

# The Reform Advocate

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THE SOCIETY FOR  
CLASSICAL  
REFORM  
JUDAISM

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



5770-2009

*The Officers and Board of Directors of the Society for Classical Reform Judaism  
send blessings and best wishes for a New Year of joy, health and peace*

*Rabbi Howard A. Berman  
Executive Director*

*B.H. Levy, Jr.  
President*



## SCRJ Expands National Outreach to Congregations

One of the major priorities of the Society for Classical Reform Judaism is working with temples around the country to foster worship opportunities, educational programs and a renewed appreciation of the historic values and traditions of our American Reform heritage. We know that the ultimate impact of our mission is not merely the articulation of philosophical principles, but the way that we can influence synagogue life and support individual Jews in their religious experience. Our aim is to help congregations affirm the diversity within their communities, and try to serve the spiritual needs of those many temple members who remain committed to Classical Reform – as well as to raise awareness of the beauty and meaning of the heritage we all share as Reform Jews.

Rabbi Howard A. Berman, our Executive Director, has been invited to preach and lecture at many congregations around the country, sharing our message and encouraging the introduction of these kinds of alternative programs. In the coming months, he will be speaking at the following temples and national gatherings:



*The Temple, Atlanta*

- November 20-22 The Temple, Hebrew Benevolent Congregation, Atlanta Georgia*
- January 7-10 Address at National Association of Retired Reform Rabbis Convention, Fort Myers, Florida*
- February 5-6 Scholar-in-Residence, Sabbath Sermons and Annual Interfaith Clergy Institute -Congregation Rodeph Shalom, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania*
- March 26 Sermon at Isaac Mayer Wise Sabbath Service at Temple Sinai, New Orleans*
- April 16-17 Sermon at Houston Congregation for Reform Judaism, Houston, Texas*
- May 14-15 Rabbi Levi Olan Memorial Lecture, Temple Emanu-El, Dallas, Texas*

We urge all SCRJ friends in these communities to participate in these opportunities to share the Society's vision with our ever-widening audience! **Please contact us if you wish us to work with your rabbi to plan an SCRJ Service or program at your congregation.**

## SCRJ To Be Prominently Featured at the URJ Biennial

The Society's commitment to be a collegial and cooperative voice within the national Reform Movement will be significantly highlighted at the upcoming Biennial Convention of the Union for Reform Judaism, November 4-8, 2009 in Toronto. This national gathering of rabbis and lay leaders of Reform congregations throughout North America, brings thousands of committed Reform Jews together to explore ways to enrich temple life and programming, and to chart the course for our Movement.

The Society has been invited to present two major programs at the Biennial. Rabbi Berman will be leading a learning session on “Classical Reform: Renewing our Heritage”, which will focus on the mission and work of the Society as a resource for worship and learning at local congregations. He will also present one of the major Shabbat Luncheon forums, on the theme: “Rabbi David Einhorn: A Bicentennial Tribute”, exploring the life and legacy of ‘the Father of Classical Reform and the Union Prayer Book’. The week of the convention marks the exact 200th birthday of Rabbi Einhorn (1809-1879), who was the major theologian of early liberal Judaism in America and the creator of the liturgical concepts that have remained the models for Reform worship to this day - including the new Prayer Book, *Mishkan Tefila*. He was also the pioneer of the Prophetic vision of social justice that became the heart of our movement - renowned as the leading Jewish abolitionist in the Civil War and an early champion of women’s rights.

The SCRJ will also have high visibility in the Convention Exposition, with a prominent booth that will display and distribute our publications, newsletters and brochures, staffed by Board members who will be available to meet with delegates to discuss our work and connect with congregations around the country. This is a major opportunity for the Society to continue to claim its rightful place in the life and deliberations of our national Reform family.

### Cooperation with HUC-JIR Continues

The Society is building on the successes of our efforts over the past year to develop joint programs and build relationships with the faculty and students of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Reform Judaism’s seminary for the training of rabbis, cantors and educators. Rabbi Berman met with enthusiastic groups of students at the Cincinnati and New York campuses last spring, and we have all been deeply gratified and heartened by the interest expressed in renewing the Classical Reform tradition by a new generation of young leaders.

At the SCRJ Board meeting in Dallas in June, the Society approved the inauguration of a new Scholarship to be granted to a student who demonstrates personal spiritual commitment, intellectual inquiry and creative reflection on the influence of historic Reform principles and practice in their emerging professional life. We hope to award the first annual grant in this academic year.

In addition, Rabbi Berman will make the first of his visits to HUC this season with his upcoming presentation of a seminar on the Society’s mission to this year’s Senior Class in Cincinnati on October 14.

## Production of New Recording of Classical Reform Worship Announced

Under the supervision of Rabbi Berman and SCRJ Board Member Cantor Erik Contzius of Temple Israel, New Rochelle, New York, the Society is producing the first in a new series of CD recordings of Classical Reform Services and music. This program will feature a Sabbath Eve Service from the Union Prayer Book - Sinai Edition, recorded live at Boston Jewish Spirit in Boston, MA, with a sermon by Rabbi Berman. The musical portions of the Service will be performed by Cantor Conztius, accompanied by professional choir and organ, and featuring a diverse program of great Reform choral music, - both historic and contemporary. Future recordings will include special Services and programs for the High Holy Days and Festivals, and will be available as compact discs as well as iPod downloads and as audio links on the SCRJ website. The first Sabbath Service disc is planned for release in the coming months...stay tuned!



### Classical Reform Judaism for the Twenty-First Century

Rabbi Arnold Mark Belzer

Congregation Mickve Israel, Savannah, Georgia

As a child I remember reading *Keeping Posted*, which was a monthly child-oriented newsletter, published by the Reform movement, and distributed to Religious school students. Vividly, I remember a particular cartoon. It was set in heaven. Soft clouds wafted in the background. Two angels stood off to one side. They were attired appropriately in white robes and wore the standard issue halos. They were pointing to another heavenly resident, also in a white robe but *without a halo*. The caption read: “Oh, he must be Reform!” At that time I enjoyed the cartoon. What motivated the cartoon then, I am not sure. Today very few young Reform Jews would get it!

I was and am proud to be a Reform Jew. I was inspired and moved by the founders of the Reform movement. The writings and basic documents of nineteenth-century Reform shaped my religious sensibilities, inspired my spiritual orientation, and informed my religious inquiry.

If there is a legitimate critique of the period of Reform Judaism from the days immediately preceding and following the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform, the movement’s first official Statement of Principles, until the 1960s or so, it is the fact

that many Reform Jews defined themselves by what they *didn't* do, or *didn't* practice, or *didn't* believe! Some critics called it “NO JUDAISM” as in—“No! We don't do that. No! We don't believe in that.” And to be accurate, historically, those negative positions often described the Judaism of the Reform laity. Reform Judaism—with its founding heritage of impeccable scholarship—too often became “uninformed Judaism.” The excuse for not knowing was simple: We are Reform! Notwithstanding the aforementioned critique, Classical Reform Judaism was, for even more people, an expression of appropriate piety, religious commitment, and true spirituality.

In the 1970s things began to change. The first-year Israel program at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR) influenced newly minted rabbis. The Union of American Hebrew Congregations' (UAHC; now Union for Reform Judaism) camping movement and the National Federation of Temple Youth (NFTY) were laboratories for experimentation, and often, iconoclastic change. Young rabbis and rabbinic students, raised in Classical Reform, were for the very first time – and this is crucial – *FOR THE VERY FIRST TIME* – exposed to traditional ritual practices and liturgical aesthetics. It was *NEW* (though very old). It was often seen as “neat,” fun, evocative, perhaps mystical, perhaps “more spiritual.” But surely it was seen by young rabbinic students as “AUTHENTIC.” The youth culture of the late 1960s and 1970s added a folk dimension to the repertoire of the Reform movement (influenced by NFTY and UAHC camps) coming at a time when formality in manners, dress, and even speech was on the wane. It was reinforced by a money crunch, which would make the guitar-wielding young cantor, or soloist, more cost effective than a paid choir and a musical director. The changes attracted many new members to the Reform movement. New suburbs, new temples, were the fertile soil for change, for experimentation with the “New Reform” or the “Warm Reform,” while older Reform congregations with Classical traditions were hold-outs. Older rabbis—holding on to power and influence in their historic, or mega-congregations, resisted change, but their younger assistant and associate rabbis, reflecting their generational orientation, exerted sometimes quiet but nevertheless consistent influences. Eventually, those “older” rabbis, educated at HUC-JIR in the pre-youth culture years of the 1940s and 1950s, began to retire. Replaced by their younger associates or by talented young veterans of the *kultur kampff* of the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s, “New Reform” or “Warm

Reform” had become “Normative Reform.” Today, the current leadership of the Reform movement, its president, as well as the president of HUC-JIR, are graying veterans of the youth culture movement. Folk music and rock music were the themes of their formative years, traditional Jewish ritual the inspiration of their spiritual lives. With the adoption of “A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism” by the Central Conference of American Rabbis in Pittsburgh in 1999, the ideological underpinnings of Reform Judaism took a 180-degree turn away from the founding principles of the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform.

By the turn of the twenty-first century, the revolution in Reform Judaism was complete. The dawning of a new century, however, awakened the inherent and latent inclinations of universalism, liberalism, aesthetic sensitivity, and prophetic commitment that were the hallmarks of early Classical Reform. The reality emerged of a new and growing Jewish polity, which included Jews-by-choice and unconverted but sympathetic spouses committed to the Jewish continuity of their children. This growing constituency in our congregations is not necessarily comfortable in a spiritual/aesthetic environment that looks more like “Conservative-lite” than the more accessible liturgical environment of Classical Reform. These new young voices are joining the grossly underserved Classical minority, and a renaissance of activism is unfolding on behalf of a new “Classical Reform Judaism for the twenty-first century.” Not at all a simple counterrevolution, but rather a new orientation and option that looks to the Classical past for inspiration but at the same time acknowledges twenty-first-century reality and encourages innovation (as opposed to imitation of Orthodox Judaism). The Sinai Edition of the Union Prayer Book (created and published by Sinai Congregation of Chicago and its rabbis, Howard Berman and Michael Sternfield), is a metaphor for the Classical Reform Judaism for the twenty-first century. Preserving the beloved aesthetics and poetry of the historic *Union Prayer Book*, but including gender neutral language, contemporary English, and transliterations, the Sinai Edition of the UPB reflects the sensibilities and needs of many twenty-first-century Reform Jews. New music written by some of the heroes and heroines of “New Reform”, insofar as they include English lyrics embedded in Hebrew liturgy, such as Debbie Friedman's widely popular compositions, could well be in the spirit of Classical Reform Judaism for the twenty-first century. A clarion call for a truly warm and totally inclusive outreach to intermarried couples is a vital component of the new Classical tradition. So too a renewed commitment to the Classical Reform founding principles of prophetically inspired social action and the ultimate achievement of a just society.

The new Classical Reform Judaism for the twenty-first century must be a religion of “YES,” must be a religion of possibilities, of outreach—a religion that promotes brotherhood and sisterhood and interfaith cooperation. The new “Classical” must be a Reform Judaism that is an “informed Judaism.” Study and intellectual activity should be considered a prime commandment of the new “Classical,” with attention being paid to the traditional material of biblical and Rabbinic text, the founding documents of Reform Judaism, as well as the writings of contemporary religious thinkers. “*I know the answer!*” should be the triumphal answer of the twenty-first-century Classical Reform Jew. Banish forever the excuse “I don’t have to know that!”

The new Classical Reform Judaism for the twenty-first century must be committed to serving the needs of the thousands of traditional Classical Reform Jews who make up a significant and extraordinarily loyal minority in hundreds of American Reform congregations. Often unappreciated, underserved, and even disrespected, Reform congregations must be encouraged to be sensitive to Classical Reform Jews and begin to serve their religious and spiritual needs. Alternative Classical worship services, with officiation that is respectful, devoid of metaphorical “nose holding,” must become available, as an option. Even the smallest Reform congregations can creatively and sensitively incorporate both styles in their services.



The new Classical Reform Judaism for the twenty-first century must be spiritually aggressive and proactive. It must encourage those whom the late Rabbi Alexander Schindler called the “unsynagogued and the unchurched” to identify with a welcoming, positive, rational Reform Judaism for this century. The new Classical should be an inclusive community that celebrates liberal religious orientation in the Jewish tradition of commitment to the ideal of “one God, one humanity.”

The new Classical Reform Judaism for the twenty-first century must reiterate resolutely the founding concept of Reform Judaism as stated in the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885:

We recognize in every religion an attempt to grasp the Infinite, and in every mode, source or book of revelation held sacred in any religious system the consciousness of the indwelling of God in man. We hold that Judaism presents the highest conception of the God  $\neg$ idea as taught in our Holy Scriptures and developed and spiritualized by the Jewish teachers, in accordance with the moral and philosophical progress of their respective ages. We maintain that Judaism preserved and defended midst continual struggles and trials and under enforced isolation, this God  $\neg$ idea as the central religious truth for the human race.

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.

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