

The Reform Advocate

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THE SOCIETY FOR
CLASSICAL
REFORM
JUDAISM

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



A New Year... and a New Chapter!

There is always a striking resonance to the fact that the beginning of a new fall season in the religious, cultural and educational life of contemporary American society echoes the ancient rhythms of our Jewish Calendar. This New Year, 5769, indeed heralds fresh horizons for the Society for Classical Reform Judaism, reflected in this inaugural issue of our new journal, *The Reform Advocate*.

This sacred High Holy Day season offers us the precious gift of new beginnings and unexplored paths for our journeys, even as we cherish the lessons and traditions of the past. As one of the oldest New Year festivals still being observed in the world today, Rosh Hashanah proclaims Judaism's revolutionary teaching that history is not cyclical and static—as other ancient cultures believed—but rather, that human experience is dynamic and evolutionary—always progressing toward new heights and greater revelations of Divine truth. For each of us, personally, this means that we need not be bound by the limitations and regrets of the past ... but rather, that there is always an opportunity to make a fresh start, and begin anew. Traditionally referred to as the “Birthday of the World”, Rosh Hashanah reminds us that each of us is a co-worker and partner in the unfolding process of Creation ... that our world - and our lives - will ultimately be what we make of them.

This first Rosh Hashanah in the history of the SCRJ indeed finds us on the threshold of great anticipation and exciting, creative possibilities. In the few short months since our founding, we have been blessed with great progress and success in our mission of advocacy for the historic ideals and traditions of American Reform Judaism as a vital option for contemporary Jews.



As we come once again to this cherished season of renewal and return, the Board of Directors of the Society for Classical Reform Judaism joins me in sending our best wishes to all of our friends and supporters. We all share together in the hopes and dreams so beautifully expressed in our beloved Union Prayer Book:

With deep humility we approach You, Our God, at this sacred time. May we listen reverently to its sacred admonition. Give us the will to serve You with singleness of heart, so that as we grow older in years, we may grow stronger in wisdom, broader in charity, and more steadfast in faith.

Hidden from our eyes are the events of the future. But we trust in You and fear not! Open unto us in mercy the portals of the New Year, and grant unto us life and health, contentment and peace... Amen

Faithfully,
Rabbi Howard A. Berman
Executive Director

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Meet our Leadership!

The Society's new National Board of Directors has met for its first two meetings – in April in Dallas and in Chicago this past August, and will gather again in New Orleans in January, 2009. We have attracted a superb group of leaders from around the country - men and women, rabbis, cantors and lay people, of a broad range of ages and professional expertise, who all share a deep commitment to our cause. Our various committees are at work developing our policies and programs, defining our goals for strategic planning, financial support and development, regional chapters, publications, and music resources. Our distinguished leaders are:

B.H. Levy, Jr, President – Savannah, Georgia
 Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn, Vice President – New Reform Temple, Kansas City, Missouri
 Victoria Woolner Samuels, Vice President – Chicago, Illinois
 Leslie J. Novitsky, Secretary – Arlington, Virginia
 Douglas H. Pike, Treasurer – Atlanta, Georgia
 Max Edward Tonkon, Board Chairman – Dallas, Texas
 Edward Ackerman – Dallas, Texas
 Rabbi Arnold M. Belzer – Congregation Mickve Israel, Savannah, Georgia
 Rabbi Edward P. Cohn – Temple Sinai, New Orleans, Louisiana
 Rabbi Hillel Cohn – Congregation Emanu-El, San Bernardino, California
 Cantor Erik Contzius – Temple Israel, New Rochelle, New York
 Morelle Levine – Los Angeles, California
 Rabbi Nadia Siritsky – Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
 Rabbi Ronald B. Sobel – Congregation Emanu-El of the City of New York
 Jan E. Stone – Chicago, Illinois
 Charles Udell – Leawood, Kansas

Reform Judaism

Ad Inspires Enthusiastic Response

We have been deeply gratified by the overwhelming response to our full-page advertisements announcing the inauguration of the Society in the recent issues of Reform Judaism magazine, the official publication of the Union for Reform Judaism. Enthusiastic and grateful expressions of support have been pouring in from around the country, as members of Reform congregations are learning of the alternative we are offering. Many people have shared deeply moving personal stories articulately expressing their commitment to the universal spiritual values and historic worship traditions we advocate. This strong voice is only the

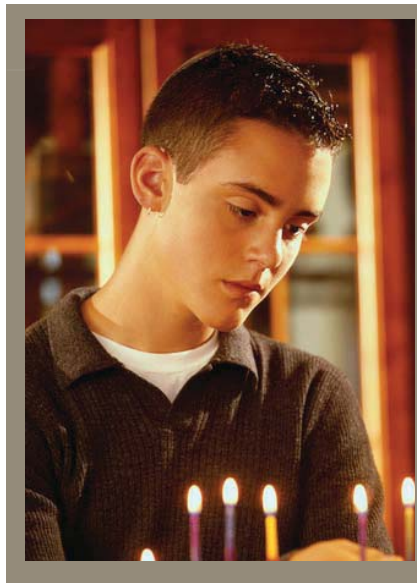
beginning of the impact that we know we can have as we seek to play a vital, constructive role in the Reform Movement. Here is a sampling of the over 125 comments and “testimonies” that resulted from this outreach effort so far:

So pleased to read your statement in Reform Judaism magazine! I am interested in your work and would like to be updated on your activities. Thank you! St. Paul, MN

Is there a chapter in Philadelphia? Maybe I'm not the only mother in America singing her toddler to sleep with Classical Reform hymns?

WELCOME! WELCOME! WELCOME!

I was born and brought up in a “Conservadox” home. I spent 7 years in Cheder and delivered my Bar Mitzvah speech in an Orthodox Shul in Yiddish. My wife was brought up in Reform Judaism - something about which I knew nothing. We were married by a Reform Rabbi. . . the first time I went to temple services, I found what I had been looking for. We have been active members of Reform Congregations ever since. Sadly, Reform Judaism, as it generally practiced today, has moved well away from me. It seems that we have been so interested in pleasing the disparate members who make up our congregation, that we have forgotten the original principles under which we were founded. We are still temple members because we realize the importance of religious institutions for the generations that will follow us, but we feel very alone. What can I do to help? Boca Raton, FL



The changes, as are painfully clear in this issue of Reform Judaism, have driven our observant family away. Thrilled to learn of this alternative! Lexington, KY

Where have you been all these years of Reform Judaism Light! I am so happy to have found you. I will make a donation today. Haverford, PA

You may be a religious life-saver for me. Reared in Classical Reform, I have always felt great spiritual connection with and respect for God and Judaism. As an adult, over the last 20 years I have felt increasing alienation, to the point that I have resigned all of my volunteer work, after 7 years on the Board, 3 on the Executive Board and sitting on the Building Committee for our new Temple. I even avoid Yahrzeit

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there. A huge gap has been in my life, and I am somewhat tired of defending my beliefs from charges of being “not religious”, “not relevant today” and “old-fashioned”... Dayton, OH

I was very pleased to read the article introducing the Society for Classical Reform Judaism in the Summer 2008 issue of Reform Judaism, and enjoyed the articles on the website. I am wondering if there will be future articles on the work of the SCRJ and if I could be placed on a mailing list. I am a member of a temple that has moved far afield from its original values and traditions of Classical Reform. This has caused great personal pain and discomfort for me. I would be interested in following the progress of the Society and being kept informed of its programs. Thank you and best wishes for success! Toronto, Canada

I was very pleased to see your ad, and I am in full agreement with your philosophy and vision in relation to Classical Reform Judaism. I am very uncomfortable with the trends toward increasing use of Hebrew in our Services, and great emphasis on Halacha, as being “more authentic”. I feel less lonely in this position now having your organization in place and functioning. I will send a contribution to the organization shortly. San Francisco, CA

My wife and I have been members of our temple since the 1970s but we miss the old Classical Reform ideas and services and were intrigued when we saw a mention of your organization. We encourage you and would like to keep up with your progress in fostering the rejuvenation of Classical Reform. Potomac, MD

We are long-time members of a Reform congregation which has evolved away from Reform tradition to the point at which it looks more like Conservative Judaism. I long for the “real” Reform in which I grew up. My wish would be to find a way to bring more of your practices to my congregation. Your comments and discussion would be welcome. If there’s a newsletter, I would like to receive it. Marlboro, NJ

I would like to find a Classical Reform Synagogue in the Seattle, WA area. Please let me know of any in that area. Many thanks.

So pleased to see your organization exists...I loved my Classical Reform temple when I converted thirty years ago and I became very active as a volunteer with the UAHC, now the URJ. But Reform Judaism has become so much more “conservative”, it has lost its appeal for me and I find myself feeling more comfortable in a Unitarian congregation. Tampa, FL

Do you know of any activity in my area supported by your organization? If not, how does one start a new congregation dedicated to Classical Reform? Princeton, NJ

The efforts of our leadership to move away from the Reform Judaism that I grew up with (with its central core devoted to social justice) has saddened me greatly and I was thrilled to see your ad in the last issue of Reform Judaism. Washington, DC

As the only person at our Saturday Morning service who brings the old Union Prayer book to lead services, I couldn't help wondering, who you were. Although I embrace many of the changes in Reform, I find myself, too often, defending the beauty and spirituality of the Reform Judaism I grew up with. Your advertisement on the back of my Union magazine intrigued me. I would love to have someone call me at their convenience. Thank You! San Diego, CA

The SCRJ will continue its advertising in the magazine on a regular basis, as part of our broader efforts at spreading our message through effective public relations and communication. RJ is respected and widely read as the major forum for the Reform Movement, and we hope to be able to reach many more potential friends and supporters of the Society through this effort.

SCRJ Reaches Out to the Movement

The Society has initiated a series of very fruitful and positive conversations with the leaders of Reform Judaism to explore areas of cooperation and shared programming. We seek to become a recognized voice in the movement, representing a positive, constructive and collegial perspective with a strong national constituency. In recent weeks, Rabbi Berman has met with the President of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, Rabbi Peter Knobel, to begin exploring ways that the SCRJ can represent the commitments of many rabbis who share our principles. We also want to be a resource for the broader spiritual leadership of Reform Judaism, in raising awareness of the pastoral needs of countless devoted temple members who identify as Classical Reform. Among the ideas that are being considered is the preparation of guidelines, including musical and sermon resources, for the use of the new Prayer Book, Mishkan T'filah, in a Classical mode, for alternative worship opportunities in congregations that have adopted this liturgy.

Another major development in building these relationships has emerged from recent meetings between Rabbi Berman and the leadership of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. During a recent visit to the main campus of our seminary in Cincinnati, warm and supportive conversations were held with HUC's President, Rabbi David Ellenson, members of the faculty and administration, and most importantly, with a group of interested students. Rabbi Ellenson has offered to encourage our presence on all four campuses of the College, with special programs for our rabbinic and cantorial students. On October 29, Rabbi Berman will be presenting a seminar for

the Senior Class, to be ordained this coming year, sharing the vision of the Society and raising awareness of the important voice that Classical Reform members will represent in their future congregations. The SCRJ will also actively work to offer support and encouragement for those students who are personally committed to our principles, and often feel isolated in the midst of the current trends in the movement. Through the efforts of our Board member, Cantor Erik Contzius, discussions have also begun with the HUC School of Sacred Music in New York. Many cantors share the Society's commitment to the preservation of the great musical heritage of the Reform synagogue, and the fostering of new music that upholds the highest artistic standards and embraces both English and Hebrew prayer and singing in our worship.

We are gratified by the positive response we have had thus far in these important efforts, and will continue to reach out to the Union for Reform Judaism, the CCAR and HUC-JIR, as well as the World Union for Progressive Judaism, to share our mission, offer our perspectives, and provide worship and educational resources that reflect the Classical Reform perspective.



Fund Raising Yields Generous Support

Since the launch of the Society in January, a major priority has been the building of a national network of contributors to provide the foundation for our work, and support our ambitious program plans. Many individuals and foundations have already come forward expressing their commitment to our mission.

We are happy to announce that a devoted leader of the Society has made a very special gift to the SCRJ, which will match every contribution we receive in 2008, up to \$100,000. This is an extraordinary expression of faith in our vision...and means that the continuing generosity of those who share our principles will be all the more effective in advancing our work and enabling us to broaden our programs and resources.

The Society for Classical Reform Judaism gratefully acknowledges recent gifts from the following friends:

Edward & Wilhelmina Ackeman	Michele Hochstadt
Richard M. Adler	Adelyn J. Hoffman
Fanchon M. Apffel	Philip D. Hoffman
Dennis Ashendorf	Helen Ann Hurst
Donna & Bill Barrows	Franklin Harris Hytken
Bernard H. Baum (Dec.)	Herbert L. Isaac
Rudolf Baum	William J. Jasper
Berna L. Benjamin	Bernard Joseph
Rabbi Seth L. Bernstein	Bettie B. Kahn
Thelma Berris	Rabbi Kenneth Kanter
Dr. Richard E. Block	Morelle I. Levine-Lasky Trust
Morton D. Cahn Jr.	Dr. Robert I. Kramer
Craig Evans Carnick	Elizabeth Levine
Eldon R. Clingan	Barbara J. Levy
Happy R. Cohen	Margie & B. H. Levy, Jr.
Lillian S. Coleman	Mr. & Mrs. Bertram L. Levy
Communities Foundation of Texas	Herbert F. Levy
Yvonne Cordeiro	Irvin L. Levy
Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn	Joyce and Leo Lewin
Dallas Jewish Community Foundation	Milton P. Levy, Jr.
Ed and Lyra Daniels	Sally Lieberman
John & Ellyn Daniels	Eugene Lipstate
Bert & Joyce Dannheisser, Jr.	Jay W. Lorch
Robert J. Davis	Carol Lowenstein
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Bertram S. Devorsetz	Stuart & Susan Lucas
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Anna Elman	S.P. Bud Mandell
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Jocelyn & Carl Feldman	Marion L. Mendel
Jill Frankel	Howard Millhauser
Gene Friedman	Marianne F. Morris
William H. Friedman	Stephen L. & Shari Naman
Howard & Marjorie Gardner	Mr. & Mrs. Walter Neudstadt, Jr.
Allan Garfinkle	Wal-Dot Foundation
Jim & Lori Gelbort	Ryan Palecek
Sharon & Lynn Goldstein	Ida Papert
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Jan E. Stone
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 Oscar B. Teller
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 Mr. & Mrs. Victor Trubitt
 Charles & Ester Udell
 Emily Vogel
 Rabbi Benno M. Wallach
 Lyanne L. Wassermann
 Mark Weber
 Irwin & Margery Weisman
 Anne Weisman & Robert
 Szurgot
 William I. Witkin
 Pauline L. Wittenberg
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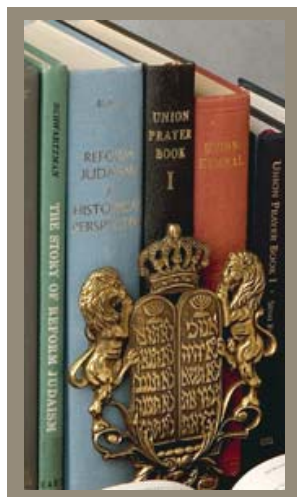
*List complete as of
 September 15, 2008*

We hope that you share our enthusiasm for the great progress we have made in the few brief months since our founding. We invite you to join us in expressing your own commitment to the renewal of the heritage of American Reform Judaism for the 21st century!

Classical Reform Judaism: A Concise Profile

*Rabbi Howard A. Berman
 Executive Director, Society for Classical Reform Judaism*

Like all religious groups, today's Reform Judaism embraces a broad spectrum of interpretation, belief, and practice. A diverse range of philosophies and worship styles are reflected in this spectrum, appropriate to a liberal religious movement that affirms individual and congregational freedom and autonomy. "Mainstream" Reform in contemporary America, reflects the widespread embrace of traditional Jewish ritual and observance that has characterized the movement's theological perspectives, liturgies, and approach to observance over the past forty years. These trends are primarily reflected in the 1975 Prayer Book of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, *Gates of Prayer*, and, to an even greater extent in its new liturgy, *Mishkan T'filah*.



The term "Classical Reform" is the most commonly used expression to denote the historic expression of Reform Judaism, as it developed in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The use of the term "Classical" is admittedly problematic, and it raises the danger of viewing a vital, dynamic expression of religious commitment as antiquarian, or bound to a particular historical period. It also has been used to narrowly define and limit the timeless and enduring teachings of authentic Reform to a particular period in its development. Other terms associated with this interpretation are "Prophetic Judaism," referring to the centrality of the ethical ideals of the Biblical Prophets, and "Progressive Reform," reflecting both the dynamic element of change, as well as a spiritual and social liberalism. Whichever term is used, the particular ideals and expressions embraced by Classical Reform are clearly distinctive in the contemporary Reform spectrum.

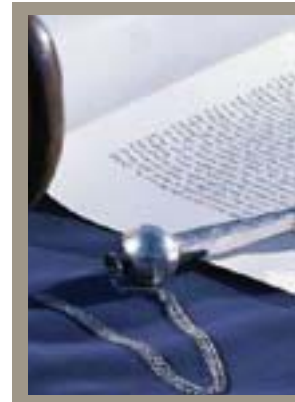
Historical Background

In essence, this tradition embodies the liberal spiritual ideals, rich intellectual foundations and broad universal vision of the early pioneers of Jewish Reform, initially in Germany, but primarily in the United States. Theologically, Classical Reform was grounded in the Biblical tradition of the Hebrew Prophets, interpreted as the emphasis on ethical action and social justice, rather than on ritual observance or ceremonial law. Intellectually, it was an outgrowth of the modern academic, scientific study of Jewish history and philosophy that emerged in Germany in the early decades of the 19th century; culturally, it reflected the transformation of Jewish communal life at that time, in response to the Emancipation of European Jewry from the social isolation of the ghetto. In America, the early Reform Movement embraced the pluralistic culture of American democracy and developed a liturgy and rationale reflecting the unique experience of Judaism in the free and open society of the United States. It taught that Judaism had always developed new responses to the challenges of each generation, and had historically engaged in a creative encounter and synthesis with many cultures throughout the ages - affirming that modern Jews had the right and responsibility to continue this dynamic process for a new chapter in Jewish history. American Reform's intellectual approach to Biblical interpretation and authority, as well as its progressive response to social issues, also reflected the influence of the development of liberal religion generally in the United States in the 19th century.

The Classical Reform tradition is rooted in the legacy of the "radical" wing of the early movement, which sought a sub-

stantial revision of both synagogue worship and theological principles. Its leading rabbinic advocates were David Einhorn, Emil G. Hirsch and Kaufmann Kohler, as well as the more “moderate” Isaac Mayer Wise, the consensus-building founder of the central institutions of the American movement. The first major statement of principles of Reform Judaism known as the “Pittsburgh Platform,” adopted by both viewpoints in 1885, remains a formative expression of historic Reform teaching. In particular, its interpretation of the primarily religious nature of Jewish identity, and its emphasis on the ethical and spiritual, rather than the ritual nature of Judaism, continue to influence many Classical Reform Jews today. The subsequent formulation of the Movement’s ideals, known as “The Guiding Principles” was ratified by the Central Conference of American Rabbis in Columbus, Ohio in 1937. This document represented a significantly different focus in its affirmation of Jewish “peoplehood,” and reflected the trend toward a reclamation of traditional ritual. While the different points on the Reform spectrum were clearly emerging by that time, it is important to realize that what is now understood as “Classical” was, in fact, the dominant perspective and style that emerged from the “union” of these two historic positions - embodied in the integration of their respective prayer books into the historic common liturgy of American Reform, the *Union Prayer Book*. Indeed, despite the debates on the role of Zionism that divided the two ends of the Reform spectrum in the 1940’s and 1950’s, what is now called “Classical” in fact remained the broader Movement’s predominant worship style and synagogue culture, until the significant shifts that influenced a major neo-traditionalist trend in the 1960’s. Much of this redirection of American Reform Judaism was a response to the tragedy of the Holocaust and to the new dynamic of Jewish identity engendered by the birth of the State of Israel in 1948. These trends were further reflected in the two subsequent formulations of theology and practice by the CCAR over the past forty years – the “Centenary Perspectives” of 1975, and the new “Statement of Principles” adopted in Pittsburgh in 1999. These platforms represented the continuing emphasis on ritual observance and the centrality of the State of Israel for Jewish identity. Classical Reformers fully embrace the strong expressions of commitment to social justice and inclusive community that distinguish these documents. However, we continue to affirm the validity and viability of the movement’s historic liberal principles and worship traditions as an alternative context for understanding both of these issues, as well as our response to the transforming events of our time.

A consideration of the historical context of the early development of Reform Judaism, and its subsequent “Classical” interpretation, raises the common question – and often the critique – of the dynamic of “assimilation” as a factor in this process. We understand this dynamic as a positive embrace of progressive, pluralistic American culture and democratic values by German Jewish immigrants in the 19th century and by the Reform movement generally as time went on. Instead of viewing this as a desire for social acceptance, it can also be seen in the broader context of the continuum of Jewish social history. That experience has always reflected a conscious encounter and creative synthesis of Judaism’s distinctive values and traditions with the broader cultural environments in which we have lived and entered into as fully as circumstances permitted. The influence of American religious aesthetics, particularly those of liberal Protestantism, on Reform worship styles, can also be interpreted in this light. This dynamic was identical to the blend of Jewish religious observance and folkways with the broader culture of medieval Russia and Poland or the Islamic world, which shaped the Orthodox Hasidic and Sephardic traditions. Reform Jews in America were engaged in a positive, creative process of acculturation that had always been at work in every period and place in Jewish history. In the free open, pluralistic society of the United States, this reflected a deep and faithful commitment to Judaism and the Jewish future. There were many, easier paths to true “assimilation,” than the painstaking rabbinic scholarship and spiritual creativity that shaped Classical Reform in Europe and America.



Major Principles

The fundamental principle of Classical Reform is that the eternal Jewish Covenant with God is at the heart of our identity and history as Jews. While our faith engenders and empowers many different understandings and interpretations of the Divine, it is the religious quest for faith and meaning that is at the core of our Jewish identity.

We believe that Judaism is primarily a universal religious faith, rather than an ethnic, cultural or nationalist identity. As a spiritual community, we cherish the unique ties of history and destiny that link us to our fellow Jews throughout the ages and around the world today. We understand the Jewish People as a community of faith, bound together by our shared experience, and grounded in the distinctive teachings of the Jewish Religion. The rich and varied ethnic and cultural traditions of the

Jewish experience throughout the ages offer meaningful dimensions for our religious identity, but our faith is timeless and universal in its aspirations.

We uphold the historic Reform concept, linked to our emphasis on the ethical and moral vision of our Hebrew Prophets, of the “Mission of Israel.” This belief holds that as Jews, we are called to be witnesses to the Unity of God and the unity of all humanity, and that we must work as individuals and as a community to bring justice and peace to the world. The leaders of the Classical Reform tradition have always been in the forefront of these efforts and challenges, addressing the great social issues of American history with prophetic courage and action. We affirm this broad, universalistic and humanistic spiritual vision.



We cherish the distinctive worship traditions of historic Reform – a meaningful, participatory liturgy that appeals to both mind and heart. This commitment has always embraced a primarily English language worship Service, enriched by the timeless elements of Hebrew texts and song that symbolically link us to our past and to our fellow Jews throughout the world. And yet, we would insist that what makes a worship experience truly “Jewish” is not its degree of Hebrew usage, but rather the ideals and values it reflects. Classical Reform worship also embraces the role of inspiring choral and instrumental music that elevates the spirit and reflects the highest artistic standards; drawing on both the great historic musical traditions that have been the distinctive heritage of the Reform synagogue, as well as the compositions of contemporary creativity. Yet another dimension of historic Reform worship is the importance of intellectually challenging preaching that offers the wisdom of our Jewish tradition in addressing both the pressing moral and social issues of our day, as well as our personal spiritual growth and the deeper meaning of our human experience. We believe that these characteristic qualities of Classical Reform worship Services, which for many of us are most meaningfully embodied in the historic liturgy of the Union Prayer Book, continue to offer a vital, creative option for many Jews today. This includes not only the many members of our congregations who were raised in and cherish this tradition, but also countless younger people – who are searching for a meaningful and accessible form of Jewish

identity and worship, based not on nostalgia nor ethnicity, but rather rooted in the realities of their experience in our contemporary, pluralistic society.

We particularly affirm and celebrate the unique experience and heritage of the Jewish experience in America. Our Torah’s principles of liberty, justice, and the equality of all people, have shaped American democracy from its earliest colonial beginnings. Inspired by the promise of the American values of freedom and opportunity, Jews have played a vital role in the founding and building of this nation. Classical Reform Judaism has always cherished this noble heritage and has remained committed to the nurturing of a distinctly American expression of Jewish worship, life, and culture, which reflect the best of our nation’s democratic ideals. We are proud citizens of this country, fully embracing our rights and obligations to the United States. These obligations include prophetic dissent, expressed in the democratic process, as well as full civic engagement in our society. We believe that the major setting for the continued dynamic development, influence and mission of Judaism in the future, will lie here in a vital and spiritually renewed American Jewish community.

The question of our relationship as American Jews to the State of Israel, is one of great importance and has a complex history in the development of the Classical Reform perspective, which embraces a broad diversity of opinion. However, there are a number of perspectives that many of us would share. The historic Reform position has always held that the national period in the early history of our people was an important formative chapter - creating the shared sense of experience and fostering the spiritual and ethical values that it was our destiny to proclaim and share with all humanity. While this dynamic view of Jewish history rejects the concept that we who live throughout the world today are in “exile,” we affirm that our link to the land of Israel is a deep and historic one and that the State of Israel has profound significance for the Jewish experience. We share with all Jews – and with many other people of good will - the hope and prayer for a secure, prosperous Israel, living in peace and justice with its neighbors.

We celebrate the rich diversity within today’s changing Jewish community. We are particularly committed to offering a warm, loving and unconditional welcome to the ever-increasing number of interfaith and multicultural families in our midst. We believe that we must support our young people and their partners and spouses with “open hearts and open doors” - celebrating their weddings and offering them a spiritual community that respects both of their identities and integrity. We believe that Classical Reform Judaism’s broad, universal message and embracing, accessible worship have a unique role to play

in reaching out to our young people in interfaith relationships, empowering them to find a meaningful setting for sharing their experience of Jewish tradition together.

Our contemporary Reform movement includes a broad diversity of interpretations and styles. Our hope and commitment is that the historic tradition of Classical Reform, which embodies its own integrity and enduring significance in the midst of the many rich streams of Jewish experience through the ages, is recognized and honored for its continuing vitality and potential to speak to a new generation of Jews today.

Reform Judaism - Its Direction

*A Sermon delivered December 14, 2007
Congregation Emanu El, San Bernardino CA*

Rabbi Hillel Cohn

While we are gathered here in our synagogue tonight, a number of the leaders of this congregation and our Sisterhood are celebrating the Shabbat in San Diego with close to 6,000 other Jews at the 69th Biennial Convention of the Union for Reform Judaism, the organization which brings over 900 reform synagogues in North America together. Our congregation has been an affiliate of the Union for the past 60 years.

Having attended many of the Union Biennials over the years, I think I can safely predict that those from our congregation who are attending will return here energized, enriched, impressed, elevated, inspired and - given a program that has hundreds of offerings and that keeps delegates busy from early in the morning till late at night - exhausted! And they will also return a bit impatient, wanting to change things here so that what they experienced all of us can experience. It is not unlike the experience of youths who attend our Union camps and come home desiring that their local synagogue replicate the camp experience.

There is no question that our Reform movement is vibrant. We are far and away the largest denomination in contemporary American Judaism. We have much to be proud of. Our summer camps for young Jews are outstanding; our Religious Action Center in Washington DC is recognized as a powerful and passionate voice for justice and the application of Jewish values in the political arena; our seminary - the Hebrew Union College - trains rabbis, cantors, educators, communal workers and promotes Jewish scholarship; materials produced for religious schools and adult learning are excellent. Our national leaders are people of extraordinary talent and commitment and they

make us proud. There is much more that gives us reason to be proud members of the Reform movement.

Surely those who attend the Biennial conventions of the Union are always moved by the experience of sharing with thousands of other deeply committed Jews in Shabbat services. In many ways it is a "revival meeting." It is more than the music or the Torah teaching that makes Shabbat at the Biennial memorable. It is, as has often been noted by Biennial attendees, extraordinary to join voices with 5,000 other Jews in singing the *Sh'ma* and reciting the prayers of our People. That, obviously, can't be fully replicated in any local synagogue.

But I am not sure that all of the direction that the Reform movement is taking is necessarily good or right and I would caution those who return from attending the Biennial in San Diego from believing that they can replicate what happens at a Biennial convention here in their home synagogue.

I think I can predict that certainly one of the things that those attending the convention in San Diego will come back with is an appreciation of the new prayer book of Reform Judaism, *Mishkan T'filah* and an impatience to use it here in our synagogue. It has just come off the presses and many congregations around the country have begun using it, generally with satisfaction. The enthusiasm for the new prayer book stems, in great measure, from the dissatisfaction with its predecessor - Gates of Prayer. I share that dissatisfaction and that is why when years ago we sought prayer books that would be appropriate and useful here we chose those we currently use. Each person attending the convention will get a copy of *Mishkan T'filah* and it is being used throughout the Biennial for the various services. While there might be some reservations about one thing or another in that book my sense is that it will be overwhelmingly appreciated. It has been years in the making. Its consistent use of gender-free language, its inclusion of variant readings for major portions of services, and its handsome design will be lauded.

But to be realistic, let me share with you my belief that a prayer book, a *Siddur*, has to be used judiciously, sensitively and sensibly. That's certainly the case with the prayerbooks we use here. Liturgy is an art - and requires trained artisans to make it work. The new prayer book of Reform Judaism is based on some perceptions whose validity I question. And those perceptions are reflective of the state of contemporary Reform Judaism. I wish to briefly touch on some of these perceptions.

The first perception is that we, contemporary American Jews,

are spiritually-starved, that we crave intense spiritual experiences, that we are seeking transcendent experiences that will save our lives from the evils of secularism... that rationality and reason have essentially failed us. The perception is that synagogues have failed in meeting the spiritual needs of their members. The new prayer book and other programs of our movement assume that we have a craving for a closer connection to God, specifically to an understanding of a God who is personal, heals and works miracles, and rewards and punishes humanity.

I seriously question that perception. It may be accurate for what I would call the “elite” of our movement, those who are deeply involved, but I don’t think it is accurate for what we call *amcha*, the mass, the common-folk, the average member of Reform synagogues and certainly not for the unaffiliated whom we would hope to bring into our synagogues.

I have often said that while the 2,000 year old rabbinic teaching says that the world rests on three things - *Torah* or study, *Avodah* or worship and *Gemillut Chasadim*, deeds of lovingkindness - the truth is that for contemporary Jews the three functional aspects of the Jewish experience are Belonging, Believing and Behaving... and that behaving and belonging are of greater significance than believing. Or at least that is how the vast majority of synagogue members treat their membership. Whether that is good or not is not the point. It is simply a reality. And by behavior I do not mean taking on all of the traditional practices that were cast off by the founders of Reform Judaism. I mean behaving in a Jewish way, living ones life by ethical standards that flow out of the Jewish experience, making life’s major choices informed by the values and teachings of Judaism but always being ready to dissent from those teachings when they are clearly out of sync with contemporary understandings and insights. The newspaper coverage of the Biennial this week announced that the results of a survey would be revealed and that these results would provide a foundation for new directions of the movement. The problem is that the survey was done among the most committed and is hardly representative of the majority. I was somewhat amused and perhaps even more perturbed by the picture which accompanied the story earlier this week circulated by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency about the results of a survey of Reform Jews that would be revealed at the San Diego convention. The picture is obviously intended to depict Reform Judaism. It shows a woman, wearing a *tallit*, carrying a Torah around in a con-

gregation where people are using the new prayer book and a few feet away from her is a man wearing *t’fillin*. Now I have long prized the diversity that Reform Judaism accepts and encourages. I love the egalitarianism that Reform Judaism pioneered and which is now firmly embedded in liberal Judaism. But I question the need to appropriate practices and forms that seem to be more of an envy of Tradition and that stem from a sense that what we are as Reform Jews is somehow inauthentic. What is authentic about our liberal Jewish experience is our long-standing commitment to the application of prophetic teachings to daily life. That is, if the picture is intended to be descriptive, and if the hundreds of workshops on the Biennial program are any indication of the direction in which Reform Judaism is headed, I am not comfortable with that at all.

A second perception that seems to be influencing Reform Judaism or at least influencing Reform Jewish leaders - clergy and laity alike - is that the only *real* place for one to be a Jew is in Israel and that the American Jewish experience will never be a full Jewish experience...that Israel is our true home. Now, those of you whom I have taught over the course of close to four decades know that I am a life-long Zionist, that I have worked and continue to work for the security and survival of Israel and that I love the land and its history and so much more. But I am also a proud American Jew, appreciative of the benefits of the American experience and convinced that I can live a full Jewish life here. I firmly believe - and I think you do, too - that we need not apologize for being American Jews and that while it is good and beneficial to visit Israel we need not feel guilty about not making *aliyah*. I fear that too much of contemporary Reform Judaism has become Israel-centered and that our movement desperately needs to strike a balance. Yes, we need to work for the acceptance of liberal Judaism in Israel but we must not sell American Judaism short in order to do that. And living in America means that we cultivate relationships with non-Jews, relationships that preclude chauvinism or arrogance on our part - just as they preclude arrogance and chauvinism on their part.

And, while there is much more to say about contemporary Reform Judaism, let me just share one more perception that I think is invalid - and it is not unrelated to the issuance of the new prayer book of Reform Judaism. It has to do with synagogue services and what happens in our synagogues. Over the past 6 1/2 years since my retirement, I have had many occasions to attend services in other synagogues as well as attending services here. What we experience is not generally positive. In what we sense is a quest for informality we encounter mediocrity, amateurism, a trivialization of the synagogue experience. In an attempt to become folksy, the synagogue service has become extremely pedestrian and for that reason does not attract us with regularity.

Now I know that styles change and I have long been open to change. Music is one of those styles. I appreciate the music that has come to us from a variety of sources. But I also know that just as my soul is elevated by a magnificent symphony it is elevated by the rich, thunderous and versatile sounds of an organ and the haunting chants of a cantor and the glorious and awesome choral renditions of Jewish liturgy. In a world where so much of life has become commonplace I look for the synagogue experience to invest my life with awe and beauty and inspiration. I look for a delicate balance between what I used to refer to as being “high-church” and the use of contemporary forms. It has to do with much more than music. It has to do with the setting, the ambiance, the entire *gestalt*. What we so often encounter in our visits to other synagogues and here as well are off-the-cuff “talks” or “chats” instead of carefully honed sermons, boring sameness instead of well-constructed services that are products of the thinking and labor of those trained in the art of Jewish liturgy and who use their training properly.



Too often I find myself uplifted more by what I experience in churches than what I experience in synagogues. While I obviously can't accept church theology I find that their valuing of passionate and purposeful preaching and glorious music move me more than does the average synagogue experience.

Now admittedly these perceptions of mine may simply be the musings of an aging curmudgeon. If they are, just dismiss them as the rantings and ravings of a retired rabbi. But, hopefully, at least one or two of you will resonate to what I have been trying to say.

I envy those of this congregation who tonight are celebrating Shabbat with 5,000 other Jews in San Diego. But, once they have come down from the clouds and returned to earth, maybe they will envy what we have experienced together right here tonight.

Who knows?

The Music of the German Rite and the Modern Synagogue

Temple Israel, New Rochelle, NY

Cantor Erik Contzius

Something that is “classic” is considered to have lasting significance or worth--in other words, it is enduring. I

have therefore always found it ironic that the Sacred Music Press of our Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion School of Sacred Music should publish something it calls “Out of Print Classics”. For one thing, if the material will again be in print, why is it called “out of print”? But more significantly, for a classic to be deemed out of print seems like an oxymoron, especially when the music contained in these volumes is so enduring.

Most of the *Out of Print Classics* come from the Reform German rite of the mid- to-late 19th century, and bear the authorship of such masters as Louis Lewandowski, Solomon Sulzer (who was Austrian, just as Lewandowsky stemmed from the Polish tradition of Posen, but I include them both -stylistically and idealistically- in the German rite), Emmanuel Kirschner, and others, who captured the hearts and minds of Jews everywhere for nearly 200 years. When faced with the term “traditional” in the synagogue, the chants of our Eastern European great-grandparents speaks to one part of the Jewish psyche, but the German rite has infiltrated the entire Jewish world, from the Americas to Europe, and even among such far-flung communities as the black Jews of Uganda. When Solomon Sulzer westernized the mellismatic flourishes of the *Alte Weise* (“old prayer modes”), he brought together East and West, preserving one tradition, but creating it anew.

And it was this creative tradition that become sacrosanct in practically every American Reform and even Conservative synagogue. Cantors, rabbis and songleaders have all tried to bring new melodies into the prayer service, and yet on Friday evening, there is almost no household or temple without the strains of Louis Lewandowski's gently flowing melody sanctifying the Sabbath's arrival over Kiddush wine. Modify a congregational *Shema* all you want, but when it comes to the Torah service, Sulzer's tune prevails.

Why should we be surprised that this music can and certainly does still speak to us? For one, it is music composed by cantors who stood on the shoulders of Beethoven, Schubert and Schumann, a musical tradition that still thrills audiences today for its classic nature (here I use the term to mean “enduring”, and not in a musicological sense). As well, the German synagogue tradition marked the first time in Jewish history that the effects of the Enlightenment and Emancipation really held sway in Jewish culture. It was the first time that Jews developed a musical expression that spoke to the modern Jewish soul as well to the timeless Jewish spirit.

This is something that the would-be innovators of today think they are doing because they imagine it has not been done before. There are many trying to bring more “progressive” musical idioms into the Jewish sanctuary: rock, folk, pop, jazz, new-age... even gospel. Their efforts seem to hold sway for a year or two...or sometimes a decade or two. And yet, some 150 years after Sulzer published his two-volume *Schir Zion*, his music is still used as spiritual expression in the modern synagogue. Why?

I believe the reason can be found in the form. Where present day innovators have sought to bring a popular, and by definition ephemeral, musical form into our worship, Sulzer and his peers brought a classical musical form into the synagogue. As praying Jews, we have sought more permanence in our lives, looking for everlasting truths in Torah and Tradition. The service itself remains relatively unchanged in its basic structure, but the music that expresses the prayers contained therein has been tinkered with over millennia. When a language speaks only to one generation at one point in time, the next generation needs to develop a new language with which to dialogue with the eternal. When one uses a language that can be heard and understood by all to contain elements of beauty, elegance, grandeur, and holiness, it can be understood by most people at any point in time.

The challenge, however, is that in past generations, we had worshipers who were musically literate. They could read music; they regularly sang. There was no television or internet with which musical performance at home had to compete. Today, people experience music like most other cultural offerings of the 21st century - in a cursory fashion, embraced for the moment and then superseded by the next passing fad. They are unsure how to embrace something that has been called a classic. There is no longer a frame of reference.

What, then, of the German tradition’s viability in today’s synagogue? Is it to be abandoned in favor of the “soup of the day” music that will eventually become passé? I think not, for several reasons.

First, regardless of an individual’s musical exposure or education, the choral music of the German Reform rite has a hymn-like quality that can and often does engender congregational singing.

Second, the musical language itself, being something much more than a hastily tossed amalgam of notes, speaks to us across time. Intrinsic in many of the Classical Reform offerings is a solid musical structure which, as exemplified in the work of J.S. Bach and others, has a musical logic, allowing us to hear timeless themes within the notes. To my ear, what is lacking in the popular music of the synagogue is that transcendent sense of eternal holiness, sadly sacrificed in favor of a simple, popular tune.



Third, there is a Jewish musical subconscious that runs like a deep vein through most American congregations. In Sulzer’s day, that vein was made up of the old chants. Today, when these melodies have all but disappeared, the common element is made up of

the music of Sulzer and his contemporaries. It is a safe and comfortable musical place in which to pray. As a child, I remember clearly having gone to only a few Sabbath Morning services and hearing the Sulzer *Kedushah* responses (although I was a synagogue regular in my youth, my synagogue’s main service was on Friday evening, and Saturday services were rarely held). As an adult, I can still conjure those strains as easily as a lullaby from my childhood. For many others as well, the Reform classical rite still holds a place, although that place may be receding from our grasp.

I would suggest that the musical heritage of our movement deserves to be re-examined closely, for not only is there considerable breadth to the repertoire, there is also redeeming musical and spiritual value. Its many settings that invoke the old chants connect us to the distant past, and its Late Romantic harmonies reflect the more recent European childhood of many of our parents and grandparents – as well as our broader Western cultural inheritance. And there is no denying that its well-structured hymns do engender the congregational singing that seems to be all the rage nowadays, and do so without resorting to complicated syncopation or grating chords. Finally, for any congregation seeking to bolster its musical horizons, one need look no further than the entire set of *Out of Print Classics* to discover (or re-discover) a treasure of music which was born out of a vibrant tradition that continues to endure.



OUR MISSION STATEMENT

We are committed to the preservation and creative nurturing of the historic ideals of Classical Reform Judaism with its progressive spiritual values, rich intellectual foundations, and distinctive worship traditions. Among these values are the centrality of the American experience in our Jewish identity, and an affirmation of our faith's prophetic vision of peace and social justice for all people. We believe that Classical Reform, which embodies its own integrity and enduring significance in the midst of the many rich streams of Jewish experience through the ages, has a continuing vitality and potential to speak to a new generation of Jews today.

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