

So What's New, Rabbi, with the Rabbis?  
A Report on the Central Conference of American Rabbis Convention  
June 18<sup>th</sup> – 21<sup>st</sup>

June 23, 2006

Temple Sinai

New Orleans, Louisiana

Our 117<sup>th</sup> annual convention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, gathered in San Diego, California, is now a pleasant and proud memory. By the number of attendees present, this year's convention was by no means a record-breaker, but the 425 rabbi-delegates brought a good number of their spouses with them – no doubt drawn to the beauty and exquisite shopping of San Diego.

## I.

There were no earth-shattering controversies that I have to report to you, thank God. We did once again confirm the fact that our Conference is bankrupt. That was last year's news and it's still the news for this year, though the reports indicate we are at least beginning to understand how we have gone bankrupt. Foolish office procedures with no one in authority overlooking what was going in or going out lead to our expenditure of restricted funds. As a matter of fact, we haven't even been able to locate an auditor who's willing to begin to help us unravel the mess we've found ourselves in. This we do know: there was no illegality committed, just first-rate incompetence! That's the bad news. But, here's the good news.

## II.

We anticipate that our coffers will soon be filled due to the sale of Mishkan T'Fillah, our new reform Siddur. We used that Siddur every day and every night for our conference services, and it was well proven to work – at different levels of satisfaction for different worship tastes, to be sure.

Mind you, no one has yet seen a complete copy of the book, inclusive of its festival services and certain alternative services. Nevertheless, the presses have been proceeding night and day with the printing of the prayer book.

Our daily worship services at the Convention, every morning and night, offered us options for how the new prayer book might be used in mainstream, classical reform, small congregation settings, and alternative/traditional synagogue settings.

The opening sermon on Sunday evening was delivered by one of America's absolutely greatest Jewish pulpiteers – Conservative Rabbi Harold Schulweiss of Los Angeles. Rabbi Schulweiss hit a sermonic home run and, by the time he concluded his message with virtually every rabbi in the ballroom busy scribbling on his or her ankles or palms so as not to lose the gem of a sermon we were privileged to hear. I will give you prior notice of the fact that Rabbi Schulweiss's sermon will be re-preached here, tomorrow morning at 10:15! No doubt, 424 other rabbis across North America will do the very same.

### III.

We enjoyed several wonderful workshops in the morning, afternoon, and evening. We had study and we had play!

- We studied the theology of the motion picture with Dr. Eugene Borowitz and Dr. Wendy Zurler, who focused on three intriguing films, the best of which was Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanors*. Lesson: as Reform Jews, we can believe in judgment of the soul after death.
- We were treated to a cantorial concert by eight outstanding reform cantors from the west coast singing from "Bima to Broadway."
- The Jacob R. Marcus Memorial Lecture was delivered by University of San Francisco historian, Dr. Andrew Heinze, and it was titled, "Jews, Christians, and the Battle for the America Soul: The Case of Joshua Loff Liebman." That lecture was illuminating and magnificently organized.
- We were introduced on Tuesday at breakfast, lunch, and dinner to our new Central Conference executive director, Stephen A. Fox, who, supposedly, is helping to unravel the mystery of the bankruptcy for us all.
- We pondered styles of interfaith marriage ceremonies, as more and more of our members are agreeing to officiate in such ceremonies. And, we also delved into such subjects in our workshops as the level of satisfaction we are attaining from our rabbinate, the level of return we are receiving on our pensions, the level of our understanding of the Talmud, Midrash, and *Job's Wife*, and what is new in Jewish education.
- We also enjoyed a luncheon with 26 SWARR members, and later there were cocktails at the pool that a few of us enjoyed. There was a pre-convention day at the zoo, and a tour of the restaurants of the Gas Lamp District of San Diego, but mind you, only to determine whether or not they were Kosher! Kidding!

Of course, when one attends a Central Conference of American Rabbis convention, one is, in effect, attending a gigantic class reunion, as we are all of us graduates of the Hebrew Union College (New York, Los Angeles, Cincinnati, or Jerusalem). And so, the alumni breakfast is always a grand occasion when we hear the latest news – the good, the bad, and the indifferent – of our college and beloved alma mater. One of the high points is the counting of our representation of each year's ordination classes, until reaching back to a point, we find no one any longer present to represent a given year's ordines.

With 32 years of such breakfasts under my belt, I remember many, many great rabbis whose distinguished voices and historic presence are no longer commanding figures among our conference.

### IV.

Rabbi Loewy and his wife, Lynn, and Rabbi Jeffrey Kurtzlander joined me in delivering a detailed report on Katrina and the current state of our congregations currently, as a new hurricane season arrives. There were a good number of people gathered in the ballroom, and I was delighted to receive a personal message from Harry

Danziger, our conference president, informing me that he was deeply touched by my remarks in that session.

#### V.

So to review, though the major themes of the conference were to meet and install our new executive director, learn about being broke, and go out and sell the new prayer book so that we can become flush with money once again, the overriding theme of our conference was the critical importance at this juncture of maintaining unity within Reform rabbinic ranks.

Thus, Rabbi Harry Danziger's entire presidential message amounted to an ardent and eloquent call for maintaining the "big tent" of Reform Judaism. He pointed out how the ancient academies of Hillel and Shammai were first century competitors, and he proceeded to ask why is it that the school of Hillel seems to always win each dispute? *Eleh v'Eleh* – this one of that one, is the Living Word of God, said Rabbi Hillel.

The answer, then, is that because, unlike Shammai, Hillel's disciples discipline themselves to carefully listen to the arguments of the school of Shammai, even when they were clearly in disagreement. Lesson to be derived: we still function all the better when we study those whose positions are not our own.

Said Harry Danziger – as Reform Jews, our short list upon which we suffer no negotiation must never grow too long. And, the list of those ideas and alternative interpretations on which we ponder and continually consider must never be allowed to become too short.

In closing then, we are often, as Reform rabbis and Reform Jews, open to a wide diversity of practice and belief, one which our movement's founders could never have dreamt possible. Nevertheless, as the largest and most successful movement of American Jewish life, we need to recognize that the hallmark of our great movement remains the fact that we hold all certainties suspect, while at the same time, not only tolerating, but engendering new options of practice and thought. Such was the 117<sup>th</sup> convention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis. It was a rich and enjoyable, stimulating and prayerful celebration of the joys and the challenges of being the world's largest liberal religious entity! I don't believe that anyone left the glorious City of San Diego indifferent to our sacred role as spiritual leaders of this magnificent movement we call Reform Judaism.

One year from this fall, the URJ Biennial will meet in San Diego. You try to make it your business to be among the lucky number to enjoy the beauty and stimulation that spiritual celebration will offer.

And that's what's new with the Rabbis!

Amen