

The New American Reform Pittsburgh Platform of 1999

by Dana Evan Kaplan

Readers of this journal will know that the American Reform rabbinate passed a new platform at its May, 1999, annual meeting. The almost two-year process attracted a great deal of attention and generated much controversy.

Most American Reform rabbis have to deal with the challenge of maintaining the affiliation of their members while trying to reach out to the large numbers of unaffiliated. Helping members to remain involved is not easy, and responding to the high intermarriage rate is even less so. At the same time, religious trends in America, including an increased independence from Israeli influences, are transforming the way that people view their rabbis and their movement. One of the results of these sometimes contradictory pressures and changes has been conflict.

The most serious conflict developed following the publication of the platform's third draft in *Reform Judaism* magazine. *Reform Judaism* is the official magazine of the American Reform Movement and is sent to every household affiliated with a congregation. The third draft was then called the "Ten Principles for Reform Judaism."

A close reading of it showed a Franz Rosenzweig-type of religious rhetoric and an enthusiasm for recommending the trying of a wide array of previously ignored or rejected traditional rituals. What seemed to set off lay opposition to the proposed platform was the photo on the cover of the magazine that showed the then Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) President Rabbi Richard Levy deep in prayer wearing a yarmulke and wrapped in a tallit.

Levy has spent most of his career in the Hillel Organization working with University students and so he has not had to deal with too many Classical Reformers. These Classical Reformers, who are strongest in certain congregations and in certain geographical regions of the United States, were shocked by what they perceived to be the traditionalism explicit in the photo. Because Levy also puts on tefillin every morning, the photo was not nearly as "traditional" as it might have been. But per-

ception is fact, and the perception was that Levy was trying to push the Reform Movement way to the "right."

Adding to the confusion in the aftermath of the vote was that many reporters had no idea what to make of what had actually happened at the conference, covered not only by Jewish newspapers, but general papers such as *USA Today* and the *New York Times*. The *Times* printed their report on the bottom of the first page, something almost unheard of for an obscure religious conference. The reporter wrote that the principles would "encourage the observance of traditional rituals" that had been abandoned by the Reform Movement in its early stages of development. The *Times* essentially ignored that the platform had gone through six drafts before being brought to a vote and that the primary reason for the multiple drafts was to make the platform more acceptable to the Classical Reformers.

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The emphasis on the "return to tradition" was typical of most of the news reports in the general media. Reporters for some of the Jewish papers had been following the story for a lot longer, and were much more familiar with the nuances of the Reform Movement. Newspapers, including the *New York Jewish Week* and *The Forward*, stressed the "victory" of the classical wing and the "watering down" of the original document. The result was that for most people it was almost impossible to fully understand what happened and why.

Even insiders seemed puzzled. Many rabbis ignored the platform completely. Almost all of the ones who wrote columns in their synagogue newsletters on the platform wrote innocuous comments stressing the benefits of the publicity and that the platform would be a "snapshot" of the state of the movement. They prom-

ised to organize study sessions so that congregants would have an opportunity to weave the document together and discuss it. But few rabbis took a strong position one way or the other on the platform.

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That's not surprising. The final platform says very little, and it says almost nothing that is distinguishable from the 1976 San Francisco statement. There was a point when the leadership of the movement was sending out signals that the platform would not be brought to a vote at Pittsburgh, but rather that the process would be continued under the new presidency of Rabbi Charles Kroloff of New Jersey. In the end, apparently it was felt that it would be better to finish and vote on a platform that could be a consensus document rather than to continue to agonize over a process. This had become divisive and might continue to fester and reinforce divisions that already existed within the American Reform Movement. It was also felt that, because Levy had almost single-handedly guided the discussion, it would be best to complete it at the conclusion of his presidency and to do so at Pittsburgh, the site of the famous (or infamous) 1885 Pittsburgh Platform.

Early drafts of the platform were highly traditional. British readers understand that American Reform includes both British reform and British liberal. Thus, it is of particular note that the early drafts included references to mikvah, tefillin, and kashrut. The question asked was whether this represented the new traditionalism of the American Reform Movement or whether it simply reflected the tastes of one Los Angeles area Hillel rabbi who had gotten used to spending time with Orthodox and Conservadox students.

Both supporters and opponents of the platform could not fail to be impressed by Levy's sincerity and enthu-

siasm. Humble and charismatic, Levy radiated warmth as well as commitment. That the process got as far as it did was certainly caused by the admiration and respect that so many in the Reform Movement have for this rabbi.

But was it a wise, strategic move? Writing in *Congress Monthly*, the magazine of the American Jewish Congress, Rabbi Lance Sussman, of Binghamton, New York, stated that the process almost tore the Reform Movement apart. Sussman, one of the brightest young scholars in the Reform Movement today, argues that "Levy tried to launch a revolution by drafting a Rosenzweigian platform. It was shot down by the Reform Movement as too radical. A compromise platform was then put together by a committee to create a "snapshot" of the movement. Attempts at the convention to reintroduce older reform language like 'personal autonomy' and 'progressive revelation' were shot down. The result was confusion."

Former British Rabbi Dow Marmur, now senior rabbi of Holy Blossom Temple in Toronto, also voted against the adoption of the platform. Writing in *The Canadian Jewish News*, he said that "though many reasons for descent have been removed from the adopted document by watering down the original drafts, what is left has lost much of its teeth." Marmur states that "despite my agreement with virtually everything that the document seems to be saying, I believe so much has been left unsaid that I could not add my vote to a statement that declares in its preamble that 'we believe it is our obligation as rabbis, once again, to state a set of principles that define Reform Judaism in our time.'"

Critics agreed that if religious autonomy was the central concept guiding the Reform Movement today, it had accelerated the trend toward religious consumerism. This consumerism means that reform congregations increasingly focus on meeting the demands of an increasingly demanding consumer group, rather than providing the atmosphere for those who feel a religious commitment and want to express that commitment in concrete terms. Many rabbis repeatedly quote from Rabbi Michael Goldberg's *Why Should Jews Survive*, in which Goldberg bluntly states that most American Jews use the word "community" the way that most politicians use the word "friend" — with ease and with emptiness.

A true religious community must have common religious goals pursued by common means and with a dedication to the religious principles and practices of that religion. One searches in vain for this dynamic in most American Reform congregations. Goldberg writes that "vibrant, lively community eludes many American Jews because even as they look for it, they carry with them the infection that kills community in contemporary American life: a culture of consumerism based on individual preference" (page 136).

Goldberg writes that most American synagogues are like religious convenience stores. When the congregants want something sweet and gooey, such as a bar mitzvah, they come in, look around, pick something out, and then drive away. Under this system, members of these congregations are just consumers exercising their individual preferences in the religious marketplace.

The impetus behind the new platform was to try to confront this sad social reality. As early as 1969, Richard Levy had written that the synagogue was failing to achieve its goals. The big question is whether increasing the amount of tradition in the movement's rhetoric is the answer to what plagues American Reform Judaism. The national leadership is making a concerted effort to create new programming and rebuild the organizational structure. Rabbi Eric Yoffie appears to be doing an excellent job at evaluating the weaknesses of the movement and moving to address those weaknesses. One example is his admission that the reform youth group, the NFTY system, is a shadow of its former self. Yoffie has moved to develop a concrete plan for the revitaliza-

tion of NFTY nationwide and has moved to hire regional coordinators to help implement a revitalization campaign.

As more and more Americans separate their personal spiritual needs from religious institutional life, the pressures on all American denominations — Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Mormon, and the rest — will become increasingly severe. If it is true that increasing religious competition is healthy for religious denominations, then we can expect the American Reform Movement to thrive. Much depends on external factors, and some of those factors are extremely unpredictable.

This past year has seen a number of shockingly violent anti-Semitic attacks. In the Sacramento, California area, three synagogues were set on fire in the middle of the night. In Chicago, a gunman shot at a group of Orthodox Jews walking home from synagogue. In Los Angeles, another man shot an automatic weapon at dozens of Jewish daycare children. No one could have anticipated these attacks, and no one can predict how future trends may influence the Jewish identities and commitments of the continuously decreasing number of Jews in America. It is fairly certain that Reform Judaism will remain the movement of choice for the largest number of American Jews for the foreseeable future. The Reform Movement has an historic opportunity to influence and educate. The 1999 Pittsburgh Platform is an attempt to do just that. □

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Move the US Embassy

by Avi Davis

On May 31, 1999, the four year extension given the Clinton Administration to move the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem expired. Some months followed before the President exercised his executive prerogative, allowing the government to waive its obligations on the grounds of national security. Yet in doing so, he failed to provide Congress or the country with a compelling reason not to move the embassy. The refusal to act on the congressional request leaves an embarrassing anomaly: of the 154 countries where the United States maintains diplomatic representation, its embassy in Israel is the only one not to be located in the host country's capital.

This situation should come as no surprise to longtime Washington observers. Since 1949, every US president has been asked to move the US Embassy to Jerusalem and each has fudged on the issue. But in 1999, no one in the Clinton Administration seems capable of articulating a convincing argument for keeping the Embassy where it is. The position that a move of the embassy will compromise the United States' role as an honest broker is dubious. No one is talking about moving the embassy to the middle of a Muslim neighborhood or to a disputed hillside.

The new embassy would be located on a ten dunam (2½ acre) parcel of undeveloped land that it has leased for years in Talpiot, an outlying suburb in Western Jerusalem. Talpiot has never been claimed by any Arab entity as Palestinian, except those who claim that all of Israel is Palestine. In fact, the area belonged to no one for centuries, existing as a wind-whipped stretch of semi-desert until the Jewish development began outside the walls of Jerusalem's Old City in the late 1800s.

It is, on the contrary, by not moving the embassy that the United States compromises itself. In exchange for not declaring a state on May 4, the Palestinians have declared that UN Resolution 181 of 1947 should function as the framework for all future negotiations over land between the Palestinian Authority and Israel. Resolution 181 originally ended the British Mandate by partitioning Palestine into Jewish and Arab States, while calling for the internationalization of Jerusalem under a UN trusteeship.

The resolution never took effect because the Arabs would not accept it. The ensuing war and following armistice gave Israel control of the western side of Jerusalem, while giving Jordan control of the east. Palestinians suggest that Western Jerusalem, which is the home of Israel's parliament, high court, and treasury, should now be the subject of negotiation.

Despite the implied manipulation behind this new Palestinian demand, it continues to win significant international support, particularly from Europeans. By continuing to refuse to move its embassy, the United States gives tacit recognition to these claims and tarnishes the image of impartiality it is trying to maintain.

Indeed, for the past fifty-two years, the United States government has refused to acknowledge Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem because it wished to maintain a veneer of impartiality. This situation exists despite Israel's record of providing free access to all religions to their holy sites (something the Jordanians never allowed) and despite the fact the bonds between the two countries has grown stronger and geopolitically more important as the years have passed.

Even if a final settlement is reached between the Palestinians and Israelis, the United States' primary security interests in the region will almost certainly rest with Israel, whose intelligence-gathering it relies on in its war against international terrorism, and whose military strength is a buffer to the radical regimes of Iraq and Iran. The same cannot be said of the Palestinians, whose state, if current indications prove accurate, may well become a sponsor of the activities the United States is seeking to subvert.

It is time for the United States government to do now what Congress, the people of Israel, and the dictates of good political sense demand: recognize Israel's sovereignty in West Jerusalem and move the United States embassy there. Delay only reinforces a growing impression that when it comes to the crunch, the United States does not have the courage to stand behind its allies. □

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