

Review By:

Rabbi PJ Schwartz

The tent of Judaism is expanding. As a result, the ways in which Jews engage in worship and ritual, understand observances and practices, and relate to God and the Jewish community are in constant flux.

In *The New Reform Judaism: Challenges and Reflections* (Jewish Publication Society), Rabbi Dana Evan Kaplan asserts that even in the face of its changing nature, Reform Judaism can be a bridge between tradition and modernity, and a vehicle through which individuals – by way of informed choice and thoughtful participation in the Jewish experience – can fulfill their spiritual needs.

Even before “audacious hospitality” became a pillar of the Reform Movement, Kaplan praises the unique opportunities Reform Judaism offers individuals to express their Jewish identity and feel a sense of belonging in a diverse community. At the same time, he asserts that the Reform Movement lacks clarity in “how it understands the relationship between God, Torah, and Israel in a non-halachic context.” He questions how, without a distinct mandate regarding Jewish law, religious belief and practice can exist within a Judaism that promotes diversity in belief and practice. Kaplan argues that Reform Judaism tends to shy away from terms such as “requirement” and “obligation,” because they counteract the broad spectrum of Reform Jewish expression.

I would suggest that rather than shy away from such words as “requirement” and “obligation” around religious belief and practice, the Reform Movement uses them in a different context. As Reform Judaism expands its reach, reimagines Jewish life in profoundly innovative ways, and shifts its focus to meet the needs of younger generations of Jews, so, too, does it challenge us as individuals to make a conscious decision to grapple with tradition, seek out our own concept of Jewish identity, and feel a responsibility to better ourselves and the world around us. Although we may be obligated to “be Jewish,” what that means about how we live our lives differs from person to person. Indeed, it *must* differ from person to person because to be a true Reform Jew is to constantly reevaluate, reexamine, and reimagine a tradition that, if we choose to make it so, can be meaningful and relevant.

As a people, we have always been entangled in the never-ending struggle to embrace modernity without abandoning tradition. Our obligation as Reform Jews, therefore, is to reveal the holy in our lives through actions that are personally meaningful to us. A cup is only a cup until we fill it with wine and recite a blessing; a candle is merely a candle until we light it and recite a blessing. Viewed through this lens, Reform Judaism has not abandoned tradition at all, but rather revitalized it in new ways.

Published in 2013, one could argue that Rabbi Kaplan's book is already outdated. Three years later, the Reform Movement continues to redefine itself. The "new" Reform Judaism of 2013 has been replaced by an even *newer* Reform Judaism focused on strengthening congregations, offering audacious hospitality, and promoting *tikkun olam* and youth engagement. This Reform Judaism looks toward the future more than ever as its presence within the American landscape continues to deepen. With its focus on social media, immediate but thoughtful responses to tragedy and current events, trans-denominational partnerships and collaboration, and a reflective approach to identifying priorities, this *newest* Reform Judaism can't help but thrive in the years to come, allowing for the next new Reform Judaism to emerge from it.

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