive? The Thoughts and Afterthoughts of an American Rabbi* (New York, 1964).
  - 24 Eugene B. Borowitz, *Liberal Judaism* (New York, 1984).
  - 25 Olitzky, Sussman and Stern eds., *Reform Judaism in America*, p. 23.

- 26 Aron Hirt-Manheimer, "Interview – Is It Time to Chart a New Course for Reform Judaism? Interview of Rabbi Richard Levy," in *Reform Judaism*, Winter 1998, pp. 10–22, 54.
- 27 Beth Sampson Bauer, letter to the editor, "Is It Time to Chart a New Course for Reform Judaism? Reactions," p. 4.
- 28 Henry A. Fribourg, "Is It Time to Chart a new Course for Reform Judaism? Reactions," p. 8.
- 29 CCAR press release, "North America's Reform Rabbis Adopt New Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism," May 26, 1999.
- 30 Eric J. Greenberg, "Yoffie Renews Call for Outreach," in *New York Jewish Week*, April 23, 1999, p. 23.

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