

**American Reform Jews: An Introduction
by Dana Evan Kaplan**

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A STUDY GUIDE

*American Reform Judaism: AN Introduction
Rutgers University Press
By Dana Evan Kaplan*

Discussion Guide by Susan Kittner Huntting

Introduction

As its title indicates, this book is an introduction to Reform Judaism that provides an overview of the Movement's history and a description of what it stands for today. As important, the book offers an in-depth look at the issues Reform Judaism struggles with well into its second century as an American liberal religious movement. Someone who has grown up as a Reform Jew will be able to reflect on personal experience in light of the events, trends and forces that were in play at the time. Someone who is a newcomer to Reform Judaism will gain the necessary background to appreciate the evolution of a dynamic American religious experience.

About the Author

Rabbi Kaplan brings to his writing a unique perspective that reflects his American roots, his life outside the United States and his Jewish experiences outside the Reform Movement. He was born and raised in New York and obtained his undergraduate degree at Yeshiva University, followed by Masters degrees from the State University of New York and the University of New Hampshire. He was ordained at HUC-JIR in Jerusalem and later received his Ph. D. in Modern Jewish History from Tel Aviv University.

Rabbi Kaplan was a Research Associate at the University of Cape Town, where he was involved in the Progressive Jewish Movement of South Africa. Presently, he teaches at the University of Missouri-Kansas City and is a visiting research fellow at the University of Miami.

Rabbi Kaplan has authored several books and many scholarly articles. His academic areas of expertise include the Jews of Cuba, the Jews of South Africa and the historical and contemporary condition of Reform Judaism. In addition, he serves Congregation B'nai Israel in Albany, Georgia.

Questions for Discussion

1. In your understanding, what ideologically distinguishes Reform Judaism from the other branches of Judaism? What appeals to you about this ideology?
2. Do you agree with the author that American Reform Judaism's "lack of a strong and compelling theology forms the weak underbelly of the Movement"? Why or why not? What other weaknesses, if any, do you see in the Movement?
3. At the beginning of the book, Kaplan cites the work of Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, and describes the American Reform Jewish community as a "low-tension" religious group, meaning that Reform Judaism makes little or no demands on its members. Towards the end of the book Kaplan argues that Reform Judaism will have a successful future if it continues on its current transformation to a "medium-tension" organization, by demanding enough from its adherents to maintain its integrity, yet remaining flexible enough to remain pluralistic. To what extent have you witnessed this transformation? What kinds of resistance do you imagine could undermine this transition?
4. Do you remember the *Union Prayer Book*? If so, what memories does it bring to mind? What was your experience in making the transition to *Gates of Prayer*? Does your congregation use *Gates of Prayer*? What do you think the impact will be of another new prayer book? How does a specific prayer book influence worship?
5. To what extent does your personal religious observance reflect what sociologist Marshall Sklare's observation that "The Jewish rituals most likely to endure [are] those capable of being redefined in modern, universal terms"?
6. Rabbi Kaplan claims, "[the] Classical Reform aesthetic slowly developed into a compulsory system of ritual that replaced the halachic system." Can you cite examples of this transformation from your own experience? What examples can you uncover from researching your own temple's history?
7. Should Reform Judaism hold to specific beliefs or practices? Which? Why?
8. The 1994 decision of the UAHC Board to deny membership to a Humanistic synagogue marked a clear communication of the Reform Movement's boundaries and acceptable parameters. Do you agree with the Board's decision? Why or why not? Other than a belief in God, what beliefs or practices should Reform congregations be required to endorse?
9. Kaplan calls Reform Judaism a "pluralist American religious denomination." From your own experience, what evidence supports this claim?
10. To what extent have you seen the Reform Movement's greater acceptance of ritual and tradition at the expense of its historical

- commitment to social justice? What do many people seem to see this as an either/or proposition?
11. Do you think Reform Jewish institutions are more or less connected to Israel than they were 20 or 30 years ago? What do you think this says about us as American Jews? What do you think this says about Israel?
 12. What educational efforts for children, adults and families have you found to be the most successful in making Reform Jews more knowledgeable about Judaism? What challenges may result from the Jewish illiteracy of so many adults?
 13. Kaplan describes many situations in which Reform outreach is successful: with non-Jewish spouses in a mixed marriage, with families in which one parent isn't Jewish, with people new to the community, with patrilineal descent as a determinant of Jewish identity. But Kaplan also cautions that Reform Judaism must have a distinct and vibrant core. In the words of Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the UAHC, "The first step of Outreach – and the single most important step – is to have a clear sense of who we are and of the boundary that exists between us as Reform Jews and the society around us." How do you think our outreach efforts have impacted "who we are" and where the "boundary" exists between Reform Jews and the American society?
 14. What changes in the role of women in the synagogue have you experienced in your lifetime? What do you see as Reform's impact of women being ordained as rabbis and invested as cantors?
 15. It is common for institutions and their policies to change because of the pressure of grassroots efforts. Both HUC-JIR and the UAHC modified their policies on women's ordination and the support of gay and lesbian rights, in response to mostly "top-down decisions." What do you see as the challenges and opportunities that exist when change is implemented this way? In what ways do you think Reform Jews act and think differently as a result of these changes?
 16. Have gay and lesbian commitment ceremonies been performed by your rabbi and/or in your congregation? How does the performance of these ceremonies add to or detract from Reform Judaism?
 17. Kaplan quotes Rabbi Leon Morris, who suggests that there may be people who are leaving the Reform Movement because it is not the serious religious community it set out to be. Specifically, Rabbi Morris writes, "I personally know many people who went to our summer camps and participated actively in our youth movement who reached a point where they felt that they outgrew the Reform movement." To what extent do you agree with Rabbi Morris? What examples support your opinion?
 18. Rabbi Kaplan suggests that several realities will help determine the future of American Reform Judaism: the trend toward "personalism, the tendency to transform and evaluate the tradition in terms of its... significance to the individual"; the continued embrace of traditional ceremonies and rituals; the migration patterns of Reform Jews; the trend towards post-denominationalism; the status of the Reform Movement in

Israel. What do you think American Reform Judaism will look like in another 100 years? Which of these factors – or any others that come to mind – will make the greatest difference?

Other Suggested Activities

1. Locate a copy of the Winter 1998 *Reform Judaism* magazine featuring the cover photo of Rabbi Richard Levy or access the cover online at <http://urj.org/rjmag/1198.html>. Then read the Letters to the Editor in the Spring 1999 issue to sample people's reactions. What is your opinion of the picture? Now, five years later, would you expect Reform Jews to react to this cover photo as they did then?
2. Read and study the most recent platform of the Reform Movement, *A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism*. You can find the platform and a commentary on the platform on the CCAR Web site: www.ccarnet.org/platforms. It is divided into three sections – God, Torah and Israel. People could be assigned to study one section in order to share their learning with the group. Consider using the following question to guide learning: How do the ideas in this platform express a break from the past and move toward a more traditional Reform Judaism?

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