

Weekend Scholar in Residence Program

Conflicting Visions: Contemporary Debates in American Reform Judaism

FRIDAY NIGHT

“The Evolution of Reform Judaism in America”

This will be the opening lecture of the weekend. We will begin with a PowerPoint presentation on the historical development of Reform Judaism in the United States. The theme of the lecture will be how Reform Judaism has changed in response to the social and intellectual environment over the last 200 years. We will discuss some of the major historical events in American Reform Judaism, including the Rosh Hashanah brawl in Albany, New York, the Trefa banquet in Cincinnati, and so forth, and will try to place our contemporary movement in historical perspective. The lecture will run for approximately 45 minutes and will be followed by a question and answer period.

SATURDAY MORNING

9:30-10:30 - Services

10:30 – 11:00 – Introductions

I think it would be nice if we take a few minutes to introduce ourselves. Everyone will briefly identify themselves and can answer the following three questions:

1. Identification: their name, short biography
2. Most interesting Judaic struggle/conflict that they have lived through
3. Most interesting Judaic struggle/conflict they foresee

11:00-12:30 – “American Religion in the New Millennium”

This second talk/discussion will deal with the religious changes happening in the United States today. Not a formal lecture, we will present a series of trends, and ask for participants to interject their comments. The moderator(s) will set the stage by talking about American religion generally, and then encourage the participants to relate the general trends to their synagogue and the Reform movement.

The trends include:

1. The Divorce Between Spirituality and Religion
2. “Mix and Match” Religion
3. Syncretistic Spirituality
4. The American Spiritual “Market Place”

5. Strict Churches Grow
6. The Return to Tradition
7. The Decentralization of Power
8. Women Leaders
9. Post-denominationalism
10. The Culture Wars
11. Other Trends:
 - a. Educational Diversity
 - b. Influence of Technology
 - c. Growth of Renewal Groups
 - d. Gender Based Spirituality
 - e. Work Spirituality

12:30-2:00 – Lunch

2:00-3:00 – Small group discussions

We have prepared a leaflet with some excerpts from Dana Evan Kaplan’s *Contemporary Debates in American Reform Judaism: Conflicting Visions* (New York and London: Routledge, 2001). Breaking into groups of 6-8 people, we will read a few of the excerpts and discuss them. Each group will focus on a different general theme. Those themes include Classical Reform v. neo-Reform; community; Outreach, intermarriage and conversion; gender issues; and issues relating to Israel and Zionism. The following focus questions may be of help:

1. How would you characterize the central issues of the debate?
2. Which perspective most resonates with you and why?
3. What is the most persuasive argument in opposition to your opinion?
4. In the midst of such dissent, how can the Reform movement move forward?

3:00-4:00 – Summary and wrap-up. Participants would report to the larger groups on their discussions. We will try to summarize what we had learned, what we agreed upon, and what we dissent from.

6:00 Havdalah and evening program (optional)

SUNDAY MORNING

10:00 – 12:00 – “Where We Are Today: Controversial Issues Facing the Contemporary Reform Movement”

We will outline the major controversies facing the Reform movement today, and will also put them in the context of the theoretical divisions that form the background for those debates. We will speak and allow for a great deal of interchange. Rather than having a

formal lecture and then questions and answers, the goal is to encourage as much participation throughout the program as possible.

12:00 -- Conclusion and Farewell

Goals for the Weekend

- 1: To give the participants a clear historical outline of how Reform Judaism developed in the United States.
- 2: To help participants to think about the religious trends that are developing in contemporary American society.
- 3: To begin a process in which the participants connect contemporary developments in religion with what is happening in their synagogue and in the Reform movement.
- 4: To communicate new information and insights while generating a substantial amount discussion and interplay.
- 5: To send them away with concrete ideas on where they can turn to for further information as well as inspiration.