

The Reform Advocate

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THE SOCIETY FOR
CLASSICAL
REFORM
JUDAISM

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



Our First Year in Review!

This second issue of *The Reform Advocate* marks the first anniversary of the founding of the Society for Classical Reform Judaism on January 31, 2008. Our inaugural year has been filled with remarkable achievements and progress!

The SCRJ has already emerged as the recognized and respected voice of advocacy for the historic ideals and worship traditions of our Reform Movement, as vital and viable options for contemporary Jews. Our mission embraces the preservation, creative nurturing, and new interpretations of Classical Reform principles and practice:

- *An inclusive, accessible, primarily English language worship service, enriched by a high standard of teaching and music, which both inspires and challenges us intellectually.*
- *The spiritual values, grounded in the timeless, universal vision of our Prophetic tradition, that inspire our personal decision-making and ethical action as a central expression of our religious commitment as Reform Jews.*
- *The centrality of the American experience in the shaping of our Jewish identity and commitment, celebrating the contributions our people have made to the founding and building of the pluralistic, democratic society of the United States.*
- *An active outreach and warm, unconditional support for interfaith couples and multicultural families - including the celebration of their weddings - and a welcome to all those seeking to become part of the Jewish community, regardless of their religious backgrounds. We believe that the broad, inclusive and universal spiritual values of the historic Reform tradition offer an inspiring message for all people on their spiritual journeys.*



We are proud to highlight some of the major accomplishments of our inaugural year:

- We have developed deeply committed and talented leadership from around the country. Our Board includes rabbis, cantors and lay people of all ages, and has been meeting regularly, with recent gatherings in Dallas, Chicago, and New Orleans. The Board has developed energetic and creative agendas for programming, communications and publications, strategic planning and financial development.
- An important indication of the depth of support for our mission has been our success in launching our efforts on a strong financial foundation - significantly exceeding our initial fund-raising goals from contributors around the country, even

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in the midst of the current economic crisis. There has been a very successful response to the matching grant, contributed by one of our leaders, which doubled every contribution to the SCRJ in 2008. This \$100,000 Challenge Grant has been renewed for 2009, and we trust that all of our supporters will help us to maximize its great potential benefits.

- Our website is attracting significant attention: www.renewreform.org. The first issue of *The Reform Advocate* also garnered widespread interest and positive response, and the entire first printing has been exhausted, with many additional copies requested for broader distribution by our Society supporters. There has been great interest and enthusiasm in response to our messages in this past year's issues of *Reform Judaism* magazine. Hundreds of inquiries and a new national network of supporters have resulted from this outreach to Movement. We are now working with the editorial staff of *RJ* in preparing formal articles in the magazine that will convey our message and share our story in greater depth.
- The Society has already sponsored special programs at a number of major temples around the country, and a particular priority is the fostering of regular worship opportunities in the Classical tradition in congregations, as an affirmation of our commitment to diversity in our progressive spiritual community.
- We have met with very warm response in our efforts to develop cooperative programs with the national institutions of Reform Judaism. The SCRJ envisions itself as a positive, constructive and collegial resource for our broader Movement. We seek to offer support for rabbis in embracing the diversity within our congregations, to help serve the needs of those of our members of all ages who are committed to the historic practices and perspectives of Classical Reform.



emerged as committed supporters. We are challenging the new generation of Reform rabbis to deepen their own personal understanding of our liberal Jewish heritage, as well as raise awareness of the pastoral opportunities to serve Classical Reform members of their congregations.

We are now developing cooperative programs with both the Union for Reform Judaism and the Central Conference of American Rabbis, including formal representation and workshops at upcoming Biennials and Conventions. We have emphasized that we are seeking to challenge the Movement to embrace its progressive ideal of respecting pluralism within the Reform family, as well as preserving the history and heritage that we all share.

As we enter our second year of activity, we are deeply encouraged by these great initial successes. They vindicate the vision of our founding leaders and early contributors, who firmly believe that there has been a great need for a shared articulation of the commitments and concerns of those many thousands of American Jews who remain devoted to the Classical Reform tradition. We also know that there is a vast potential following for the Society, particularly among young interfaith families, for whom our inclusive values and accessible approach to worship have particular meaning.

We need your active participation and practical support. Our impact on individual congregations and rabbis and the broader Reform Movement will be determined by the breadth and strength of our voice. We invite and challenge you to step forward – and to encourage others to share with us – as we renew the historic vision of American liberal Judaism for the 21st century!

We have already presented seminars on the Society's vision to this year's Ordination Classes at the Hebrew Union College campuses in Cincinnati and New York, and a number of rabbinic and cantorial students have

The Illustrations in this Issue

The beautiful photographs that illustrate this issue of *The Reform Advocate* feature the magnificent art and architecture of Temple Sinai in New Orleans. Founded in 1870, Congregation Temple Sinai is the largest synagogue and the oldest Reform Congregation in the State. The Temple cherishes its rich historic traditions, including the Classical Reform dimensions of its worship, music and broad vision of community service. Its Senior Rabbi, Dr. Edward Paul Cohn serves on the Board of the SCRJ, and the congregation graciously hosted our National Board meeting in January, 2009.

The Temple was built in 1927 in the Byzantine/Art Deco style that characterized synagogue architecture at that time. Many major Reform congregations built their sanctuaries in this design, whose soaring domes and octagonal shape symbolized Reform Judaism's linking of the ancient Eastern roots of our tradition with the progressive development of modern Judaism in Western culture. The design of the stained glass windows, carved detail and sanctuary structure, depict ancient Jewish symbols that reflect distinctive Reform spiritual values. The broad ethical focus of the Ten Commandments, the Menorah's "light of truth", the outstretched hands of blessing, all convey the timeless universal vision of our faith.

We hope to feature images and symbolism from a variety of historic and contemporary Reform Temples throughout the country in future issues.

Photography by Max Cohen.



Models for Inclusion

*Congregations Affirm Diversity
with Alternative Worship Opportunities*

One of the major priorities of the SCRJ is the fostering of opportunities for Classical Reform worship, study and celebration in congregations around the country. We have no agenda of calling for "mainstream" temples to completely change the current styles of their Services. However, as we all know, there are significant numbers of Reform Jews who remain deeply committed to the distinctive historic worship traditions of our Movement. Their love of the liturgy, music and spiritual environment in which they experienced most of their religious lives, from youth to adulthood, remain as precious and meaningful to them as any individual's accustomed religious practice. Characteristically reflecting the intellectual foundation for Reform Jewish

practice, this attachment is not only emotional and aesthetic, but is also based explicitly on philosophical principles that remain central to many of us in our adherence to the Classical tradition. The broad, humanistic, universal religious aspirations of the Biblical Prophets; an emphasis on ethical commitment over ritual; the central focus on accessible, rationally meaningful worship in English, enriched by the symbolic connections to the primary Hebrew texts and enhanced by inspirational music of the highest artistic standards; and the central role of serious, challenging rabbinic teaching from the pulpit; are all critical elements of Reform worship that we embrace. The substantial departure from many of these elements and ideals has included the introduction of more ritually-focused traditionalist observance, greater use of Hebrew, the substitution of "pop/folk" musical styles, and the replacement of the sermon with the informal, improvisational *D'var Torah*. Many of these changes have left many faithful Reform Jews alienated, disenfranchised and marginalized in the

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congregations they have attended and supported throughout their lives.

However, there are many Temples around the country that have found creative and effective ways of serving the diverse spiritual needs of all of their members. The current trends in our Movement, which encourage liturgical experimentation and the offering of a variety of spiritual experiences under the “big tent” or the imaginatively named “synaplex” models, offer special potential for the renewal of the Classical Reform alternative in local congregations. There are certainly many temples that still use the Classical mode as their primary worship style. The famed Temple Emanu-El in New York has retained the original *Union Prayer Book* and the great musical heritage of the Reform synagogue in its worship every day of the year. The historic Chicago Sinai Congregation, which explicitly defines itself as Classical Reform, has produced the modern language, gender inclusive revision of the *Union Prayer Book-Sinai Edition* that has opened new possibilities for a contemporary expression of these ideals. Increasing numbers of “contemporary Classical” congregations, such as the New Reform Temple in Kansas City, the Houston Congregation for Reform Judaism, and Boston Jewish Spirit in central Boston, also use the *Union Prayer Book-Sinai Edition* as their primary liturgy, in Services that blend the organ/choir musical tradition with the currently popular modes of congregational singing, in both Hebrew and English.

An approach that has major potential for many congregations is the alternative use of the different liturgies of the Reform Movement, to embrace a broad range of needs. Savannah’s historic Congregation Mickve Israel uses *Gates of Prayer* and a more traditionalist approach for its Shabbat Eve Services, while turning to the *Union Prayer Book*, accompanied by organ and soloist or choir, for its Sabbath Morning Service. Many major temples offer a regular monthly Classical Reform Service that is the primary Service for a given weekend. Temple Emanu-El in Dallas has done this very successfully, using the original UPB, and The



Temple- Adath Israel Brith Sholom in Louisville designates one Friday evening each month for the *Sinai UPB*, complete with choir and *Union Hymnal* singing. Finally, yet another variation is represented by Temple Sinai in New Orleans, which has adopted the new Prayer Book of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, *Mishkan Tefila*, as its main liturgy, but uses it in a very distinctively Classical mode- with grand choir and pipe organ, a major focus on its English texts, and the continuation of the congregation’s heritage of formal preaching.

The Society for Classical Reform Judaism is deeply committed to supporting and advocating these many effective ways for congregations to broaden their horizons, reach out to every part of their memberships, and offer their people the opportunity to experience the full range of worship traditions and interpretations that make for an authentically liberal, inclusive religious community. The ultimate goal of this effort is to strengthen our temples, and enable them to truly embrace the historic ideal of the Reform synagogue as a “house of prayer for all people.”

An SCRJ Forum: Progressive Reform Perspectives on Interfaith Marriage

One of the primary principles of the Society for Classical Reform Judaism is our commitment to welcoming intermarried families, including support for rabbinic officiation at the weddings of interfaith couples. We believe that this position is an essential extension of the historic Reform concept of Judaism as universal religious alternative for all, and the interpretation of Jewish peoplehood as an inclusive spiritual community. We recognize that many of the early Classical Reformers shared the social and cultural perspectives of their time in their opposition to intermarriage. However we also affirm the prophetic courage and vision of those liberal Reform rabbis who were the earliest champions of a positive pastoral response to the challenge of mixed marriage over the past century. At the same time, in our commitment to the diversity within our Movement, we respect the personal struggles and sincere choices that every rabbi must engage in as they confront this major reality of

contemporary Jewish life. There is great passion on both sides of this complex question, and while we are firm in our own commitments, we believe that the debate must be based on respect for the integrity of different views.

We present three distinctive reflections on this issue by rabbinic members of the Society's Board. Each one approaches the question from a different approach – ranging from broad philosophical analysis, to the more practical issues of pastoral implications and congregational policy. We present these perspectives not as a definitive or comprehensive resolution, but rather as contributions to the ongoing dialogue on this pivotal challenge facing American Judaism today.

A New Jewish Vision for a New Millennium:

A Classical Reform Response to Intermarriage, Jewish Identity and the Jewish Future in the 21st Century

Rabbi Howard A. Berman

Executive Director, The Society for Classical Reform Judaism

The faithful cynic of the Book of Ecclesiastes observed that “there is nothing new under the sun.” And indeed, as we approach the end of the first decade of the new Millennium, we find that most of the critical questions and crises that have faced American Jewry over the course of the 20th century, persist - with even greater urgency and ferment - at the dawn of the 21st. Chief among them are the continuing anxieties and debates over the future of Judaism and a distinctive Jewish community in a free, open, pluralistic society.

A majority of American Jews remain unaffiliated and unconnected to the organized Jewish community, and our overall population continues to decline. The ever-increasing rate of intermarriage remains, as always, the locus of the analysis and debate on these challenges. All too often, the overwhelming response to the perceived crisis of post-Holocaust Jewish survival in the modern world, is a parochial appeal to ethnic solidarity, and a growing trend toward religious traditionalism – a return to greater ritual observance and deepened cultural identity, as the only alleged safeguards against the great threat of “assimilation.”

A dissenting voice and an alternative vision are offered by our particular expression of Judaism in response to these issues. Our liberal, Classical Reform commitment, with its historic universalistic perspective of Jewish destiny, characteristically frames and responds to these questions in rather different ways – and offers a uniquely creative and vital response to these challenges. Our approach affirms the progressive principles of the historic liberal interpretation of our Movement; deeply rooted in the broad, universal ideals of social justice, tolerance and inclusion, proclaimed by our Biblical Prophets, and grounded in the free spirit of American democracy.

We realize, of course, that we are rather outside the mainstream – even within our own Reform Movement, which has largely embraced the broader Jewish establishment’s agenda of greater emphasis on traditional ritual observance and discipline, a renewed emphasis on the perpetuation of a distinctive Jewish ethnic and cultural identity, and a focus on the State of Israel as the central frame of reference for Jewish loyalty and commitment. Despite the focus on “out-reach” to intermarrieds, and significant resources devoted programs of welcome and education, most rabbis still refuse to officiate at the weddings of interfaith couples, and many congregations restrict their full and equal participation in temple life.

Ethnic pride, cultural identity and an attachment to Israel cannot substitute for an authentic spiritual experience of our tradition

Many of us have respectful and yet profound differences with many of these trends. We certainly agree that each of these elements of the Jewish experience can indeed be enriching complements to a full and deep Jewish spiritual commitment. However, we would argue that a return to ritual and ceremonial practices that the founders of our Movement rejected on sound ethical, intellectual and cultural grounds, are not the essential elements of a vital personal Jewish faith. Ethnic pride, cultural identity and an attachment to Israel cannot substitute for an authentic spiritual experience of our tradition. We would also argue that they are clearly not the solutions and panaceas they are claimed to be. We, no less passionately committed to the Jewish future, confront these very same issues and realities, and respond with very different conclusions.

We would challenge many of these fundamental assumptions: the premise for example, that our goal should be the perpetuation of the present model of an ethnic and culturally based Jewish identity. We reject the view that the Jewish religion is merely one component of “identity” - usually considered optional - and dependent upon a distinctive and even separatist ethnic overlay, in order to survive in a pluralistic society. And we question whether Judaism’s future and viability can – or even should – be solely determined by the continuation of an ethnically Jewish-born critical mass.

Now, to get some perspective, it is important for us to remember that virtually every one of these issues and debates was alive, and raged just as furiously, back in the mid 19th century – when Reform Judaism was first established in America. The early Reformers faced the very same issues, with even greater urgency. They did not have the immense infrastructure of a large and active Jewish community and well funded institutions to work with... in many ways, they were literally laboring in an empty, barren wilderness.

But, they saw clearly, that the Jewish experience in this country would be very different than it had been in the old, tradition-bound ghettos and shtetls of Europe. They realized that many of the traditional aspects of Jewish life and identity they had known in the past were shaped more by centuries of persecution and isolation, than by any inherent, essential, internal qualities within Judaism itself. They knew from the history of our People, that the most creative and dynamic eras of our past were those times and places in which Jews had been free to fully enter into the surrounding cultures in which they lived – when they were able to achieve a creative synthesis of an authentically Jewish *religious* community, within the broader *social* environment. They realized that Judaism, in this new world of liberty and freedom, would have to reclaim that ideal and refocus its basic assumptions and energies, if it was to thrive on these shores... and reach its full potential as a moral and spiritual force in American life.

The principles of the new liberal American Judaism they fostered, are the very same ideals we who uphold the Classical Reform tradition have continued to proclaim to this day: that Judaism is first and foremost

a religious faith... that we are indeed a distinctive People, with a unique history and destiny... but that we are primarily a *spiritual* community... not merely another social, ethnic or cultural group. They believed that Judaism is a powerful, life-transforming personal encounter with God... and a unifying, sustaining ideal for a strong and enduring community of faith. They courageously and proudly taught that the Jewish *religion* - not an ethnic, European imported “Jewishness,” but rather a vigorously modern, deeply spiritual expression of timeless values and beliefs - would be able to flourish here in the free, open, pluralistic, and *deeply religious society* of the United States. They believed 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. They were also determined that superstitious folklore; a liturgical language no longer comprehensible to most Jews, let alone others; and obsolete rituals and traditions which had lost all meaning for modern minds and hearts... should not remain as obstacles to making the Synagogue in America a “house of prayer for all people.”

Our Reform pioneers were confident of Judaism’s essential uniqueness... its profoundly distinctive perspectives on the nature of God and of human life and destiny... its vigorously intellectual character. They believed that these qualities could offer a clear and compelling alternative in the midst of the dominant Christian culture, offering *both* born Jews - *and many others* - an attractive, meaningful spiritual option. And since it was the power of Judaism’s faith and mes-



sage, and its timeless, universal spiritual ideals that the early Reformers relied upon, they were liberated from a dependence on Old World cultural trappings and the preservation of an immigrant identity. Cultural assimilation was not a threat for Jews who confidently embraced and contributed fully to the best of American life - and remained faithful and deeply committed to Jewish belief, community, worship and social ideals - long after the last vestiges of ghetto or *shtetl* nostalgia had been forgotten.

...we seek to welcome and embrace interfaith couples and families with “open hearts and an open door”... *fully and unconditionally*...

That reality has come to pass, and that time is now. Whatever the future holds for Jewish life in America, there is one certain reality... within one generation from now, and certainly within 25 years, the vast majority of the children and grandchildren of American Jews will no longer be Jewish in any meaningful *ethnic* or *cultural* sense. It is even arguable whether most American Jews today can truly be considered ethnically Jewish by any conventional definition. Most of us would identify ourselves, by any cultural standard - of language, aesthetics, or social outlook - as totally American. Moreover, the current 55% rate of intermarriage can only continue to increase exponentially. This is an inescapable fact of life in an open pluralistic society. Many of us have come to realize that it is not intermarriage itself, but rather our *response* to this challenge that will determine its ultimate implications for the Jewish future. If Jewish parents, rabbis and congregations continue to reject and turn their own children away when they seek support and blessing for their love, then intermarriage will indeed be a threat to Jewish survival... *a self-fulfilling prophecy!* Instead, true to the inclusive, liberal spirit of Reform Judaism, we seek to welcome and embrace interfaith couples and families with “open hearts and an open door”... *fully and unconditionally*... supporting them, celebrating their weddings, and lovingly embracing their children.

We strongly believe that we will transform this perceived “threat” into a golden opportunity for Jewish

renewal. Countless young families – who might well have been lost to our faith – can be empowered by worshipping together – in a Service whose language and music is accessible to all of them, and embraces everyone. We want to support them in raising children who may well cherish and embrace *both* sides of their *cultural* heritage - and who at the same time, are being raised *religiously* with a deep Jewish spiritual commitment.

Of the 5½ million Jews in America today, more than 800,000 are children of intermarriages under the age of 18. Twenty-five years from now, the diversity we already embrace will be the norm in American Jewry. All of the conventional assumptions about preserving Jewish identity by appealing to ethnic pride, immigrant memories, or vicarious Israeli nationalism will be totally irrelevant and largely meaningless to the vast majority of American Jews a generation from now. And yet, if our liberal Reform perspective prevails – they will indeed be *fully and totally Jewish* by religious faith and observance... as well as, full, unhyphenated Americans by socialization and culture.

Significantly, our response to intermarriage is only one dimension of the challenges - and opportunities - that we face. Every contemporary trend in American society reflects the fact that there are millions of people no longer bound by familial loyalty to their ancestral religious faith, but who are actively, intelligently, seriously, searching for spiritual alternatives they can claim for themselves. Until now, we – even in most Reform Temples – have kept Judaism to ourselves – making it seem remote and inaccessible – like a closed, exclusive private club, or a fraternity with secret handshakes, hidden passwords and frightening initiation rites. We have obscured our faith’s beautiful, compelling message in external trappings that serve as insurmountable obstacles to those whose spiritual search would be so powerfully attracted to Judaism’s distinctive teachings and universal truths. Without resorting to aggressive missionary tactics - and always respecting the beauty and truth of other faiths - we must nevertheless make our message accessible to all who wish to hear and embrace it. It is time for us to practice the broad, universal vision we so proudly proclaim ... making our temples truly welcoming “houses of prayer for all people!” We are confident that a progressive, inclusive

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Ultimately, we must realize the clear implications of what we have seen so dramatically reflected in the contemporary social and political sphere - that there is no more powerful and enduring force in American life than religious faith. We need to claim for Judaism the rightful place it deserves as a spiritual force and available option in American life. We must learn the fundamental lesson that American history so clearly teaches - that the ethnic and cultural identity of immigrant traditions survives perhaps two or, at most, three generations in American society. *Religious faith* however, including minority religious traditions, *endure as the most powerful communal forces in American life*. Ethnic and cultural identities are inevitably lost to assimilation within a few generations... but *religion in America does not assimilate*. If anything, American culture *engenders and nurtures* the proliferation of small religious groups and sects - which have shown remarkable resilience and power to both self-perpetuate and attract new followers!

We stand at a major crossroad in Jewish history... one with great challenges and possibilities... calling for courage, creativity no less than at the other critical turning points in the 5000 year epoch of our People's past. The challenge of survival, and the promise of renewal that this new millennium holds for Judaism and the Jewish People, calls for nothing less than revolutionary, radical responses... nothing less than the courageous transformation of our Jewish community.

We must redeem our faith and our People from a predominately, social and culturally defined, Israel-centered, Holocaust-remnant mentality, into a post-ethnic, universally-visioned spiritual force! We must renew an American Jewish community that cherishes, but is not dominated - nor drained of its own integrity and resources - by its special relationship to our brothers and sisters in the land of Israel. We must forever remember with reverence the precious martyrs and moral lessons of the Shoah, but we must also be prepared to

be renewed and healed and move on, to focus on the future. We must move beyond the facile and shallow appeals to narrow, ethnic "Jewishness" - so often expressed in the language of alienation, ambivalence and vulgarity - that we offer our children as illusory substitutes for a meaningful spiritual commitment. We must reclaim our vision as a religious community, defined by our timeless, transcendent ideals: our search for God... our commitment to working for justice and peace in human society... and our study of our magnificent tradition, that offers us life-transforming inspiration for our daily lives, and for the redemption of our world.



The Human Face of Intermarriage:

A Rabbi's Pastoral Reflections

Rabbi Nadia Siritsky

A snapshot of a couple that allegedly is destroying the Jewish people:

"I feel devastated.. Like I got kicked in the stomach. I mean, I've known this Rabbi all my life. He bat mitzvahed me. He confirmed me... I just always thought that he would marry me. But he just looked at me, shook his head and told me that he wouldn't. He said that we were destroying the Jewish people. I don't understand. I am so happy with John. I love him so much. He treats me so well. It's not like I don't love Judaism too. We wouldn't have come to him if Judaism wasn't important to us."

They sit in front of me - her crying, him handing her a tissue and rubbing her back. His face is concerned and confused. He leans over and says to me: "I'm not even really Christian but my parents are. In fact, they keep telling us that their minister will be happy to marry us. But I don't know, Christianity never really made sense to me as a faith, growing up, so why would I want to have a minister marry me now? It seems opportunistic. Besides which, I know that she would not feel comfortable with that either. And, I mean, like I said, I don't even think of myself as Christian. I never really did. I never felt I could ask questions. I never really fit in..."

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So I don't understand, because it's not like it's even really an interfaith marriage. It's just that I don't know enough right now to say that I would want to convert. I mean, I like Judaism, and I love the way her family has welcomed me in. I love the lighting of the candles

and the warmth... It's just that he wanted me to make all these promises. And I couldn't make them... because I just don't know. I mean, I don't even know if we will have children, and there he was asking me to make all these promises."

She goes on: "I just thought he'd be happy for me...happy that I was in love. But I just felt condemned. Like who I was, and what I had chosen for

myself, were not good enough... And then we went and asked my Hillel Rabbi, who told us the same thing. I had been so active in college, and we had gotten close, you know? I thought he would understand that if I was asking, it was because Judaism was still important to me. But he said that our marriage was what was wrong with the Jewish people. He told me about how Hitler was going to have a posthumous victory because of people like us. That was harsh. Who is he to judge us? How does he know what we are going to do? I was so embarrassed in front of John... like how could I be so devoted to a people that judged me so harshly? I wanted to give up- just run away and go to a Justice of the Peace... I didn't want to have anything else to do with Judaism. If they won't accept me for who I am, why should I bother? But it was John who talked me out of it."

John now speaks up: "I know how much she loves Judaism. How much of a part of her it is. And it does seem really beautiful. Just because I am not ready to make all these promises in an honest and authentic manner does not mean I don't see its beauty... does not mean I don't appreciate the way that it makes space for questions... the way it places family and relationship first." He sighs. "I love her so much. And it's a part of her. A really beautiful part of her. I don't want to watch her try to kill that part of herself off, just because she

feels hurt and rejected right now. I just kept thinking, there has to be another option... and then my friend told me about you. So, we thought, that, uh, maybe you could help..."

One Rabbinic Response

I sit before them... moved to tears by how much they care about Judaism... how brave it was for them to risk rejection for a third time! These are the people who are destroying the Jewish people? This loving couple that is practically begging for a rabbi to help them find a way to incorporate Judaism into their life together as a couple- these are not the people who are destroying the Jewish people. These are the people who are saving the Jewish people, despite all odds.

Because, the claim that our survival is in jeopardy is true. By many objective standards, we do not seem to be growing. But, I disagree with their assessment of the threat. We are losing Jews, not because of who they choose to marry, but because of how we respond to them. The more restrictive our definition for "who is a Jew", the more we will shrink. When I am faced, again and again, with couples exactly like this one -thoughtful, loving couples, who so desperately want to be married by a rabbi, and find their place within the Jewish community- I feel awe. I feel tremendous awe for the powerful Jewish spirit that, once again, as it has always done, refuses to be deterred from living its faith on its own terms.

And I feel anger. A deep anger and sadness for how fear becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. We are our own worst enemy. The desire to protect the Jewish people is actually turning Jews away. As a child of a Holocaust survivor, I know, only too well the fear of extinction that is causing so many to react in a narrow and restrictive manner. If we have learned anything from that unspeakably awful experience, than I wish it was that fear is at the root of prejudice, and that giving in to fear is an abdication of faith.

The saddest part is that one cannot reason with fear. If only I could somehow reach my colleagues and get them to hear beyond their fears... If only they had a fraction of the faith of this couple that refused to give up hope... There are so many reasons to see intermarriage as a wonderful opportunity to learn, grow and



indeed, thrive. I believe that, depending on how we respond to it, intermarriage can be a blessing.

Trying to Reason with Fear

The first and most obvious way in which intermarriage can be a blessing for the Jewish people, is the new possibilities that a personal encounter with Judaism can offer to many non-Jews who do not feel very connected to their faith of birth. Many non-Jews, through their exposure to Judaism eventually incorporate elements of our faith into their lives. For a variety of personal or family reasons, they may or may not always choose to formalize this process through an official conversion, but either way, their presence in our congregations is a huge gift. Through their questions and insights, they bring a new perspective on rituals and beliefs that we may have taken for granted, giving us the opportunity to be renewed in our own faith. Very often, they may inspire their own partners to become more observant, or to attend services more regularly. In countless ways, these individuals, who come into our communities through intermarriage and choose to stay, to whatever extent, binding their fate with our own, are huge blessings. We owe them our gratitude, not our judgment and suspicion.

In countless ways, these individuals, who come into our communities through intermarriage and choose to stay, to whatever extent, binding their fate with our own, are huge blessings. We owe them our gratitude, not our judgment and suspicion.

Of course, not everyone who marries a Jew chooses to live Jewishly. It may be because they have their own religious faith, or it may be because they do not want to be where they are not welcomed or wanted. Nevertheless, such individuals, and their families, can still be a force for good and blessing for the Jewish people. The advent of thousands of non-Jews choosing to link their fate with the fate of Jews means that thousands upon thousands of non-Jews will have a personal stake in fighting anti-Semitism, and given a new reason to stand up in the face of hatred. If the only thing that they know about the Jews is that they rejected their child, just for being in love with a Jew, we will probably have that many less allies in the world. And having countless new advocates, with personal connections to our people, is just as essential in our perennial quest for Jewish continuity.

This is part of my sadness. I understand that the concern over numbers emerges from our own unresolved grief over the millions who perished in the Holocaust. But the way we express our fears does not help to create a world where we can say with certainty: "Never again". I believe that our challenge is a task of alchemy, namely to transform our dark shadowy legacy into one where ignorance is replaced with understanding, blindness with sight, fear with trust and hatred with love. This is the real task of Jewish continuity, to liberate ourselves from the specters of our history. How many times do we need to experience *Mitzrayim* - the biblical Egypt which symbolizes all narrow places that imprison us - to learn how to love those who come to dwell amongst us?

The most frequent objection to intermarriage is: the children. How can the children of a minority be brought up, being exposed to the faith of a minority and a majority? Both sides of the debate turn to statistics, of varying degrees of validity, to back up their arguments... And, so, it is appropriate to note here that there are several studies that seem to indicate that children of intermarriage have just as high a degree of Jewish self-identification as the children of two Jews married.

But, the hazard of relying upon research, is that these studies are done on intermarried couples and their children in a social environment where their parents may have been rejected at least as often as the couple described above. We only know the outcomes of the current situation, that, for so many, feels devastating. We do not know what the outcomes could be if we, as a Jewish community, were to respond differently- if we were to respond with love instead of fear. What if couples who chose to marry, and wanted a rabbi to participate, were lovingly welcomed into the Jewish community, without judgment or condition? What would the rates of Jewish identification for their children would be?

Jewish Continuity

Jewish continuity is not just about quantity but quality. And when couples intermarry, the Jewish community

is given the opportunity to be enriched at every level. The fate of the Jewish people depends upon Jews and non-Jews, upon individuals like our couple, who are bravely willing to risk rejection and stigma. And the Jewish community may not be brave enough to admit it, but we owe them our deep and abiding gratitude. They are teaching us how to keep our faith alive, as did all those generations before us. We, who were strangers in a strange land, have an obligation to love those who come to dwell amongst us.

The real threat of extinction is when we cease to be true to ourselves and true to our faith. At the core of our faith is the *Sh'ma* and the *V'ahavta*, namely the command to listen and to love. We are commanded to listen to G!d's ongoing revelation through love and to respond in love. The challenge of intermarriage is an opportunity to do just that, to listen closely to these couples, and to hear G!d's word in the powerful love that they embody- in their love for one another, and in their faith that inspires them to risk repeated rejection in order to receive blessing. And, who are we to withhold blessing?

The Sacred is beyond all language and words...and just as I choose to express the Divine with a spelling that moves beyond conventional language, so have I chosen to respond to the challenge of interfaith marriage in a way that also transcends the boundaries and limitations that we impose on the Divine Creation, and one another. This is the theological understanding that calls me to remain open and all-embracing of the many different ways G!d is revealed in human love that do not always fit into the categories of our understanding... through all the different religions, and through all the countless ways in which the Sacred becomes manifest in this world and in our lives.

May we soon find the strength to respond to love with love, not fear. May we have faith in Judaism's ability to not only survive, but to thrive. And may we have the courage to trust that G!d is working through love to bring healing to our broken world.

A House of Prayer for All People

Congregational Policy on Intermarriage and the Role of Non-Jewish Spouses and Parents in the Synagogue

Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn

The New Reform Temple, Kansas City, Missouri

The phenomenon of intermarriage is a reality of Jewish life today. Many - if not the majority - of our young families may have a spouse that was not born into the Jewish community. If we are lucky, and if we, as rabbis and congregations, respond in a warm, welcoming and inclusive way, that family will decide to raise their children as Jews. We may not have control over whom our children choose to marry but we can certainly create an environment in our synagogues that is conducive to an interfaith couple feeling welcomed and wanted.

The first step is starting with a positive attitude toward interfaith couples. Regardless of whether a rabbi is willing or not to perform the actual wedding ceremony, I believe it is crucial to talk face to face with the couple, even if it is to refer them to another officiant. A telephone refusal or, even worse, being told by the rabbi's secretary that he/she is unwilling to perform the wedding, is the death blow to the relationship between that couple and the temple. How can we expect our young people to stay involved in a synagogue where the rabbi treated their request for support at this critical moment in their lives as an annoyance to be quickly dispatched? Personally, I see an interfaith marriage both as a challenge and as an opportunity for the Jewish people.

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By our response we have the potential of either ensuring a Jewish future for that family or alienating them. Being deeply committed to officiating at interfaith ceremonies, and standing in solidarity with a couple throughout the process of their wedding, as well as the ongoing journey that follows, opens the door for a life long relationship. In my preparatory meetings with couples, I always emphasize that my hope is that their wedding will be the *beginning* of our relationship, rather than the end of it.

My congregation, the New Reform Temple of Kansas City, has always believed that the supportive environment and spiritual community we create for interfaith

families is a primary value of our Classical Reform principles. The following thoughts and policies on the Bar and Bat Mitzvah experience reflect our approach to all life-cycle celebrations.

Isaiah's words "My House shall be called a House of Prayer for all people" are well known to all of us and are emblazoned in the entrance of many synagogues in our nation. But are we truly welcoming? Are we doing all we can to welcome our non-Jewish members and their extended families into our community? I believe we must look critically into our traditions and practices and try to determine where we can be flexible and what are the points that must be retained. For instance, a traditionalist interpretation of Jewish law would prohibit a non-Jew from touching the Torah Scroll. In fact, this approach would also include women in such a prohibition. Reform Judaism rejects such outdated and offensive concepts in favor of a progressive, inclusive and egalitarian understanding of our tradition. We see tradition as having a "voice but not a veto" and thus feel obligated to adapt our tradition to our times, in order to make Jewish observance relevant to our people. When we see that there are non-Jewish parents who are very involved in the religious upbringing and education of their children and who are active volunteers in our temples, we cannot deny them full participation in an important family milestone, such as a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. Thus, they absolutely must be called to the Torah together with their Jewish partner. In the liturgy surrounding the reading of the Torah, we speak of passing our heritage "l'dor vador...from generation to generation." If there is anyone who deserves to be honored at the ceremony as a critical link in this inheritance, it is the gentile parent, who has so often demonstrated great personal dedication as a link in the chain of transmission of our faith through the generations.

We also try to create opportunities for involvement for more distant non-Jewish relatives and friends at such celebrations. It is crucial that they feel involved and appreciated and participate in the service to the full extent of their comfort level and ability. Honors such as opening the Ark, participation in readings, and serving as ushers to greet other family members are all appropriate venues for involvement for the non-

Jewish relatives who clearly respect and want to share in the celebration of these milestones.

We live in a world where the greatest challenge facing our people is not the lack of acceptance, but the fact that we are so accepted that the rate of interfaith marriages is high and rising. We must find creative and meaningful ways to extend the openness and acceptance that we have experienced and so greatly benefited from in American society, into our own life as a Jewish community. Of course we want to work to develop within our children a deep and meaningful enough Jewish commitment that they will want to share it with their life partner. However, we must also respond positively to the reality that in a diverse society, this will not always be the case. As rabbis and congregations we must be aware that by responding with narrow, exclusionary actions that are both morally discriminatory and personally hurtful, we risk alienating and losing our children...and their children. Conversely, by taking positive, welcoming and supportive steps to welcome the *entire* family, and *every* member of our temple, we truly make them houses of prayer for ALL people, with efforts that will surely yield great results and a bright Jewish future!

From the Pulpit

Each issue of The Reform Advocate will feature a sermon from a member of our Rabbinic Advisory Committee, offering spiritual reflections and inspirational messages on a broad variety of themes. One of our commitments in the SCRJ is the advancement of the Classical Reform tradition of excellence in preaching, and the primary role of the sermon in our worship.



“What Next?”

Reflections on Genesis 50:15-26

Rabbi Edward Paul Cohn

*Congregation Temple Sinai,
New Orleans, Louisiana*

This Sermon was delivered at the Sabbath Service of Temple Sinai attended by the Board of Directors of the SCRJ on January 9, 2009.

Every year, as we read the *parasha* for this week, the climactic conclusion of the saga of the Joseph narrative, don't we lose ourselves in the heart-rending betrayals through which Joseph so suffers? But we know how it will end. We will thrill to the astounding victories and those incredible twists of fate which finally place Jacob's favorite son, the “dreamer”, of all people...upon the throne of power and at the height of influence!

Throughout it all, unlike his father Jacob, his grandfather, Isaac, or his great-grandfather, Abraham, Joseph never sees or hears either God or a Divine Messenger. But it is alright, because along with Joseph, we who remain his kin so many generations since, we too understand that as God was with Joseph, busy at work, secret and hidden, so too God is with us. And yet that does not prevent us from asking, as surely Joseph asked, “What Next?”

Following the death and burial of their father, Jacob, Joseph's still clueless brothers expect their comeuppance for all of their treachery performed in the past. That's how it worked in Godfather II, isn't it? Hoping just to survive, Joseph's brothers present themselves before him willing to become his slaves.

One more time, Joseph reminds them: “Have no fear! Am I a substitute for God? You intended me harm, but God intended it for good - so as to bring about the present result... the survival of many people!”

The Joseph saga ultimately means to teach us that God will meet us at every moment of our future, and that, on every tomorrow, God will be calling us into a renewed relationship.

The Joseph saga ultimately means to teach us that God will meet us at every moment of our future, and that, on every tomorrow, God will be calling us into a

renewed relationship. How well I remember that on summertime evenings of my childhood, my beloved Aunt Judy used to read to me and to my cousins those exciting stories from the *Big Golden Book of the Bible*. We carefully listened to her every word as she read us the stories of Joseph and of Moses and of young David and of brave Daniel and we determined to get us a faith like that; one to take with you when Goliath had to be fought and when those lions surrounded you in the den, and when your private circumstances made you wonder, “What Next?”

Our Prayer Book, our rabbis, our Temple and the Reform Judaism in which we were raised in the 1950's and 60's, taught us to trust in prayer, to sense the presence of God in our lives, and to be ever alert for one's own sense of destiny and higher calling. Those were simpler times. Childhood lasted longer in those years, thank God.

The world has changed many times over and often for the better. Who would have imagined in say 1958, the Presidential Inauguration which will take place in Washington next week? Talk about faith in the mission of goodness over evil that has triumphed since the 1950's...the progressive, hard fought revelation upon the human heart and mind that we are all brothers and sisters! Yes, sometimes, by incredible good fortune and human hard work, it all works out. Sometimes, it definitely does not. If I asked any one of the SCRJ Board Members who are here gathered for their meeting, “Was there any weakness in the vision of Classical Reform Judaism?”, I think more than a few of them would agree that it was the error of thinking too highly of our human nature. In their faithful optimism, many of our Reform pioneers seemed to forget that if halting steps are sometimes made toward the sunlight of loving kindness and compassion, well then, we also trip too often and slide backward toward the abyss of moral indifference and human cruelty. There is no such thing as inevitable salvation. Our times today certainly underscore that fact. The horrific and frightening outbreak of the war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza sobers even the most hopeful. And we ask ourselves: “What Next?”

Professor Carol Zaleski of Smith College described our circumstances so well when she wrote:

There are times when the world, instead of being the solid stage on which we conduct our affairs, instead of enveloping us in its massive givenness, seems to totter at the cliff's edge. The news announces financial meltdown, the friend who seemed forever young dies, the best plans and provisions crumble. What does the future hold? ...there's no denying the sense of precariousness that runs below our activities like an underground stream.

In short, Dr. Zaleski has also asked herself: What Next?

People turn to all manner of religious responses in times such as these. For that matter, the atheists have been making great headway at Barnes and Noble. Bill Maher made a sorry film poking fun and often well-deserved shots at the bizarre and undeniably unholy counterfeit religion of certainty as it presents itself in multiple flavors. It's one of those times when it is not that the people will believe in nothing. They will believe in anything!

Joseph's brothers, poor things, might have followed any path, even willing to enslave themselves body or mind. But Joseph's example ought to stay with us. He had this amazing inner sense of his personal gifts and destiny. His was a life given up in service to both his Creator and to his fellow creation. Joseph was really not an empty headed dreamer. His eyes were open to reality. He had not forgotten the dark side of human nature. And we know that he had experienced his full share of "WHAT NEXT?" moments. Nevertheless he clung to that mission: to bring food to the starving and to be a saving remnant of the ancient faith and Covenant.

Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, in his fabulous work, *The Dignity of Difference*, mentions those political forces which, through history, who once seemed to be such economic super powers, and yet their invincibility proved of short duration.

Venice - 16th Century,
Netherlands - 17th Century,
France - 18th Century,
Britain - 19th Century,
United States - 20th Century.

And then he remarks how the great religions have survived for many centuries: Islam – 15, Christianity – 20, Judaism – 40 centuries. Why? He answers, listen:

...the world faiths embody truths unavailable to economics and politics, and they remain salient even when everything else changes. They remind us that civilizations survive not by strength but by how they respond to the weak; not by wealth, but by the care they show for the poor. ...The ultimate value we should be concerned to maximize is human dignity – the dignity of all human beings, equally, as children of the creative, redeeming God.

Well, wasn't Joseph trying to communicate just that message to his brothers?

Everyone's quoting and reading Lincoln now. It's obvious we are all celebrating his 200th birthday. Among the perennial areas of scholarly investigation is the true nature of Abraham Lincoln's religious faith. He was a man whose very nature drew him to Scripture and to the profundities of theological dialogue. But, you know, Lincoln remained uncommitted to any single church, denomination or creed. The way I read it, Lincoln, whether he knew it or not, was a Classical Reform Jew! He could be nothing else. Writing contemporaneously with Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, Lincoln in his second annual message to Congress admonished:

The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country.

Like Joseph, and like Lincoln, the founders of American Reform Judaism understood that their lives were more than their own. They were here for a purpose and their destiny was to make a significant difference for their having been here on earth. Their goal was to reform the old world Judaism and to imbue it with reason, the rationalism of science, a stream-lined Judaism, inclusive, eloquent, aesthetically uplifting and always responsive to the prophetic imperative.

The decades of the 1970's, 80's and 90's witnessed some very splendid progress and proud accomplishments by our Reform Movement. We know them well. Together, clergy and laity, we addressed and successfully reconciled and welcomed a new day, responding to so many difficult, but sacred challenges which demanded our urgent attention: civil rights, anti war protest, gay rights, women's rights, American Reform Zionism, outreach to the intermarried, and the patrilineal standard for the determination of Jewish descent, to name a few.

But, also in that time, I fear we compromised on some of the distinctive expressions and beliefs, which had historically described our Reform Judaism. We became ever more a Movement of Options, but for more than a few of us, our choice of expression was left out of the menu.

Lincoln was right, "the dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present". Those of us who remain unapologetic and stalwart supporters of the beauty of Classical Reform Judaism have no desire to press its personal theology, its philosophy, its liturgies or music upon everyone else. We understand that the world has changed and we with it. But we have every right to expect that this articulation of our ancient faith with its stirring harmonies of Americanism, and its undaunted optimism, and its earnest prophetic calling will receive its just due as a perfectly legitimate expression of Reform Judaism by the institutions of our Movement.

My beloved teacher, the great historian Dr. Jacob Rader Marcus, always reminded us that our Reform Judaism is the largest liberal religious movement in the world. There is a multitude of approaches, each with its distinctive beauty and orientation. But what is essential is that the historically significant and still inspiring and strengthening voice of Classical Reform continues to lift the hearts of Jews everywhere and be there for them when they ask themselves: "What Next?"

Ultimately Joseph's message to us in this portion which brings the Book of Genesis to its close is this:

only he or she who has been a force for human goodness, and abides in hearts and souls made better by ones presence on earth can be said to have lived.

This universal principle applies to our personal spiritual lives as well. Morgan Roberts, a minister friend of mine, a dear friend from my days in Pittsburgh, once wrote to tell of his dog, a boxer, named Churchill.

"Churchill is unceasingly at my side. He waits outside the glass door of the shower when I bathe. He exists to be in my presence. This does not mean that he understands what is going on in my mind, or why I leave him...or why I feed him in a certain way, or take him for a walk at one time and not another.

As with God and man, so it is with man and dog: my ways are higher than his ways, and my thoughts are beyond the reach of his thoughts.

Churchill has no answers about why I let certain things happen to him. I am sure he cannot understand why I let the veterinarian stick needles in him. Still, he jumps in the car with enthusiasm when I invite him to make that annual trip for the needle sticking.

He lives without answers. However, his is the bliss of the eternal now... He knows whose dog he is, and he knows whom he loves...

Creatures who know *that* can live without answers...without having to ask, 'What Next?'

A Meditation from the Union Prayer Book

Grant us peace, Your most precious gift, Eternal Source of peace, and enable our people Israel to be its messenger unto all the world. Bless our country that it may ever be a stronghold of peace and its advocate in the council of nations. May contentment reign within our borders, health and happiness within our homes. Strengthen the bonds of friendship and harmony among the inhabitants of all lands. Plant virtue in every soul, and may the love of Your name hallow every home and every heart. We praise You, O God, Giver of peace. Amen.



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.

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
web site: www.RENEWREFORM.org

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Executive Director

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