

Reform: A Judaism for Our Time

Yom Kippur Morning 5770/2009

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Religion is getting a bad reputation these days. Among the best sellers on the NY Times book list are books with names like: “The End of Faith”, “God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything”, and “The God Delusion”. Their authors inform us that religious fundamentalists have distorted religious teachings for their own ends, that most religious teachings are nonsense and it is clear not only that God could not have commanded any of this but most certainly, God does not exist. These authors take religious literalists to task for being, well, literal, for believing in the most absurd notions. They proclaim that this would be amusing if only the consequences weren’t so tragic. In fact, they charge, religion leads to child abuse, is dangerous to one’s health and results in hatred toward every sort of minority, usually ending in wholesale persecution, torture and war. The authors conclude that the greatest threat to humanity has been religion.

Even those without a particular dislike of religion have gotten into the act. A number of neuro-scientists have published articles which state that religious experience does not consist of an objective divinity being revealed to us but that what we call an experience of God is nothing more than certain neurons being triggered and particular parts of our brain being excited.

Not only are our main steam religions being attacked from without but they are also undergoing changes within. The boundaries between religious denominations are dissolving. Methodists, Lutherans and Episcopalians now can worship with one another, and even exchange clergy with one another. Within Judaism, there have sprung up in the last few years, two new rabbinic seminaries which see themselves as “transdenominational”, that is, producing rabbis from no particular movement, and there are two congregations here in LA who declare that they are “post-denominational”.

Socio-economically, the three largest denominations of Judaism are indistinguishable from one another. Whereas, in the early 20th Century, Reform Jews were marked as upper class, Conservative Jews middle class and Orthodox Jews lower class, today, that is no longer the case. Whereas German Jews flocked to Reform congregations and Russian Jews filled Orthodox schuls, today, two to three generations removed from the immigrant experience, those distinctions no longer exist.

And, whereas, Reform was marked by English-filled prayer books and American style dress, today, Reform Judaism has much more Hebrew in our service than we ever had before, increasing numbers of Reform Jews are wearing kipot, and our services now include Chasidic melodies. Conservative Jews who were identified by their practice of keeping kosher within the home while eating tref outside of it, now have abandoned keeping kosher altogether, and whereas, in the 50s and even 60s, they would park their car around the corner from the schul and walk the remaining block so to give the impression they didn’t drive on Shabbat, now, like Reform Jews, they park their cars out front.

It is thus against the backdrop of world in which God’s existence is denied, in which the teachings of religion are held to be dangerous to the health, safety and

wellbeing of others, and in which the defining differences between our denominations are blurring, it is against this background that I want to argue for the importance of being a Reform Jew and to help articulate just what are the principles on which Reform Judaism stands.

I believe that the Torah portion for this Yom Kippur morning contains within it the essence of what it means to be a Reform Jew. It contains Moses' parting words to the Israelites, who are assembled at the border of the Promised Land. In his opening words, Moses says to them: "Atem nitzavim hayom, kulchem: You are standing today, here, all of you, to enter into a covenant with the Lord your God." Now, the last time the Israelites all stood together - men, women and children - was at Sinai, forty years before. Moses is saying, in essence, to the next generation: "We are, now, as if we were at Sinai, once again, entering into a new covenant with the Lord."

Every generation has the ability to hear God's revelation, just as our ancestors first heard it at Mt. Sinai, 3,500 years ago. And when God's word is heard, it is heard anew. What we come to believe about God and what we believe God - who is the ultimate source of goodness - wants us to do in the world changes in each generation with each revelation. It changes because we have changed. I want to stress this again: To be a Reform Jew is to hold that revelation was not a unique moment in history, but is ongoing.

This means that Judaism becomes an ever evolving, ever changing religion. What was right for one generation may not be right for us. What one generation believed God to be may not be our conception of the divine. As Reform Jews, we are not afraid critically examine our 4,000 year old tradition and to see some aspects of it not only as no longer relevant but even as no longer moral.

We Reform Jews have decided, for example, that our ancestor's ways of expressing gratitude or contrition no longer needs to be through a sacrifice offered up on the altar. Therefore, we no longer look to restore the Temple that once stood in Jerusalem. Because the reasons for not wearing a mixture of wool and linen garments does not seem to effect our moral behavior or increase our religious sensitivity, we ignore that commandment. And since our tradition's historic exclusion of women from synagogue participation is simply wrong, we reject those commandments that relegate them to second-rate status and, instead, welcome women as full participants and leaders in the religious life of our People.

The fact is that our understanding of whom God is and what we are to do has changed over the centuries. Jewish practice and belief changed radically 2,000 years ago when the Second Temple was destroyed, it changed radically during our exposure to Persian theology and to Greek thought. It changed during our years in Babylon. It changed again during our exposure to Islamic poetry and jurisprudence in Spain and in our years in the Rhine Valley following the Christian crusades. It changed during the Enlightenment, when Jews were allowed into the universities for the first time in centuries and scientific thought permeated our discourse. Judaism has changed as a result of the women's movement in the 1960s and the Gay Pride movement these last three decades. To be a Reform Jew is to proclaim that our religion has survived and will keep on surviving through change and adaptation.

What are the mechanisms of change? How are we to know which traditions are to be maintained, which ignored and which roundly rejected? Here we come to the second

defining characteristic of Reform Judaism: that science, rationality, and critical inquiry are all parts of God's revelation. As part of God's creation, we are so constructed as to be inquiring, restlessly pushing the boundaries of what we know and what we can do. Our tradition reminds us of this when we are told the story of Adam and Eve's reaching out to eat the fruit of knowledge.

As Reform Jews, we believe that science and reason are not our enemies; rather they are our tools to further understand who God is, and what is to be our role in the world. Take, for example, our understanding of the cosmos. We know now that the stars above are not lights that God has pasted on a domed ceiling over our heads, but rather, they are suns, millions of light years away. Our awe, our humbleness at the vastness of creation has been increased by the scientific discoveries of our age. We know now that humanity did not begin by God placing one perfectly formed male and female in a garden, to start the human race. But what we do know through chemistry, biology, archaeology, anthropology, and neurology, is even more extraordinary and wondrous; that life started as single cell organisms and progressed over millions and millions of years to a life form that can think, discover and create. Thus, as Reform Jews we must oppose those who see science as the enemy of religion, who try and concoct ridiculous creationism fantasies for how the world began. Again, I will repeat: what science reveals to us is part of divine revelation, as well.

To be a Reform Jew, is to recognize that what we think about God can also change in each generation. Each generation will determine the language that we use, the words which we employ to refer to divinity. Once, we expressed God's power in metaphors familiar to farmers and nomads. God was a shepherd, king, and shield. To be a Reform Jew is to feel free to use newer metaphors for God: mentor, force, guide, source, power. To be a Reform Jew is to declare that prayers which ask God to send rain or to bring the dead back to life are no longer relevant to our time and are to be eliminated from our worship.

To be a Reform Jew in our day and age is to embrace a pluralistic vision of truth. No longer may we proclaim that we have the only truth. We recognize that the experience of divinity is different among the peoples of the earth; that their particular visions are to be honored and respected providing that they uphold our current, best understanding of what is good and moral in the world. To be a Reform Jew, then, is to hold a pluralistic vision of unity. To understand that unity does not mean conformity, that unity does not mean an undifferentiated mass, but that unity is holding differences in harmony. To be a Reform Jew is to stand against those who hold the narrow view that America is a Christian country for Christians. To be a Reform Jew is to reject those who proclaim the world is divided between the saved and the damned. To be a Reform Jew is to oppose those who declare that one is either part of the faithful or is an infidel.

To be a Reform Jew is also to accept our obligation to help create the Messianic Age. Our Reform founders, two hundred years ago, already rejected the notion of a singular Messiah, an individual, who would bring about a world of perfection and peace. Rather, they held that each of us is responsible for helping to bring about this time. To be a Reform Jew means that we believe that the world will be perfected through our efforts, through our deeds and actions. Praying to God to suddenly intervene to cure all disease or end all war is futile. Rather we must join together, both within our Jewish community and with our non-Jewish neighbors to work to create the world for which we yearn.

To be a Reform Jew is to believe that we are not a Chosen People but a Choosing People. This means that to be a Reform Jew should not be an issue of expediency, of belonging to a denomination that places no requirements nor obligations upon its members. Rather, to be a Reform Jew means the obligation to choose; to choose thoughtfully and wisely as to our religious practice. It means that we are to know our tradition, to use our rationality, our knowledge, and yes, our heart and intuition, to make informed choices as to our religious behavior. And sometimes, like Jacob, our choices call for serious wrestling with our traditions.

I want to challenge you this morning to do some wrestling with our tradition; not to treat Reform Judaism like those demeaning jokes that are told about us, that we're so liberal that we're closed on the high holydays, not to treat our movement as an excuse to know nothing and to do nothing, not to erroneously believe that "feeling Jewish" is enough.

I want to ask you this morning to stop seeing the Orthodox and Chasidic Jews among us as "authentic Jews". They are authentic anachronisms; upholding a revelation about God and about how we are to behave, from 2000 years ago. The future of Judaism does not lie with those who reject critical history and science, with those who relegate women to secondary status. The future, instead, lies with the ever changing, ever evolving nature of our people. It lies with those who are willing to seriously wrestle with what our tradition offers in light of what the modern world reveals; who are not afraid to embrace those rituals and ethical acts, which elevate their souls and make the world a better place.

I want to challenge you this morning to wrestle with questions about giving tzedakah. How much of our donations should go to fellow Jews, to our neighbors, to the hungry? How much to the needy of our country or the needy of other nations? How much for our environment? I challenge you to explore, as I have suggested in previous years, what a modern version of keeping kosher would look like. That, perhaps, we should pay less attention to whether milk or meat is mixed together, rather whether our food is eco friendly and safe to eat. I challenge you to explore what our tradition teaches about how we are to deal with our employees and our employers. I challenge you to explore what our tradition teaches about gossip and how that is relevant in our world, today. I invite you to seriously consider your politics and political stance and to explore whether that contributes towards moving us into the Messianic age.

In other words, I want us to be Reform Jews: inquisitive, challenging, rational and, at times, emotional. I want us to be in a relationship with the holy; a relationship that demands of us our thoughtful and willing participation, that requires of us our head and heart, in order to create the Judaism of our time, for our generation, for our People, hearing and responding to God's voice now, just as our mothers and fathers heard and responded to it so many years ago.

We all stood together at Sinai. We stood together on the border of the Promised Land, and, now, "Atem nitzavim hayom", we stand here, today. May we hear God's voice, anew. May we hear it with all our head and heart. May we do our part to keep Judaism alive, ever changing, ever evolving, ever responsive to the voice of God.