

The Realistic Challenges Confronting the Liberal Jew

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As an identified Reform Jew I appreciate the benefits that a movement bestows. My attachment to fellow Reform Jews provides me with a reassurance that I am not isolated, a voice crying out in the wilderness, that my beliefs and practices are being shared by thousands of other Jews like me. When the decibels of my individual voice can become magnified so exponentially, it enables me to be heard in the broader society. The Reform movement thus lends meaning and importance to what I do and believe as an individual. For example, my personal commitment to social values and action does not stop with me but is given very effective expression by my movement that lays heavy emphasis on *tikun olam* and addresses this message to our nation and the world.

One aspect of a movement is that it creates and fosters a specific subculture for its constituents. Among the benefits that I derive from identifying with my particular denomination is a feeling of being comfortable within its culture. It is a culture that accords harmoniously with the general American culture and allows me to keep a foot in each circle without feeling conflicted. The great attraction of my denomination is the autonomy it grants the individual to practice one's Judaism. My movement does not impose upon its adherents a monolithic theology. The range of God belief extends from the personal supernatural to the natural with many shadings in between. However, autonomy has two sides to it – blessing and curse. The freedom to choose which *mitzvot* to keep is predicated on personal responsibility. Within this realm of responsibility, one has to admit, the Reform constituency has proved lacking. The freedom to choose has all too often been confused as freedom not to choose at all. Every group that has pledged to live by a covenant or some form of compact assumes certain obligations and the freedom its members enjoy is circumscribed by the rules of that voluntary accepted compact. The Reform movement's failure to foster greater Jewish observance by its constituents courts the danger of weakening Jewish identity. As Mordecai Kaplan points out, a group preserves its groupness by loyally keeping its *sancta*.

The delineation among the branches of Judaism is not as sharp as it was in the past except at their extremes. A classic Reform Temple in Manhattan and a *haredi* synagogue in Borough Park bear little resemblance to one another. But in the middle, made up of Conservative, Reconstructionist, Reform, and to some extent Centrist Orthodox, change has taken place that allows for crossovers with little or at least less discomfort than in the past. This is especially manifest where Reform synagogues have adopted more traditional rituals and where tradition-oriented denominations have tilted more to the Liberal side. Such a freer interflow between the denominations augurs well for a greater sense of *klal Yisrael* for the American Jewish community. The likelihood is that we will wind up with two groupings of Jews: Orthodox and Liberal. This does not necessarily mean that the institutional structures of the present branches will disappear although they may become weakened. It also implies that we should not expect new denominations to emerge. The present denominations have spread out a wide umbrella seeking inclusivity through flexibility and by accommodating a broad spectrum of religious views and practices. Such latitude discourages the need for new denominations. In speaking of pluralism we are

inclined to apply the term to the inter-relation of religious groups but the reality is that a form of pluralism exists even within a particular denomination.

Based on what we find in the Jewish population studies and our observation of the “typical” American Jew it seems reasonable to predict that the majority of Jews in America will continue to identify with the Liberal Progressive camp. Their common embrace of modernity and their shared outlook on life in general argues for ever greater interaction and cooperation among them. Such cooperation may well take the form of joint endeavors in such areas as publishing, adoption of standards in Jewish education, common sponsorship of schools, camps, and social institutions. Pragmatically it is conceivable that in a community different Jewish denominations might well share one physical structure to house a school with a non-denominational curriculum as well as social and recreational facilities. Attached to such a common structure, provision would also be made for separate worship quarters. Such a central Jewish campus will have not only economic advantages but will encourage all kinds of Jews, children as well as adults, to meet and interact and create a feeling of Jewish identity and unity.

The continued threat of anti-Semitism both here and abroad and the security of Israel will continue to exert a centrifugal pressure to confront these dangers and will motivate Jews of all stripes to interact cooperatively in order to present a unified and effective front. In the past Jews have identified principally with the Democratic party but today we see that a significant number have become Republicans. This trend is likely to grow and increase so that Jews will continue to represent a broader spectrum of the political scene. Disenchantment with the Left has led many Jews into the conservative camp; witness the emergence of Neoconservatism, many of whose founding members are Jews and whose ranks is peopled by a large percentage of Jews. While increasingly Jews will veer from forming a monolithic political block, it is safe to assume that regardless of their political affiliation they will remain rooted in their traditional values reflecting concern for the poor, the underdog, discrimination, and human rights. The various branches of Judaism will function cooperatively in promoting such values and will speak to the outside world with one voice.

Jews of all denominations will face challenges that will incline them to make choices based on their self-interest or their concern for and definition of Jewish identity. Thus the doctrine of the separation of church and state long held as a sacred cow of American domestic policy is no longer held so sacred by Orthodox Jews who welcome and seek government aid for their day schools and *yeshivahs*. The belief that intensive Jewish education is our first line of defense and bolsters Jewish identity and preserves Jewish survival obviously trumps concern for the separation of powers. This is in direct contradiction to the position held by the Reform movement and other Liberal denominations including secular Jews.

Another challenge that denominational and other Jews will face has to do with the alliances they are willing to forge with groups that espouse important social positions that are totally inimical to our own. A case in point is the strong support of Israel and the pro-Zionist views held by the Christian Evangelicals and Fundamentalists. The Reform movement, along with some secular groups, has been most vociferous in rejecting such support based on the theological motivation behind such support and the views of the religious right on such things as abortion, prayer in the schools, teaching Creationism and Intelligent Design, gays, and equality of women, etc. For others in our midst, the existence and security of Israel is paramount and transcends any disagreement we may have with the

Evangelicals on social and political issues. It is likely that such ethical conundrums as means and ends will continue to confound us in the future and will advise us not to take absolutist positions.

The equating of patrilineal descent by some Liberal Jews with matrilineal descent in determining a child's Jewishness has become a divisive issue for the Jewish religious community. In a very real sense it has raised for us the question of who is a Jew. The rationale for favoring patrilineality based on the changed reality of American Jewish life has not proved persuasive for those who oppose it for *halakhic* reasons. The issue courts the danger of creating a chasm in the Jewish religious community where one Jew will not recognize another as a Jew and will refuse to intermarry with him/her. There are already beginning signs of this happening. Orthodox rabbis, especially in Israel, are becoming increasingly scrupulous in demanding proof for the Jewishness of the mothers of bride and groom.

A continuing challenge to the entire Jewish community has been the problem of intermarriage that constitutes a threat to Jewish continuity. Given the signs of the times intermarriage is likely to increase. That the rate of intermarriage is lowest among the Orthodox and more traditional Jews should give us in the Liberal camp reason for pause and reflection. Liberal Jewish parents have become pliant in their objections to intermarriage and have now settled in their acceptance "as long as he or she converts." An honest and realistic appraisal should lead us to question whether Jewish parents have reason to be so happy or accepting of such conversions. This is not to gainsay that a conversion is better than no conversion at all. But even where conversion takes place we are left with a situation where part of the children's family will be non-Jews. There will be non-Jewish grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles, and Christian holiday family celebrations. Such experiences and influences cannot help but have a weakening effect on the cohesiveness of the Jewish cement. I believe that studies have confirmed that Jewish children living in such a setting partake less of Jewish religious observance and emerge with a diluted and weakened bonding with the Jewish people and Israel. We in the Liberal denominations need to feel challenged more soberly about intermarriage even with conversion and recognize its serious ramifications for the depth of Jewish identity. Counting primarily numbers while ignoring the quality of Jewishness places us at the peril of creating a river a mile wide and an inch deep.

One of the most serious challenges that needs to be faced by the Jewish pluralistic religious community is that most of its adherents live their daily lives in a secular fashion. In their day-to-day existence, they engage in very little activity that can be termed Jewish. Their synagogue attendance is extremely low, so also is ritual practice at home, participation in Jewish cultural events, reading Jewish books, and support of Jewish institutions of learning and charity. The religious education received by children in Liberal synagogues is extremely shallow and for most of them does not extend beyond Bar/Bat Mitzvah. It is hardly a formula for producing knowledgeable and committed Jews. The proliferation of Jewish day schools in recent years is a hopeful sign but much more needs to be done. A much greater portion of Jewish philanthropy needs to be channeled to full-time Jewish education, Jewish camps, and adult study seminars. The quality of Jewish identity depends on it.

It is always a dangerous business to gaze into one's crystal ball and attempt to prognosticate the future. The future is unknown and also mysterious and unpredictable. It does

not always follow the logical signs given to us. The future often behaves illogically and presents us with surprises that we would never anticipate. The strong assimilatory power of American culture that exerts so much force on American Jews has led many to question whether our grandchildren will be Jewish and whether the American Jewish Diaspora will survive. But there are also countervailing signs to such pessimism that point to a more positive and hopeful future. Among these should be counted the renaissance of the Orthodox movement, the increasing number of Jewish children receiving more intensive Jewish education, an overall trend even among Liberal Jews to return to tradition, the proliferation of Judaic studies at universities, and a renewed feeling of pride and security in being Jewish. Hopefully, the various branches of pluralistic Judaism will garner these positives and view it as their mandate to build a platform solid enough to have Jews of all colorations stand on it in a common embrace.