

YOM KIPPUR MORNING 5777/2016
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BOLTON STREET SYNAGOGUE, BALTIMORE, MARYLAND
Blessed Are You . . . Who Has Made me a (Reform) Jew

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Photo by Jennifer Kaplan

In Judaism there are three kinds of prayer: petitionary prayer, as when we ask for peace; prayers of praise, as many of the psalms are; and prayers of thanksgiving, as the *Shehecheyanu* is. Now, I want to ask you a question? Of these three kinds of prayer - petition, praise and thanksgiving - which is your favorite? Go ahead, say it aloud.

I think I heard most of you say thanksgiving. That's my favorite too. For thanksgiving, or gratitude, makes us feel good. It makes us feel rich, content, and blessed.

I also have a favorite blessing for gratitude. It's not *Shehecheyanu*, for giving us life, sustaining us and bringing us to this time, though that would certainly rank high on the list. Nor is my favorite the blessing for being created in God's image, even though I feel that blessing deeply. It is not for lifting up the fallen or being released from our shackles either, though at some critical times I have felt lifted up and set free.

No, my favorite blessing is this one:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שֶׁעָשִׂי יִשְׂרָאֵל.
Praised are You, Eternal God, Who has made me a Jew.

It's not because I believe we Jews are more exalted than others - that we are chosen. Because I don't. It is, rather, because I feel blessed to be heir to this incredible tradition, with its righteous and ennobling values, its embrace of argumentation and questioning, its passion for justice and peace, and its outsized contributions to human civilization.

But that's only half of the story, for to me it is an equally great blessing to have been suckled and sustained by Reform Judaism. That is how I learned how Abraham once argued with God, demanding to know, "Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?" That is how I learned about speaking truth to power, from a rabbi who brought Dr. King into our synagogue and later decried an unjust war. And that's how, as an adult, I broke through my shackles and freed myself from the tyranny of homophobia.

But Reform Judaism for me also provided a spiritual home. Through its synagogues, summer camps, youth movement, and even its publications, I fell deeply in love with Judaism and the Jewish people. It is where I came to love our music, art, literature, our wisdom, our ethics and our aspirations. Without it my life would be markedly different - lonelier and spiritually more impoverished, I imagine.

And so I have a feel a certain vexation when people describe Reform Judaism in negative terms, as in what Reform Jews don't do - as in not keeping kosher, or in not observing the Sabbath according to halacha. It makes me want to ask: "In what other context do we, you and I, define ourselves by what we are not? I am neither a Buddhist nor an electrician,

but I don't define myself that way. It's more affirming and more accurate to say, simply, "I am a Reform Jew who happens to be a rabbi."

I'm also bothered by the misplaced idea that Reform is somehow a lazy or a watered down form of Judaism. In fact, Reform Judaism is what saved our tradition from being deemed irrelevant and irredeemable. It is what assured that people like you and me can today say, proudly and with sincerity, "*Baruch Atah Adonai* Who has made me a Jew."

For 200 years ago, the Jews coming out of the ghettos and entering the intellectual and aesthetic environment of the the eighteenth-century Enlightenment faced a conflict of values, one which made Judaism feel profoundly backward and inappropriate.¹ Study of the sciences and humanities, and even how people spoke and dressed, were exerting increasing pressure on traditional beliefs and practices. Notions such as chosenness and the belief in a personal messiah were yielding to a more universalistic and humanistic approach to the human condition. The divine authorship of the Torah was becoming open to question.

And so over time, a scientific approach to the study of Judaism, *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, emerged. Majestic new temples were designed. Seating for men and women together was permitted. Music to exalt the soul was written and instruments were reintroduced. Sermons to explain, entreat and uplift were normalized. Services were shortened and designed to "elevate the spirits of worshipers for whom prevalent practice had become meaningless, distasteful, or even repugnant."² Prayers in the vernacular were translated.

And after landing in America, such congregations would be organized to create the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, which two years later

¹ Michael A. Meyer, "Reform Judaism" in *Contemporary Jewish Thought*, Arthur A. Cohen and Paul Mendes-Flohr, eds., p. 767.

² *Id.*, pp. 768-68.

would help found the Hebrew Union College in order to train rabbis for the particularly American style of Judaism that was emerging in the 1870s.

Here in America, as Jewish law - especially concerning diet and the Shabbat - loosened its hold, Reform Judaism came up with a new approach - still treating Torah as our guide for living, but giving the past a voice rather than a veto, and allowing our own voices to enter the conversation in a search for meaning and a way to respond to God's commandments. In this way, Reform Judaism found new possibilities of living Jewishly. It would create coeducational programs for girls that eventually would lead to the bat mitzvah and women rabbis and cantors becoming altogether normative. It would be among the first American religious denominations to admit LGBT congregations and to ordain openly LGBT rabbis and cantors.

By the late 20th century, it would also be known for embracing Jews by choice and interfaith couples and their children; for its commitment to *tikkun olam* and living our values of justice and righteousness; and by its dogged defense of the rights of women and for its struggle for religious pluralism in Israel.

About five months ago, our synagogue made an important decision to depart from its independent identification and to affiliate with the Union for Reform Judaism. And while I stayed in the background of those deliberations, our decision is one that I think is right for our congregation - for practical reasons as well as spiritual and ideological ones.

Some years back, *Reform Judaism Online* asked regular people what Reform Judaism meant to them. Permit me to share some of their responses:

John Planer: Reform Judaism asks that I assume personal responsibility for my beliefs, values, and behavior; and I, in turn,

refuse to allow any sacred text or religious authority to dictate to me what I shall believe, what rituals I shall perform, or what God expects of me. Rather I believe that each person, formally or intuitively, writes a personal covenant with God. And how we each envision that covenant says nothing about God, and much about ourselves.

Reform Judaism also does not ask that I reject reason. I study our sacred texts using critical scholarship. I freely question core beliefs and values. I refuse to posit definitive answers to ultimate questions. Because I am at peace with uncertainty, I accept alternate ways of seeking meaning and understanding God.

Finally, my Reform Judaism rejects fear or guilt as goads to belief. It makes heavy demands upon me, yet it affords no special status or promises of afterlife, longevity, safety, wealth, or status—save perhaps the promise of a full life in close relationship with God.

Laurence Kaufman: The most important Reform Judaism contribution has been the creation of a Jewish way of life that is compatible with living as a full member of society as a whole.

Dana Jennings: Outreach is the Reform contribution I care most deeply about. We live in a world where each one of us is a broken tablet—imagine, 6.5 billion broken tablets—and, ideally, the world's religions offer refuge, a place to repair to and be repaired. For me, Reform Judaism is that refuge, an extended community that placed its healing *tallit* about my broken spirit and gave me the gift of its acceptance—and not only the gift of community, but, too, the gifts of Torah, prayer, and a legacy of wisdom that's thousands of years old.

Being a Reform Jew gives me a way to be in this broken world. Rather than lapsing into cynicism and despair, I approach our corrupt

culture with a mission: to try to be a divine and healing spark each moment of each day—emphasis on the trying.

Jennifer Warriner: I think Reform Judaism’s most significant contribution is making each of us responsible for our own struggle with God. While we are guided by the Torah and assisted by our rabbis, we are not constrained by the precept that what we should believe and how we should behave were determined hundreds of years ago. Rather, each of us has the freedom to study Torah and decide for ourselves whether “thou shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk” means a cheeseburger is prohibited. I can interpret for myself whether the sin in Sodom was homosexuality or being inhospitable to strangers, or whether my God wants women and children to be treated as property.

This modification did not make Judaism “easier.” Instead, it created, for each of us, an unending obligation to struggle with God and with ourselves about the meaning of Torah, laws, and judgments. In order to engage in this struggle we must study Jewish texts and history to determine the best interpretation of these words for our lives at this time. But I would much rather argue like Abraham or wrestle like Jacob than blindly follow accepted customs set forth in previous centuries. I love the “work” of being a Reform Jew.

Ellen Morrow: Having grown up as a Reform Jew, I’ve never felt “less than” because I am female, but there was a period—28 years ago—when I felt defensive and angry because some people in my congregation did not accept my decision to marry a non-Jew. I continued to act as if I belonged, but I don’t know if I would have continued to stay as involved in my congregation if there hadn’t been a real shift toward acceptance, particularly once my children were born. I wouldn’t have allowed them to grow up feeling excluded or judged or considered “not as Jewish.” The acceptance that finally did

come also made it easier for my husband to become a Jew by choice 10 years ago; he did not feel pressured and there was no resistance.

Judy Fisher: A significant Reform contribution is our liturgy, especially the new melodies and songs making Judaism relevant to today.

John Planer: Reform Judaism cherishes both our particularism and our universality. As Reform Jews we are a people, a tribe, whose vision is universal and whose membership is always open. I am comfortable being a Jew within the fellowship of all humanity.

So I feel blessed not only to be a Jew, but to be a progressive, liberal, Reform Jew. And, if you do not feel the same way yet, I hope you will come to feel similarly. We remain the same synagogue you know and hopefully love, even as our congregation is now part of a movement of over one-thousand synagogues around the world who share a common sensibility, a common approach, a common world view to living Judaism. The sacred obligation of *tikkun olam*; the serious study of our sacred texts where everything is on the table; the embrace of everyone who wants to come into these doors, gay and straight, black and white and Asian, Jew and gentile; and a serious approach to prayer, including new modes and music - this is what it means to practice Reform Judaism.

I couldn't be prouder of our decision or happier for our community. Not just because we will benefit from what we get from the Union for Reform Judaism - its network of camps, its Israel trips and study programs, its youth programming and educational support, its publications and conferences - but also be what we will gain simply by belonging and contributing. For belonging itself is a mitzvah, a sacred obligation and a good deed. The Mishnah in Tractate Avot instructs, "*Al Tifrosh min hatzibor*" - Do not separate yourself from the community. I take this to mean, by extension, "Or you will lose something important: part of

yourself.” To belong is to link ourselves to our shared values and to contribute to our common cause.

This past weekend, modern Judaism lost one of its greatest scholars ever. Himself a Reform Jew, Jacob Neusner authored more than 900 books. Mishnah, Talmud, Midrash - you name it and chances are he wrote about it.

Among the countless sentences Neusner penned, one declares that the Jew is called to be holy, and therefore supporting Jewish institutions is itself a holy act, even rendering one a “religious” person.³ “The Jew no more ‘gives’ tzedakah,” wrote Neusner, “than the citizen ‘gives’ income taxes to the federal government. You pay taxes because you must. [It] is the paramount duty of the Jew for the “community demands tzedakah as much as the government demands taxes.”⁴

So the time has come to be part of something larger than ourselves and to contribute to our common cause of liberal, progressive, or if you prefer, Reform Judaism. In doing so, we declare that we will no longer be off on our own. We no longer will be separate, no longer seen as an outlier, that somewhat iconoclastic independent synagogue over in Roland Park. For we are now at one with the largest Jewish denomination in the United States and, believe it or not, even here in Baltimore, Maryland.

This is something worth celebrating, so I truly hope you will join me on Friday, December 2, 2016, for a celebratory dinner and service with a special guest, Rabbi Jonah Pesner, Director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism and Senior Vice President of the Union for Reform Judaism. A friend and colleague from my time in Boston, Jonah also

³Jacob Neusner, *Tzedakah: Can Jewish Philanthropy Buy Jewish Survival?*, UAHC Press, NY, 1997, pp. 74-79.

⁴ *Id.*, pp. 32-34.

happens to be an exceptionally dynamic and compelling speaker, so be sure to mark your calendar and not miss out on something special.

The year 5777 marks the thirtieth year of the founding of this special community. According to Mishnah, thirty is the age of full maturity, the peak of one's strength. And so it is quite apt that in this, our thirtieth year, we have chosen to link ourselves to a movement and a Judaism that most closely resembles our own. Through it may each of us grow, flourish, experience spiritual renewal, and know contentment and peace.

Ken Yehi Ratzon.