

Two Kinds of Reform Judaism

Friday, March 7, 2008, Congregation Bnai Brith, Rabbi Steve Cohen

Last night we heard a talk here by Rabbi Margaret Holub from Mendocino, about the traditional Jewish way of preparing a body for burial, and discussed how we might introduce that tradition in our community.

In your pews you can see the new yellow Shabbat morning prayer book that we are now using, which presents a more traditional Shabbat Morning service than the old maroon-covered book which this congregation used for over ten years.

Two of the professional leaders of this congregation, the Director of Education and the rabbi, wear a kippah on their heads all day long, every day.

And there is talk of re-examining our synagogue's policy about kosher and non-kosher food.

No wonder that some people are wondering: Isn't this a Reform Temple? Where is all this heading? It makes me think of that all-purpose Jewish telegram: "Start worrying. Details to follow."

These questions about tradition and change, about what it means to be a Reform Jew and a Reform Jewish congregation are, I believe, the most interesting and most important questions that we as a Jewish community can discuss at this point in our history. I know that I feel a responsibility, as the Temple's rabbi, to state my own position as clearly as possible, and to do everything I can to make sure that this conversation is held in an atmosphere of openness, of respect, and of tolerance for a wide range of opinions.

So tonight I would like to offer a few preliminary thoughts about change and tradition in Judaism, with a clear acknowledgement that we will be discussing these things for as long as this congregation exists.

Let me begin by saying that we are not the only congregation asking these questions. In fact, since its inception in Germany nearly 200 years ago, Reform Judaism has been debating what exactly should be its relationship to Jewish tradition.

One famous breaking point in our movement's history came on June 12, 1883, at the dinner honoring the first graduating class of Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati—the Rabbinic school of the Reform Movement. The menu that night included clams, soft-shell crab, shrimp salad and frog legs in cream. That menu led directly to the mass resignation of the traditional wing of the Reform Movement, who walked out and went off to found Conservative Judaism.

More recently, just ten years ago Rabbi Richard Levy, who was at the time President of the Central Conference of American Rabbis provoked an equally fierce debate within Reform Judaism when he appeared on the cover of Reform Judaism magazine wearing his tallit and t'fillin.

These two events, the treif banquet...as it came to be known...of 1883, and Richard Levy's shocking cover photograph of 1998 epitomize the two sides of Reform Judaism, both of which existed in 1883 and both of which still claim large numbers of adherents in the Reform Jewish world today. As we explore our own community's relationship to tradition, we should examine these two sides of the Reform Jewish world, and consider which reflects better our own approach.

The two camps within Reform Judaism are not simply more Jewish and less Jewish...although many people look at it that way.

The difference between the two kinds of Reform Judaism boils down to how you understand the essential idea of Reform Judaism. One camp within our movement believes that Reform Judaism is a Judaism of reason, modernity and the enlightenment. And the other camp holds that Reform Judaism is a Judaism of personal, individual choice.

When the caterer for Hebrew Union College back in 1883 planned that treif graduation banquet menu, they did so in the staunchly held belief that the Bible's prohibition of shellfish was an ancient, pre-modern, outmoded rule that no longer held meaning for modern, enlightened Jews. When Rabbi Richard Levy went public in his tallit and tefillin, he did so to demonstrate that if he as an individual found meaning and beauty and holiness in wearing those old, pre-modern, ritual objects, then putting them on...was the Reform thing to do.

These then are the two Reform Judaisms: first, the Reform Judaism of Modernity, which rejected the non-rational pre-modern elements of traditional Judaism. And second, the Reform Judaism of individual choice, which took Jewish decision making away from the rabbis, and gave it to each individual Jew. Neither one is more or less truly Reform, and both have had great spokesmen over the past 200 years.

Both camps, incidentally, that is Reform Judaism as a whole, has been consistent in setting the prophetic message of social justice...of the divine command to work for a just society...at the core of Jewish life. There really has been no split within Reform Judaism about the primacy of Tikkun Olam. But we have been divided over our attitudes toward modernity, and toward individual choice.

Those of you who have been members here for awhile know that this congregation has had rabbis in each of these camps...if you think back to Rabbis Koller, Kendall, Gross-Schaefer, Shapiro, Sugarman and now Cohen. Some of these Rabbis emphasized that Reform meant a Judaism for the modern age, and others taught that Reform meant, first and foremost, a Judaism of individual choice.

Most of you can probably guess in which camp I find myself...and I will say it plainly in a minute. But before I do, let me ask each of you: Which kind of Reform Jew are you?

I am, as most of you know, a Reform rabbi of the Richard Levy stripe. I could only be a Reform Rabbi...I could never be a Conservative or Orthodox rabbi, because I was raised to believe that each one of us has to decide for ourself which Jewish practices to follow. If you come here on a Wednesday morning to our Misty Mountain Morning Minyan, you will see me wearing this tallit and also tefillin...because it is meaningful to me. But if you ask me if you should put them on, the only answer I will give you is: do what feels right to you.

I know that for our congregants this can be confusing, and sometimes frustrating. I drive on Shabbat...although I wish I didn't. I will eat non-kosher beef, lamb or chicken...if it is free-range and organic. And I do daven some mornings and other mornings I do not. And yet I wear this kippah all the time, and I prefer the old prayers to the new ones, and I do like the experience of praying in a big old tallit. So for those who want to know "Are you traditional or untraditional?" the only honest answer I can give is "yes."

But if you ask me “Are you Reform, Conservative or Orthodox?” I will tell you clearly “I am Reform” because ultimately only Reform Judaism leaves these decisions up to the individual.

The interesting next question, of course, is, “with a rabbi who leaves everything up to the individual, how are decisions going to be made for the community?” In a traditional synagogue, the rabbi and only the rabbi decides what is kosher, and whether and when a kipah and tallit must be worn. Now this rabbi wants each person to make their own decisions. But some decisions have to be made for the community. Will we pray in Hebrew or in English? And which Hebrew words? And which English translations? Is it OK for the Temple Youth Group to go bowling on Friday night (not a hypothetical question, by the way)...isn't it better for them to get together, to do something with other Jews, than to go off to their movies and parties and basketball games? And is it OK to serve shrimp cocktail in the social hall, or to have a platter of cheese on one end of the room and a platter of meat at the other end? And what do we want our teachers in Hebrew school to say when our kids ask about intermarriage, or about whether the stories in the Torah actually happened?

All of these are communal decisions, which will be made...one way or another...by someone. In some cases, we will decide simply by choosing not to decide. In others, a young teacher, or a youth group leader is going to make a decision on their own...because of there not being any Temple policy. In others, the Cantor or I will make a call...as in the old days. And in other cases, we will talk it through as a community, and arrive at some kind of group decision. It's going to be interesting!!

To be honest, it will at times be confusing...and sometimes frustrating. But I firmly believe that the confusion and frustration are a price worth paying...they are the price of freedom. Freedom of choice. Freedom of conscience. Schverer zein a yid...it's hard to be a Jew. Schverer zein a Reform yid...it's hard to be Reform Jew...but I would not choose any other way. Shabbat Shalom.