

Very Reform
Rabbi Mark Kaiserman
The Reform Temple of Forest Hills
Yom Kippur Morning – September 25, 2023

The words are always pretty similar.

“Well, Rabbi, my family isn’t very religious. We don’t go to services very often. I mean, we aren’t observant or do that much with Judaism. I guess you could say we are very Reform.”

Very Reform. Reform Judaism. The liberal or progressive denomination of Judaism, over 200 years of theology, belief, and practice, has become a synonym for “not observant” - defining by what we don’t do.

I grew up a Reform Jew. My parents were religiously light in their observance. Chanukah and Passover were the only holidays we celebrated at home. But they believed their children should have a meaningful Jewish education and sent us to Religious School at the local Reform synagogue, Beth Elohim in Brooklyn. Fifty years later, I am still a Reform Jew. In fact, I say with pride and conviction that I am Very Reform. You should be Very Reform too.

Reform Judaism is often dismissed by other denominations. It has been called drop-off Judaism or Judaism Lite. Sometimes, it’s called lazy or even heretical. It has been seen as anti-Israel, anti-tradition, and not actually Jewish. Former chief rabbi of Israel Shlomo Amar said Reform Jews were the same as Holocaust deniers.¹

Yet Reform Judaism is the largest Jewish movement in the United States. More Jews identify as Reform than Orthodox and Conservative combined.² There are over 1000 Reform synagogues worldwide. Without Reform Judaism, most Jews would have been lost to Judaism. Secular and cultural Jews have a connection to Judaism without traditional observance only because Reform Judaism broadened what it means to be Jewish. Reform Judaism has helped create our modern understanding of Judaism as a religion.

From its earliest days in Germany, Reform Judaism understood itself as *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, the science of Judaism. Judaism could be interpreted through a modern lens alongside our biblical and Talmudic heritage. The Creation story could be understood through Evolution. *Halakha*, Jewish law, has power and influence, but we make our own choices through knowledge and modern reflection. In some ways, Reform expects more of us. Not simply to follow but to learn, to decide, to understand.

The changing world around us does, and should, influence our Jewish selves. The creation of the State of Israel, the Holocaust, democracy, technology, and better understandings of equality and diversity must be as much a part of our Judaism as tradition. Judaism has always reformed itself. When the Temple was destroyed in Jerusalem in 70 AD, Judaism underwent a massive reimaging, replacing sacrifice of animals with prayers of the heart. Historian Robert Seltzer says, “Reform Judaism is one of the most recent manifestations of the repeated re-forming of Judaism, an exemplar of the principle of change while maintaining continuity...showing how an ancient heritage has remained vital and meaningful.”³

As a Reform synagogue with a Rabbi and Cantor trained in a Reform seminary, I want to highlight three ways I think Reform Judaism stands out. What we might identify as fundamental aspects of this approach to Judaism that we can celebrate. Three ways that we can recognize as Very Reform: Inclusion, Change, and Connection.

Inclusion

A homogeneous vision of any aspect of life makes things easy. If everyone is expected to have identical beliefs and practices, there should be little dissension or disagreement. In our community, we prize individuality. The differences between us are what gives us strength.

Without a standard of belief or observance, Reform becomes a tapestry of different practices and understanding among all of us. You may see fundamental aspects of Judaism, God, Torah, and Israel, very differently than the person next to you in this sanctuary.

Our inclusivity enables so many people to be here this morning. Some of us grew up in Reform Jewish homes, some in Conservative or Orthodox or Non-Observant. Some of us chose Judaism along our life’s journey, and some of us aren’t Jewish but are part of the extended community through belief, practice, and family connection.

While we pray together as a community, our approach to God is not uniform. We have a variety of concepts of God, including not believing. God can be all things and none of them simultaneously. We should each have our personal connection to a source of power and inspiration. When I say “*Baruch Ata Adonai*,” it might and maybe should be something entirely different to every other person. Over the course of our lives, our concept of God is likely to change, and our faith should be open to that development.

Such inclusivity means we offer a multiplicity of ways to connect. Just in services, our Reform community reads and listens, shares in Hebrew and English, provides transliteration and translation to make words more accessible. We use meditation, song, chanting; solos, choir, group singing, and musical instruments to enhance and expand ways to share our needs, thanks, and contemplations about life.

The Torah portion for this morning reminds us that the beliefs and actions of Jewish life are very close, in our mouths and in our hearts.⁴ So, our Judaism must include the world immediately around us. That means including the people. We focus on the soul of the person in front of us, welcoming in individuals and families, and become richer for the variety and diversity of our congregational family. We are better because you are here.

We do not proselytize, yet thousands of people find their way to Judaism through conversion. We try to say “Yes” as often as we can. That means recognizing Jews and Jewish families that might be very different from the expectations of tradition. For example, when we pass the Torah from generation to generation at *b’nai mitzvah*, all parents and grandparents are part of it because every member of the family has been part of that young person’s journey.

Reform Judaism leads the way by example. The first American Jewish movement to ordain women as rabbis and cantors. To understand our religion as not being limiting but inviting. Embracing all families of love as part of our community - same-sex couples, single-parent households, blended families, interfaith homes. Recognizing that our individuality, our special needs, our diversity, our inclusivity are what make us stronger, more loving, and much more compelling. That is Very Reform.

Change

Rabbi Leonard Fine once wrote a book called *Reform is Verb*. Sometimes, people refer to our community as Reformed Judaism. Aside from the confusion that “reformed” implies gangsters and criminals, “reformed” is in the past tense. We are still reforming and will keep changing and growing as the world changes.

Change is hard, but we learn to adapt and even embrace those changes. I remember when we first started adding the matriarchs to the Avot prayer. Along with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, we now began to also identify Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah as inspirations to our Jewish life. That change took time but is now an expected and integral part of our prayer.

We changed to make bat mitzvah equal to bar mitzvah. While other communities might restrict what a girl can lead in the service, at a Reform congregation, all young Jewish adults have the same opportunities.

Some of the changes in Reform were about re-interpreting traditional notions. Gender has been at the forefront with leadership by women as rabbis, cantors, and Temple presidents, the importance of the sisterhood or Women's Connection, mixed seating at services enabling everyone to sit together, and the complete inclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals and families. These are integral parts of who we are. At a community gathering, when traditional Jews advocate for male-only leaders and separate gender seating as a compromise, it is telling us that our core beliefs can be discarded.

Changes and innovations in Reform Judaism come from influences from all around us. Our musical offerings are wide and varied, with all sorts of musical instruments, from the organ and piano to flute, drum, and full bands. We added mixed-gender choirs and the guitar-playing songleader. We brought in sermons in the vernacular on contemporary topics. You can be the judge if that was a good idea.

We invented Jewish Confirmation for high school students, Purim Carnivals, opening the Torah all the way on Simchat Torah, and B'nai Mitzvah social justice projects. We also found new ways to understand Jewish traditions and laws. For example, still today, some women are unable to divorce their husbands due to discriminatory Orthodox Jewish marriage laws. We found ways to make Judaism accessible and open to more and more people. That's being Very Reform.

One of the most notable changes that Reform Judaism developed was a focus on Social Justice. In this morning's haftarah portion, the prophet Isaiah declares that rituals, such as fasting and prayer, do not fulfill the fundamentals of Judaism alone. We must reach out to others, sharing our food with those who are hungry and helping those in need.⁵ Torah study and prayer have their importance, but it is justice that we must pursue.

The word "mitzvah" was redefined not as a "commandment from God" but as a vehicle for ethical living. Often translated now as "good deed," Reform Judaism has made part of our fundamental understanding of the world to help the disenfranchised. While Jews have always looked after the Jewish community, we see mitzvot as supporting the needs of all peoples regardless of religion or country. Today's layperson's hour that follows this service and our study session at 2pm both will focus on how social justice is part of our daily lives.

Connection

Such changes and inclusion allow that third fundamental of connection. One can be a Reform Jew on their own, but it takes all of us to create a Reform Jewish community. We find strength and meaning in being with others. I remember one High Holy Days when our member Sadie Rosenkrantz, of blessed memory, sat down next to 10-year-old Mackenzie Sisolak. Their age difference was 100 years. Only within community do we connect with the wide range of people that make up our synagogue.

While all Jewish denominations celebrate community, we do so in very Reform ways. Youth group was my on-ramp to embrace Judaism where I could be my truest self. That's still true for our teens today. Past ToFHY President Josh Greenberg reflected, "ToFHY was truly a safe space where I could be myself and make meaningful connections that have still lasted years after graduation."

We connect at cookies at Oneg, Shabbat dinners, Jewish summer camp, and Israel trips. We learned how much we need community during the pandemic when we didn't remain isolated in quarantine but used technology to and share.

It is not only over food and social time that we connect, but it is in living Jewish life. We find each other at Temple Tots, and family education, pet blessings, choir, Women's Connection, holiday celebrations, study sessions, and social action projects. Here, we make lifelong friends and find support at our lowest moments of struggle and our moments of celebration.

A synagogue is the container to find and connect. The Reform Temple of Forest Hills is such a place, evidenced by your being here today, in-person or online. A synagogue needs support to survive and thrive. We thank all of you for keeping RTFH strong not only with your presence but making sure we have the means to keep the values of inclusion, change, and connection existing into the future.

Rabbi Eric Yoffie, the former president of the Union for Reform Judaism, said, "Reform Judaism is, and will remain, the dominant form of Judaism in North America."⁶ We have created a Jewish home for a wide range of people seeking connection. This January on Sunday mornings, Cantor Pincus and I will offer an Adult Education course on Reform Judaism. We hope you'll share what brought you to this community and find further connections with each other.

What does it mean to be a Reform Jew? It isn't what we aren't but who we are. A Reform Jew actively seeks to make this a better world, to connect and welcome, and to stand proud because of our actions and beliefs. That is what makes someone Very Reform.

¹ <https://www.jta.org/2017/09/06/israel/former-chief-rabbi-of-israel-calls-reform-jews-worse-than-holocaust-deniers>

² <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/06/22/denominational-switching-among-u-s-jews-reform-judaism-has-gained-conservative-judaism-has-lost>

³ Robert M. Seltzer, "What is Modern About Reform Judaism," *A Life of Meaning: Embracing Reform Judaism's Sacred Path*, p. 163.

⁴ Deuteronomy 30:14.

⁵ Isaiah 58:2-7.

⁶ Eric H. Yoffie, "The Important of Reform Judaism," *A Life of Meaning: Embracing Reform Judaism's Sacred Path*, p. 579.