

# The Reform Advocate

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THE SOCIETY FOR  
CLASSICAL  
REFORM  
JUDAISM

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



## *A SPECIAL ISSUE*

### AN INTRODUCTION TO CLASSICAL REFORM MUSIC

#### **Our Reform Musical Tradition: Some Personal Reflections**

*Rabbi Howard A. Berman*

*Executive Director, The Society for Classical Reform Judaism*

One of the most distinctive dimensions and enduring legacies of the Classical Reform tradition is the great repertoire of liturgical music that our Movement has created over the past two centuries. The early Reformers were guided by the overarching themes of our history - affirming Judaism's characteristic integration of uniquely Jewish values and observance within the broader social environments in which our people have lived. They fully embraced the cultural and intellectual progress of the modern age as inherently compatible with Jewish tradition and identity. These values were the context for the emergence of new expressions of Jewish life and worship that reflected the different artistic and cultural settings of modern Europe and America.

The renewal of synagogue music was a major priority from the beginning of the Reform Movement. The radically transformed aesthetic sensibilities and intellectual perspectives of a new generation of Jews, born outside the isolation of the ghetto - educated and rooted in modern science, literature, art, and music - called for new

approaches to worship that would challenge and inspire them. The pioneering generation of liberal rabbis asserted that this process would not be the assimilationist intrusion of alien influences, but rather the forthright reclamation of the majestic musical traditions of ancient Jewish history itself. Their argument was rooted in the choral and instrumental heritage of the Biblical Temple in Jerusalem, so celebrated in the Book of Psalms and documented in the Talmud. These texts clearly indicate that the



*The Choir of the Pestalozzistrasse Synagogue, Berlin, Preserves the Great German Reform Musical Tradition*

grand choral music of the Levites, accompanied by string and wind instruments (including the earliest forms of the pipe organ) were all rooted in ancient Jewish practice. A new generation of German Jewish composers, beginning with Salomon Sulzer (1804-1890) and Louis Lewandowski (1821-1894), grounded both in Jewish learning and contemporary musicianship, developed a repertoire of music for the synagogue that gave voice to both traditional cantorial modes and the best of contemporary styles. Their compositions became the beloved heritage of Reform Jews throughout the world. Their use of the religious and classical musical motifs and styles of their own time and

place was no different - and no less “Jewish” - than the influence of Russian and Polish folk music on Hasidic “niggun” songs and Klezmer, or the echo of Arabic Islamic chant on the music of the Sephardic tradition.

And yet, “Classical Reform music” is not limited to the masterpieces of the 19th century. This dynamic artistry has continued to the present generation of Jewish musicians and composers who are creating new “classics” for our time. They employ the contemporary musical modes and vocabulary of the 21st century, just as Sulzer and Lewandowski reflected the influence of German Romanticism in their time. Even the “camp” music that many might argue displaced the great choral and organ repertoire in many congregations, was made possible by the groundbreaking vision of the Classical Reform tradition. The revered Debbie Friedman, whose simple, folk melodies are embraced so widely today, was guided by the historic Reform principles that inspired modern ways of expressing timeless spiritual values – and insisted that Jewish worship should reflect a blend of both Hebrew texts and vernacular translations.

The Society for Classical Reform Judaism is deeply committed both to the preservation and the creative renewal of the distinctive worship and musical traditions of our heritage as a Movement.

We advocate both for a renewed encounter with the familiar melodies and hymn lyrics beloved by generations of deeply faithful Reform Jews, as well as the development of new compositions and styles for our time. We champion the role of the organ and choir in their unique ability to inspire the mind and heart with “the majesty of holiness”... and we also celebrate the way that guitar and other instruments can invite more intimate settings for participation. The ideal we espouse is a fully integrated blend of both the historic and contemporary strands of our Reform heritage and values – thoughtfully and sensitively incorporated into worship that can embrace a variety of needs, challenging our people to think, pray and sing “outside the box.” This approach can empower and inspire everyone in our diverse congregations – while celebrating the distinctive heritage we all share as Reform Jews.

*We welcome your thoughts and comments.  
Contact us at [scrjprograms@gmail.com](mailto:scrjprograms@gmail.com).*

## WHAT IS “CLASSICAL REFORM MUSIC”?

*by Cantor Aaron Kaplan*

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.



*The 1865 Organ at Cincinnati's  
Famed Plum Street Temple*

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!

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.



*Israel's Hallel Choir Performing at the Society's Institute on Classical Reform Judaism at Hebrew Union College Jerusalem, March 2012*

By the 1850's 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. *Continued on page 4...*

## NEW TO *THE ADVOCATE*

### **CLASSICAL REFORM MUSIC SECTION**

Classical Reform music is an integral part of the Classical Reform worship experience. Beginning with the next issue, *The Advocate* will include a regular Classical Reform music section that will highlight: 1) the history of Classical Reform music, 2) short biographies of traditional and contemporary Classical Reform composers, 3) reflections from lay and professional leaders on the significance of this music for the 21st century, and 4) links to resources and audio files of these timeless pieces.

### **SPOTLIGHT ON REFORM JEWISH HISTORY**

Upcoming issues will also include a spotlight on Reform Jewish history, which will focus on little known but significant facts that have influenced the development of Reform Jewish thought, theology and practice.

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 wor-

ship 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!

## THE MUSIC OF THE GERMAN RITE & THE MODERN SYNAGOGUE

by Cantor Erik Contzius



Something that is “classic” is considered to have lasting significance or worth - in other words, it is enduring. I have therefore always found it ironic that the Sacred Music Press of our Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion School of Sacred Music should publish something it calls “Out of

Print Classics.” For one thing, if the material will again be in print, why is it called “out of print”? But more significantly, for a classic to be deemed out of print seems like an oxymoron, especially when the music contained in these volumes is so enduring.

Most of the Out of Print Classics come from the Reform German rite of the mid-to-late 19th century, and bear the authorship of such masters as Louis Lewandowski,

Solomon Sulzer (who was Austrian, just as Lewandowski stemmed from the Polish tradition of Posen, but I include them both - stylistically and idealistically - in the German rite), Emmanuel Kirschner, and others, who captured the hearts and minds of Jews everywhere for nearly 200 years. When faced with the term “traditional” in the synagogue, the chants of our Eastern European great-grandparents speaks to one part of the Jewish psyche, but the German rite has infiltrated the entire Jewish world, from the Americas to Europe, and even among such far-flung

communities as the black Jews of Uganda. When Solomon Sulzer westernized the mellismatic flourishes of the *Alte Weise* (“old prayer modes”), he brought together East and West, preserving one tradition, but creating it anew.

And it was this creative tradition that become sacrosanct in practically every American Reform and even Conservative synagogue. Cantors, rabbis and songleaders have all tried to bring new melodies into the prayer service, and yet on Friday evening, there is almost no household or temple without the strains of Louis Lewandowski’s gently flowing melody sanctifying the Sabbath’s arrival over Kiddush wine. Modify a congregational Shema all you want, but when

it comes to the Torah service, Sulzer's tune prevails. Why should we be surprised that this music can and certainly does still speak to us? For one, it is music composed by cantors who stood on the shoulders of Beethoven, Schubert and Schumann, a musical tradition that still thrills audiences today for its classic nature (here I use the term to mean "enduring", and not in a musicological sense). As well, the German synagogue tradition marked the first time in Jewish history that the effects of the Enlightenment and Emancipation really held sway in Jewish culture. It was the first time that Jews developed amusical expression that spoke to the modern Jewish soul as well as the timeless Jewish spirit.

This is something that the would-be innovators of today think they are doing because they imagine it has not been done before. There are many trying to bring more "progressive" musical idioms into the Jewish sanctuary: rock, folk, pop, jazz, new-age... even gospel. Their efforts seem to hold sway for a year or two...or sometimes a decade or two. And yet, some 150 years after Sulzer published his two-volume *Schir Zion*, his music is still used as spiritual expression in the modern synagogue. Why?

I believe the reason can be found in the form. Where present day innovators have sought to bring a popular, and by definition ephemeral, musical form into our worship, Sulzer and his peers brought a classical musical form into the synagogue. As praying Jews, we have sought more permanence in our lives, looking for everlasting truths in Torah and Tradition. The service itself remains relatively unchanged in its basic structure, but the music that expresses the prayers contained therein has been tinkered with over millennia. When a language speaks only to one generation at one point in time, the next generation needs to develop a new language with which to dialogue with the eternal. When one uses a language that can be heard and understood by all to contain elements of beauty, elegance, grandeur, and holiness, it can be understood by most people at any point in time.

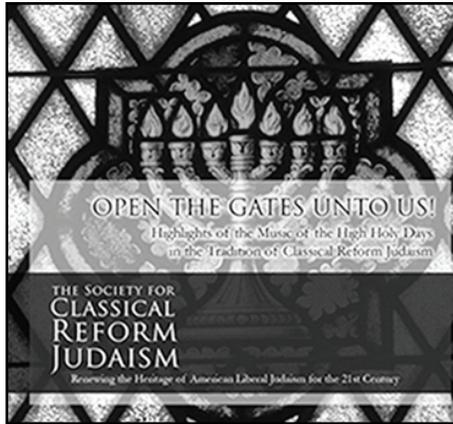
The challenge, however, is that in past generations, we had worshipers who were musically literate. They could read music; they regularly sang. There was no television or internet with which musical performance at home had to compete. Today, people experience music like most other cultural offerings of the 21st century - in a cursory fashion, embraced for the moment and then superseded by the next passing fad. They are unsure how to embrace something that has been called a

classic. There is no longer a frame of reference. What, then, of the German tradition's viability in today's synagogue? Is it to be abandoned in favor of the "soup of the day" music that will eventually become passé? I think not, for several reasons. First, regardless of an individual's musical exposure or education, the choral music of the German Reform rite has a hymnlike quality that can and often does engender congregational singing.

Second, the musical language itself, being something much more than a hastily tossed amalgam of notes, speaks to us across time. Intrinsic in many of the Classical Reform offerings is a solid musical structure which, as exemplified in the work of J.S. Bach and others, has a musical logic, allowing us to hear timeless themes within the notes. To my ear, what is lacking in the popular music of the synagogue is that transcendent sense of eternal holiness, sadly sacrificed in favor of a simple, popular tune.

Third, there is a Jewish musical subconscious that runs like a deep vein through most American congregations. In Sulzer's day, that vein was made up of the old chants. Today, when these melodies have all but disappeared, the common element is made up of the music of Sulzer and his contemporaries. It is a safe and comfortable musical place in which to pray. As a child, I remember clearly having gone to only a few Sabbath Morning services and hearing the Sulzer Kedushah responses (although I was a synagogue regular in my youth, my synagogue's main service was on Friday evening, and Saturday services were rarely held). As an adult, I can still conjure those strains as easily as a lullaby from my childhood. For many others as well, the Reform classical rite still holds a place, although that place may be receding from our grasp.

I would suggest that the musical heritage of our movement deserves to be re-examined closely, for not only is there considerable breadth to the repertoire, there is also redeeming musical and spiritual value. Its many settings that invoke the old chants connect us to the distant past, and its Late Romantic harmonies reflect the more recent European childhood of many of our parents and grandparents - as well as our broader Western cultural inheritance. And there is no denying that its well-structured hymns do engender the congregational singing that seems to be all the rage nowadays, and do so without resorting to complicated syncopation or grating chords. Finally, for any congregation seeking to bolster its musical horizons, one need look no further than the entire set of *Out of Print Classics* to discover (or re-discover) a treasure of music which was born out of a vibrant tradition that continues to endure.



## ANNOUNCING THE RELEASE OF *OPEN THE GATES UNTO US!*

*Highlights of the Music of the High Holy Days in the tradition of  
Classical Reform Judaism*

This recording of the great musical highlights of the High Holy Days reflects a characteristic blend of the ancient melodies and chants of the synagogue, with the embrace of the best of the influences of the many cultures and periods that have shaped the Jewish experience. Featured are performances from some of America's most prominent congregations. (For information about ordering, go to [www.renewreform.org](http://www.renewreform.org).)

### ***OPEN THE GATES UNTO US!***

#### **An Interview with Cantor Aaron Kaplan**

*by Rabbi Devon Lerner*

*Cantor Kaplan is a board member for the Society for Classical Reform Judaism and a co-creator, along with Rabbi Howard Berman, of "Open the Gates Unto Us!," the Society's New High Holy Day CD.*

Cantor Kaplan, I have heard you say many times that working on ***Open the Gates Unto Us!*** was a labor of love. What made this project so special to you?



*The music on this CD evokes loving memories of my Jewish upbringing. I grew up in a Classical Reform congregation, and enjoyed the beauty and majesty of the High Holy Day repertoire, but few people hear this music today. Many Reform congregations have moved away from the Classical Reform style and embraced contemporary compositions, so much so, that most Jews in my generation have never heard this High Holy Day repertoire on the CD. That is sad to me.*

Why, in your opinion, have congregations stopped performing these Classical Reform pieces?

*Some congregations believe that contemporary music is more relevant and more engaging for Reform Jews today. Much of this new music is also participatory. It is written so members can sing along. All of this is fine and good. I include many contemporary pieces in my services as well, but there is a very important place for the majesty and inspiration, and a feeling of transcendence, that Classical Reform music and Classical Reform musical styles provide.*

*Not all of these "classical" pieces are performance pieces. Classical Reform music can and is sung today by members in many Reform congregations.*

How do you think this music will be received?

*Many listeners will be hearing this music for the first time, including several of my classmates in the Hebrew Union College Cantorial program. The compositions are new to them. My younger colleagues who have heard some of this repertoire say that these compositions are very powerful, but some also believe that this repertoire is good only in concert, and not for worship. But I strongly disagree. There is an important place for grand, transcendent, musical ideas that help us appreciate the liturgy and the theological messages that they contain.*

*Our goal is to challenge today's Reform congregations to explore our great musical heritage and*

*incorporate it into their worship. As I always say, I think we need a combination of contemporary and grand liturgical music. Our goal in producing Open the Gates Unto Us! is to showcase the beauty and power of these classical works, Even though the music on the CD was created from the late 19th century, through the 20th century, and even into the 21st century, it is still relevant and viable. All but one of the tracks was recorded live at Temple Emanu-El, NY, Temple Sinai of New Orleans, or Chicago Sinai Congregation. This is proof that this music still speaks to many.*

Many of the recordings include choirs and instruments, such as an organ, that many congregations do not have and can't afford to provide. How would they be able to incorporate Classical Reform music in their services?

*Congregations that do not have an organ can use a keyboard. Other instruments can be incorporated as well. The music can be adapted for a soloist, and still offer a rich and moving experience. In fact, we can elevate the artistic richness*

*for today's listeners, by making musical midrash, by interpreting the Classical pieces in new ways.*

What to you hope to achieve with this CD?

*The goal is to reinvigorate the old, so it can be presented in a new, very sophisticated and artistic way. As one Midrash says; so "the old shall be made new and the new made holy."*

*This recording offers not only a meaningful listening experience and devotional experience, but also a tremendous resource for music education. **Open the Gates Unto Us!** is the only collection and presentation of Classical Reform High Holy Day music of its kind. It is the second in a series of Classical Reform CDs that can be used for intellectual discussion and debate, for scholars, educators and for congregations as well. Temples can also use this CD as part of their adult education and as one of many musical resources to help them determine which music they want to include in their own worship.*

To order a copy of **Open the Gates Unto Us!** and to learn more about the CD, go to [www.renewreform.org](http://www.renewreform.org)



**Announcing**  
the publication of

## THE UNION PRAYER BOOK

A NEW REVISION OF THE UPB - SINAI EDITION

*The Union Prayer Book: Sinai Edition, Revised* is a contemporary language, gender-neutral liturgy for Reform congregations wishing to maintain the historic worship traditions of our Movement's heritage. Preserving the beloved texts and cadences of the 1940 *Union Prayer Book*, the *Sinai Edition* also embraces the newest developments in Jewish liturgical responses to the realities of our time – a heightened awareness of inclusive language and a recognition of the spiritual challenges of the transforming events of Jewish history in this generation.

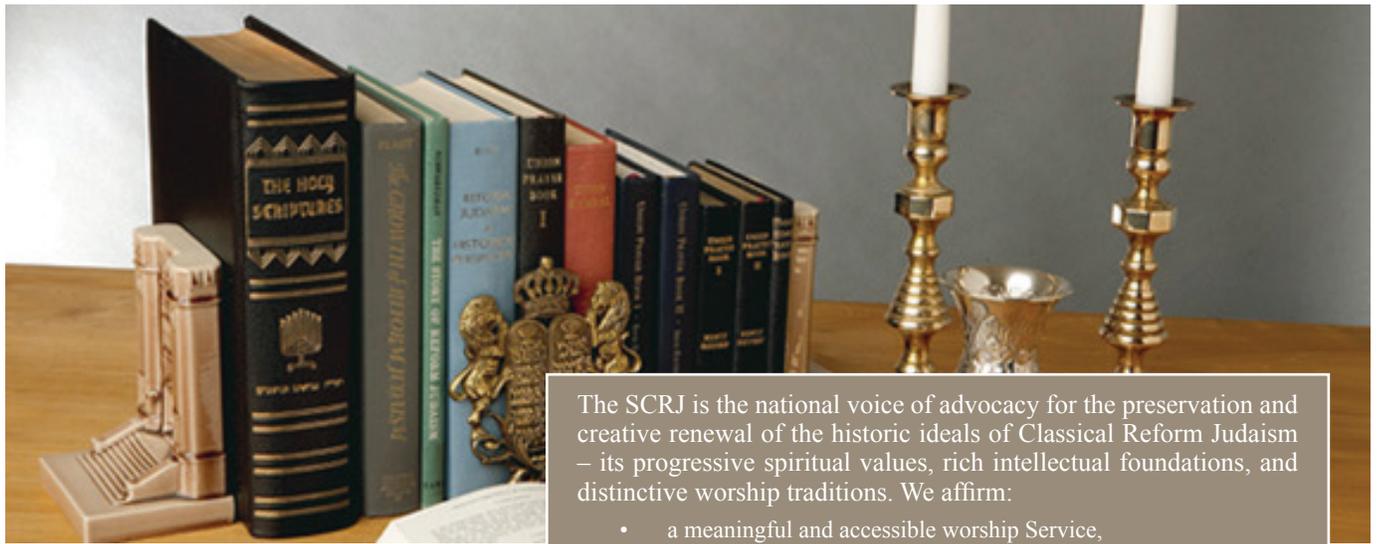
The new Union Prayer Book is conceived to be used in a broad variety of ways—as a congregation's major liturgy or as an alternative resource for worship services reflecting the traditions of our distinctive Reform heritage. The "UPB" is now available once again for those who cherish this tradition, as well as for a new generation seeking an accessible, embracing spiritual experience.

**For further information and to order, please contact:**

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For further information and to order, please contact: The Society for Classical Reform Judaism at 877.326.1400 or [www.renewreform.org](http://www.renewreform.org). Cost: \$25 per copy, plus postage.



The SCRJ is the national voice of advocacy for the preservation and creative renewal of the historic ideals of Classical Reform Judaism – its progressive spiritual values, rich intellectual foundations, and distinctive worship traditions. We affirm:

- a meaningful and accessible worship Service, primarily in English
- the ethical values, grounded in the timeless, universal vision of our Hebrew Prophets, that inspire our personal decision making and communal responsibility as primary expressions of our religious commitment as Jews
- the centrality of the American experience in our Jewish identity
- a warm, unconditional welcome and support for interfaith families

The integrity and inspiration of our Classical Reform heritage have continuing vitality and relevance for a new generation of Jews today.

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