

A New Judaism for a New Millennium: A Classical Reform Response to Intermarriage and Jewish Identity

Rabbi Howard A. Berman
The Society for Classical Reform Judaism

The faithful cynic of the Book of Ecclesiastes observed that “there is nothing new under the sun.” And indeed, as we approach the end of the first decade of the new Millennium, we find that most of the critical questions and crises that have faced American Jewry over the course of the 20th century, persist - with even greater urgency and ferment - at the dawn of the 21st. Chief among them are the continuing anxieties and debates over Jewish survival and renewal in an open, pluralistic society; the never-ending concerns over the State of Israel - its search for peace, and our complicated relationship to it as American Jews; and, of course, our struggle to understand the meaning and impact of the Holocaust for Jewish life today and in the future.

The recent past has seen a proliferation of analysis and, of course, debate on each of these issues. Major surveys and sociological studies, and a variety of recently published books by prominent scholars and observers, all underscore this as a time of critical transition - of significant developments and striking contrasts in Jewish life. These studies and reports portray a community experiencing both dramatic renewal and revitalization, as well as continuing patterns of widespread alienation and marginalization of masses of Jews. Jewish scholarship flourishes...synagogue memberships continue to grow... fundraising for Jewish institutions is wildly successful... and yet a majority of American Jews remain unaffiliated and unconnected to the organized Jewish community, and our overall population continues to decline. Finally, the ever-increasing rate of intermarriage remains, as always, the most emotionally debated issue of all.

And what is clear is that the differing responses to these challenges - the diverse and often conflicting philosophies and strategies at work in confronting these realities - have led to a growing polarization in the Jewish community. There is increasing alienation and conflict between the different segments of American Jewish life; both between the various religious denominations, and between religious and secular expressions of communal identity. At every point on the spectrum of Jewish life and thought, differing analysis and strategies are espoused in confronting these questions - and as we know, the overwhelming response to the perceived crisis of post-Holocaust Jewish survival in the modern world, from virtually every sector, both religious and secular, Orthodox and Reform, is a growing trend toward traditionalism – a return to greater ritual observance and deepened cultural identity, as the only alleged safeguards against the great threat of “assimilation.”

I want to reflect on the perspective that our particular expression of Judaism brings in response to these issues and challenges: our liberal, Classical Reform commitment which,

characteristically, frames and responds to these questions in a rather different way. I want to share with you why I have come to believe, even more fervently than ever before, that the historic vision of Reform Judaism offers a uniquely creative and vital response to these challenges.

Now, we speak often of the distinctive heritage and message of our “Prophetic” understanding of our Faith. We proudly proclaim the progressive principles of the historic liberal interpretation of our Movement; deeply rooted in the broad, universal ideals of social justice, tolerance and inclusion, proclaimed by our Biblical Prophets, and grounded in the free spirit of American democracy.

We realize, of course, that we are rather outside the mainstream – even within our own Reform Movement, which has largely embraced the broader Jewish establishment’s agenda of greater emphasis on traditional ritual observance and discipline, a renewed emphasis on Hebrew language as a vehicle for establishing a distinctive Jewish identity, and a focus on Israel and Zionism as the central frame of reference for Jewish loyalty and commitment.

Many of us have respectful and yet profound differences with many of these trends. While we certainly agree that each of these elements of Jewish experience can indeed be enriching complements to a full and deep Jewish spiritual commitment, we would argue that they are not the essential elements of a personal Jewish faith, and they cannot substitute for an authentic religious experience of our tradition. We would also argue that they are clearly not the solutions and panaceas they are claimed to be.

It seems to me that our dissent from the neo-traditionalism and, even what many of us would feel, the narrow parochialism that characterizes so much of Jewish life today, is primarily based on our critique of many underlying assumptions in our community. American Jews largely identify, as both an ethnic group as well as a religious community. Much - perhaps even most - of Jewish identity, is predicated on the perpetuation of cultural ties to a pre-American, largely Eastern European immigrant nostalgia... combined with a focus on support - emotional, political, and financial - of the State of Israel, as the very center of our Jewish concerns.

The traditionalist trends at work throughout American Jewry are fostered as counter offensives and defensive measures against “assimilation” - the erosion and loss of this distinctive cultural identity, within the larger sphere of American society. Many of these current trends - greater emphasis on ritual observance, greater use of Hebrew in worship and religious discourse; the idealization and even romanticization of perceived “Golden-Age” eras of Jewish life in the “Old Country”; and a reliance on the State of Israel as a source of pride and communal cohesion; all of these dynamics - usually heralded by the mainstream Jewish establishment as signs of renewal and revitalization - can also be seen as a “circling of the wagons” mentality...a desperate effort to stave off inevitable disaster...

Now, the disaster is, once again, that dreaded phantom “assimilation”. And of course in this line of thinking, the greatest threat of all remains intermarriage and the assumption that Jews who marry non-Jews, will inevitably have non-Jewish children irretrievably lost to future generations of our People.

Well there are many of us - no less passionately committed to the Jewish future - who confront these very same issues and realities, and might well respond by saying “It ain’t necessarily so...”

We would challenge many of these fundamental assumptions: the premise for example, that our goal should be the perpetuation of the present model of an ethnic and culturally bound Jewish identity - in which religion is one important - but all too often minor – component...supported by and dependent upon a distinctive and even separatist ethnic overlay, in order to survive in a pluralistic society. And we might well question whether Judaism’s future and viability will be solely determined by the continuation of an ethnically Jewish-born critical mass.

Now, to get some perspective, it is important for us to remember that virtually every one of these issues and debates was alive, and raged just as furiously, back in the mid 19th century – when Reform Judaism was first established in America. The early Reformers faced the very same issues, with even greater urgency! They did not have the immense infrastructure of a large and active Jewish community and well funded institutions to work with... in many ways, they were literally laboring in an empty, barren wilderness!

But, they saw clearly, that things were very different in this country than they had been in the old, tradition-bound ghettos and shtetls of Europe. They realized that many of the traditional aspects of Jewish life and identity they had known in the past were shaped more by centuries of persecution and isolation, than by any inherent, essential, internal qualities within Judaism itself. They knew from the history of our People, that the most creative and dynamic eras of our past were those times and places in which Jews had been free to fully enter into the surrounding cultures in which they lived - and were able to achieve a creative synthesis of an authentically Jewish *religious* community, within the broader *social* environment. They realized that Judaism, in this new world of liberty and freedom, would have to reclaim that ideal and refocus its basic assumptions and energies, if it was to thrive on these shores... and reach its full potential as a moral and spiritual force in American life.

The principles of the new liberal American Judaism they fostered, are the very same ideals we have continued to proclaim to this day: that Judaism is first and foremost a religious faith... that we are indeed a distinctive People, with a unique history and destiny... but that we are primarily a *spiritual* community... not merely another social, ethnic or cultural group... *and most certainly not a nationality.*

They believed that Judaism is a powerful, life-transforming personal encounter with God... and a unifying, sustaining ideal for a strong and enduring community of faith. They courageously and proudly taught that the Jewish *religion* - not an ethnic, European

imported “Jewishness,” but rather a vigorously modern, deeply spiritual expression of timeless values and beliefs - would be able to flourish here in the free, open, pluralistic, *and deeply religious* society of the United States. They believed that Reform Judaism had a universal message to proclaim and share: a message of faith through reason, compatible and not in conflict with science and modern culture...a broad, humanistic faith, whose definition of salvation was the moral and ethical transformation of society here on earth. They were supremely confident that Judaism could hold its own in the marketplace of religious options in this country – as a faith that could appeal not only to born Jews but to all spiritual seekers! They did not emulate the aggressive missionary practices of American churches, and upheld the authentic Jewish principle that all faiths are true and valid that teach the unity of God and of humanity... but they were also determined that superstitious folklore; a liturgical language no longer comprehensible to most Jews, let alone others; and obsolete rituals and traditions which had lost all meaning for modern minds and hearts... that these should not remain as obstacles to making the Synagogue in America a “House of Prayer for all People.”

Our Reform pioneers were confident of Judaism’s essential uniqueness... its profoundly distinctive perspectives on the nature of God and of human life and destiny...its vigorously intellectual character...and they believed that these qualities could offer a clear and compelling alternative in the midst of the dominant Christian culture, offering *both* born Jews - *and many others* - an attractive, meaningful spiritual option. And since it was the power of Judaism’s faith and message, and its timeless, universal spiritual ideals that the early Reformers relied upon, they were liberated from a dependence on Old World cultural trappings and the preservation of an immigrant identity! Cultural assimilation was not a threat for Jews who participated and contributed fully to the best of American life...and remained faithful and deeply committed to Jewish belief, celebration, worship and social ideals... long after the last vestiges of ghetto or shtetl nostalgia had been forgotten.

Now unfortunately, this hopeful, confident, optimistic vision of those early Reform pioneers was just on the verge of a triumphant flowering in late 19th century America, when historical forces unfolded that derailed and undermined its development and progress. The dawn of the 20th century brought millions of Jews from Eastern Europe to America. These immigrants, coming from a tradition-bound Orthodoxy, had long been isolated from the non-Jewish world, as well as from modern science and culture. For them, the broad liberal, socially integrated Judaism expounded by the American Reformers, was incomprehensible – at least at first. And then, within a generation, the trauma of the Holocaust left world Jewry in isolation and shock... and the subsequent struggle for the birth of the State of Israel, inspired the mandate all Jews felt to nurture, support and identify with the refuge it offered. In the end, all of these forces contributed to an eclipse of the historic Classical Reform vision. But times have continued to change...and eclipses are temporary...and the sun eventually shines once again! At this dawn of a new era, that vision speaks to us once again with renewed and compelling power!

As you know, many Jews today use the term “Classical Reform,” as we seek to differentiate this distinctive philosophy. And yet, most Reform Jews today feel that somehow, the “Classical” position is primarily about preserving a quaint historic relic. But the term “Classical Reform,” with its antiquarian implications, is a phrase that was actually unknown to our founders! Significantly, they used the term, “Radical Reform” to describe themselves! I would suggest that we need to reclaim their courageous and radical principles of a spiritually defined, broadly out-reaching Judaism once again – as we face the troubled future of American Jewry on the threshold of the 21st century.

For let us make no mistake – whatever the future holds for Jewish life in America, there is one certain and incontrovertible reality: and we don’t need a crystal ball to see it! Within one generation from now, and certainly within 25 years, the vast majority of the children and grandchildren of American Jews will no longer be Jewish in any meaningful *ethnic* or *cultural* sense! It is even arguable whether most American Jews today, under the age of 50, can truly be considered ethnically Jewish by any conventional definition. Most of us would identify ourselves by any cultural standard - of language, aesthetics, or social outlook, as totally American. Moreover, the current 55% rate of intermarriage can only continue to increase exponentially. This is an inescapable fact of life in an open pluralistic society, and many of us have realized that it is not intermarriage itself, but rather our *response* to this challenge that will determine its ultimate implications for the Jewish future. If Jewish parents continue to rant and rave, and if rabbis and congregations continue to reject and turn their own children away when they seek support and blessing for their love, then intermarriage will indeed be a threat to Jewish survival... *a self-fulfilling prophecy!* Instead, true to the inclusive, liberal spirit of Classical Reform, we seek to welcome and embrace interfaith couples and families with “open hearts and an open door”... *fully and unconditionally*... support them, celebrate their weddings, and lovingly embrace their children. We strongly believe that we will transform this perceived “threat” into a golden opportunity for Jewish renewal! Hundreds of young families – who might well have been lost to our faith – can be empowered by worshipping together – in a Service whose language and music is accessible to all of them, and embraces everyone. We want to support them in raising children who may well cherish and embrace *both* sides of their *cultural* heritage - and who at the same time, are being raised *religiously* with a vigorous and liberal Jewish faith commitment.

Yes! For us, the future is already here! Just look around at your families and friends! If there indeed ever was such a thing as a particular Jewish “look,” you’d be hard pressed to single it out in the midst of the diverse ethnic, national and racial make-up of today’s American Jewish community... which includes Goldbergs and Johnsons, Cohens and Mackenzies, Feldmans and O’Malleys and a colorful assortment of Adams, Robinsons, Rossis, DeFrancos, Tanakas, and Changs!!!

Of the 5 ½ million Jews in America today, more than 800,000 are children of intermarriages under the age of 18! Twenty-five years from now, the diversity we already embrace will be the norm in American Jewry! All of the conventional assumptions about preserving Jewish identity by appealing to ethnic pride, immigrant memories, or vicarious Israeli nationalism; stereotypical characteristics such as Yiddish

phrases, a taste for bagels, or some kind of supposedly “sophisticated” edgy New York style humor... all of these will be totally irrelevant and largely meaningless to the vast majority of American Jews a generation from now! And yet, if our liberal Reform perspective prevails – they will indeed be *fully and totally Jewish by religious faith and observance... but by socialization and culture, full, unhyphenated Americans.*

But even claiming the children of intermarriage is only half of the equation! Every contemporary trend in American society reflects the fact that there are millions of people no longer bound by familial loyalty to their ancestral religious faith, but who are actively, intelligently, seriously, searching for spiritual alternatives they can claim for themselves. Until now, we – even in most Reform Temples – have kept Judaism to ourselves – making it seem remote and inaccessible – like a closed, exclusive private club, or a fraternity with secret handshakes, hidden passwords and frightening initiation rites. We have obscured our faith’s beautiful, compelling message in external trappings that serve as insurmountable obstacles to those whose spiritual search would be so powerfully attracted to Judaism’s distinctive teachings and universal truths. Without resorting to aggressive, insensitive, missionary tactics - and always respecting the beauty and truth of other faiths - we must nevertheless make our message accessible to all who wish to hear and embrace it. It is time for us to reclaim the Classical Reform commitment that we so proudly proclaim ... to truly make our temples welcoming, embracing and empowering “houses of prayer for all people!” We are confident that a progressive, inclusive Judaism can more than hold its own and compete in the marketplace of religious alternatives that mark American society today.

Friends, ultimately, we must also wake up and realize the clear implications of what we have seen so dramatically reflected in the contemporary social and political sphere: that there is no more powerful and enduring force in American life than religious faith... and that we need to claim for Judaism the rightful place it deserves as a spiritual force and available option in American life. We must learn the fundamental lesson that American history so clearly teaches - that the ethnic and cultural identity of immigrant traditions survives perhaps two or at most three generations in American society. *Religious faith* however, including minority religious traditions, *endure as the most powerful communal forces in American life!* Ethnic and cultural identities are inevitably lost to assimilation within a few generations... but *religion in America does not assimilate!* If anything, American culture *engenders and nurtures* the proliferation of small religious groups and sects – which have shown remarkable resilience and power to both self-perpetuate and attract new followers!

And so friends, we are at a major crossroads in Jewish history... one with great challenges and possibilities... calling for courage, creativity and vision, no less than at the other critical turning points in the 5000 year epoch of our People’s past! The challenge of survival, and the promise of renewal and renaissance, that this new millennium holds for Judaism and the Jewish People, calls for nothing less than revolutionary, radical responses... nothing less than the courageous transformation of our Jewish community!

We must redeem our Faith and our People from a predominately, social and culturally defined, Israel-centered, Holocaust-obsessed remnant, into a post-ethnic, universally-visioned spiritual force! We must reclaim a religious community that cherishes, but is not dominated – nor drained of its own integrity and resources - by its special relationship to our brothers and sisters in the land of Israel. We must, in this new century, be a community that forever remembers with reverence the precious martyrs and moral lessons of the Holocaust, but is prepared to renew itself and move on, to focus on the future. We must move beyond the facile and shallow substitutes of “Jewishness” to reclaim our vision as a religious community, defined and experienced by our timeless, transcendent ideals - our search for the encounter with God... our commitment to working for justice and peace in human society... and our study of Torah that empowers us to seek the life-transforming resources of meaning, comfort, wisdom, guidance and inspiration that our Faith so abundantly offers for our daily lives...

Yes... this may well sound radical... and there is no question that much of this would be considered shocking heresy by many in the mainstream Jewish establishment. And yet, this is what Classical Reform has always taught that Judaism in America should be. And this is what Jewish life, energies, resources, and education, must all become about, once again...not the desperate, cheap substitutes we offer to our justifiably alienated kids.

GOD and TORAH... ETHICAL VALUES and LOVINGKINDESS...THE STRUGGLE FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE...not multimillion dollar JCC's with pools and health clubs and pottery workshops...FAITH and LEARNING... and not the illusion that an obscenely elaborate Bar Mitzvah celebration...or a summer on a kibbutz...or the exploitation of the Holocaust as a guilt tactic... are panaceas to ensure Jewish loyalty and commitment among our young people - now or in the future.

Only if we reclaim that historic – and yes, “radical” Reform vision of a vital Jewish spiritual renewal...only if we have the confidence in Judaism's universal message, the willingness to rededicate ourselves to those ideals, and the courage to proclaim and share them with others – only then can we even dare to hope that a century from now– on the Eve of Rosh Hashanah, in the year 2100 – that any more than a small remnant of our descendents – clinging to an ever-dimming memory – will be gathered in a handful of surviving synagogues to usher in a New Year...

On this threshold of a new and decisive era, we need to reaffirm our sacred commitment, and at the same time take the faith-filled risks required to realize this mission. May we be granted the clarity of vision and the strength of spirit to dedicate ourselves to this goal!