

# The Reform Advocate

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THE SOCIETY FOR  
CLASSICAL  
REFORM  
JUDAISM

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



## Grant from Society for Classical Reform Judaism and the Edward and Wilhelmina Ackerman Foundation Supports Rabbinical Student Scholarships at HUC-JIR/Cincinnati

The Society for Classical Reform Judaism (SCRJ), with the support of the Edward and Wilhelmina Ackerman Foundation, has announced a five-year grant in the amount of \$500,000 to Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR). This grant will support rabbinical students on the Cincinnati campus with scholarships, Prize Essay Awards, a Student Travel Fund, and an annual SCRJ Institute.



“We are grateful to the Society for Classical Reform Judaism and the Ackerman Foundation for their generous commitment to sustaining HUC-JIR’s pluralism and openness to all views, which represents our strength as the academic, spiritual, and professional leadership development center for the Reform Movement,” said Rabbi Kenneth Ehrlich, Dean of HUC-JIR’s Cincinnati campus.

As part of this grant, Rabbi Howard A. Berman, SCRJ Executive Director, will deliver a presentation to the Senior Seminar course on the Cincinnati campus, and will meet with all interested students on the Cincinnati, Los Angeles, and New York campuses. Classical Reform Judaism – its history, thought, and liturgical expressions – will be included in Core and Elective courses in the Rabbinical School on the Cincinnati campus and the School of Sacred Music on the New York campus, and in campus co-curricular activities and programs. Cincinnati faculty will work to develop an elective course on Classical Reform Judaism, which may be offered through e-learning to students on other campuses. Rabbinical students will be provided with resource materials, including the *Union Prayer Book – Sinai Edition*, books, journals, liturgical and musical materials, including the classics of Reform thought and liturgy in specially produced reprints of out-of-print titles.

Rabbi Howard A. Berman, SCRJ Executive Director, noted “Since its founding in 2008, the Society has been committed to the building of a collegial relationship with HUC-JIR in order to sustain the historic principles and worship traditions of Classical Reform Judaism as core values in its teaching and practice. The SCRJ affirms the broad inclusive, universal ideals of the Classical Reform tradition, which have a unique role to play in reaching a new generation of younger Jews today, including the increasing numbers of interfaith families within the Reform Movement. We are very excited to have this opportunity to share our vision with a new generation of rabbis, and to support them in rediscovering and reaffirming the heritage we all share as Reform Jews.”

“The Society for Classical Reform Judaism salutes the Ackerman Foundation for its creative philanthropy in funding this initiative,” said B. H. Levy, Jr., President of the SCRJ Board. “We hope that this grant program will raise awareness of prophetic Judaism within coming generations of Reform rabbis to enable those rabbis to more fully appreciate Classical Reform as a living, breathing, and worthwhile model, both for daily living and public worship. We also hope that this initiative will lead to other creative paths along which the Society and HUC-JIR can partner to enrich the lives of North American Jewry.”



Through its support for HUC-JIR, the SCRJ seeks to foster the continuous creative development of a distinctively American expression of Jewish life and identity, and advocates on behalf of outreach and genuine inclusion of the diverse strains in today’s changing Jewish community. The SCRJ seeks to broaden its partnership with HUC-JIR to support and encourage an awareness of the Classical Reform tradition among the emerging generation of rabbis, cantors, and educators.

Over the past two years, HUC-JIR has invited the SCRJ to meet with students at the Cincinnati and New York campuses and to participate in the annual Senior Seminar with rabbinical and cantorial students completing their studies and approaching Ordination/Investiture. This past year, the SCRJ initiated its scholarship program in Cincinnati through awards to five students for their reflective essays on their understandings and connection to Classical Reform Judaism.



*The newly renovated  
Klau Library at HUC*

Founded in 1875, **Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion** is the nation’s oldest institution of higher Jewish education and the academic, spiritual, and professional leadership development center of Reform Judaism. HUC-JIR educates men and women for service to American and world Jewry as rabbis, cantors, educators, and communal service professionals, and offers graduate and post-graduate programs to scholars of all faiths. With centers of learning in Cincinnati, Jerusalem, Los Angeles, and New York, HUC-JIR’s scholarly resources comprise renowned library and museum collections, the American Jewish Archives, biblical archaeology excavations, research institutes and centers, and academic publications. HUC-JIR invites the community to an array of cultural and educational programs which illuminate Jewish history, identity, and contemporary creativity and which foster interfaith and multiethnic understanding. [www.huc.edu](http://www.huc.edu)

## 2010 SCRJ Scholarship Program for Rabbinical Students at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion: The First Phase of our Partnership

Since 2009, the Society has reached out to HUC-JIR and its student body, providing education about our mission, and mentorship for those students whose theological beliefs and practices are compatible with the Society’s values and philosophy. Rabbi Howard Berman met with the Senior Class at the Cincinnati and New York campuses. Interested students in Cincinnati were invited to learn about the Society’s mission, and write an essay outlining the ways in which their belief system is in line with Classical Reform Judaism. The enthusiastic response speaks to the continued relevance of our message to the next generation of rabbis, and to the potential impact generated by all those whose lives they will touch.

It is thanks to the deep interest and generosity of members of the Society’s Board, that we were able to offer interested students not only a first prize of \$3,000, but also a second prize of \$1,500 and a third prize of \$1,000,

and additional stipends for all applicants. The generosity of this gift will allow us to encourage all of these students, as we hope to maintain a close relationship with them, providing them with mentorship and support during their studies and following their ordination.

This scholarship represents an important first step in our deepening relationship with HUC-JIR that will allow us to be recognized as a defining voice of Reform Judaism, not only of generations past, but of the future as well. Thanks to the generosity of our donors, the seeds of our growth are able to be planted.

We are delighted to be able to reprint the winning essay, and excerpts of the essays of all of the scholarship recipients.

*First Place: Rabbi Barbara Block*

*Rabbi Barbara Block was ordained as a rabbi in 2010, and is serving as rabbi at Congregation Beth Aaron in Billings, MT. She has served previously as an academic*

*advisor and adjunct professor at St. Catherine University in St. Paul, MN, and was a founding member of Congregation Shir Tikvah in the Twin Cities.*



It was October 14, one month to the day before I was to deliver my senior sermon, and I was still casting about for inspiration. That morning, Rabbi

Howard Berman spoke to our senior seminar about the Society for Classical Reform Judaism. He spoke passionately and eloquently about bringing back to the center the Classical Reform ideals of universalism and ethical behavior based on prophetic Judaism. He urged us as worship leaders to consider embracing the Society's mission of re-enfranchising tens of thousands of Jews around the country who have embraced classical minhag and have found themselves shut out of Reform services that have become increasingly dominated by Hebrew prayer and informal worship styles. He urged us as educators to teach children to understand that rituals and ceremonies

that they are taught as normative have to be linked to ethical values.

Rabbi Berman's presentation and our subsequent one-on-one conversation later that morning electrified my mind. I had grown up at Temple Shaarai Shomayim in Lancaster, Pennsylvania in the 1950s and 60s, and taken to heart the messages of Classical Reform Judaism. I learned by heart Prophet Micah's famous instruction, and it has been a guidepost in my life to this day: "It has been told you, O mortal, what is good and what the Eternal requires of you: only to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God."<sup>1</sup>

Although during my high school years I welcomed the more casual trends that became common in Reform worship and in my college years I experimented with more traditional practice – some of which I have come to appreciate – I have always retained a commitment to the ideals of my Classical Reform Jewish upbringing, particularly the ideals of universalism and of living an ethical life.

Although I have personally learned enough Hebrew to appreciate more of the Hebrew liturgy than we recited from the Union Prayer Book of my youth, I have always thought that we needed to be mindful of those for whom praying in Hebrew was difficult and unintelligible. I have made it a practice at my student pulpits to be as inclusive as possible of those whose preference is for English prayer. True to the Classical Reform Jewish ideal of intellectual honesty, I believe that we should not offer Hebrew prayers we do not understand or with which we deeply disagree. They are not, after all, magical incantations! When I learned enough Hebrew to understand what I was saying in the first paragraph of the traditional 'aleinu' – that is, that I was thanking God "for not making us like the other families of the earth," I could no longer recite it. When I led services in my home congregation, I substituted the prayer of my youth, the Adoration, in place of the Hebrew Aleinu. The congregations I have served as student rabbi have preferred a Hebrew aleinu, and so I have taught an alternate version of the Hebrew verses. In addition, I have explained the reasons I insist on these substitutions through sermon and adult education sessions.

The ideas that were presented by Rabbi Berman in senior seminar that morning in October resonated deeply with me – and they inspired me to base my

senior sermon on the ideas of Classical Reform Judaism. I conclude my essay with a version of this sermon which I have edited for this publication:

Barbara Block

Fifth Year Sermon

Parashat Chayei Sarah

Originally Delivered on November 14th, 2010

In the Scheuer Chapel

Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, OH<sup>2</sup>

For two years of my life, I did not set foot inside a synagogue.

For two years I did not set foot in synagogue, but perhaps that is not so noteworthy. It is not so unusual for those in their 20s to set themselves apart from the community. Even now, 30 years after my exit from synagogue life, many Jews in their 20s find little appeal in the houses of worship of their parents. V'ei kol chadash tachat ha-shamesh. There is nothing at all new under the sun.

In fact, my generation was not the first modern generation to exit from the synagogue and from Jewish life. In 1927, over 80 years ago, the French Jewish scholar Edmond Fleg wrote,

When I was twenty I too had no lot, nor part in Israel; I was persuaded that Israel would disappear, and that in twenty years' time people would no longer speak of her. Twenty years have passed, and another twelve, and I have become a Jew again.<sup>3</sup>

Edmond Fleg returned to Judaism, and so, obviously, have many of us estranged from our faith. The poet Uri Zvi Greenberg captures the tension of our relationship with Judaism during that difficult time:

God, You taunt me, "Flee if you can!"

But I can't flee.

For when I turn away from You, angry and heart-sick,

With a vow on my lips, like burning coal:

"I will not see You again" –

I can't do it.

And I turn back

And knock on your door,

Tortured with longing.

As though you had sent me a love letter.<sup>4</sup>

Like Greenberg, we could not stay away. We could not stay away from God, from Judaism, and from the Jewish community. It was as though they had sent us a love letter. But what was written in that love letter? What drew us back?

Why be Jewish, when it is so easy to walk away? Summer camp is great for children; singing, campfires and dressing in white on Shabbat kindle enthusiasm in our youth. Birthright trips to Israel are exciting and enriching for college students. Visiting the Kotel for the first time, climbing Masada at dawn, swimming in the Dead Sea, and eating falafel are memorable experiences, connecting us to the State of Israel – but then, seeing the Coliseum and eating gelato on the Via Veneto in Rome connect us to Rome. Sushi and sangria in the sukkah is cool for those in their 20s, providing a setting that is familiar and comfortable to young professionals. But when the campfires and the singing are over, when Israel is once more thousands of miles away, when the sushi has been eaten and the sangria pitcher emptied, why be Jewish? The answer must lie in something more than fun times, catchy songs, panoramic views of ancient sites, and tasty food.

We remain Jews because the *message* of Judaism is a message worth hearing. We are Jews because the values promoted by Judaism are values that will bring about a better world. Edmond Fleg answered the question "Why be Jewish" with a series of affirmations that we read this morning in our siddur. These affirmations, written nearly a century ago, speak to us today:

"I am a Jew because the faith of Israel demands of me no abdication of the mind."

"I am a Jew because at every time when despair cries out, the Jew hopes."

"I am a Jew because the promise of Israel is the universal promise."

We must rededicate ourselves today to these Jewish values: the values of intellectual honesty, of hope, and of universalism.

Forty years before Fleg the founders of Reform Judaism wrote in the Pittsburgh Platform, "We recognize in Judaism a progressive religion, ever striving to be

in accord with the postulates of reason. We hold that the modern discoveries of scientific research in the domains of nature and history are not antagonistic to the doctrines of Judaism”<sup>5</sup>

Most Jews today do embrace secular knowledge. Since the time of the Enlightenment in Europe, when Jews were first admitted to universities, Jews have pursued higher education with great enthusiasm, excelling in a wide range of academic fields. But secular knowledge is not enough.

Reform Judaism champions the truths gained in modernity and seeks to blend modern secular knowledge with traditional Jewish wisdom. While the founders of Reform Judaism reacted against the confining traditional lifestyle of their upbringing, they still affirmed the importance of Jewish teachings, particularly the Bible. They wrote, “We recognize in the Bible the record of the consecration of the Jewish people to its mission as priest of the one God, and value it as the most potent instrument of religious and moral instruction.”<sup>6</sup>

This blending of secular and Jewish knowledge creates a tension, but it is a tension worth living. We lose out when either side of the balance is rejected. A small but growing number of Jews reject secular knowledge, forbidding the reading of anything other than traditional Jewish texts and banning the reading of non-Orthodox interpretations of those texts. A larger number, while not rejecting secular knowledge outright, have become followers of the post-modern trend that devalues reason in favor of emotion.<sup>7</sup> It is healthy to be aware of our emotions and to seek emotional fulfillment. It is sometimes appropriate to listen to our gut when we make decisions. But it is dangerous to allow emotion to rule without due regard for intellect. Our instant-gratification, twenty-second sound bite culture has become preoccupied with immediate experience and feelings. Passion for passion’s sake is worshipped. But we pay a heavy price for silencing reason in order to follow our hearts. “The heart wants what the heart wants” is a truism – and can lead to heart-breaking disaster.

There are far too many Jews who embrace secular knowledge and intellect, but who turn their backs on Jewish learning. We all know Jews who have walked

away from their Jewish upbringing – or who perhaps affiliate with Jewish institutions for social and cultural reasons but show complete disinterest in Jewish study, settling for a 13-year-old’s view of God, Jewish ethics, and theology. This, too, is an abdication of the mind. The world needs Jewish knowledge every bit as much as it needs secular knowledge. Orthodox Rabbi Norman Lamm writes:

Torah, faith, religious learning on one side and Madda, science, worldly knowledge on the other, together offer us a more over-arching and truer vision than either one set alone. Each set gives one view of the Creator as well as of [the] creation ... Each alone is true, but only partially true; both together present the possibility of a larger truth.<sup>8</sup>

We must not turn away from secular knowledge. We must not turn away from Jewish knowledge.

*The Union Prayer Book of Reform Judaism* offers this prayer:

Our God, open our eyes that we may see and welcome all truth, whether shining from the annals of ancient revelations or reaching us through the seers of our own time: for Your light is not hidden from any generation of Your children that yearn for You and seek Your guidance.<sup>9</sup>

“When despair cries out, the Jew hopes,” wrote Fleg, but we seem to have lost this message. Knowledge is the foundation of Jewish life, but to act on this knowledge we must renew our commitment to the Jewish ideal of hope.

During a recent visit to a confirmation class, I learned that even our youth are turning pessimistic. Their rabbi asked them, “Do you think that the world will be a better place in 10 years?” The confirmation class had to vote with their feet. If they thought that the world WOULD be a better place, they were to stand on the white square at one end of the room. If they thought that the world would NOT be a better place, they were to stand on the black square at the other end of the room. Those who were uncertain placed themselves on the grey squares of the continuum. The majority were on the dark end of the spectrum. The rabbi questioned them: why are you standing where you are? These savvy students had some pretty sophisticated answers. They knew about the economy and the price of oil and the size of the na-

tional debt. Their teachers had done a fine job of educating them about societal and world problems. But they had apparently missed the message of hope for a better world.

When we focus too hard on problems we see only that the glass is half empty. We become mired in despair and become paralyzed. When we are paralyzed, it helps to look to models that give us hope. These models abound; we need only to open our eyes to them.

Leondis Fuller's life did not have a hopeful start. His father was an alcoholic, and his mother struggled as a single parent to raise him. At 16, Leondis himself fathered a child, then became addicted to drugs and alcohol. Despite his seemingly hopeless situation, Fuller managed to overcome his addictions, eventually attending college and becoming a Baptist minister. He became a real father to his three sons. But then, one by one, each of his sons died, each one a victim to gun violence. Fuller had every reason to give up hope. But he realized that although he could do nothing to change the past, he could move forward. He could "do something to change what happens to people today." Fuller runs an organization that helps young fathers on probation or parole find jobs and become better parents. He counsels drug and alcohol addicts at a local church and gives motivational speeches to prisoners and at-risk kids. Said one man he helped: "He was able to encourage me when I could not encourage myself."<sup>10</sup>

When we encounter the stories of people like Leondis Fuller, people who have not given up hope despite having every reason to do so, who use their own bitter experiences to give others hope and encouragement, we find our own hope and strength.

*The Union Prayer Book of Reform Judaism* offers this prayer:

And I tell you the good in us will win,  
Over all our wickedness, over all the wrongs we  
have done.  
We will look at the pages of written history, and  
be amazed, and then we will laugh and sing,  
And the good that is in us all, children in their  
cradles, will have won.<sup>11</sup>

Fleg wrote, "the promise of Israel is the universal

promise." The message of hope that Judaism teaches is not merely about individual well-being. Nor is the message that the Jewish people alone will have salvation. Judaism's message is the message of a better world for *kol yoshei teivel*, for all who dwell on earth. Many Jews do not set foot in synagogue, but even those with the most tenuous of connections to Judaism will often find their way to a Passover Seder. Perhaps they are there because it connects them to family; perhaps they need their annual fix of eating *haroset* and singing *dayeinu*. But I believe that there is more than family, food, and song that draws most Jews to the Seder. We return year after year to hear the Passover story, a story that proclaims the universal messages of freedom and of justice.

The Passover story tells of the exodus of the Jews from Egypt, of their escape from slavery into freedom. This is a story of a particular people at a particular time. But the sages who wrote the Haggadah were not content to deliver a message that was particular. The Haggadah instructs that "In every generation all individuals are bound to regard themselves as if they had personally gone forth from Egypt." We include ourselves in the Exodus, reciting that WE were slaves in the land of Egypt, so that we might identify with all who are enslaved today, and to work for their freedom and for a just world.

The universal theme of justice found in the story of Passover reverberates throughout Jewish thought. In Deuteronomy we are exhorted, "tzedek, tzedek, tirdof!" "Justice, justice, shall you pursue!"<sup>12</sup> The Torah tells us over and over to care for the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. We are told to love our neighbor as ourselves. The prophets pick up and expand on this theme. Amos challenges his people to pay attention to what is truly important: "Spare Me the sound of your hymns, And the music of your lutes. But let justice well up like water, Righteousness like an unfailing stream."<sup>13</sup>

The preaching of the prophets provides a stirring call to justice. Our stories teach the same message, touching our hearts in a different way. Here is one of my favorite stories:

Before he died, Elijah declared that he would return once each generation in the guise of any poor or oppressed person, coming to people's doors to see how he would be treated. By the treatment offered this poor person, who would be Elijah himself, he would know whether the population had reached a level of humanity making them capable of participating in the dawn of the Messianic age.<sup>14</sup>

We learn about the Jewish call to justice through our texts and stories. Today, we take our message of universal justice literally around the globe. Two years ago, the Reform movement launched the campaign "Nothing But Nets" to fight malaria in Sub-Saharan Africa. By providing insecticide-treated bed nets to low-income families, the Union for Reform Judaism has saved more than 60,000 lives. We fulfill the words of Torah when we live our message.

*The Union Prayer Book* offers this prayer:

May the time not be distant, O God, when Your name shall be worshipped in all the earth, when unbelief shall disappear and error be no more. Fervently we pray that the day may come when all people shall invoke Your name, when corruption and evil shall give way to purity and goodness, when superstition shall no longer enslave the mind, nor idolatry blind the eye, when all who dwell on earth shall know that to You alone every knee shall bend and every tongue give praise. May all, created in Your image, recognize that we are brothers and sisters, so that, one in spirit and one in harmony, we may be forever united before You. Then shall Your reign be established on earth and the word of Your ancient prophet be fulfilled: The Eternal God will reign forever and ever.<sup>15</sup>

We need to reach out to Jews in their 20s – and in their 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s, 70s, and 80s – to make the synagogue an appealing place to be. We need to foster connection for Jews by birth and Jews by choice, for intermarried couples and for single people, for gays, lesbians, transgendered and straight folks, and for those who are poor as well as those who are rich.

We need to bring our community together not for Jewish continuity for its own sake, but so that the message of Judaism will be carried to the world in our time and in future generations.

Judaism sends every one of us a love letter. The message in that love letter is a message of truth, of hope and of a better world for all. It is up to us to open that letter and to take its message to heart.

Ken yehi ratzon!

<sup>1</sup> Micah, 6:8

<sup>2</sup> This version has been edited from the original for the purposes of this essay.

My thanks to my sermon advisor, Rabbi Kenneth A. Kanter, for his invaluable assistance in the preparation of this sermon.

<sup>3</sup> Fleg, Edmond. Translated from French. Reprinted in *The Zionist Idea; a Historical Analysis and Reader* edited by Arthur Hertzberg.

<sup>4</sup> Greenberg, Uri Zvi. Adapted from "Like a Woman." Found in *Gates of Forgiveness*, CCAR Press.

<sup>5</sup> Pittsburgh Platform, 1885.

<sup>6</sup> Pittsburgh Platform, 1885.

<sup>7</sup> Dr. Barry Kogan contributed this point.

<sup>8</sup> Lamm, Norman. *Torah Umadda*, p. 236

<sup>9</sup> CCAR. *The Union Prayerbook: Sinai Edition*.

Chicago: Chicago Sinai Congregation, 2000. Page 27.

<sup>10</sup> [http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/nationworld/2003545802\\_minister29.html](http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/nationworld/2003545802_minister29.html)

<sup>11</sup> CCAR. *The Union Prayerbook: Sinai Edition*.

Chicago: Chicago Sinai Congregation, 2000. Page 356.

<sup>12</sup> Deut. 16:20

<sup>13</sup> Amos, 5:23-24

<sup>14</sup> Shir Tikvah Passover Haggadah. Minneapolis, MN, 1999, page 28.

<sup>15</sup> CCAR. *The Union Prayerbook: Sinai Edition*.

Chicago: Chicago Sinai Congregation, 2000. Page 294

### *Second Place: Michal Merraro Loving*

*Michal Merraro Loving grew up splitting her time between her parents, in California and Israel. She earned a BA from Whittier College with a double major in English and Philosophy, and an MA in Philosophy from California State University, Long Beach. After working in the corporate world for a few years, she decided to enter rabbinical school and is now in her fourth year of study.*



Struggling with my theology helps me to better understand myself and my place in the universe, and frees me to grow and evolve. This, in short, is why I am a Classical Reform Jew. I don't fit into a box very well, and I am somewhat paradoxical. I have trouble connecting to the anthropomorphic God described in the Bible and Talmud, but I disagree that God can be wholly indwelling or pantheistic like Marcia Falk or Baruch Spinoza. Having grown up in Israel, it is my second home, and a safe haven for Jews everywhere, but I criticize and do not always support its political decisions. I love marking the seasons by which

holiday foods I'm eating, and marking the passage of the week with the rituals of Shabbat, yet I also feel that Judaism as a whole is more based on ethics than ritual. Some days, when my husband makes bacon and eggs for breakfast, I turn down the bacon; other days, I take a bite of his pepperoni pizza with gusto. The list goes on. The primary reason I am attracted to Classical Reform Judaism is because it accepts me. It affirms a broad, inclusive pluralism that accepts Jewish exploration from Jews and non-Jews alike.

My identity is grounded, first and foremost, in a spirituality that originates in shared Jewish history. All Jews today are shaped by our collective past. That said, I am very aware that I am living in America, not in Israel or Europe, and that it is the dawn of the 21st century. Although I am a product of history, I am not bound by it. Our ancestors created laws of kashrut, among others, for a variety of reasons: perhaps they noticed that pork caused more sickness than other foods, or perhaps there was an ethical prohibition of killing two generations of animals at once, or perhaps the rabbis simply wanted to further enforce a social distinction between Jews and gentiles. The reasons why kashrut originated do not matter to those who follow it. They have faith in the sacred nature of the text. I do not. We do not practice any form of kashrut in our house, and on those occasions when I refrain from eating pork or shellfish, it is because I wish to feel a connection to a Jewish shared past, not because I believe that the laws are sacrosanct and must be obeyed.

I find that this philosophy is different than many of my rabbinical school classmates. My first year at HUC, my husband and I adopted a stray kitten that was severely malnourished. The vet instructed us to feed him a strict diet of chicken, rice, and cottage cheese, mixing up two of the three foods at a time. Imagine my shock when I mentioned this to a classmate, and she told me that I should disobey the vet, for the diet violated kosher law! I was appalled. Reform Judaism does not recognize the authority of *halacha*. We are Jewish based on what we believe, not based on the rules we observe.

Because we live in America in the year 2010, I pray following the customs of this country's Reform Judaism. I deeply appreciate that while Classical Reform Judaism may not promote more religiously conservative practices or liturgical preferences, it also does not condemn them. I prefer a service to be mostly in

English, for that is our country's native tongue, and I want congregants to understand what they are saying. I love choirs and organ music, because I believe that melody helps people relate to their spirituality in ways that simple words often cannot.

Every aspect of my personal spiritual journey and rabbinical career up until this point has led me toward a path that values openness, inclusion, and diversity, one that "recognize[s] the many different ways in which individuals define and experience their religious belief". I seek acceptance of those who question their theology, and understanding for those who have varying levels of observance and practice. I want a community that arises from but is not defined by historical tradition, that loves Israel as I do, and that values education from the *bima*. Classical Reform Judaism is the only brand of Judaism I know that completely satisfies these requirements. For this reason, I do not feel that identifying myself as Classically Reform is a choice. Intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally, it is a necessity.

### *Third Place: Ari Plost*

*Ari Plost, a graduate of Swarthmore College, is a fifth year student at HUC and also working towards an MA of education administration. He is honored to share in the lives of his congregants as the rabbinic intern at Cincinnati's historic Rockdale Temple.*



Rabbinical school has been a great religious journey, opening me to the great breadth and depth of practices that are available to Reform Jews. I grew up in a Conservative synagogue and attended regular Orthodox services in a multi-denominational

Jewish Day School until the age of fifteen. I continued a more traditional practice of Judaism through high school, university, and most of my twenties. After running a consulting business for several years, I made the difficult, though deeply meaningful decision to attend rabbinical school—and to join the Reform movement.

The values of the original Classical Reformers are why I joined the Reform movement and why I believe they will serve as the foundation of our future. These

principles are: an unparalleled devotion that speaks with relevance to our inherited history of American Reform Judaism, a deep commitment to the ethics of social justice that reflect our Prophetic obligations and an unequivocal embrace of the religious pluralism of our American tradition.

History is a source of strength and unity. Classical Reform Judaism is the earliest foundation of our American Reform Jewish history. One vivid example of how history can provide unity is the story of how Dr. Kaufman Kohler helped American Reform Jews develop their principles. In a time when our movement is undergoing transformation and uncertainty, it is helpful to look at another time in history when we were able to come together in strength.

In the mid-nineteenth century, progressive Judaism lacked cohesive definition, leaving it vulnerable to the vociferous attacks from more traditional Jews. Dr. Kohler was not shy about expressing his personal views; he openly opposed practices that yielded too much Orientalism as well as the inequality of women in Orthodox observance. He knew, however, that it was not enough to just share his personal views; the movement also needed to express a set of common principles clearly.

Dr. Kohler strongly advocated the necessity to clarify statements of faith that defined the movement. He reached out to progressive Jewish rabbis across the country, inviting them to a conference to take “unified action in all matters pertaining to the welfare of American Judaism.” Together, they created the Pittsburgh Platform.

In recounting Kohler’s narrative, I am not suggesting a return to the past language of the Pittsburgh Platform. Instead, I am offering that we are stronger when we turn to our history to recall how our movement has focused on principles during times of challenge and transformation. Our principles are different today because our society is different today.

Yet, while we are a diverse movement, we are still one Reform movement. Social action is a unifying anchor. When confronted with the suffering of the

world, social action efforts can reinforce our shared values and principles.

One special contribution of temples with a connection to Classical Reform Judaism is their often disproportionate contribution to the urban landscape. Such a devotion to cities has also been evident during my time in Cincinnati and at Rockdale Temple. The inner city of Cincinnati, the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood, affords tremendous potential, but also suffers from much of the systematized disadvantages of such areas. This past year, the Cincinnati Jewish community organized a benefit called the Over-the-Rhine Jewish Benefit (OTRJB) that created bridge building conversations between leaders in Over-the-Rhine and those in the Jewish community. I believe that it is through acts of social action, such as a commitment to urban renewal, that we can aspire to the Prophetic vision. Will we be a movement that flees our cities? Or we will embody the ten righteous souls for whom God promised Abraham that Sodom would not be destroyed?

I am grateful to the Society for Classical Reform Judaism for uplifting an inclusive and universal spirit in its principles. American Jews have benefited from the tolerance that has been afforded to us by our chosen homeland of America. From the very beginnings of the American Jewish experience, American Jews have worked, lived and socialized with those from other faith-backgrounds. American Jews discovered interdependence with those of other faiths to solve our nation’s most enduring challenges. As a recipient of the benefits of a religious pluralist society, I am a strong advocate for a complete embrace of the interwoven tapestry of religious expression and practice of our religious lives. Such a lens welcomes interfaith families, an interest to collaborate with those of other faiths, and even an acceptance of English as an important quality of the Reform liturgy.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the Society for Classical Reform Judaism for offering me the opportunity to pause in order to reflect on my own religious growth. Moreover, it is with earnest humility that I appreciate the invitation to seek our perspectives as rabbinical students, knowing that we are tomorrow’s rabbis. It has not been an easy time to be a rabbinical student, especially with the economic times and the resulting instability. Thank you for the dignity that you have afforded to this next generation by asking to hear our voice.

I would also like to offer my gratitude to those Classical Reformers who helped build the movement on a steady foundation from its earliest days. Their direction provided the principles that continue to inspire our movement—an unparalleled devotion that speaks with relevance to our inherited history of American Reform Judaism, a deep commitment to the ethics of social justice that reflect our Prophetic obligations, and an unequivocal embrace of the religious pluralism of our American tradition. I stand on the shoulders of giants.

*Honorable Mention: Anne Strauss*



Anne Strauss, Ensign, United States Navy – received commission in December 2007 to enter Chaplain Candidate Program Officer Program. She completed Officer Development School in June 2008 and Chaplain Basic Training June-July 2009. She grew up in Dallas, TX, and studied in both

Washington University in St. Louis, and Bates College in Maine, graduating with a degree in English literature, she is in her third year of rabbinical school at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, OH, and hopes to transition to active duty following ordination.

I think that the ideals and values of Classical Reform Judaism are encouraging and inspiring. I believe that an elevated literary style, rather than everyday language, conveys both the grand splendor and the true intimacy of a prayer service.

A style of eloquent language does not imply inaccessibility or convolution. Rather, elevated, majestic language can cultivate a feeling of dignity, splendor, and wonder. Because the practice of Torah study has always been intimately connected with Jewish prayer, intellectual engagement in a Jewish context can be a meaningful way of communicating with God. The eloquent poetry of the Union Prayer Book including the contemporary, inclusive language revised Sinai Edition - evokes the grand splendor and majesty of God. Furthermore, because it is not our everyday style, the poetic Classical Reform style provokes us to careful examination of our words of prayer, which can deepen our intimacy with our liturgy.

Similarly, the music of prayer and words of praise to God should bring us beyond the world of top 40 countdown styles and pop trends. The composers

and choirs of the classical Reform movement created an extensive repertoire of beautiful, inspiring pieces. My appreciation for this music most certainly derives from my own experience growing up at Temple Emanu-El in Dallas, which was home to two leaders in the Classical Reform musical world, Sam Adler and Simon Sargon. My enthusiasm and preference for the Classical Reform musical repertoire and style does not mean that I think this is the only appropriate musical accompaniment for services. It is certainly not feasible or even appropriate in every service environment. My wish is that, through the SCRJ, more people might have the benefit of experiencing this rich part of our Classical Reform culture.

Reform Judaism found a unique home in America and developed into a distinctive practice with far-reaching influence. America and Judaism are linked in our history, and I feel that they are likewise linked within my values. My patriotism comes, in part, from being grateful to be a Jew in America. I cannot imagine a bimah without an American flag standing next to the Israeli one. In 2007, I received a commission to become a chaplain in the United States Navy, and was sworn in at the embassy in Tel Aviv while doing my rabbinic year in Israel. I've completed officer development school and chaplain basic training and hope to transition to an active duty chaplain when I am ordained.

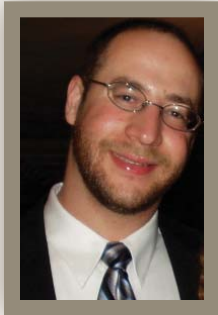
My desire to serve my country derives, in part, from gratitude for having been able to live and worship freely as a Jew. Our American heritage is also our Jewish heritage. The unique blend of liberty, tolerance, freedom, and cooperation that we find in America is complex – yet its roots are clearly in Torah, and so many of our greatest leaders have been aware and appreciative of this. In America, the Jewish people found a home like no other – truly an “almost chosen” nation. Classical Reform celebrates our continuing place in America and our rich American heritage.

In the American Jewish leadership, there is currently some debate about whether American Judaism has moved into “post-denominationalism,” with all the different branches gradually fusing into to vaguely similar service styles. Pluralism and cooperation are certainly to be welcomed. But we must be proud of our own tradition as well, and remember that, as a

major national movement of congregations, rabbis and our seminary, Reform is older than any other branch of Judaism in America. The Society for Classical Reform Judaism can help us to remember our own important historical heritage, and to ensure that its “living waters” will sustain the Jewish people in America for generations to come.

*Honorable Mention: Jordan Helfman*

*Jordan Helfman grew up at Temple Beth Or in Washington Twp and graduated from Michigan State University. Following his graduation, he worked for Liberal Judaism in England co-running their youth movement, LJY-Netzer. Currently Jordan is working as the Limmud Director at URJ Crane Lake Camp in West Stockbridge, MA and is a third year student at HUC-JIR in Cincinnati.*



The Classical Reform aesthetic was created to make Judaism more relevant and accessible to Jews of the 19th and 20th centuries. Similarly we must look to see that the worship style is relevant and accessible to the Jews of our time. Progressive Judaism should move forward while still honoring the past.

I agree whole-heartedly with the Society for Classical Reform Judaism’s principles related to the aesthetic and content of worship, namely, the use of English and the idea of sincerity in worship, as said by Rabbi John Rayner (z”l):

“We affirm the paramount need for sincerity in worship: we may not say with our lips what we do not believe in our hearts.”

By insisting on saying liturgical passages, such as the traditional text of the *Aleynu* prayer, that is either mistranslated or left un-translated, we are not being honest with ourselves. We should not be so ashamed of the text that we are saying in Hebrew that we cannot translate it faithfully into English for our communities. To solve this problem, we should not hesitate to make changes to these liturgies, just as the ‘original’ Reform Jews had no problem re-writing and redacting ritual.

The Society for Classical Reform Judaism needs to remind our greater movement of its core values and to re-invigorate it with purpose. The prophetic values of clothing of the naked, feeding of the poor, loving mercy and walking humbly with God are more important than squabbles over the outer drawings of religion with its *talitot* and *kippot*.

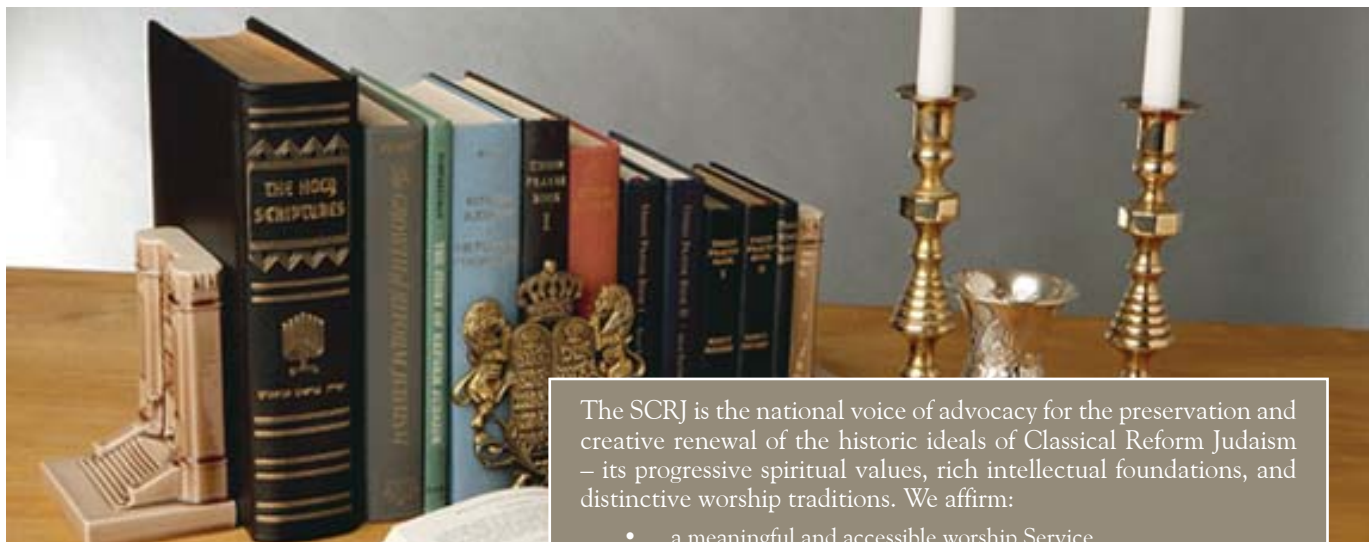
What is important is that we are constantly reminded to make these prophetic ideas into more than just thoughts or tenants of faith, but into actions. Hopefully, in this way, we can actualize the belief of the early Reformers that, “Reform Judaism had a universal message to proclaim and share: a message 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”.



*The Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives on the HUC Campus*

## YOU CAN BE A PART OF THE SUCCESS OF THE SOCIETY!

We know that all our supporters share our excitement and gratification at the major progress we have made in building our relationship with the broader Reform Movement and its future leaders. As we widen our vision and influence, we look to YOU for greater financial support to help us fulfill Classical Reform’s potential to inspire a new generation of American Jews, as we further develop the Society’s programs of education and outreach around the country. We hope that every reader of *The Reform Advocate* will want to personally participate in our work as we come to the conclusion of a year of growth and achievement. Please consider supporting the Society with your first contribution if you have not already done so - if you are already one of our deeply appreciated donors, we invite you to consider an additional gift!



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.

# THE SOCIETY FOR CLASSICAL REFORM JUDAISM

15 Newbury St. Boston, MA 02116  
*local:* 617.247.4700 *toll free:* 877.326.1400  
*e-mail:* [info@renewreform.org](mailto:info@renewreform.org)  
*web site:* [www.RENEWREFORM.org](http://www.RENEWREFORM.org)

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