

NOTE: This sermon is the result of a collaboration with my colleague, Rabbi Elyse Goldstein, following the delivery of her paper, “Ten Reasons to be Proud You are a Reform Jew”. Portions of her paper have been included, with her permission, in the text of this sermon.

Rosh Hashanah Morning
5772

Beth Israel Judea
San Francisco, CA

Just before I left Toronto to come to San Francisco, I was invited to teach at the Professional Development and Orientation Day of the Reform Educators’ Council. All of the teachers who teach in the Religious and Hebrew schools of the local Reform congregations gathered for a day of workshops and *Torah l’shma*—study for its own sake.

At the opening session, my good friend and colleague, Rabbi Elyse Goldstein, editor of The Women’s Torah Commentary, presented a paper entitled, “Ten Reasons to be Proud You Are a Reform Jew.” And I knew, at that moment, that I would need to prepare my own version to share with you. It is important to me that you understand who I am as a Jew and what I have come to believe.

In this holy congregation there is a proud history of both Reform and Conservative Judaism. Yet, since the merger of Beth Israel and Temple Judea more than forty years ago, two of your three rabbis, Rabbi Morris, of blessed memory, and Rabbi Goodman were Reform rabbis. And now you have me...

You see, I have always been a Reform Jew. I was raised in a Reform Jewish family, educated and confirmed at Holy Blossom Temple, the oldest and the largest Reform Temple in Toronto, and one of the oldest and largest Jewish congregations in Canada. I had the good fortune to be a young person at Holy Blossom in the days when Gunther Plaut was the senior rabbi. (You may know him as the person who wrote “The Torah”.) I can say without any doubt that my Jewish identity was shaped by my participation in the Reform movement’s youth programs and at its summer camp-institutes in Warwick, NY and Zionsville, IN. I studied for the rabbinate, and I was ordained at the Reform movement’s European seminary, The Leo Baeck College in London, England.

Now, that is not to say that I haven’t experienced religious life outside the Reform movement. Like many who grew up in the 70’s, I spent time with Conservative and Orthodox Judaism, experimented with Eastern mystical religions, and even gave Labour Zionism a try—working the land on Kevutzat Schiller, a secular Kibbutz near Rehovot. I have prayed with Christians and meditated in monasteries, and studied Bible with Muslims. And even in seminary, I had classmates from the Masorti and Conservative movements, which were also served by the Leo Baeck College. But when all is said and done, I am a Reform Jew as I have always been, and I am proud to be a Reform Jew... and now I’m going to tell you why.

But before I give you my 10 reasons, I have to deal with three popular misconceptions about Reform Judaism that sometimes get in the way, and sometimes make it difficult for Reform Jews to maintain their religious self-esteem.

Popular Misconception #1 – There is a hierarchical ladder in Jewish religious life, with Orthodoxy on top, Conservative in the middle, Reform on the bottom. Reconstructionism and Renewal are somewhere beside the ladder, though no one is quite sure exactly where.

According to “popular misconception #1”, the goal of religious life is to “move up” the ladder. If a Reform Jew should, for example, choose to lay *t’fillin* or keep kosher, he is becoming Conservative. If a Conservative Jew keeps kosher outside the home as well as in, or doesn’t drive on Shabbat, she is becoming Orthodox. And this is the goal.

According to “popular misconception #1”, a wayward Orthodox Jew is “sort-of-Conservative.” A non-practicing Jew is “sort-of-Reformed.” According to “popular misconception #1”, Reform Judaism is Orthodoxy with lots of stuff left out. Orthodox Judaism is Reform with lots more stuff included. All of this, of course, is nonsense.

Popular misconception #2 – All it takes to be a good Reform Jew is to be a good person.

This popular misconception is expressed almost universally by those Reform Jews who practice virtually nothing, in order to explain to themselves and others how they can connect themselves to the Jewish religion without actually engaging themselves in it.

Without question, Judaism teaches ethical behaviour as a religious imperative. But it is so much more: customs and ceremonies and traditions, and a Torah and a history and a people and a system of *mitzvot*—sacred responsibilities that are both moral and ritual.

Being a good person is a worthy goal in itself. These Ten Days of Repentance are devoted to our attempt to make ourselves better people. But being a good person is not the same as being a good Jew. After all, there are good people who are Catholics, Buddhists and Moslems. And there are some Jews who are not good people. One does not equal the other. It is much too easy to say that Judaism has no expectations of you other than being nice and helping old people across the street. I was a Boy Scout in the 60’s—those were their expectations. If you are born Jewish, or you are a Jew-by-choice, and you are a good person—you are a good Jewish person to be sure, but not necessarily a good Jew.

Popular misconception #3 – There are no minimum standards for Reform Judaism.

According to “popular misconception #3”, you can believe nothing, practice nothing and do nothing, and still count yourself among Reform Jews. I hear it often from Jews who, knowing that I am a Reform rabbi, proudly inform me that “our family is not very religious.” They think that, somehow, this will please me, though I have still not figured out why. “Popular misconception #3” is extremely popular with Jews who are not connected to any synagogue and who, having practiced no Judaism at all since they were children, or since their children were children, say “I guess I’m Reform.”

“Popular misconception #3” also has an Israeli version. In this version, Orthodox Judaism is “*dati*—religious”, and Reform Judaism is “*chiloni*—secular.” The Israeli version of “popular misconception #3” is part of the campaign of propaganda waged against our Israeli movement. But lately it has spread to the Diaspora as well, where the Orthodox have tried to lay claim to the term “religious” and make it equivalent to “Orthodox”. How many times have we heard people say, “Oh, you are Reform, I’m religious.”

Well, I’ve got news for you. I’m religious. Here in the Diaspora, there are five branches of religious Judaism: Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, Renewal and Orthodox. Five kinds of “*dati*.” Reform Judaism is not “*chiloni*”. (Jews who are not connected to religious life and its institutions are “*chiloni*”. Reform Judaism is religious Judaism.

I believe that the Jewish religion has standards by which we determine who is a good Jew. By definition, then, Reform Judaism also has such standards.

And now I would like to share with you ten reasons why I am proud to be a Reform Jew, and what I understand the standards of Reform Judaism to be.

1. I am proud to be a Reform Jew because Reform Judaism challenges my mind and my intellect. Reform Judaism is a movement of study, of questioning and even of doubt, but also of constant learning. I am a Reform Jew because I cannot study the Torah uncritically or without depth; I cannot be satisfied with “it is *geschribben*—it is *written*” as an answer. I approach the text without any preconceived notion of its infallibility, and therefore I consider chronology, socio-political reality, editing, redacting and historical context in my understanding and interpretation of the text. I do not accept that every contradiction in the Torah can be explained by a midrash. I cannot explain things that escape logic with the statement, “we don’t understand it but we do it anyway.” I want my mind to be sharp and clear not just on the fine points of Talmudic *pilpul* but also on creative reasoning, critical methodology and modern scholarship. Judaism as a whole has always valued education; Reform Judaism demands it. There can be no blind following of rituals without understanding them. Reform Jews are not required to “do first and understand later.” A good Reform Jew is, therefore, a person who studies, who comes to adult education and Torah study, attends public lectures and classes, reads Jewish books and knows why he or she does certain things—or why he or she does not. A good Reform Jew questions and seeks answers, and having found some, seeks some more. A good Reform Jew is critical and analytical in his or her study of Judaism.

2. I am proud to be a Reform Jew because, in addition to my mind, Reform Judaism demands the devotion of my heart.

While Classical Reform Judaism in the 1800’s in Germany may have asked only a Judaism of the mind, Reform Judaism today expects a Judaism of emotion. The rationalism of early Reform did not answer the spiritual needs of a new generation. Jews today want a Judaism of the heart, not only of the mind; participatory prayer and singing rather than passive listening; children’s voices and laughter rather than just adults politely praying; a Judaism of soul and feeling as well as talking and thinking. A good Reform Jew is comfortable making the journey from the realm of the intellect to the realm of passion and enthusiasm. I am a Reform Jew because of all of the movements, Reform has just the right balance between heart and mind.

3. I am proud to be a Reform Jew because *tikkun olam* has always been high on the agenda of Reform Judaism. We were in the forefront of the sponsorship of Vietnamese boat people. We led the struggle to free Soviet Jews. We were leaders in the movement for gay rights and the legalization of same-sex marriage. We led coalitions for Rwanda and Darfur, and we participate in local community action to alleviate hunger and promote literacy. We support those who are most in need. A good Reform Jew feeds the hungry and clothes the naked of any race, creed or religion. I am a Reform Jew because Reform Judaism does not tolerate injustice. We live in the world, not despite the world, not in ignorance of the world, not blind to anyone’s suffering.

4. I am proud to be a Reform Jew because Reform Judaism offers hope in the face of despair. We do not maintain a morbid fascination or worship of the past, of our sufferings or our

martyrdom. We do not look for anti-Semitism in every action and every word. For Reform Judaism, the Holocaust is neither our only experience nor the final word. A good Reform Jew remembers the past but lives for the present and hopes for the future. I am a Reform Jew because I believe that the modern world is a good place and Jews should enjoy the benefits of living in it.

5. I am proud to be a Reform Jew because Reform Judaism is committed to dynamic and vibrant Jewish life in Israel and in the Diaspora. Reform Judaism takes great pride in the accomplishments of the State of Israel, and has taken the leadership in the struggle for religious pluralism there. And though we are deeply and unreservedly pro-Zionist, Reform Judaism holds that it is possible for Jews to live a full and satisfying religious life in the Diaspora. And so we work to keep Jewry in the United States and in other Diaspora communities vibrant and creative, safe and secure. A good Reform Jew, therefore, works for the preservation of Israel, while not abandoning the work of a strong Jewish community here. A good Reform Jew has a positive relationship with Israel, no matter how he or she may feel about Israel's government or politics at any given moment. A good Reform Jew will visit Israel as often as possible, for study, recreation and personal connection. I am a Reform Jew because I have the freedom to be critical and passionate and demanding in my love for Israel. I am a Reform Jew because I love my homeland, Israel, and I love my homeland, America, as well.
6. I am proud to be a Reform Jew because Reform is the only movement that has included full equality for women since its very inception. While other movement's limit a woman's participation, Reform assumes that full opportunities for religious self-expression and communal leadership are equally available to men and women. We do not hold that women and men have different capacities for spirituality or different abilities to carry out their religious obligations. Quite frankly, I cannot understand why, in today's world, any Jewish woman would accept any limitation on her religious duties or privileges. I am a Reform Jew because in this area Reform is unequivocal, unapologetic, and unambiguous.
7. I am proud to be a Reform Jew because Reform Judaism values personal autonomy. Personal autonomy means that each Jew is free to interpret and practice in a meaningful way, not by rote, not because your bubbe or zaidie did it that way, but because it has deep religious meaning for you. A good Reform Jew, therefore, will interpret and practice and pick and choose many different things over the course of a Jewish lifetime. This is perhaps the most misunderstood tenet of Reform Judaism, leading many to mistakenly assume that Reform is "do nothing" Judaism. Reform Judaism was never meant to be a justification for doing nothing, for practicing no ritual, for being apathetic or non-committed. Some people believe that Reform Judaism gives you "permission" to eat traif or work on Shabbat. It does not. But it does give free choice and personal autonomy. Traif remains traif. Work remains work. You choose, and ideally, you make an informed choice.

Are there minimum standards? Of course there are.

In 1976, the Central Conference of American Rabbis adopted the Centenary Perspective as the definitive platform of Reform Judaism. It lists, in its article IV, Our Religious Obligations:

“...creating a Jewish home centered on family devotion; life-long study; private prayer and public worship; daily religious

observance; keeping the Sabbath and the holy days; celebrating the major events of life; involvement with the synagogue and community; and other activities which promote the survival of the Jewish people and enhance its existence.”

As long ago as 1899, Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, the founder of North American Reform Judaism wrote:

“We need ceremonies which in the consciousness of our age elevate the soul to God, or which unite us to a religious community all over the world. We must have ceremonies. We must have outward signs and tokens...”

A Reform Jew today must choose outward signs to express his or her Jewish religious commitment.

- 8.** I am proud to be a Reform Jew because our teachers and rabbis are real people. They are not symbols or relics from ages past. They are neither myths nor messiahs. Our rabbis are fathers and feminists; they work in hospices and Hillels; they are single and married, women and men.

Our rabbis are not holier than thou, and good Reform Jews do not expect their Rabbi to be more religious than they are. We don't say, “I eat traif but my Rabbi better keep kosher. I drive to shul but my Rabbi had better walk.” While it is true that as rabbis, we must strive to be excellent role models, upstanding moral individuals whose whole heart and soul is dedicated to Judaism and its perpetuation, most of us are not “rebbees”—people don't stand in awe when we enter a room (although it is an interesting concept)—but I am happy that people are not afraid of us. Many times we are the rabbis people talk to. I am proud to be a rabbi who lives among his people, and is at one with them.

- 9.** I am proud to be a Reform Jew because Reform is the movement which best answers today's spiritual needs with true creativity. Jews today are hungry for ritual, longing for symbols to give them meaning in a meaningless world. That is why “New Age” is attractive to so many. Native traditions, Eastern traditions are alluring to us because of their aura of spirituality. People want ceremonies and life-cycle events which speak to the inner life of the spirit. I believe that Reform Judaism has the most vibrant and creative direction of all the movements in trying to feed that hunger. Reform rabbis have created life cycle events that speak powerfully to today's men and women. In On The Doorposts, the new Gates of the Home, there are new ceremonies for moments in our lives when Judaism had previously been silent: brit ceremonies for our daughters, ceremonies marking miscarriage and stillbirth, ceremonies for when our children leave home, and for when we grow old. Our music blends Hebrew and English seamlessly, folk with tradition, congregational singing with *chazzanut*. Our congregations are always experimenting with new liturgies, new ways of marking the seasons and the passages of time.
- 10.** Finally, I am proud to be a Reform Jew because Reform Judaism is ever changing, developing and growing, just as Judaism has authentically done for the past two thousand years. In this way, Reform may be the only truly “authentic” form of Judaism, manifesting in each generation as a reflection of that generation's needs and understanding. Just as Judaism was transformed after the destruction of the Second Temple—from a sacrificial cult led by an

hereditary priesthood to a religious system of study, prayer and the performance of mitzvot under the leadership of the rabbis, so has Reform Judaism met the challenge of modernity with the ability to adapt, adjust and alter Jewish belief and practice. Reform Judaism was born as an answer to the panic that ensued when the ghetto walls were brought down and Jews could enter the secular society. It offered a way for Jews to remain active in their religious life, while taking advantage of the opportunities of the secular world. It offered Jews a way to translate their Judaism into a livable, creative and growing system for their time. I am Reform because I do not want to be a relic of the past. I cannot live exactly as my ancestors lived because they could not live exactly as their ancestors lived. Thus it has been throughout all the generations of our people, from Abraham until now.

Ten reasons to be Reform. Ten reasons to be proud. Ten lessons to teach our children. Ten responses for our neighbours and friends.

Ten principles to call to mind and to celebrate, as we enter into these Ten Days of Repentance, atone for sins long-forgotten, renew our spirits and refresh our souls, to commune with the Holy Blessed One, whose love, guidance and protection we seek, and to prepare to face the New Year that begins this day. May it be a year of health and well-being, goodness and blessing for us all.
Ken Yihi Ratzon.