

Reform Means Change

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I am a Reform Jew and a Reform rabbi and I would like to make some predictions as to what the Reform Movement and the Reform Synagogue will be in the future, fully aware of the Rabbinic dictum that after the Destruction of the Temple prophecy was given over to children and fools. Though I am too old to fit into one category, I know that I am not too old to fit into the other. Still, to prophesy as to what the Reform Movement and Synagogue will be in the future may well indicate that I fit into the other category.

I will make three predictions that are not so much prophecies as projections based on things as they are and following the trajectory from what is to what might be.

I begin with an assumption based on a statement of my grandfather: He used to ask in a rhetorical manner, “*Izt alles gelt? Az m'fregt, Yoh!*” which I translate as, “Is everything money? If you are asking, then the answer is, ‘Yes!’” The assumption that I make is that the economic situation in the near future will be more or less the way it is now. Hopefully, it will be better; hopefully, it won’t be much worse. A little worse may not affect my predictions; a lot worse will. (However, there is another Yiddish statement that gives a modicum of hope in such a dire situation, “*Az iz gut far Yidden, ist shlecht far Yidden, az ist shlecht far Yidden is gut far Yidden,*” which I might translate idiomatically as “When the gross national product declines, synagogue attendance will rise.”)

Let me take the first. Reform Judaism began in Germany, starting in Seesen in 1810. By 1848, it had developed into *Liberales Judentum* which spread throughout Germany, so by that year only two Reform congregations, one in Hamburg and one in one Berlin, (and possibly one other) remained. The Synagogues of *Liberales Judentum* used a more traditional liturgy along with the use of the organ, a mixed choir, and sermons in German. Liberal Judaism, (with a capital L) therefore was more traditional than Reform Judaism, but it was still liberal (with a small L).

If one looks in America at the development of Reform Jewish liturgy from the UPB (*Union Prayer Book*) with stars to the UPB with Latin letters to the Gates of Prayer to *Mishkan Tefillah*, which calls itself “The Reform Siddur,” we see a movement toward more traditional liturgy, with more Hebrew and more observances suggested. “Suggested,” of course, and not “mandated,” the *Mishkan Tefillah* is, after all, a **Reform** prayer book! Still, there are the phrases, “For those who choose to put on a *Talit*” and “For those who choose to put on *Tefillin*”!

One may ask, “Why the more traditional liturgy – even *mehayevei ha-meitim* has returned!?” One might answer that many Reform Jews are involved both with more traditional practices and more traditional liturgies; or one might answer that Reform Jews are doing what other Jews are doing or to put it in more sociological terms, we are doing what other Jews are doing, because other Jews are our reference group, they are those in whose eyes we think we are seen. And that is because American Jews are becoming more and more like one another, in terms of economic status (my grandfather’s statement!) and in terms of background. Once Reform Jews were rich and other Jews were poor; now Orthodox Jews are rich and non-Orthodox Jews, including Reform Jews are not so rich.

More and more American Jews are American-born. The differences among Jews stemming from Eastern Europe no longer obtain – I have to explain to my class what a “*Litvak*” is and the differences between Jews coming from Eastern Europe and those com-

ing from Western Europe equally no longer obtain. Since Jews are more and more like one another, they are beginning to pray like one another I say “pray” advisedly, because in America, the markers for separate status, even for Jews, has tended to be religious markers. Secular *Yiddishkeit* has lost an outside group with which to identify. Take the *Arbeter Ring*, “The Workman’s Circle.” In my hometown of Cleveland, it is housed in Shaker Heights. There are very few workmen in Shaker Heights!

If religion be the marker for Jews in general, then the particular parties in American Judaism have begun to learn from one another. Even in Orthodox *shuls*, there are *Bas Mitzvahs*! There are even women presidents of such *shuls*! And wonder of wonders, there is now a status for learned Orthodox women, not exactly rabbis, they can’t *pasken shaylos*, decide matters of religious law, but they can teach Torah! For Conservative Jews, one can be a woman and be a rabbi and one can be gay and be rabbi. I think they learned that from Reform Jews. I hope that we, Reform Jews, will learn from our Orthodox brethren how to make *Shabbos* a total experience – and here I mean using the Jewish techniques of cooking and eating, so that our people will have meals together and thus add a communal experience to the religious experience of prayer. So, one way or another, Reform Jews will become more “traditional.”

Let me move to a second prediction: if American Jews are more and more like one another and they resemble each other more and more in terms of liturgy and observance, what does that say about the various parties in American Jewry? While it is clear that there is a difference between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Judaism in terms of the particular act of faith made about the nature of the Torah, an act of faith which the other groups do not make, it is not clear what is the difference between a Conservative Jew, a Reconstructionist Jew, and a Reform Jew. If the difference be not clear, what need is there for specific seminaries? There are already seminaries like The Academy for Jewish Religion in Riverdale and Hebrew College in Boston that ordain rabbis without specific labels. So do we need specific seminaries?

And speaking of labels, could there be a merger of JTS and HUC-JIR? Let me invoke two principles, the first, a societal one, already suggested, that American Jews are more or less alike – so that the reason that led to founding of JTS funded by German Jews who were Reform Jews to provide religious leadership for the influx of Eastern European Jews, no longer applies. Conservative Jews are like Reform Jews and vice versa.

To invoke the second principle, my grandfather’s principle, *Gelt*. If, in these troubled economic times, there is talk of General Motors merging with Chrysler, one wonders whether there could be a merging of JTS with HUC-JIR. The symbols are already there in the movements and in the schools; they talk about *halakhah* and we have institutes on Reform *halakhah*. Talking about *halakhah* has not prevented either movement from making changes to conform to the world-view of our college-educated, liberal congregants. The gay issue is a case in point. So, if ‘principles’ can be adjusted, and money is an issue, why not a merger?

Let me make a third prediction, which may seem a bit troubling. We shall have to reflect on our relation with the State of Israel. Israel, *Baruch Ha-shem*, has celebrated its sixtieth anniversary. For many of us, the developing State was what we grew up with, with *pushkes* and flags, and pride in its existence and fear in our guts when we thought it was in danger and exultation when we thought it was safe. Thank God, the State is there!

And that is the problem: it is **there** and we are **here** and we are not going there. Some of us may go there, but some of them there are coming here. That the founding of the State would end the Diaspora has not happened; we are here; there are reborn Jewish communities in Western Europe and even in the FSU. The *Golah*, the Diaspora, remains and for the same economic reasons (remember *Gelt*, *i.e.*, doing better outside the Land) that were given for the first Diaspora mentioned in the Torah (Numbers 32 and 34) when the Tribe of Reuben, the Tribe of Gad and half of the Tribe of Manasseh found better pasture land for their flocks **outside** the Land.

More than that, the notion that founding of the State would bring on the Messianic Advent, the *athalta d'geulah*, has not proven true. (It is hard to think of Olmert and Katzav as exemplars of *athalta d'geulah*!) Whether *ba-aretz* or *ba-golah*, the Land or in the Diaspora, we are all still in *golus*, in exile, in an unredeemed world. That may suggest a theology of the *Golah*: to be “merely a religion,” in the words of the Napoleonic Sanhedrin, is to be concerned about ultimate values all the while being a religious minority in a larger setting. It means being bereft of power and since Lord Acton’s dictum, “Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely” applies everywhere and at all times, it means to be free of the corruption of power and to stand for justice for all, as a way of getting justice for ourselves. Maybe that is what created the Jewish profession, *die Yiddische fach*, of *tikkun olam*, of fixing the world!

That raises a question, if that fixing requires speaking truth to power, as Abraham Heschel did to the American government, can we, *hutz l'aretz*, outside the Land, speak to the Israeli government? Hopefully, there will be little to talk about. Maybe, everything will work out, maybe there will be a two-state solution (Some think, and I am one of them, that the ruling elite of Israel has no interest whatsoever in a two-state solution. I believe Netanyahu is openly opposed to it.)

What if things don’t work out? What if the occupation continues? What if ‘transfer’ is proposed? What will we say then? If we are going to be a “religion,” not only will we have to deal with liturgy and traditional observances, but we will have to deal with the core of Judaism, the belief in God and an universal moral code which touches all persons, even as Hillel taught, *da'alakh saney l'havrakh lo ta'aveid* (BT Shabbat 31a), “What is hateful to you, don’t do to someone else.” Such a code, such a religion, applies in the Land and outside the Land. It applies to all persons, Jews and non-Jews alike. Wherever we are, we are Jews and we should expect Jews to act as Jews wherever they are. That may sound difficult, but we should remember, *Iz shver tzu zein a Yid*, “It is difficult to be a Jew.”

