

Inside Reform Judaism

<i>David Ellenson</i>	
Courage to Create	1
<i>Jan Katzew</i>	
Sharing Leadership	2
Letters to Eric Yoffie	3
<i>Eric H. Yoffie</i>	
A Promising Future	7
<i>Richard Levy & Suzanne Singer</i>	
(Re)Defining Reform(ing)	8
<i>Lawrence Hoffman</i>	
Addressing the Newest Frontier	10
<i>Kenneth Chasen</i>	
More than Consumer Needs	11
<i>Jason Kalman</i>	
Responsible Religious Affiliation	12
<i>Barbara B. Friedman</i>	
A Changing Landscape	13
<i>Norman Cohen</i>	
Reform's Curriculum	13
<i>Andy Bachman</i>	
Open Reform	15
<i>Kerry Olitzky & Kathy Kahn</i>	
With Open Arms	16
<i>Peter Knobel</i>	
Doing God's Work	17
<i>Daniel G. Zemel</i>	
Reform's Torah	18
<i>David Berkman</i>	
Camping	19
<i>Angela Warnick Buchdahl</i>	
A New Prayerbook	20
<i>Kay Greenwald</i>	
Beyond Liturgy	22
<i>Tony Bayfield</i>	
Becoming the Mainstream	22
<i>Neil Gillman</i>	
An Outsider	24
<i>Ni'Sh'ma</i>	25
<i>Ruth Andrew Ellenson</i>	
The Oxymoron of Jewish Cool	27
<i>Leonard Fein</i>	
Sh'ma Ethics	28

Can a “Reform congregation — grounded in freedom, autonomy, and self-determination — meet the most powerful needs of the soul? Do we have the capacity to inspire a Judaism of passion and devotion that can withstand the seductions of secular American life?” In a “letter” to Rabbi Eric Yoffie, Rabbi Janet Marder poses questions that cut to core concerns in the movement today. Other “letters” and essays explore how to remain agile and responsive to a changing American Judaism.

We continue our ongoing column reflecting on “cool” — check it out on page 27. *Sh'ma* welcomes opportunities to work with individuals and institutions in exploring critical issues facing contemporary Jewry. In that vein, I would like to thank Terry Rosenberg for helping suggest many of the questions that inspired the following essays, and for spearheading a funding partnership for this issue that also includes Lili Bosse, Robin Broidy, Barbara Friedman, and Nicki Neuman Tanner. — SB

Courage to Create a Judaism of Meaning

David Ellenson

When Isaac Mayer Wise established the Union of American Hebrew Congregations in 1873 and the Hebrew Union College in 1875, he avoided the label “Reform” in the titles of his institutions because he did not believe he was creating a denominationally distinct form of Judaism. His intention was to create an “American Judaism” that would guide the broad mass of American Jews at a time when the Jewish community was overwhelmingly composed of culturally homogeneous German-speaking Jews. The advent of large numbers of Eastern European Jews after 1881 caused his dream of a unified “American Israel” to perish.

This historical observation is no more than reminiscence today. The social and cultural factors that once so powerfully divided German and Eastern European Jews have long disappeared, and today’s American Jewish community — new immigrants from South Africa, Iran, Israel, and the FSU notwithstanding — is characterized by a high degree of cultural–social homogeneity. Wise’s non-sectarian vision of Reform appears viable once again.

Other factors only underscore the scope of the challenge the movement has today and highlight the task Reform confronts if Judaism is to speak to the bulk of American Jews in relevant and compelling terms. For all the universalistic aspirations and affirmations that marked Wise and the Jewish community during and immediately after his era, endogamy remained the communal rule. This is obviously not now the case. The high rate of intermarriage in present-day America speaks to how acculturated as well as how accepted Jews are by the American mainstream. While the American Jewish community may now be culturally homogeneous, it is just as surely “ethnically diverse.” Acknowledging this, the Reform movement is creating an inclusive and welcoming community that promotes the vitality of the Jewish people and religion in America.


American society today is open in ways that were unimaginable a century ago. Jews construct their individual identity and communal commitments in a world where people derive meaning against a backdrop of virtually unlimited options for affiliation and participation. Yet, as social creatures who seek meaning, Jews remain in need of fellowship, learning, and prayer, and the synagogue and allied institutions can and must

provide the gateways and, ultimately, the venues where the fulfillment of such needs occurs.

At the same time, the synagogue will need to foster identity and to craft meaning in novel terms that speak to the present generation. In his important works, Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow cites the creation of the highly informal and personalized opportunities for meaning and community that many Generation X and Y persons seek, and he points out how important aesthetics and culture are to the building of their community. Reform leadership and laity must incorporate these developments into their communal planning, as institutions can no longer depend upon traditional associational and kinship patterns to foster affiliation. Contemporary Jews move among movements and individual teachers as they engage in their own personal search for spiritual purpose and community. The Reform movement should embrace this development, and our teachers must have the courage and conviction to acknowledge that an emphasis upon a “Judaism of meaning,” as opposed to a “Judaism of boundaries and borders,” is what is needed in our day.

Reform must establish multiple entry points for all elements of our diverse population in formal and informal settings that are both within and beyond the walls of the synagogue. These settings must include temples

and camps, offices and schools, restaurants and shopping centers, the city and the wilderness. Programming should include all types of study that can transform institutions and forge meaning for both the individual and the group, social action programs that contribute to justice in the world, opportunities for the creation of community both formal and casual, and worship and lifecycle celebrations and observances that are evocative and joyous. Our most creative rabbis and professionals are providing for these moments of dialogical encounter already; these efforts must be replicated and increased.

People today, no less than in the past, wish to perceive a sacred vitality at the core of their lives. Living within a pluralistic framework that underscores the importance of individual choice, Jews still can and will seek out Judaism for the wisdom, identity, and community our tradition affords if our religion speaks to them in meaningful cadences. The legacy Isaac Mayer Wise bestowed upon Reform to address broad sectors of the community remains enduring, and the future of Judaism in the U.S. depends, to a large degree, upon the ability of the movement and HUC-JIR to provide leadership that will maintain and revitalize Jewish community, worship, study, association, and action in light of the conditions and values that shape our people today. 

Rabbi David Ellenson is President of Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion.

Sharing Leadership: A Work in Process and Progress

Jan Katzew

“Virtually everything I have done as a volunteer leader in the Reform movement from the congregation through my current position has been done in partnership with our professionals.”

—Robert Heller

“In any successful volunteer–professional partnership in the Reform movement, the participants must believe that the decision-making is a joint process. This requires a great deal of trust, respect, and faith in the partners who are working together.”

—Marilynn Yentis

These two statements by volunteer leaders in the Reform movement testify to a distinctive, if not defining, aspect of Reform Judaism. With the contraction of halakhic authority and the growth of congregational autonomy, decisions of religious policy and even practice are the shared province of pro-

fessionals and volunteers. To be sure, the balance between authority and autonomy is elusive and the partnership between professionals and volunteers is dynamic. In today’s era of professionalization, partnership often means that volunteers are directors that issue directives; they must assert lay ownership and share responsibility. Acknowledging imperfection and asymmetry in the partnership — at times the same vagaries as in any human relationship — is critical to the success of shared leadership. The partnership works more often in theory than in practice — sometimes ending in “divorce” or *détente*, but other times leading to synergy and symbiosis.

Rather than relying on *poskim* as arbiters of Jewish law (Orthodox) or members of a law committee (Conservative) to determine norms of Jewish practice, Reform Jewish thought and

Rabbi Jan Katzew, PhD, is Director of Lifelong Jewish Learning at the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ). He co-authored this essay with Robert Heller, Esq., Chairman of the Board of the Union for Reform Judaism and Marilyn Yentis, Chair of the Reform Commission on Lifelong Jewish Learning.

November 2007

Kislev 5768

To subscribe: 877-568-SHMA

www.shma.com