



The New Reform Judaism: Challenges and Reflections, Rabbi Dana Evan Kaplan. Foreword by Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie, afterword by Rabbi Rick Jacobs. Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, 2013. xiv+368 pp., ISBN 978-0-8276-0934-1 (hbk), \$39.95

Dana Evan Kaplan is an energetic historian of American Reform Judaism, and in this, the third of his books with this specific focus he looks briefly backwards before directing his thoughts to contemporary changes, their genesis, and their potential impact on the future of Reform Judaism.

The book is divided into eight chapters, preceded and followed by an Introduction and Conclusion; there is also a foreword by Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie, former President of the Union for Reform Judaism, and an afterword by Rabbi Rick Jacobs, the current President of the Union for Reform Judaism. The chapter headings are as follows: In Search of a Reform Jewish Theology; A Brief History of the American Reform Movement; To Observe or not to Observe?; A New Reform Revolution in Worship and Practice; A New Reform Revolution in Values and Ethics; Who is a (Reform) Jew?; On the Boundaries of Reform; Seeking the Spiritual.

Eric Yoffie sets the stage by praising Kaplan for his sensitive engagement with a dynamic and vibrant community, one which has changed profoundly over the last fifty years. He applauds Kaplan's description of the challenges inherent in defining boundaries in

Reform Judaism, in the face of a younger generation's search for a richer vein of spirituality in their lives. He does, however, indicate that not all of Kaplan's conclusions are to his liking, specifically with regard to the possible post denominational future of US Jewry, and of the need for a more coherent theology in Reform Judaism.

Rick Jacobs' afterword endorses Kaplan's main points, making the generational divide between Yoffie and himself very apparent; but it strengthens Kaplan's book that in the Foreword a rabbi who doesn't agree with him on everything has introduced his work, with overwhelming but not complete positivity.

It is immediately clear from his introduction that Kaplan feels empowered by his long years in the rabbinate to give a magisterial assessment of American Reform Judaism, shining a quite forensic light on those aspects which, while once being perceived as strengths, have proved in his view, to be weaknesses. He criticises arid atmospheres and misplaced emphases, the lack of an appropriate methodology for engaging with classic texts and drawing conclusions from them. He rejects the notion of any single belief or practice to express the essence of Judaism.

Kaplan praises the way that US Reform has become progressively less monolithic as the decades have gone by, noting how the uniformity of earlier years has been replaced by something much more dynamic, more diverse and more inclusive. He notes the selective textual analyses that underpinned Reform's early day obsession with ethical monotheism and prophetic Judaism, ignoring much else to be found in prophetic literature, and expresses the concern that 'Reform Judaism will become the religion of the least, the refuge of those seeking to justify not doing anything.' (p.10)

In the chapters of the book, Kaplan evinces his particular interest in theology and the Reform movement, and the obstacles that might need to be removed for a measured and informed engagement with classical Jewish texts and the God who suffuses their pages. He is perfectly happy to engage with theological challenges, but acknowledges that other Reform Jews find it hard to see and understand that Judaism and has always been a religion that responds to 'contemporary cultural influences' (p.53)

The two most important chapters, to my view, are three and four, 'To Observe or Not to Observe' and 'Worship and Practice'. The former includes a retrospective on the engagement of Reform with Halacha (sic), and the pivotal moment when attitudes towards previously eschewed practices such as kashrut, regular acts of synagogal based observance, such as Shabbat and the Chagim, marriage and divorce, changed dramatically and Reform Jews began to review these areas of Jewish life and their practical and spiritual potential in a new way.

In the latter the word 'revolution' is used in the title and the chapter commences with the 1999 Pittsburgh 'Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism', largely authored by Rabbi Richard Levy, which advocated an openness to experimenting with rituals that had formerly been dismissed, such as mikveh and tefillin, and which caused an enormous controversy within Reform circles. For Kaplan, greater openness to Jewish ritual within American Reform Judaism is a huge positive, though he asserts that it was not without drawbacks, specifically with regard to a coherent theology that bound Reform Jews and told them where they stood with regard God and religious truth. For him, the changing environment of the 1970s led to the acceptance of theological pluralism which undermined the core truth of Classical Reform, that it represented the purest form of ethical monotheism.

If the revolution leads to positive results it may be worth it, but the risk is that the only substantial outcome will be a muddled and multi-layered theology that will trouble American Reform 'for decades to come' (p. 138).

Kaplan clearly cares for the Reform Judaism to which he has devoted his adult life, understands the changes that have taken place and accepts many of them, but it seems fair to say that he is not especially confident about its future by very reason of its disparity and the lack of an ethos which not only binds but sustains a religious approach that also seeks to be a unifying ideology and theology.

We should salute Dana Evan Kaplan's diligence in completing this latest survey of American Reform Judaism, and from a British perspective consider its content for implications that may one day, or may already be, relevant to us.

Rabbi Dr Charles Middleburgh