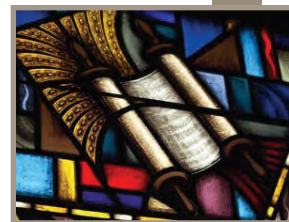


The Reform Advocate

Volume V, Number 4: Winter 2013

THE SOCIETY FOR
CLASSICAL
REFORM
JUDAISM

Renewing the Heritage
of American Liberal Judaism
for the 21st Century



THE REFORM ADVOCATE

A Five Year Retrospective

This issue of the Advocate marks the conclusion of the fifth anniversary year of the Society for Classical Reform Judaism. In this short period of time, the SCRJ has emerged as a respected voice within the broader Reform Movement. Our remarkable progress has been recorded in the pages of our Journal, The Reform Advocate, which was first published in the fall of 2008. In each successive issue, we have sought to provide both reports on our various programs and activities, as well as essays reflecting a broad range of perspectives on the principles and practice of the Classical Reform position. This special issue is an anthology of some of the key articles that have appeared over these first years of our work. It brings together, as an informative resource, a representative overview of our most important activities and recurring themes, and we hope that it will serve as a general introduction to the Society's work and commitments. The complete archive of The Reform Advocate, including the full texts of the summarized pieces in this issue, can be found on our website, at renewreform.org/publications.

SCRJ Partnership with Hebrew Union College Marks Four Years of Learning and Encounter

From Volume V, Number 2: Summer, 2013

This spring, the Cincinnati campus of HUC-JIR and the Society for Classical Reform Judaism celebrated the fourth year of a partnership that has enabled a new generation of future rabbis, cantors and educators to encounter the distinctive principles and traditions of their Reform Jewish heritage. In addition to the ongoing scholarship opportunities, liturgical resources, and annual seminars sponsored by the Society, this milestone was marked in Cincinnati with a special Founder's Day Conference, from March 21-23, on the theme, "Our



*Rabbi Berman meeting with first year students
at Hebrew Union College, Jerusalem*

Founders: Reclaiming and Renewing our Heritage" featuring a variety of programs exploring the legacies of leading pioneers of the Movement.



Rabbinic students attending Conference seminar at HUC, Cincinnati

National lay and rabbinic leaders joined students and faculty, as well as representatives from regional Jewish communities, in exploring the history, values, and vision of the American liberal Jewish tradition in three days of seminars. The lives and legacies of three spiritual forbearers – Isaac Mayer Wise (1819-1900), Stephen S. Wise (1874-1949), and David Einhorn (1809-1879) – were the focus of this year's conference. Each of these prominent rabbinic leaders played an instrumental role in the shaping of the Reform Movement in the United States.

The Conference featured forums that covered such topics as the role of the Wises and Einhorn as, respectively, moderate pragmatists and radical visionaries; the integration of Reform Judaism's historic principles and practices into a contemporary setting; and the creative renewal of the Movement's historic worship traditions. The opening session of the conference included greetings by Rabbi David Ellenson, President, HUC-JIR; Rabbi Jonathan Cohen, Dean, HUC-JIR/Cincinnati; and Rabbi Howard Berman, Executive Director, Society for Classical Reform Judaism. Seminars were presented by Dr. Ellenson, Professors Richard Sarason, David Aaron and Gary Zola, and Rabbi Lance Sussman, Senior Rabbi of the historic Congregation Keneseth Israel, Philadelphia.

Second Annual Society Institute at HUC Jerusalem Campus

The SCRJ Institute at the Jerusalem center of HUC-JIR was held during the week of April 8, and broadened the range of programs inaugurated last year. A Welcome Dinner provided the opportunity for

the faculty of the College and the rabbis and leaders of the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism to follow the Society's progress. Rabbi Berman and Dean Naamah Kelman reflected on the significance of sharing the Classical Reform tradition with both the American rabbinic and cantorial students during their first year of study at the Jerusalem campus, as well as the important resource that our shared heritage can provide for the Israeli Reform Movement. Rabbi Berman presented seminars for both the Israeli and American students, with lively discussion and genuine interest in the importance of linking the Israeli experience to our historic Reform roots.

A highlight of the Institute was the Festive Maariv Evening Service held in the Murstein Synagogue on campus, on Thursday, April 11. This part of our annual program has become a unique opportunity for Israelis to experience the beauty of the worship and music of the Classical Reform tradition. The Service, in Hebrew and English, using the Union Prayer Book – Sinai Edition, featured the great choral music of European, American and Israeli Reform Judaism, performed by a superb choir of students and local singers. The Synagogue was filled with people from all over Israel who wanted to share this distinctive dimension of the historic Jewish experience.

This year we also inaugurated the SCRJ Prize Essay program at the Jerusalem campus. Two Israeli and two American students submitted award winning essays on various aspects of Reform Jewish history and spirituality. This program has been a very meaningful and successful way to build interest and personal mentoring connections between students and the Society.

A CENTER OF THE CLASSICAL REFORM TRADITION IN JERUSALEM

One of the most exciting – and perhaps somewhat unexpected – developments in the expanding vision of the Society over the past two years has been the very special relationship that has emerged between the SCRJ and Kehilat Har-El in Jerusalem. Founded in 1958 as Israel's first Reform synagogue, Har-El has been the major link between our international Movement's



Choir of cantorial students performing at the Society's Classical Reform Service at HUC in Jerusalem

historic heritage and roots, and the development of a uniquely Israeli expression of Progressive Judaism. In its liturgy, music and worship practices, Har-El has created a paradigm for this integration of Reform tradition and Israeli culture – proudly and forthrightly nurturing a distinctive alternative experience for Israelis seeking an uplifting spiritual experience enhanced by beautiful prayers and music, intellectual inquiry and engagement in the pressing social and political issues of contemporary society. Led by the dynamic team of Rabbi Ada Zavidov and Cantor Evan Cohen, Har-El has been in the forefront of the continuing growth of the Reform Movement as a distinctive option in a Jewish community dominated by the extremes of an Orthodox religious establishment and the widespread alienation from religious faith among the vast majority of secular Israelis.

In 2012, during the Society's inaugural year of programs at the Jerusalem campus of Hebrew Union College, Rabbi Berman met with Rabbi Zavidov and Cantor Cohen and a deep friendship and sense of shared values immediately created a special bond. It became clear that Har-El was eager to embrace its own identity as Israel's flagship center of the Classical Reform voice. Rabbi Berman's first presentation to the congregation in March 2012, describing the vision and work of the SCRJ, led to a wonderful partnership that has deepened and grown. Through a special grant from the Ackerman Foundation of Dallas, Har-El has been empowered to promote and broaden its unique musical and liturgical program, offering monthly Shabbat Services in the Classical Reform tradition. These Services have attracted a broad range of Israelis and visitors from around the world drawn by the unique

availability of this option. The success of the first year of this outreach was celebrated on the weekend of April 12-13, 2013, when a delegation of Society members shared Shabbat with the congregation. On Friday evening, the Service featured a program of historic and contemporary highlights of the Classical Reform repertoire, accompanied by piano and harp.



Rabbi Ada Zavidov & Cantor Evan Cohen led a Classical Reform Service at Kehilat Har-El in Jerusalem

On behalf of the Society, Rabbi Berman was presented with an original pen and ink depiction of the "Many Faces of Jerusalem" by renowned Israeli artist and Har-El member, Avraham Yakin. Afterward, the SCRJ guests were hosted for

Shabbat dinner by members of the synagogue. On Sabbath Morning, following the Service, a large crowd participated in a luncheon reception and discussion on the principles of Classical Reform, and the role that our liberal Jewish tradition and its values could play in Israeli life.

We look forward to continuing this very special and mutually inspiring relationship, as Israel's pioneer Progressive Synagogue claims – and proclaims – its distinctive identity and shares the historic Reform vision of a modern, liberal, accessible and inclusive understanding of Judaism for modern Israelis!

Selections From A Special Issue
The 200th Anniversary of Reform Judaism
The SCRJ “Roots of Reform” Pilgrimage to Germany
July 14-20, 2010



*The “New Synagogue”, Oranienburgerstrasse, Berlin
 Built in 1857, it was Germany’s largest Liberal temple
 and was recently restored as a museum*

From Volume IV, Number 4: Winter, 2010

The broad, progressive, humanistic ideals of the Reform Movement – embracing Judaism’s capacity for dynamic change and renewal; the freedom of individual conscience and intellect in formulating personal belief and practice; and a universal vision of peace and justice for all people as our Faith’s ultimate goal, are all timeless values as old as Judaism itself – and found creative expression in every generation of our history. The dawn of the modern era in the 19th century, and the emancipation of the Jews of Europe from centuries of ghetto segregation and oppression, led to the critical need for new understandings of Jewish belief and observance, in response to the

challenges of modern life. It was at this juncture in history that Reform Judaism emerged as a distinctive force in Jewish life and thought. The Reform Movement reclaimed those timeless core values of a universal social vision and an emphasis on the Torah’s eternal ethical mandates – rather than on ritual or ceremonial laws that had lost their meaning and relevance for modern minds and hearts.

While many key developments and personalities were part of this process of renewal over the 19th and early 20th centuries, it was a singular event that marks the formal birth of the modern Reform Movement as a distinctive tradition of Jewish belief and practice. Israel Jacobson, who lived from 1768 to 1828 and was a prominent German Jewish community leader, educator and philanthropist, founded the first modern Jewish school in the small Westphalian town of Seesen in 1801. For the first time in modern history, Jewish children, both boys and – radically – girls, were offered an opportunity to receive an education in Jewish religious studies and Hebrew language – as well as a thorough grounding in modern secular studies – history, language, science and the arts. So renowned did Jacobson’s School become for its educational excellence, that it soon attracted progressive Christian families as well – and all students, whether Jewish, Catholic or Protestant, undertook the same curriculum of Jewish and general studies.

The School’s approach to religious education reflected Jacobson’s involvement with the new liberal understandings of Judaism that were emerging at that time – primarily inspired by the teachings of the famous German Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn. Mendelssohn taught that Jews could remain faithful to their religious tradition and

identity, while fully embracing the opportunities afforded by their newly achieved civil rights and entry into modern European culture. As these ideas coalesced into an organized religious movement, they were embraced at the Jacobson School in Seesen. The daily worship Services at the School reflected the liturgical reforms that began to spread throughout the German Jewish community – reclaiming what had actually been earlier historic traditions in Judaism in previous centuries. Among these reforms, fully rooted in Jewish law and custom dating back to Biblical times, were worship Services in both Hebrew and the vernacular, accompanied by choral and instrumental music – including the organ.

After years of planning, the School's new chapel was built and dedicated in a ceremony that attracted wide attention on July 17, 1810. This building came to be regarded as the world's first Reform synagogue. In a radically bold move, Jacobson called the chapel not a "synagogue", but a temple – the first use of that term in Judaism since the destruction of the Biblical Sanctuary in Jerusalem by the Romans in the First Century. This was a profoundly



Our Commemoration Ceremony at the Monument on the site of the Seesen Temple

installation of a full pipe organ in a synagogue in modern times. As Jacobson argued – and later pioneer Reform rabbis would eventually demonstrate with scholarly analysis of Jewish law – pipe instruments – mentioned often in the Torah and the Book of Psalms, were used regularly in the Services in the Biblical Temple in Jerusalem, predating the adoption of the organ in Christian worship by over 2000 years. The reclaiming of the beauty and majesty of the organ in the synagogue was merely a renewal of a long – if suppressed – tradition in Jewish practice.

It was this historic event that marked the formal birth of Reform Judaism – which would grow and develop as the major force in modern Jewish religious life – both in its gradual spread throughout Germany and the rest of Europe, and eventually in America. It was in America that Reform Judaism became the dominant expression of the Jewish religion by the late 19th century. This country nurtured a distinctively American expression of liberal Judaism that flourished in the free, open, democratic and pluralistic society of the United States.

Of course, it was a singular act of Providence that led hundreds of thousands of German Jews to America in the mid 19th century, in the face of continuing oppression – bringing with them the liberal Reform ideals that had been nurtured in Seesen and later in Berlin, Hamburg and other major cities. Tragically, the rich thousand year-old Jewish culture and tradition of Germany, that gave rise to the Reform Movement, was brutally destroyed in the 20th



The Pestalozzistrasse Synagogue, where the historic German Reform liturgical tradition continues

revolutionary statement – explicitly proclaiming that Jews were no longer in exile – and that our places of worship, wherever we lived, were as sacred as the ancient shrine in Jerusalem. Among the other path-breaking innovations of the new Temple was the first

century. The great Reform temples and institutions of learning that stood prominently and proudly in every German city – including the original 1810 Jacobson Temple in Seesen – were among the first of all of the synagogues to be desecrated and destroyed by Nazi mobs on Kristallnacht – November 9, 1938 – ushering in the unimaginable horror of the Holocaust.

And so, it was both to commemorate this great milestone Anniversary, as well as to pay reverent tribute to the memory of this shattered legacy, that a delegation from the Society for Classical Reform Judaism undertook a special pilgrimage to our movement's birthplace this past summer. Twenty-seven SCRJ members from around the country joined 25 delegates from the European Union for Progressive Judaism, representing Reform congregations in Great Britain, Germany, and Poland – both prominent rabbis and lay leaders – to share in this special commemoration. For all of us, it proved to be an incredibly powerful and emotional experience that changed our lives forever. This journey brought us back to the places that witnessed the birth of our modern Jewish consciousness – Berlin, Hamburg, and Seesen itself. We visited the sites of the great synagogues and schools of early Reform Judaism – all now gone, and commemorated by the ubiquitous monuments, memorials and museums that are the heartbreaking remnants of this sacred heritage.

The journey brought us face to face with the stark reality of the Holocaust – in deeply personal ways that few of us, as American Jews, had ever experienced so viscerally. But our pilgrimage was also very consciously one of positive affirmation and celebration of the vibrant spiritual life that created and nurtured the modern progressive Jewish spirit. And it also brought us together in solidarity and support for the miraculous rebirth and renewal of Jewish life in Germany today. In a transformation that could hardly have been imagined even 25 years ago, Germany is today the fastest growing Jewish community in the

world – now numbering over 100,000 – with over 25,000 in Berlin itself. Most of these are families who left the former Soviet Union, and were warmly welcomed to settle in Germany – a reflection of the complex dynamic of atonement and positive, supportive and even deeply reverent preoccupation with Jews and Judaism that characterize every aspect of German life today. We wanted to experience this renewal – and the rebirth of a growing Reform Movement in the country of its birth – offering a uniquely meaningful spiritual experience for those Russian Jews who had been cut-off from their faith and heritage. And yet while we were determined to celebrate the milestone anniversary, and enthusiastically witness this miraculous renewal,

the reality was never far from our consciousness that in our own generation, Germany had once been home to a totally integrated and uniquely acculturated Jewish community of over 600,000. We were always painfully aware that where monuments and memorials now stand, great centers of Jewish faith and life once flourished...and that

what is now displayed – however meaningfully and effectively – in elaborate museums, was once a living human presence and a dynamic spiritual force. As we came to realize very quickly...in Germany today, every Shehecheyanu – every prayer of gratitude and thanksgiving...every blessing...must always be followed by Kaddish.

This Special Issue of The Reform Advocate, is dedicated to this Bicentennial Anniversary of our liberal Jewish religious tradition. It includes a number of personal reflections by those who participated in this pilgrimage. We hope that some of the deep emotion, inspiration, and broader significance of this experience will help our readers to mark this great milestone.



The Holocaust Memorial, Berlin

A Jewish Journey to Germany

Rabbi Howard A. Berman

From Volume IV, Number 4: Winter, 2010

It is very hard to express in words the incredible depth and variety of emotions of what for me personally was a life-transforming week of exhilaration and inspiration. I have devoted my entire life to the practice, faith, teaching and advancement of the liberal spiritual ideals of Reform Judaism and its historic heritage. From my earliest teenage years, I have been enthralled with this history and tradition... and have come to know its personalities and landmark places as major influences in my spiritual and intellectual life.

Despite the ambivalence we all feel toward Germany, I have revered the landmarks of our Movement's birth – particularly the great synagogues and the magnificent musical heritage – from reading and imagining what the “glory-days” were like prior to the tragic destruction of German Jewry. I truly never dreamed I would be able to actually go and stand in these places – mainly because I have felt that the pain would be too great. As we worked to make this journey a reality, I could not believe it was actually going to happen...and it did not truly dawn on me until we landed in Frankfurt on July 14. While I have traveled to the other major sites of the Holocaust – Warsaw, Krakow, and Auschwitz itself, somehow, stepping foot on German soil seemed emotionally insurmountable. I always wondered how I would feel walking along the streets of Berlin and looking into the faces of any adult old enough to have been alive at that time. I always imagined how I would be silently screaming the questions

“Where were you?” What were you doing... what were you thinking...as houses of God were burning on the elegant avenues of Berlin... as



The Choir of the Pestalozzistrasse Synagogue, which performs the great music of the German Reform musical tradition

your friends and neighbors were being dragged from their homes?”

When the Society began to consider ways in which we would commemorate the Bicentennial, a number of our leaders suggested what would obviously be the most effective way to mark the milestone – an actual pilgrimage to the places where Reform Judaism was born. I struggled with this – we all did – but we also all came to realize that being there – to bear witness to our own heritage and to the great legacy of Jewish life and culture that had flourished in Germany for over 1000 years before Hitler, was a moral and spiritual obligation. We also felt strongly that we wanted to see for ourselves the miracle that has unfolded in Germany in the past 25 years – the rebirth of Jewish life in the place that everyone thought would never again be anymore than a graveyard for our People.

We wanted to stand in solidarity with those 100,000 Jews who live in Germany today, and who are rebuilding the community and renewing the Jewish presence and contribution to German life – to see the new synagogues and schools that have literally risen out of the ashes – usually on the very sites of those that were destroyed. We felt that it was incumbent upon us to experience and affirm the inescapable reality that every Jew in the world today must confront – that in the face of the boundless grief and the unspeakable tragedy that will forever be a dark

place in our hearts – that we are, in spite of it all, here... alive... in the 21st century! While we will never cease our grieving for the 6 million lost, we must also be forever grateful that the Jewish People and Faith still live and flourish, in every corner of the world...in America, in Israel, in Europe and even in Germany itself...long after Hitler's dream of a 1000 year Third Reich is nothing more than a universally reviled memory. We felt called to reaffirm that transcendent truth of Jewish history that just as the crushed and vanquished victims of Imperial Rome 2000 years ago, survived and went on to create a renewed Jewish life throughout the world, continuing to enrich and shape world civilization long after the great Roman Empire was reduced to ruins, so too have we triumphed over the cruelty and evil of the Nazi terror.

And so we embarked on our pilgrimage determined that it not be primarily a Holocaust memorial experience – but even more, a celebration of our distinctive Reform heritage and an affirmation of the eternal miracle of Jewish survival. However, we came to realize, almost immediately, that it would be impossible to totally separate these dimensions of our experience – as we constantly encountered the echoes and the counterpoint that are the reality of Germany today. We arrived on July 14, and as we landed in Frankfurt, I felt a pang in my stomach...a physical sense of anxiety. This anticipatory response proved to be warranted. As the plane load of passengers from our flight – which included a number from our group – myself and two other rabbis – made our way through the arrivals terminal, we reached Passport Control. A stern, large framed, uniformed woman, the security officer, came forward and barked an order in a clipped voice – whose accent I am not mimicking as a stereotype, but am replicating to give you a sense of how it sounded and felt to us:

“You vill form two lines – one vill go the right and one vill go to the left...”

The three of us looked at each other – ashen faced – we did not have to articulate the emotions we felt, or the vicarious memories that were evoked... of Jews hearing these same orders in another time... when, each morning, those very orders were given to the inmates of the Death Camps – determining who

would live and who would die that day. If we had any illusions that we were going to keep the demons at bay, at that moment we inescapably realized that we were indeed in Germany – and that the dark shadows would be pervasive.

Our Pilgrimage to Hamburg

For me personally, the most emotional part of our visit was our pilgrimage to Hamburg, to visit the famed Hamburg Temple on the last day of our journey. The Jacobson Temple, essentially a school chapel, was indeed the site of the first Reform worship and



The Hamburg Temple building today

ideas, but it was the Hamburg Temple, established in 1818, that was the first actual Reform Congregation to be organized in the world. The Temple itself has, for me, always been a virtually mystical symbol. I recall first seeing photos of the building, described as “The Mother Temple of Reform Judaism” in a Religious School magazine when I was a teenager, and somehow, it became deeply a part of my own spiritual consciousness. The congregation built this magnificent sanctuary in 1931 – it was the last synagogue to be built in Germany before the Destruction. A beautiful modern building in the pure Bauhaus style, it was a tragic embodiment of the pride, hope and confidence that German Jews felt as late as two years before Hitler came to power.

On Kristallnacht, November 9, 1938, it was considered too new and expensive a structure to be burned by the Nazis. While the sanctuary was ransacked – an event very movingly depicted in a bronze sculpture in front of the building, depicting the Torah Scrolls being thrown out of the Ark, the building survived intact. After the war, the Hamburg Temple was taken over as the North German National Radio Network, as its main headquarters and broadcast studios, and serves this purpose today. There is a reborn Jewish community and two new synagogues in Hamburg – but this sacred shrine is usually not open to the public and no Jewish groups or tourists are allowed entry. Through the intercession of Abraham Geiger College, our group received permission to visit and have a Service – the first Jewish Service to be held in what had been the beautiful Sanctuary, since 1938.



*Shoah Monument in front of the
Hamburg Temple*

Our three hour trip to Hamburg was reserved for the last day of our week-long program. Despite all of the many powerful emotions and inspiring experiences we had shared, the realization of this impending encounter was always in my consciousness. As we entered Hamburg, we saw the beauty and vitality of this lovely city – a small, compact mix of historic neighborhoods and a prosperous, modern downtown with commercial buildings and stylish shopping boulevards. The Temple is located on Oberstrasse, a lovely tree-lined street in the fashionable residential area of Rotherbaum, where most of the congregation had lived in elegant apartment houses and villas prior to the Deportation to the concentration camps. As we turned on to the street and approached our first view of the building, I literally began to tremble... the façade came into full view the image that I had known and had this mystical relationship with since my childhood. We stepped off the bus, and gathered in front of the build in – at the very striking monument on its steps. In a nation filled with countless Holocaust monuments and memorials of every possible design and concept – few match the stark emotional power of this one. The three dimensional bronze sculpture depicts the Temple Ark on Kristallnacht... the curtains torn open and the Torah Scrolls falling out onto the ground... with the simple inscription, “November 9, 1938 – In Memoriam.”

We stood there, gazing up at the massive front of the still very modern looking edifice – the single round window puncturing the otherwise solid front – in the shape of a seven branch Menorah... and that timeless universal invitation emblazoned in Hebrew across the entry doors... “My House Shall Be a House of Prayer for All People”...painful in its ironic poignancy.

It is remarkable that aside from sparing the building, that the Gestapo also did not destroy these Jewish symbols. Photos of the building during the War do indicate that wooden boards were nailed over the Hebrew inscription...but the Menorah design of the front window was left untouched, even while the rest of the walls were covered with obscene graffiti by the Hitler Youth, and garbage was piled on the plaza in front.

I had shared some of the very personal meaning of this place with the rest of our group on the bus ride from Berlin, and had requested their forbearance in allowing me to enter the building alone to spend a few moments to process the experience. I walked into the cavernous space... unrecognizable as the Sanctuary it had been, except for a part of the marble wall that had been the Holy Ark. At that moment, all of the years of the memory of what this place

had represented for me, came crashing into my consciousness, and I was overcome. I am a passionate person and feel emotions deeply and openly...but I do not cry easily...even when I feel grief. But there in that place, I found myself crumpling onto a seat and breaking into heaving sobs. I have not cried like that – gasping for air with such gut-wrenching physical pain – in my life. It was perhaps 10 minutes before I was able to breathe normally again. It all dawned on me in that moment – I was experiencing my own personal release of all the profound sadness that had been building throughout the trip.

After a lifetime of rational, intellectual understanding of the Holocaust as a historic event, I had never truly experienced my own personal grief viscerally...not even many years ago, when I visited Auschwitz itself. There, seeing the gas chambers and the crematoria, one feels numb and cannot weep. However, here in this quiet place, that enshrines all that I believe in and cherish and have dedicated my entire life to – it just all came pouring out – all of the sorrow I have ever personally felt, deep in my heart, over the Shoah...

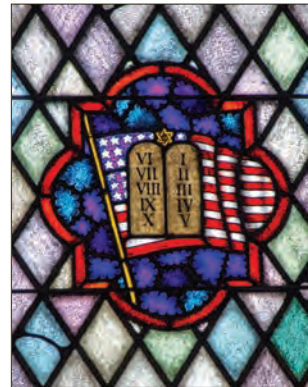
When I was able to compose myself, I led our memorial ceremony. Everyone was deeply conscious of the drama of the moment- that we were being granted the incredible privilege of sharing the first Jewish worship in this sacred space since Yom Kippur 1938... that this was the first time the Shema had resounded within these walls in over 70 years – last sung by a thousand souls now long gone... in a world that no longer existed. After we concluded, with the recitation of the Kaddish and the singing of the German Reform version of Adon Olam just as it would have been sung on that last Kol Nidre Eve before Kristallnacht, there were many tears and many of us held each other and sobbed. I will never forget this moment, and indeed cannot get the images out of my consciousness. I will be forever grateful for the privilege of having experienced this personal encounter... as a testimony of the tradition and faith of our People, our survival out of the ashes, and the continuing, living message of the Reform Jewish heritage that I so cherish.

Our American Jewish Heritage: A Personal Perspective

Rabbi Howard A. Berman

From, Volume II, Number 2: Spring, 2010

One of the distinguishing perspectives of Reform Judaism has always been a central focus on the unique spiritual significance of the Jewish encounter with America. As expressed in the Statement of Principles of the SCRJ,



*Chaplains Memorial
Window, HUC Chapel,
Cincinnati*

We affirm and celebrate the unique experience of Judaism in the United States. Our Hebrew Bible's ideals of liberty and justice have helped shape American democracy from its earliest beginnings. Inspired by our tradition, and responding to its ethical and social values, Jews have played a vital role in the founding and building of America. We cherish this noble heritage and are committed to the exercise of our rights and responsibilities as proud and loyal citizens of this nation. These obligations include prophetic dissent, expressed in the democratic process, as well as full civic engagement in our society.

The utterly unique unfolding of the Jewish experience in this land has shaped each of us in profound and complex ways. The fundamental perspectives from which we think about being Jews in contemporary America are unprecedented in the long history of our people. From the earliest colonial beginnings,

the Jews of this nation perceived a virtually cosmic, providential significance to the meaning of America for our people and faith. A new, dynamic, progressive expression of our tradition was inspired and shaped by this free, open, pluralistic society. The United States represented the rejection of the prejudices and tyrannies of traditional authority in European culture – and there emerged on these shores a spirit of freedom and liberty of conscience that threw off the shackles of entrenched authority, whether religious or political. This was a reforming spirit that influenced every religious community that settled here and nurtured the full flowering of liberal Judaism, beyond the tentative beginnings the Reform Movement had initially made in 19th century Europe.

And yet, just as significantly, not only did America shape Judaism on these shores... the Jewish tradition, in turn, profoundly influenced the evolution of American democracy. In early America, beginning with the Pilgrim ideals of religious freedom and the rights of citizens, this spirit was consciously rooted in the ideals of the Hebrew Bible. The image of the Exodus – of the liberation of the Israelites from slavery and their journey to the Promised Land – became a primary theme in American history, inspiring generations of settlers and slaves, immigrants and refugees, seeking their own liberation. The models of civil legislation in our Torah, and the principles of justice and human rights championed by our Jewish Prophets, pervaded the culture and political philosophy of the colonies. Whether it was the Biblical and Talmudic echoes in the legal codes of the colonies or the importance of the Hebrew language in the early intellectual life of the Pilgrims and Puritans, the influence of Jewish tradition on the early evolution of American culture was indeed profound.

This formative Jewish spiritual influence on the emergence of American democracy culminated in 1776 with the Declaration of Independence and the beginning of the American Revolution. The struggle for independence was infused with a ringing affirmation of the inherent natural rights of every

individual; a notion deeply grounded in the Torah's distinctive concept of humanity created in the Divine image. This Biblical spirit was perhaps nowhere more dramatically symbolized than by the inscription on the famous Liberty Bell – the stirring words that became the rallying cry of the struggle for independence, taken from the Book of Leviticus: "Proclaim liberty throughout the land, unto all the inhabitants thereof!" And while we are deeply conscious that these noble ideals were not fully realized at first – and remain unfulfilled for too many American citizens even today – they nevertheless heralded the birth of a new age of freedom and opportunity for the oppressed and downtrodden of the world, providing hope and promise for millions of people... none more so than the Jews.

Indeed with that arrival of the first Jewish settlers on American soil in 1654, only a few decades after the Mayflower landed at Plymouth Rock, an unprecedented new chapter opened in the annals of our people's history. In every other nation on the face of the earth, Jews had been considered aliens – despised outsiders – persecuted heretics. But here, from virtually the very beginning of American history, Jews have been an integral part of the





*The Historic Touro Synagogue (1763)
Newport, Rhode Island*

founding and building of this nation – its earliest settlement...its colonial development...the struggles of the Revolution...and the building of the new democratic society. And in turn, America was the first - and for a long time - the only place in the world where Jews were able to exercise the rights and freedom of full citizens. For the first time in 2000 years, since the destruction of ancient Israel by the Roman legions, there was a place where Jews could be fully at home...with the same civil and religious rights as all others. This was a nation made up not of one dominant native ethnic or religious majority, in which we were the conspicuous outsiders but, rather, a pluralistic society composed of many different religions, races, and cultures.

The unprecedented, indeed revolutionary, experience of Jews in this new nation was most dramatically reflected in the words of none other than George Washington himself. Following the War for Independence in 1790, our first President visited the seaside town of Newport, Rhode Island, to win support for the ratification of the new federal Constitution. During his visit, he was invited to visit Newport's famous Touro Synagogue. This congregation was then already over a century old. Its beautiful sanctuary, built in 1763, stands to this day as a national historic shrine. Washington wanted to visit the synagogue to express his gratitude to the Jewish community for its unswerving support for the Revolutionary cause during the war. When he returned to Philadelphia, he

wrote a letter of appreciation to the congregation, for the warm welcome he had received. This letter is one of the great documents of American history...and the virtual charter of American Jewry...

To the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island August 21, 1790:

...The reflection on the days of difficulty and danger which are past, is rendered the more sweet from a consciousness that they are succeeded by days of uncommon prosperity and security.

If we have wisdom to make the best use of the advantages with which we are now favored, we cannot fail, under the just administration of a good government, to become a great and a happy people.

The citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy — a policy worthy of imitation. All possess alike, liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship.

It is now no more that 'toleration' is spoken of — as if it were by the indulgence of one group of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily, the Government of the United States, which requires only that they who live under its protection should conduct themselves as good citizen, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support...

May you, the Children of the stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants — while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make them afraid.

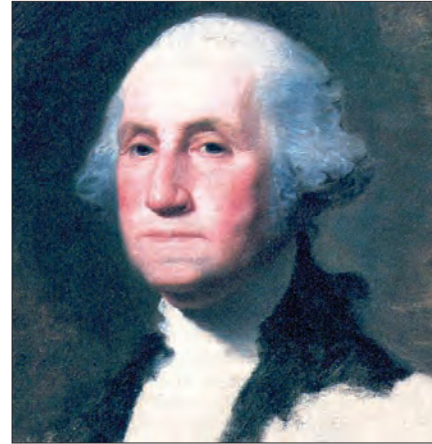
May the Father of all mercies scatter light, and not darkness, upon our paths... and make us all, in our several vocations, useful here, and then, in His own due time and way, everlastingly happy.

*Your Servant,
George Washington*

The profound significance of this document is impossible to overstate. In every other country in the world in 1790, Jews were disenfranchised and persecuted outsiders...locked behind ghetto walls in the capitals of Europe or isolated in remote, impoverished shtetl villages. In no place did they have even the most basic civil rights. But here, in the United States, the President of the new nation became the first modern head of state to ever visit a synagogue. And in the name of the government, he pledged this remarkable commitment of liberty far beyond mere tolerance. In the broad sweep of Jewish history, this was nothing short of a miracle...indeed, this could have happened “only in America!” And in response to this miracle, on these shores there emerged the greatest, freest, most influential Jewish community the world has ever known...an integral part of American culture that has made major contributions to every aspect of our country’s life.

In our celebration of this heritage, and our grateful and proud expressions of our love and commitment to this nation, we are, of course, compelled to emphasize that we affirm the very noblest and highest ideals of America. We forthrightly recognize that there are yet many unfulfilled dreams and mandates in the continuing unfolding of our country’s destiny. There remain great injustices and inequalities in our midst, with a dark strain of extremism, bigotry and violence that are a perversion of all that America authentically stands for. The many challenges that our nation faces at this particular moment in our history are stark reminders that the American dream of liberty and justice for all is still far from reality. And yet, our love and devotion to this country must not be undermined by these daunting realities... and we dare not

surrender our claims of love of country and authentic patriotism – handing them over to the dangerous mischief of extremists and fundamentalists. Rather, we must continue to labor tirelessly, as responsible citizens, in the ongoing struggle for justice and peace — in our midst and in the world. This has been the



President George Washington

Jewish mission throughout the ages... and is the mission and destiny of America at its truest and best.

I feel compelled to share a deeply personal perspective as an example of why I, as an American Jew have always cherished this dimension of my identity and heritage. I will never forget an experience I had when I attended the dedication of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C. in 1993. I recall vividly the opening ceremonies and my first tour of the Museum, with its crushing lessons of horror and tragedy. We walked through the exhibits, with their painfully vivid depictions of the death camps, gas chambers, and crematoria. We saw the heartbreaking piles of shoes taken from the storerooms at Auschwitz and the haunting photographs of hundreds of faces – so many of them children – devastating in the realization that they represent only a tiny fraction of those who were slaughtered.

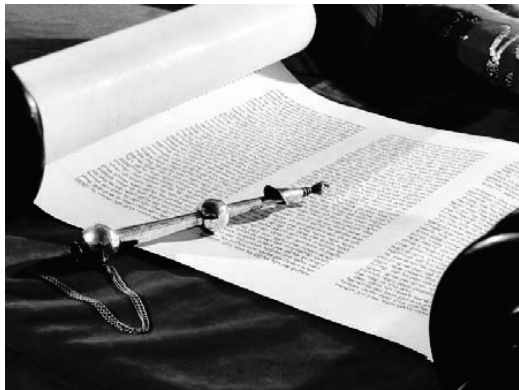
Emotionally drained, as everyone who visits the Memorial inevitably is, I left the building, and then walked a few blocks down the National Mall. I felt a particular need to stop into the National Archives building, to see, as I have done many times

through the years, the original drafts of the sacred documents of our nation's heritage – the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. As I stood there in the quiet awe of that soaring, sanctuary-like space, I could not help but be overwhelmed by the counterpoint – the incredibly stark contrast – between what I was feeling at that moment and what I had just witnessed at the Holocaust Museum. There, I had just seen vivid testimony of history's worst desecration of the human spirit... here, I stood before the precious relics of the noblest heights to which the human mind and heart can aspire...

I pondered those familiar words – here, in their original, handwritten form – that we, as human beings, we are “all created equal, and endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness...”. I was so struck at that very moment, as perhaps never before, why July 4, 1776, must be considered one of the most sacred dates in Jewish history.

At that moment, with the impressions of the Holocaust Museum so fresh in my mind, I realized something that I had often intellectually pondered but perhaps never so emotionally comprehended before...

if that faded piece of parchment before me had never been written...had my great-grandparents not left their small villages in eastern Europe over a century ago, to come to this place of freedom and hope... created by that very



document...I would — by definition — be dead...indeed, I never would have been born.

Beyond all of the political controversies and debates of any given moment, this must be the inescapable realization of every American Jew... Had not our grandparents or great –grandparents left all of their hundreds of towns and villages in Europe over the last three centuries, and found new life here in America, we would...every one of us...by definition... be dead. Standing there, before the Declaration of Independence, and realizing this truth with such force, was a moment of profound realization of the courage and faith that guided my family and so many others in making that difficult journey to a new world so long ago. I was overwhelmed with deep and humble gratitude – that of all the long ages and far places of human history and of Jewish suffering, that I was granted the blessing – and the privilege – of having been born in this time...and in this place. Ultimately, this is why our precious heritage, as Jews and Americans, is so deeply rooted in our consciousness. Now, more than ever, this rich legacy presents us with powerful spiritual challenges and moral mandates:

to join with all people of faith and good will to “proclaim liberty throughout the land, unto all the inhabitants thereof...”

to pursue justice...and healing.. and peace...in our nation, and throughout the world...

and to continue, with love and devotion, courage and dedication, to do our part, as Americans and as Jews, to build a nation true to its noblest and most sacred ideals...

*“One nation” ...but rich in diversity,
“under God” ...but with many different
understandings of the Divine
“with liberty...and justice...for all. ”*

Reform Judaism - Its Direction

Rabbi Hillel Cohn, *Congregation Emanu El,
San Bernardino, CA*

From Volume I, Number 1: Autumn, 2008

While we are gathered here in our synagogue tonight, a number of the leaders of this congregation and our Sisterhood are celebrating the Shabbat in San Diego with close to 6,000 other Jews at the 69th Biennial Convention of the Union for Reform Judaism, the organization which brings over 900 reform synagogues in North America together. Our congregation has been an affiliate of the Union for the past 60 years.

Having attended many of the Union Biennials over the years, I think I can safely predict that those from our congregation who are attending will return here energized, enriched, impressed, elevated, inspired and — given a program that has hundreds of offerings and that keeps delegates busy from early in the morning till late at night — exhausted! And they will also return a bit impatient, wanting to change things here so that what they experienced all of us can experience. It is not unlike the experience of youths who attend our Union camps and come home desiring that their local synagogue replicate the camp experience.

There is no question that our Reform movement is vibrant. We are far and away the largest denomination in contemporary American Judaism. We have much to be proud of. Our summer camps for young Jews are outstanding; our Religious Action Center in

Washington DC is recognized as a powerful and passionate voice for justice and the application of Jewish values in the political arena; our seminary - the Hebrew Union College - trains rabbis, cantors, educators, communal workers and promotes Jewish scholarship; materials produced for religious schools and adult learning are excellent. Our national leaders are people of extraordinary talent and commitment and they make us proud. There is much more that gives us reason to be proud members of the Reform movement.

Surely those who attend the Biennial conventions of the Union are always moved by the experience of sharing with thousands of other deeply committed Jews in Shabbat services. In many ways it is “revival meeting.” It is more than the music or the Torah teaching that makes Shabbat at the Biennial memorable. It is, as has often been noted by Biennial attendees, extraordinary to join voices with 5,000 other Jews in singing the Shema and reciting the prayers of our People. That, obviously, can’t be fully replicated in any local synagogue.

But I am not sure that all of the direction that the Reform movement is taking is necessarily good or right and I would caution those who return from attending the Biennial in San Diego from believing that they can replicate what happens at a Biennial convention here in their home synagogue.

I think I can predict that certainly one of the things that those attending the convention in San Diego will come back with is an appreciation of the new prayer book of Reform Judaism, *Mishkan T’filah* and an impatience to use it here in our synagogue. It has just come off the presses and many congregations around the country have begun using it, generally with satisfaction. The enthusiasm for the new prayer book stems, in great measure, from the dissatisfaction with its predecessor - *Gates of Prayer*. I share that



dissatisfaction and that is why when years ago we sought prayer books that would be appropriate and useful here we chose those we currently use. Each person attending the convention will get a copy of Mishkan T'filah and it is being used throughout the Biennial for the various services. While there might be some reservations about one thing or another in that book my sense is that it will be overwhelmingly appreciated. It has been years in the making. Its consistent use of gender-free language, its inclusion of variant readings for major portions of services, and its handsome design will be lauded.

But to be realistic, let me share with you my belief that a prayer book, a Siddur, has to be used judiciously, sensitively and sensibly. That's certainly the case with the prayer books we use here. Liturgy is an art — and requires trained artisans to make it work. The new prayer book of Reform Judaism is based on some perceptions whose validity I question. And those perceptions are reflective of the state of contemporary Reform Judaism. I wish to briefly touch on some of these perceptions.

The first perception is that we, contemporary American Jews, are spiritually starved, that we crave intense spiritual experiences, that we are seeking transcendent experiences that will save our lives from the evils of secularism...that rationality and reason have essentially failed us. The perception is that synagogues have failed in meeting the spiritual needs of their members. The new prayer book and other programs of our movement assume that we have a craving for a closer connection to God, specifically to an understanding of a God who is personal, heals and works miracles, and rewards and punishes humanity. I seriously question that perception. It may be accurate for what I would call the "elite" of our movement, those who are deeply involved, but I don't think it is accurate for what we call *amcha*, the mass, the common-folk, the average member of Reform synagogues and certainly not for the unaffiliated whom we would hope to bring into our synagogues.



I have often said that while the 2,000 year old rabbinic teaching says that the world rests on three things — Torah or study, Avodah or worship and Gemillut Chasadim, deeds of loving kindness — the truth is that for contemporary Jews the three functional aspects of the Jewish experience are Belonging, Believing and Behaving... and that behaving and belonging are of greater significance than believing.

Or at least that is how the vast majority of synagogue members treat their membership. Whether that is good or not is not the point. It is simply a reality. And by behavior I do not mean taking on all of the traditional practices that were cast off by the founders of Reform Judaism. I mean behaving in a Jewish way, living one's life by ethical standards that flow out of the Jewish experience, making life's major choices informed by the values and teachings of Judaism but always being ready to dissent from those teachings

when they are clearly out of sync with contemporary understandings and insights.

The newspaper coverage of the Biennial this week announced that the results of a survey would be revealed and that these results would provide a foundation for new directions of the movement. The problem is that the survey was done among the most committed and is hardly representative of the majority. I was somewhat amused and perhaps even more perturbed by the picture that accompanied the story earlier this week circulated by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency about the results of a survey of Reform Jews that would be revealed at the San Diego convention. The picture is obviously intended to depict Reform Judaism. It shows a woman, wearing a tallit, carrying a Torah around in a congregation where people are using the new prayer book and a few feet away from her is a man wearing t'fillin.

Now I have long prized the diversity that Reform Judaism accepts and encourages. I love the egalitarianism that Reform Judaism pioneered and which is now firmly embedded in liberal Judaism. But I question the need to appropriate practices and forms that seem to be more of an envy of Tradition and that stem from a sense that what we are as Reform Jews is somehow inauthentic. What is authentic about our liberal Jewish experience is our long-standing commitment to the application of prophetic teachings to daily life. That is, if the picture is intended to be descriptive, and if the hundreds of workshops on the Biennial program are any indication of the direction in which Reform Judaism is headed, I am not comfortable with that at all.

A second perception that seems to be influencing Reform Judaism or at least influencing Reform Jewish leaders - clergy and laity alike - is that the only real place for one to be a Jew is in Israel and that the American Jewish experience will never be a full Jewish experience...that Israel is our true home. Now, those of you whom I have taught over the course of close to four decades know that I am a life-long Zionist, that I have worked and continue to work for the security and survival of Israel and that I love the land and its history and so much more. But I am also a proud American Jew, appreciative of the benefits of the American experience and convinced that I can live a full Jewish life here. I firmly believe — and I think you do, too — that we need not apologize for being American Jews and that while it is good and beneficial to visit Israel, we need not feel guilty about not making aliyah. I fear that too much of contemporary Reform Judaism has become Israel-centered and that our movement desperately needs to strike a balance. Yes, we need to work for the acceptance of liberal Judaism in Israel but we must not sell American Judaism short in order to do that. And living in America means that we cultivate relationships with non-Jews, relationships that preclude chauvinism or arrogance on our part — just as they preclude arrogance and chauvinism on their part.

And, while there is much more to say about contemporary Reform Judaism, let me just share one more perception that I think is invalid — and it is not unrelated to the issuance of the new prayer book of Reform Judaism. It has to do with synagogue services and what happens in our synagogues. Over the past 6 1/2 years since my retirement, I have had many occasions to attend services in other synagogues as well as attending services here. What we experience is not generally positive. In what we sense is a quest for informality we encounter mediocrity, amateurism, a trivialization of the synagogue experience. In an attempt to become folksy, the synagogue service has become extremely pedestrian and for that reason does not attract us with regularity.

Now I know that styles change and I have long been open to change. Music is one of those styles. I appreciate the music that has come to us from a variety of sources. But I also know that just as my soul is elevated by a magnificent symphony it is elevated by the rich, thunderous and versatile sounds of an organ and the haunting chants of a cantor and the glorious and awesome choral renditions of Jewish liturgy. In a world where so much of life has become commonplace, I look for the synagogue experience to invest my life with awe and beauty and inspiration. I look for a delicate balance between what I used to refer to as being “High-Church” and the use of contemporary forms. It has to do with much more than music. It has to do with the setting, the ambiance, the entire gestalt. What we so often encounter in our visits to other synagogues and here as well are off-the-cuff “talks” or “chats” instead of carefully honed sermons, boring sameness instead of well constructed services that are products of the thinking and labor of those trained in the art of Jewish liturgy and who use their training properly.

Too often I find myself uplifted more by what I experience in churches than what I experience in synagogues. While I obviously can’t accept church theology I find that their valuing of passionate and purposeful preaching and glorious music move me more than does the average synagogue experience.

Now admittedly these perceptions of mine may simply be the musings of an aging curmudgeon. If they are, just dismiss them as the rantings and ravings

of a retired rabbi. But, hopefully, at least one or two of you will resonate to what I have been trying to say. I envy those of this congregation who tonight are celebrating Shabbat with 5,000 other Jews in San Diego. But, once they have come down from the clouds and returned to earth, maybe they will envy what we have experienced together right here tonight. Who knows?

The Face of Intermarriage: A Rabbi's Pastoral Reflections

Rabbi Nadia Siritsky, Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation

From Volume I, Number 2: Winter, 2009

A snapshot of a couple that allegedly is destroying the Jewish people:

"I feel devastated... Like I got kicked in the stomach. I mean, I've known this Rabbi all my life. He bat mitzvahed me. He confirmed me... I just always thought that he would marry me. But he just looked at me, shook his head and told me that he wouldn't. He said that we were destroying the Jewish people. I don't understand. I am so happy with John. I love him so much. He treats me so well. It's not like I don't love Judaism too. We wouldn't have come to him if Judaism wasn't important to us."

They sit in front of me — her crying, him handing her a tissue and rubbing her back. His face is concerned and confused. He leans over and says to me:

"I'm not even really Christian but my parents are. In fact, they keep telling us that their minister will be happy to marry us. But I don't know, Christianity never really made sense to me as a faith, growing up, so why would I want to have a minister marry me now? It seems opportunistic. Besides which, I know that she would not feel comfortable with that either. And, I mean, like I said, I don't even think of

myself as Christian. I never really did. I never felt I could ask questions. I never really fit in... So I don't understand, because it's not like it's even really an interfaith marriage. It's just that I don't know enough right now to say that I would want to convert. I mean, I like Judaism, and I love the way her family has welcomed me in. I love the lighting of the candles and the warmth... It's just that he wanted me to make all these promises. And I couldn't make them... because I just don't know. I mean, I don't even know if we will have children, and there he was asking me to make all these promises."

She goes on:

"I just thought he'd be happy for me...happy that I was in love. But I just felt condemned. Like who I was, and what I had chosen for myself, were not good enough... And then we went and asked my Hillel Rabbi, who told us the same thing. I had been so active in college, and we had gotten close, you know? I thought he would understand that if I was asking, it was because Judaism was still important to me. But he said that our marriage was what was wrong with the Jewish people. He told me about how Hitler was going to have a posthumous victory because of people like us. That was harsh. Who is he to judge us? How does he know what we are going to do? I was so embarrassed in front of John...like how could I be so devoted to a people that judged me so harshly? I wanted to give up — just run away and go to a Justice of the Peace... I didn't want to have anything else to do with Judaism. If they won't accept me for who I am, why should I bother? But it was John who talked me out of it."



John now speaks up:

"I know how much she loves Judaism. How much of a part of her it is. And it does seem really beautiful. Just because I am not ready to make all these promises in an honest and authentic manner does not mean I don't see its beauty...does not mean I don't appreciate the way that it makes space for questions...the way it places family and relationship first." He sighs. "I love her so much. And it's a part of her. A really beautiful part of her. I don't want to watch her try to kill that part of herself off, just because she feels hurt and rejected right now. I just kept thinking, there has to be another option...and then my friend told me about you. So, we thought, that, uh, maybe you could help..."



I am faced, again and again, with couples exactly like this one — thoughtful, loving couples, who so desperately want to be married by a rabbi, and find their place within the Jewish community — I feel awe. I feel tremendous awe for the powerful Jewish spirit that, once again, as it has always done, refuses to be deterred from living its faith on its own terms.

And I feel anger. A deep anger and sadness for how fear becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. We are our own worst enemy. The desire to protect the Jewish people is actually turning Jews away. As a child of a Holocaust survivor, I know, only too well the fear of extinction

that is causing so many to react in a narrow and restrictive manner. If we have learned anything from that unspeakably awful experience, than I wish it was that fear is at the root of prejudice, and that giving in to fear is an abdication of faith.

One Rabbinic Response

I sit before them...moved to tears by how much they care about Judaism...how brave it was for them to risk rejection for a third time! These are the people who are destroying the Jewish people? This loving couple that is practically begging for a rabbi to help them find a way to incorporate Judaism into their life together as a couple — these are not the people who are destroying the Jewish people. These are the people who are saving the Jewish people, despite all odds.

Because, the claim that our survival is in jeopardy is true. By many objective standards, we do not seem to be growing. But, I disagree with their assessment of the threat. We are losing Jews, not because of who they choose to marry, but because of how we respond to them. The more restrictive our definition for "who is a Jew", the more we will shrink. When

The saddest part is that one cannot reason with fear. If only I could somehow reach my colleagues and get them to hear beyond their fears... If only they had a fraction of the faith of this couple that refused to give up hope... There are so many reasons to see intermarriage as a wonderful opportunity to learn, grow and indeed, thrive. I believe that, depending on how we respond to it, intermarriage can be a blessing.

Trying to Reason with Fear

The first and most obvious way in which intermarriage can be a blessing for the Jewish people, is the new possibilities that a personal encounter with Judaism can offer to many non-Jews who do not feel very connected to their faith of birth. Many non-Jews, through their exposure to Judaism eventually incorporate elements of our faith into their lives. For a variety of personal or family reasons, they may or may not always choose to formalize this process through an official conversion, but either

way, their presence in our congregations is a huge gift. Through their questions and insights, they bring a new perspective on rituals and beliefs that we may have taken for granted, giving us the opportunity to be renewed in our own faith. Very often, they may inspire their own partners to become more observant, or to attend services more regularly. In countless ways, these individuals, who come into our communities through intermarriage and choose to stay, to whatever extent, binding their fate with our own, are huge blessings. We owe them our gratitude, not our judgment and suspicion. In countless ways, these individuals, who come into our communities through intermarriage and choose to stay, to whatever extent, binding their fate with our own, are huge blessings. We owe them our gratitude, not our judgment and suspicion.

Of course, not everyone who marries a Jew chooses to live Jewishly. It may be because they have their own religious faith, or it may be because they do not want to be where they are not welcomed or wanted. Nevertheless, such individuals, and their families, can still be a force for good and blessing for the Jewish people. The advent of thousands of non-Jews choosing to link their fate with the fate of Jews means that thousands upon thousands of non-Jews will have a personal stake in fighting anti-Semitism, and given a new reason to stand up in the face of hatred. If the only thing that they know about the Jews is that they rejected their child, just for being in love with a Jew, we will probably have that many less allies in the world. And having countless new advocates, with personal connections to our people, is just as essential in our perennial quest for Jewish continuity. This is part of my sadness. I understand that the concern over numbers emerges from our own unresolved grief over the millions who perished in the Holocaust. But the way we express our fears does not help to create a world where we can say with certainty: "Never again". I believe that our challenge is a task of alchemy, namely to transform our dark shadowy legacy into one where ignorance is replaced

*I believe that...
intermarriage
can be a blessing.*

with understanding, blindness with sight, fear with trust and hatred with love. This is the real task of Jewish continuity, to liberate ourselves from the specters of our history. How many times do we need to experience Mitzrayim - the biblical Egypt which symbolizes all narrow places that imprison us — to learn how to love those who come to dwell amongst us?

The most frequent objection to intermarriage is: the children. How can the children of a minority be brought up, being exposed to the faith of a minority and a majority? Both sides of the

debate turn to statistics, of varying degrees of validity, to back up their arguments... And, so, it is appropriate to note our faith is the Shema and the V'ahavta, namely the command to listen and to love. We are commanded to listen to G!d's ongoing revelation through love and to respond in love. The challenge of intermarriage is an opportunity to do just that, to listen closely to these couples, and to hear G!d's word in the powerful love that they embody- in their love for one another, and in their faith that inspires them to risk repeated rejection in order to receive blessing. And, who are we to withhold blessing?

The Sacred is beyond all language and words...and just as I choose to express the Divine with a spelling that moves beyond conventional language, so have I chosen to respond to the challenge of interfaith marriage in a way that also transcends the boundaries and limitations that we impose on the Divine Creation, and one another. This is the theological understanding that calls me to remain open and all-embracing of the many different ways G!d is revealed in human love that do not always fit into the categories of our understanding... through all the different religions, and through all the countless ways in which the Sacred becomes manifest in this world and in our lives.

May we soon find the strength to respond to love with love, not fear. May we have faith in Judaism's

ability to not only survive, but to thrive. And may we have the courage to trust that G!d is working through love to bring healing to our broken world.

WHAT IS CLASSICAL REFORM MUSIC?

Cantor Aaron Kaplan, Houston, Texas

From Volume V, Number 1: Spring, 2013

I have always had a problem with labels, especially in the world of music. I distinctly remember in one of my undergraduate music history classes, my music history professor cautioned us at the beginning of the term to not look at music from the context of respective periods in history. He was quick to point out that at no point was there an official declaration from an authoritative presence that we have now officially concluded the Renaissance period, and as of this moment, we are now in the Baroque.

In the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the term “classical,” as it pertains to music, is defined as: 1) of or relating to music of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, characterized by an emphasis on balance, clarity, and moderation; and 2) of, relating to, or being music in the educated European tradition that includes such forms as art song, chamber music, opera, and symphony as distinguished from folk or popular music or jazz. Even according to these definitions, I have certain problems with these classifications. Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, and many others did not classify the music they were composing as “classical.” To them they were simply writing music, and because of the innovative greatness of what they composed,

they, and their musical compositions have withstood the test of time, and are studied and performed to this day, while other composers and music simply faded from memory. So in essence, the term “classical” should really be applied to something that is truly enduring.

That definition is very fitting to describe much of the music associated with the Reform Movement, especially here in America. After all, the melody that we commonly associated with the Friday evening Kiddush was composed by 19th century composer Louis Lewandowski, the melody that we most associate with the Sabbath candle blessing was composed by Abraham Wolf Binder, a composer who came to prominence here in America in the early 20th century. These melodies have withstood the test of time, not because they are considered “classics,” but because they are great melodies!



*Plum Street Temple Organ
Cincinnati, Ohio*

Unfortunately, the term “Classical Reform,” as it has been applied to a particular genre of music, has also taken on negative connotations. When one attributes a particular piece of liturgical music as “Classical Reform music,” the negative stereotypes associated with this classification are adjectives such as “high-church,” “performative,” “Protestant,” “non-participatory,” meaning the music is inaccessible, and does not encourage congregational singing. Additionally, this genre of music has also been described as “artistically esoteric.” Those who grew up in Conservative and Orthodox synagogues, will often remark that this style of music “does not sound

Jewish,” or that when hearing it, they feel as if they are in a church. These adjectives and classifications are exactly what I described them, as strictly stereotypes. What makes the term “classical” appropriate to this particular genre of music is that it completely fits within the characterization of something that is truly enduring. This style of music is deeply and

profoundly rooted in Jewish tradition. The organ, the instrument most commonly associated with Classical Reform worship, is rooted in the pipe, brass, and percussion instruments described in the book of Psalms. Another feature of Classical Reform worship, the choir, is rooted in the ceremonial practices that took place in the ancient Temple in Jerusalem, where the Levites would provide the musical aesthetic to the sacrificial cult. While choirs in Jewish worship have traditionally consisted of only men, with the embrace of egalitarianism, women were included in synagogue choirs as well. All of these elements are completely grounded in Jewish tradition.

Choirs were at first only volunteer and therefore were regarded as aids to congregational singing. But once the choirs became professional and the perception was established that choirs sang to, rather than with, the congregation, the two practices – choral and congregational singing – proved antithetical. While many leading Reform congregations continued to retain professionally trained cantors, the professional choir became widespread, and by 1920, when most temples had shifted their main service from Saturday morning to Friday night, the professional choirs were, for the most part, employed.

By the 1850s the reforms to synagogue music in America became much more radical. Services featured English hymns purposely modeled on the styles of contemporary American religious music, used in Protestant churches as well. While Orthodox congregations retained the Ashkenazic music from Europe (which, of course, had itself been influenced by non-Jewish religious and folk melodies) more and more American Jews affiliated with Reform congregations accepted the “American brand” of Jewish music.

In 1894, the Central Conference of American Rabbis published a single liturgy for the Movement, the Union Prayer Book. This was an attempt to unify all Reform congregations in America, and new music had to be composed that was suitable for the new liturgy. Since many Reform synagogue choirs

and organists were non-Jewish professionals, they created new music reflecting contemporary 19th century chorales. Many Jews, too, tried to compose music that would suit this taste. The early hymnals published by the Reform Movement in America contained hymns based upon melodies composed by Mozart, Beethoven, and Schumann. So in essence, given all of these variables, how can we accurately, and appropriately characterize music that would be part of Classical Reform worship? I would define “Classical Reform” music to be repertoire that invests the worship experience with awe, beauty and inspiration. It is music that strikes a delicate balance between grand formality and popular contemporary forms. It is music that through its historicity, defines what being Jewish in the United States could mean on the highest level and how a sense of dignified tradition in our worship could coexist with music that looks optimistically toward the future.


This music is indicative of the distinctive traditions of Reform Synagogue worship that includes its great repertoire of choral and instrumental music, especially the organ which has brought and heightened the levels of inspiration and meaning to the Reform vision of prayer, and fully and consciously grounded in the historic precedent of Jewish tradition. This music illuminates the deeper midrash (story) in our liturgy. Classical Reform music has a musical logic, allowing us to hear timeless themes within the notes, music that is transcendent, sublime, and of eternal holiness, composed by cantors and composers who stood and continue to stand on the shoulders of Beethoven, Schubert, and Schumann, while at the same time, fostering new interpretations of liturgy, that will provide an uplifting, participatory repertoire for the 21st century. Most importantly, Classical Reform music should compel each worshiper, upon hearing and singing, to proudly proclaim, *Ashreinu, mah tov chelkeinu* – Blessed are we! How good is our portion! How pleasant our lot! How beautiful our heritage!

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