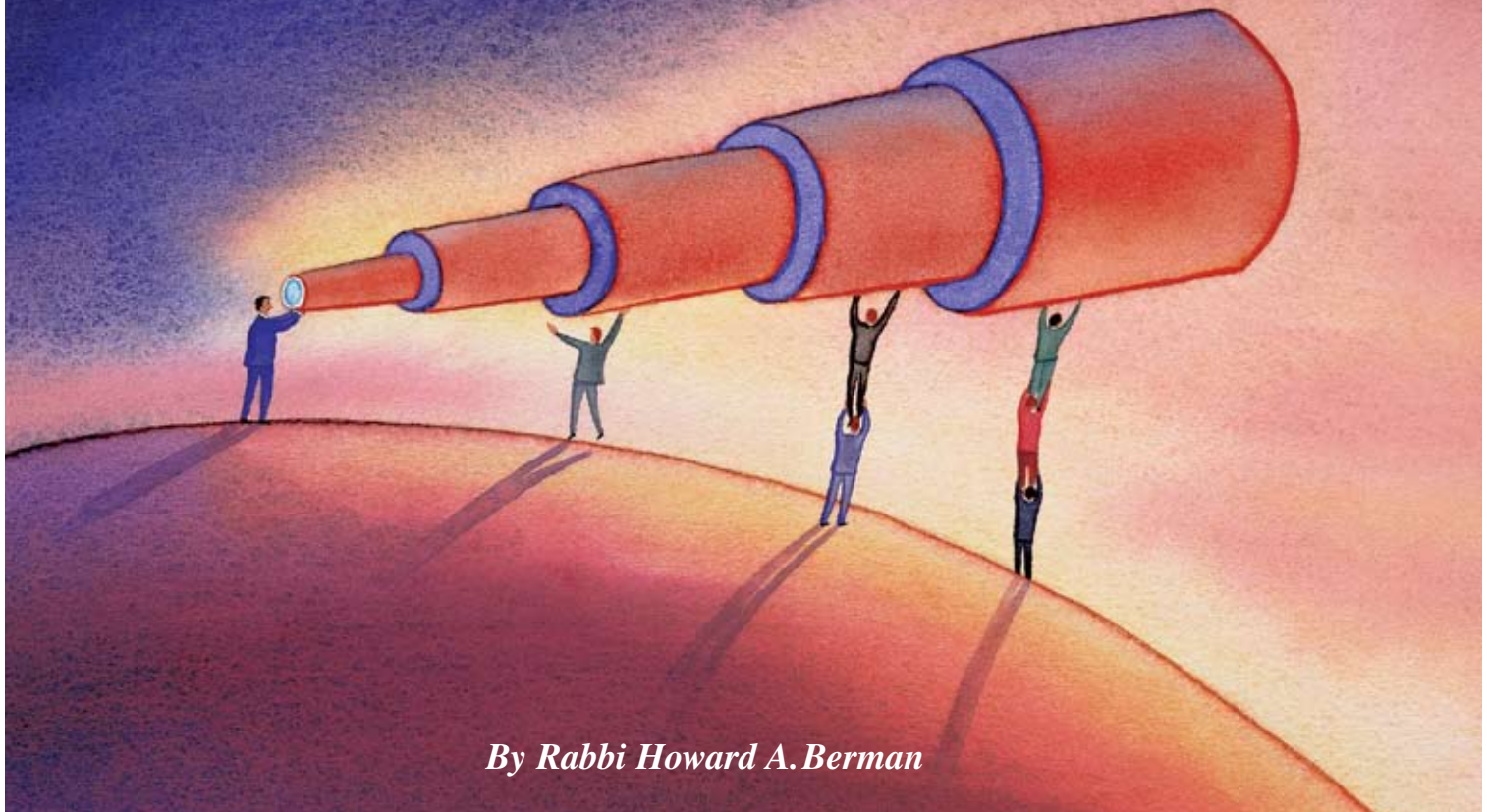


A New Judaism for a New Millennium



By Rabbi Howard A. Berman

The faithful cynic of the Book of Ecclesiastes observed that “there is nothing new under the sun.” As we approach the end of the first decade of the new millennium, we find that most of the critical questions that have faced American Jewry over the course of the 20th century persist with even greater urgency and ferment. Chief among them are the continuing anxieties over the future of Judaism and a distinctive Jewish community in a free, open and pluralistic society.

A majority of American Jews remain unaffiliated and unconnected to the organized Jewish community and our overall population continues to decline. The ever-increasing rate of intermarriage remains, as always, the locus of the analysis and debate on these challenges. All too often, Jewish institutions have responded to the

perceived crisis of post-Holocaust Jewish survival in the modern world with a parochial appeal to ethnic solidarity and religious traditionalism--a return to greater ritual observance and deepened cultural identity, as the only alleged safeguards against the great threat of “assimilation.”

Our particular expression of Judaism offers a dissenting voice and an alternative vision in response to these issues. Our liberal, Classical Reform commitment, with its historic universalistic perspective of Jewish destiny, characteristically frames and responds to these questions in a different way and offers a uniquely creative and vital response to these challenges. Our responses affirm the progressive principles of the historic liberal interpretation of our movement deeply rooted in the broad, universal ideals of social justice, tolerance and inclusion pro-

claimed by our Biblical Prophets and grounded in the free spirit of American democracy.

We realize, of course, that we are 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 the perpetuation of a distinctive Jewish ethnic and cultural identity and a focus on the State of Israel as the central frame of reference for Jewish loyalty and commitment.

Many of us have respectful and yet profound differences with these trends. We agree that each of these elements of the Jewish experience can be enriching complements to a full and deep Jewish spiritual commitment. However, we would argue that a return to ritual and

***“We must
reclaim our vision
as a religious community,
defined by our timeless,
transcendent ideals: our search
for God, our commitment to
working for justice and peace in
human society and our study of
our magnificent tradition that
offers us life-transforming
inspiration for our daily
lives and for the
redemption of our
world.”***

ceremonial practices that the founders of our movement rejected on sound ethical, intellectual and cultural grounds, are not the essential elements of a vital personal Jewish faith. Ethnic pride, cultural identity and an attachment to Israel cannot substitute for an authentic spiritual experience of our tradition. We, no less passionately committed to the Jewish future, confront these very same issues and realities and respond with very different conclusions.

We would challenge the premise that our goal should be the perpetuation of the present model of an ethnic and culturally based Jewish identity, in which Judaism as a religion is merely one, usually optional, component dependent upon a distinctive and even separatist ethnic overlay, in order to survive in a pluralistic society. We question whether Judaism's future and viability can, or even should, be solely determined by the continuation of an ethnically Jewish-born critical mass.

Now, to get some perspective, virtually every one of these debates was alive and raged just as furiously 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. Some 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 – when they 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. We believe that Judaism is first and foremost a religious faith. We are indeed a distinctive people, with a unique history and destiny, but we are primarily a *spiritual* community... not merely another social, ethnic or cultural group.

The early Reformers 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 a vigorously modern, deeply spiritual expression of timeless values and beliefs, would 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 also determined that superstitious folklore, a liturgical language no longer comprehensible to most Jews, let alone others, and obsolete rituals and traditions that had lost all meaning for modern minds and hearts, 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 and its vigorously intellectual character. 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 the early Reformers relied upon the power of Judaism's faith and message and its timeless, universal spiritual ideals, 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.

That reality has come to pass and that time is now. Whatever the future holds for Jewish life in America, there is one certain and incontrovertible reality: 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 ... supporting them, celebrating their weddings and lovingly embracing their children. We strongly believe that we will transform this perceived "threat" into a golden opportunity for Jewish renewal! Countless 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.

Of the 5½ million Jews in America today, more than 800,000 are children of intermarriages under the age of 18. In a quarter-century, 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 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 and full, unhyphenated Americans by socialization and culture.

Responding to intermarriage is not even the primary challenge – or the major opportunity – that we face. 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

“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 transform our people from a predominantly socially and culturally defined, Israel-centered, Holocaust-obsessed remnant into a post-ethnic, spiritual force with universal vision.”

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.

Ultimately, we must also 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. We need to claim for Judaism the place it deserves as a spiritual force and available option in American life. We must learn the fundamental lesson of American history 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 identi-

ties 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!

We stand at a major crossroads in Jewish history, one that calls for for courage, cre-

ativity and vision. 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 transform our people from a predominantly socially and culturally defined, Israel-centered, Holocaust-obsessed remnant into a post-ethnic, spiritual force with universal vision. 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 be a community that forever remembers with reverence the precious martyrs and moral lessons of the Shoah, but is prepared to renew itself and to focus on the future. We must move beyond the facile and shallow appeals to narrow, ethnic “Jewishness” – so often expressed in the language of alienation, ambivalence and even vulgarity – that we offer our children as illusionary substitutes for a meaningful spiritual commitment.

We must reclaim our vision as a religious community, defined by our timeless, transcendent ideals: our search for God, our commitment to working for justice and peace in human society and our study of our magnificent tradition that offers us life-transforming inspiration for our daily lives and for the redemption of our world.

Rabbi Howard A. Berman is the National Executive Director of the Society for Classical Reform Judaism, and also leads Boston Jewish Spirit, a progressive Reform congregation in Boston, Mass.

This article originally appeared on www.InterfaithFamily.com