

Why I Am A Reform Jew

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Why am I a Reform Jew? That's an important question! Answer: I could be no other! Actually if there was no Reform Judaism, I would have been forced to invent it. Only I fear I would have frozen it at its 1960s formulation, and that would have been a mistake because Reform must, well, reform!

It was not at all my mother's plan that I know anything about Reform Judaism. As the daughter of an Orthodox rabbi, one who died tragically young at 38 and left seven children for his wife (my Bubby) to raise, Mom had a low regard for Reform. Truth is, she knew very little about it, though they were married by a great Reform rabbi, Edward L. Israel – one of my mentors.

What happened, though, was that my brother's Bar Mitzvah drew near and my parents had not yet joined a synagogue. The Orthodox and Conservative options in Baltimore were out of the question due to our distance from their Shuls. They insisted my brother Stan attend Hebrew School twice a week, plus Sunday religious school. From Glen Burnie, where we lived, that meant six hours of driving each week into downtown Baltimore. We were not a two-car family in the 1950s. And so, we joined what was commonly known as the Eutaw Place Temple – Oheb-Shalom – an historic Reform Temple founded in 1853 and once led by Henrietta Szold's father, Rabbi Benjamin Szold.

The Bar Mitzvah at Oheb-Shalom was possible with Hebrew School following Religious School on Sundays. I was registered in 1st grade. My brother hated it. I was in love with my teacher (Miss Rita Taft Lovett) and with the great, giant domed sanctuary – complete with Marble Ark and dramatic, sweeping balconies. And then, there was the fabulous cantor, choir, and pipe organ.

My mother used to say that I was predictably well behaved in only two settings: when I was fed and when they took me to Temple. To this day, I cherish memories of sacred moments in that old glorious, majestic building. In 1960, the congregation left it to head northwest toward the Promised Land of Pikesville with all of the other Jews of Baltimore. We dedicated a new, 2200 seat ultra-modern sanctuary designed by the renowned Harvard architect Walter Gropius. I loved that building, too.

There I was captured by the dream of becoming a Reform Rabbi. But, that's about the time my parents, wise now to the lead time necessary, resigned from Oheb-Shalom and joined an Orthodox synagogue where I was enrolled in private Hebrew studies for the Orthodox Bar Mitzvah my mother had always dreamt of.

She loved it. I did it for her – and that service on October 1, 1961 was my last effort at being an Orthodox Jew. Actually, I kept Kosher for a year further, until one day a cup of split pea soup with unexpected cubes of ham confronted me with a crisis of faith. I was 14 and honest enough with my feelings to conclude that nothing about that soup was going to define my faith. My God was bigger than a cup of soup – with or without the ham.

Three years later, I began my studies in the undergraduate program of the Hebrew Union College and enrolled as a freshman at the University of Cincinnati. Eight years later, with two bachelor's degrees and one Masters at Hebrew Letters, I was ordained a Reform Rabbi. I had not a doubt, but that my rabbi grandfather would have approved – in time!

Why am I a Reform Jew? It is an appropriate question on this Shabbas Evening in March, as we approach this coming week the 106th Yahrzeit of Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise – the institutional founder of American Reform Judaism. Rabbi Wise was the genius behind the establishment of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations founded in 1873.

That same Union, now comprised of over 900 Reform Congregations has contributed over a million dollars this year alone to help save our New Orleans Congregations. Temple Sinai and its members have been a steadfast and often leading participant in Union programs – social action, worship, educational, Brotherhood, Sisterhood, youth group, ARZA, Jacobs Camp, World Union, and, no doubt, more!

Wise also founded the HUC-JIR in 1875, and the CCAR in 1889. Our Rabbi Max Heller was in the third graduating class of the College-Institute, ordained by Isaac Mayer Wise. Wise was also present for the dedication of our Temple Sinai's first Temple in 1872 on Carondelet Street.

Why I am a Reform Jew? I'll get to it.

I.

I do not believe in the Divine authority of the Bible. I reject the binding authority of Halacha – Jewish law.

I believe in the evolving nature of human wisdom and understanding. I believe that the Bible is a human document, authored by Divinely inspired writers, and is as fallible and inconsistent and human nature inevitably proves to be.

II.

I am a Reform Jew because I believe in change, and not deadly changelessness.

- Liturgy (personal Messiah, repetition) – the mind can't absorb more than the bottom can endure!
- Women's rights (equality, ordination, Get)
- Gay and lesbian equality (in the synagogue and pulpit)

III.

Personal choice and options:

- The nature of God
- Personal practice and ritual preference, Hebrew versus English, covered heads, Kashrut, Shabbat, music

IV.

- I believe in Prophetic Justice placing universalism above particularism – the bottom line of faith.
- I believe in Zionism and Americanism, but God before nation!
- I believe in C'lal Yisrael – all denominations of Judaism are authentic Judaisms – Elu v'Elu-devray Elohim Chayim.

V.

Reform Judaism outreaches to non-churched and interfaith marriages.

Reform Judaism is inherently chaotic. No one lay, rabbi, individual, or group can rule on what is appropriate or necessary to do or to believe. All that we know is unacceptable is to insist that any given way or belief is the right one. Choice and option rule the day!

Study and learning, experimentation, and free exploration on the part of each and every one of us are what is necessary. One is not a Reform Jew out of indifference or laziness. To be a Reform Jew, one ought to be a literate, informed Jew.

We are not liberal Jews because we don't do this or that. We are liberal Jews because we profoundly trust that our wisdom and understanding of the covenant between God and the Jewish people evolves, clarifies, and refines itself in each and every generation. We proudly link ourselves to Israel's patriarchs, matriarchs, prophets, martyrs, and heroic sages.

Nothing of the Jewish past is forbidden to be reclaimed by Reform Judaism. But also, we are not enslaved or chained to it, either. Halocha has a vote, but not a veto in our view of our role as servants of the Living God.

We place ethics over ritual, and prophetic justice over liturgical or rabbinic law. We Reform Jews insist upon freedom of conscience, and we seek to lessen the influence and impact of superstition over reason in our worship and in the living of our faith.

Rabbi Wise once said: "The world belongs to those who dare." Suffice it to say, Isaac Mayer Wise called us Reform Jews to be daring, visionary, and filled with zeal for the preservation and the growth of Judaism's joyous message of human kinship as children of the one Creator God.

I am a Reform Jew because of that reality – one God overall, one brother-sisterhood of all. Reform Judaism's message, its comfort, and its challenge fill my life with purpose and with meaning. As with the Psalmist of old, I too exalt:

Samachtee B'omreem Lee,
Beit Adonai Nay-laych
I rejoice when they say unto me,

Let go unto the house of the Lord.

And so may it be for you and yours!

Amen