

## Embracing Tradition While Moving Forward

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As a teenager, I was surprised to find out that one year when my mom was a little girl, my grandparents had a Christmas tree in their home. Now you have to realize, I was surprised because my grandparents were *REALLY* Jewish, Brooklyn Jewish, first generation, Yiddish speaking, Jewish. They were both raised in Orthodox homes, they were both very well educated in Judaism, and we went to temple just about every Friday night, after we had a traditional Shabbat dinner at home. We celebrated almost every Jewish holiday. And we always played “who is a Jew” when watching television.

When my grandmother told me about the year that they experimented with the Christmas tree, I was very curious, and had to ask her why? It was at that time that she explained to me why she was Reform Jew.

She explained that when she was growing up, the Judaism that she was raised with kept her in the kitchen or in the balcony. She saw that there were limits to what she could do, and was told, both explicitly and implicitly, that a woman should know her place and stay in the background. This was in sharp contrast to what she was experiencing outside of her Jewish world, where she saw women taking to the streets to earn the right to vote, and fighting for workers rights, and even reproductive rights. Seeing women speaking up in the public sphere helped make my grandmother an ardent feminist.

My grandmother was a child of immigrants who came to America to avoid anti-Semitism AND persecution. So for her, fighting discrimination in any venue was a natural extension of the values she was raised with.

For her, to be Orthodox was to live as a second class citizen, to be discriminated against because of her gender. So she chose instead to be what is often known as “just Jewish.”

My grandfather’s story was a bit different. For him, he felt Orthodoxy to be oppressive and without choice or understanding. He loved to read, to ask why. And in the Orthodox Jewish orphanage that he was raised in, he was told to just *do*, and not to question what he was told. So at the age of 14, he left the orphanage, and orthodoxy, behind him.

So while they were both very proud of being Jewish, my grandparents chose not to join a synagogue when they got married. And one year when my mom was little, they were yearning for ritual, yearning to be like all the other families on their block, and they put up what they called a “Chanukah bush,” complete with blue and white lights.

But, as my grandmother told me, it just didn’t feel right. It didn’t feel like it was *theirs*. They longed to be a part of a Jewish community, to celebrate the holidays with other families. But they did not want to go someplace where they couldn’t sit together as a family, or where their

daughters would be treated differently than their son, and they did not want to go someplace that was out of step with this modern world that they so loved being a part of.

Luckily for them, and for me, my grandmother's sister and brother-in-law had just joined a group of like minded people who were starting a synagogue not far from where they lived. But it was a very different synagogue than the Satmar Chassidic shul that my grandmother grew up in, or the dour orphanage of my grandfather's childhood. This was a Reform temple.

It wasn't long before my grandparents became active members, with their children in the religious school, and my grandmother and grandfather participating in the Sisterhood and Brotherhood. My grandmother even served on the temple board of trustees. And my mom received the formal Jewish education that my grandmother had longed for when she was growing up. In fact, this *Magen David* that I am wearing tonight is the one that my grandmother gave my mother at her Confirmation.

My grandmother explained to me how Reform Judaism gave her and my grandfather a way to be at home in the Jewish community, a place where they could study, pray, and participate in the life of the community in a way that was authentically Jewish and *without* compromising their core values.

In recent years there has been a lot of talk about the idea that we are moving into a time of post-denominational Judaism. When the Jewish community is surveyed, and asked about their denominational affiliation, a growing number of Jews respond like my grandmother once did, saying that they are "just Jewish," others check off "secular" or the answer I find most entertaining, they mark the box that says "something else Jewish."<sup>1</sup> I'm not sure about what that means, but it clearly makes some people happy.

And I don't have a problem with any of those responses. One of the wonderful things about Judaism is that we have always operated with a big tent mentality with multiple ways to express our identity and still be part of the Jewish people.

I believe that it is not only *important* for there to be different religious movements, but there also needs to be ways to participate in the Jewish community beyond synagogue life.

But tonight, tonight I want to make the case for Reform Judaism. I want to talk about why it matters that our congregation is affiliated not only with the URJ - the Union for Reform Judaism, but also with ARZA - the American Reform Zionist Association, and the WUPJ - the World Union of Progressive Judaism.

By belonging to B'nai Israel we have the opportunity not only to be a part of a sacred congregation *here* in Sacramento, but we also have the ability to be part of creating a vibrant Jewish community across North America, and throughout the world, where our voices can be heard in Washington, DC and in Jerusalem. And by working with the Reform movement, we

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<sup>1</sup> "Non-Denominational & Post-Denominational: Beyond the major movements - two tendencies in American Jewry," by Dr. Steven M Cohen, Contact, Summer 2005

can provide real support for Reform congregations and Liberal Judaism in Israel and in countries where to be a Reform Jew is to struggle for recognition from the Jewish community.

I take great pride that ours is one of the oldest Reform synagogues in the country, and that B'nai Israel has been wrestling with what it means to embrace tradition while living in the modern world since 1870, when we first began to discuss whether or not we should have mixed seating in the synagogue, or introduce an organ into our Shabbat worship, and what prayer book we should use. Because what these discussions were *really* about were how do we draw people closer to Judaism, how do we help people see that our faith and our values are still relevant to their lives.

The families who belonged to B'nai Israel in the 1870's didn't choose to become Reform Jews out of laziness or ignorance. They embraced Reform Judaism for many of the same reasons my grandparents did in the 1940's. They were in search of a way to be authentically Jewish while living in the modern world.

Our archives reveal that B'nai Israel voted for our congregation to affiliate with the Reform Movement after nearly a decade of study, analysis, and heated debate.

They sent delegations to San Francisco to see what Reform services were all about, and from 1870-1878, they vigorously debated what our religious practices should be. In 1877, B'nai Israel welcomed Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, the founder of American Reform Judaism, when he came to speak to them and challenge them, and challenge us, to think about what it means to be Jewish in America.

B'nai Israel listened to his call, and became the 37th synagogue to join what was then known as the UAHC - the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, now known as the URJ - the Union for Reform Judaism.

It is a union that numbers over 900 congregations and represents about 1.5 million people. And of the approximately 6 million Jews who live in the US, the Reform Movement continues to be the largest religious movement in the American Jewish community.

From the 1870s until today, B'nai Israel has embraced the spirit of Reform Judaism and has forged a path for its members that allows us to integrate our identities as Jews and as Americans, and to do as we say on our website, to embrace tradition while moving forward.

I am a Reform Jew because I believe in what it stands for. While I grew up practicing an eclectic form of traditional Judaism that combined Ashkenazi and Sephardic practices at home, outside the home, our public affiliation was primarily with Reform Judaism. I am proud to say that my children are 4th generation Reform Jews from both my family and their father's family. I guess my family helps disprove the nay sayers who have been saying for the last 200 years, that Reform Jews are always just one generation away from vanishing into total assimilation.

One of the things that I can't stand is when I hear Jews respond to the question of "what type of Jew are you?" and they say "well, I don't keep kosher, I don't keep Shabbat, I'm not a member of a synagogue, I don't really *do* anything Jewish, so I must be Reform."

That answer literally makes me want to scream. As our B'nai Israel founders who embraced Reform Judaism knew, that is *not* what it means to be a Reform Jew. To be a Reform Jew means *embracing* your Judaism while still living in the modern world, it means making choices from a place of knowledge and understanding, it means responding to the call of social justice from the Torah, from the Prophets, from the many voices throughout our history, and responding to that call with action, and doing as Jews have done for thousands of years, adapting to our surrounding culture while still living according to our values and traditions.

Reform Judaism teaches us that we have an obligation to think about *why* we do or don't keep kosher, it means going to religious school as a child, whether we want to or not, and then *staying* engaged in ongoing learning as an adult.

Calling yourself a Reform Jew means belonging to a synagogue because you know that it is a Jewish value to support your community, even if you personally can't or don't want to come to services every Shabbat.

As a Rabbi, it shouldn't be surprising that I am curious about why someone joins one synagogue rather than another, or how many of our members consciously identify not only as members of B'nai Israel, but also as members of the Reform Movement.

When I sent out the email in August asking you to share your stories with me, about why you identify with the Reform movement, I was not surprised to learn that the things that are meaningful to you about Reform Judaism, are many of the same things that have drawn me close to it as well.

To be a Reform Jew *does* mean different things to different people, and the details of how we express our Judaism changes from one person to another. But there are also some very important overarching principles and values that bring us all together under the same big chuppah.

In the responses that I received I saw that no matter how long the person had been a member of our synagogue, no matter how old they were, whether they were single, or married, with children or without, a primary value that I have heard from so many of our congregants is the importance of being part of a k'hilat kodesh, a sacred community, and being part of something that was larger than themselves. And in particular being part of a community that was welcoming to the many different types of Jewish families that we have. People were happy that at B'nai Israel you could be straight or gay, have two Jewish parents, or be an interfaith family, that you can be single or married, widowed or divorced, born Jewish or someone who chose Judaism, you could be young or old, and everything in between, but in this community, everyone is welcomed, and everyone is valued.

Most of us were not born or raised in Sacramento. And many of us came to B'nai Israel not necessarily because we were looking for a place to pray, but because we were in search of

finding a community that could serve as our extended family. We came in search of others with shared values and a shared sense of responsibility towards each other, we were looking for a place where we could simply be Jewish.

Some of you may not realize this, but my husband who comes to B'nai Israel every Friday night, rarely spends more than 5 minutes in any given service. His time in the Sanctuary tonight is probably a new record for him.

And yet, he is *religious* about accompanying me each week, and hates to miss a Shabbat at B'nai Israel. So then you have to ask, why would someone who really doesn't like to pray and who has already heard the rabbi's sermon, *at least once*, insist on coming to temple? Because he comes to spend time with his community. For him, it is the people that draws him here not the prayers. He finds God at the oneg in the language of conversation, rather than in the sanctuary through the language of prayer. Or in the words of Rabbi Harold Schulweis - "God is not in you and not in me, God is between us."

Over the years B'nai Israel has grown, and our membership lives throughout Sacramento County, and beyond. Having a strong sense of community was easier in the days when our temple was downtown, and our members lived and worked near by.

One of the commitments our Board has made this year is to focus on creating better ways for us to integrate new members into the congregation, while at the same time providing our members who have been here for awhile ways to meet each other and to strengthen their connections with each other.

If you would like to help us in creating a more connected community, by joining a chaverah, by being a shammus on Shabbat, hosting a get together at your home, being a greeter at events, or a baker for our onegs, being on the membership committee, or doing something that we haven't even thought of yet, please let me know by sending me an email with your name, contact info, and what you would like to do so I can get you connected with others with similar interests.

But in order for us to be a truly welcoming community, we need everyone to help. I want to urge you not to be shy, and tonight after services, and actually each time that you're here, *please* introduce yourselves to the people you're sitting next to. If you don't know their name, they probably don't know yours either. That's why we put your names on the High Holiday tickets. And I would bet that unless you already know the person that you're sitting next to, they are probably just as nervous about striking up a conversation as you are. And if you're not sure what to talk about, just ask the person you're sitting next to "wow, didn't you think the rabbi's sermon was brilliant, even if it was a little on the long side?" I'm sure this will be a conversation starter.

While Reform Judaism has in some generations been a bit light with ritual, we have always emphasized the importance of lifelong Jewish learning. In fact the whole idea of Confirmation was not only to keep our boys in a formal Jewish learning environment beyond the age of 13, but it was also to provide an opportunity for our girls to study as well.

While many like my husband are drawn here by their desire to be a part of a community, for others it is the opportunity to engage in life-long learning that keeps them here. And it is not uncommon that we have two to three times the amount of people at Torah study on a Shabbat morning than we do for Shabbat morning services.

For many, study is a form of prayer, and the way they express their religious. As the Talmud teaches “when two people sit and words of Torah pass between them, them, the Divine Presence, dwells between them.”<sup>2</sup>

But as Judaism teaches us, we do not study just for the sake of learning, we study so we know how to live a good life, a moral life, and a Jewish life.

Reform Judaism has embraced the teaching known as “*Eilu devarim*” as both an explanation for the importance of study as well as providing us guidelines for our responsibilities towards each other. For me, it is a summary of what it means to be part of the Reform Jewish community.

If you want, you can find *Eilu Devarim* on p. 90 in your prayer books.

In it we are taught:

*Eilu devarim sh'ain l'hem shiur...*these are the things without measure, their fruit we eat now, their essence remains for us in the life to come:

To honor father and mother:  
to perform acts of love and kindness:  
to attend the house of study daily:  
to welcome the stranger:  
to visit the sick:  
to rejoice with bride and groom:  
to console the bereaved:  
to pray with sincerity:  
to make peace where there is strife.

*V'talmud torah k'neged kulam* - but the study of Torah is equal to them all.<sup>3</sup>

And for those of you who remember the old Gates of Prayer siddur, you may remember that there was one more sentence after “*v'talmud torah k'neged kulam.*” In Gates of Prayer it was written that the study of Torah is equal to them all because it leads to them all.

This prayer so beautifully reflects the interconnectedness of community, of worship, of study, and of social action - the four cornerstones of Judaism, and of our congregation.

By being part of a community we can find comfort, meaning, and a sense of responsibility from our relationships with others. But by engaging in study, we can learn not only what values are emphasized in Judaism, and what our obligations are, but *why*. We are given the keys to unlock

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<sup>2</sup> Pirke Avot 3:3

<sup>3</sup> Gates of Repentance, p. 90

Judaism. And I believe that through study, and through understanding, we will want to do more, not less.

Too often people have the impression that to be a Reform Jew is to be a minimalist Jew, the least you can do to be a Jew and still be a Jew kind of Jew.

And too many have fallen prey to the belief that to be “authentically Jewish” means to speak with a Yiddish accent, wear a big fur hat, and live a life reminiscent of Tevye in Fiddler on the Roof, or at least Brooklyn in the 1950s.

But what people too often overlook is that even Tevye did not practice a blind and unquestioning Judaism. He understood that there was more than one side to an argument, and even as he sang out “tradition!”, he bent and adapted to the changing realities that the world threw his way. He listened, he argued, but finally, he *reformed* his practice and his belief.

One of the things that makes Reform Judaism different than the other movements in Judaism is not that we don’t believe in mitzvot, and not that we don’t observe them, but rather that the mitzvot that we emphasize, the mitzvot that we say are at the core of being Jewish are simply different than those mitzvot that are emphasized in Orthodox or Conservative synagogues.

From its earliest years, Reform Judaism has listened to the call of the prophets who warned us against empty ritual, or putting on a show of piety instead of caring for the needs of people. Reform Judaism has rejected the notion that Judaism is a stagnant religion, and embraced the historical reality that Judaism has always, and I mean always, adapted to the environments and the times in which we live.

While I would prefer that all of our congregants embraced *both* ritual and social justice. I also have to admit, that if I was pressed to say which is the greater Jewish imperative, keeping kosher or feeding the hungry, sleeping in a sukkah or providing shelter for the homeless, I think you know how I would answer.

But as a Reform Jew, I would also say that you *should* consider keeping kosher, or even some form of kashrut, so that you can become sensitized to the fact that food is a blessing that too many in our midst do not enjoy on a regular basis.

As a Reform Jew I believe that we *should* build sukkot and sleep and eat in them, to remind ourselves both of our ancestors who wandered for 40 years in the desert, and also to remember our ancestors who were forced to be refugees from countless nations.

And while Reform Judaism has often been squeamish about using the *language* of obligation, we have not been hesitant in *acting* in a way that reflects this value.

When our congregation has been called upon to raise funds to help the victims of local hate crimes, or to help those suffering from natural disasters we have. When asked to help the hungry and the homeless, we have raised tens of thousands of dollars to give to Mazon and have opened our congregation to Family Promise. When renovating our sanctuary a few years ago, we

remembered the Israeli Reform synagogues who struggle for funds while Orthodox synagogues are funded by the State, and we donated \$25,000 to a Israeli Reform synagogue's building campaign.

When members of our congregation have been ill, other members have come forward with meals to nourish them. When someone has been in need of a minyan, people who did not know them have come forward so that they could have a shiva minyan.

It is time that we change our language to reflect our actions. A mitzvah is not just a good deed, it is a moral imperative, it is a commandment. When we understand that we do what we do, as individuals and as a congregation, not just because it makes us feel good to do it, but because it is what our religion demands of us, *then* we can recognize that helping the poor, feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, welcoming the stranger, consoling the bereaved, *are* religious acts, *are* mitzvot, and are just as important as attending services, keeping kosher, or observing Shabbat.

We call our movement "Reform Judaism" not REFORMED Judaism because we are supposed to be engaged in an ongoing process of reevaluating, understanding, and strengthening our relationship with Judaism, and that includes our understanding of, and our *practice* of, the mitzvot.

Just as one generation chose to reject Hebrew, the centrality of the land of Israel, and much of the ritual and symbols of Judaism, subsequent generations have embraced them all. And each of us should remember that we have been shaped by the Judaism that the generation that came before us practiced. Just as our children are being shaped by the choices that we make.

We have much to be indebted to the earlier generations of Reform Jews, the ones who taught us the value of making choices from a place of knowledge and understanding, the ones who reminded us that egalitarianism and inclusiveness *are* Jewish values, and who showed us how we could be fully American without sacrificing our faith, and who also taught us that part of the moral obligation of being a Jew in America is to actively work to protect and support the Jews in Israel, and around the world.

These earlier generations of Reform Jews also taught us that we need to speak up, as Jews, to bring the message of social justice from the prophets into the streets of America. They taught us to live according to Hillel's teachings, and to always ask ourselves three important questions "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?"

These earlier generations understood so well that when we worked together as a community we could engage in real tikkun olam, real healing, in our communities, in our country, in our world, and in ourselves. They founded national organizations so that small synagogues were supported by larger ones, they invested in our future by helping fund the education of our rabbis, cantors, and educators, they created youth groups and summer camps that have cultivated generations of synagogue leaders and members.

And these earlier generations passionately believed that to be Jewish meant working diligently to leave this world in better shape than how they found it, not just for us, but for all people.

To be a religious Jew, to be a Reform Jew, means to do as our tradition commands, to do as is written on the outside of this sanctuary, in words from the Talmud, what is hateful to you, do not do to anyone else.

It was with this understanding of our religious obligations, that the Reform Movement started the Religious Action Center fifty years ago, and became an instrumental player in the Civil Rights Movement. And we should be proud of the fact that the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act were both drafted in the RAC's conference room by Jewish, African-American, and other civil rights leaders.<sup>4</sup>

The blessings of the mitzvot that were practiced by earlier generations of Reform Jews are our inheritance. So now I ask you, what will our legacy be? What will the B'nai Israel archives reveal to those who sit in this sanctuary, or at least a remodeled version of it, in 50 years?

Will they look back at us and feel pride in what we have done, in how we have expressed our Jewish values?

Social action has always been a cornerstone of B'nai Israel's activity. But we must also remember that it is only one cornerstone. Community, life long learning, and spirituality are equally a part of the foundation on which our congregation rests.

So why I am talking to you about Reform Judaism tonight? Because I believe that it is important for us to understand who we are as a community, to find our common values, our shared practices, and to be proud of what it means to call ourselves a Reform congregation.

The imagery of the Reform Judaism that I practice is different than what my grandparents practiced, and it is most certainly different than what B'nai Israel practiced in the 1870's, or the 1970's for that matter. And it is most likely different than how my sons will practice as adults. But the four avenues in which we express our faith and our religiosity, these have not changed - community, lifelong study, worship, and social justice. These four values continue to inspire us, to nourish us, and to provide us with a way to live meaningful lives not only as Reform Jews, but as *religious* Jews.

Shana tova u'metukah - may you have a sweet new year, filled with joy, good health, opportunities to study, and to engage in tikkun olam, all the while growing closer to our community.

*Ken yehi ratzon.* May this be God's will.

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<sup>4</sup> Religious Action Center, <http://rac.org/aboutrac/rachistory/>