

Erev RH 2022
Where Are We Going?
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Let me first speak to all of you who are observing in the UJC Zoom meeting room. I love you; we love you; and if you can't be here in person because of an illness or you're traveling or – in the case of a few “zoomies” – welcoming new babies into the world, we all understand and love and respect that you are choosing to be with us in spirit and cyberspace.

Everyone else, honestly, it's time to come home. The blessing of zoom was that we could all be together when COVID said we couldn't. The curse is that it has become too easy to avoid getting dressed and coming in person. Wear a mask, socially distance, and be **here** in person.

It's time to come home.

Tonight begins my 29th and last formal High Holy Day services. I look forward to serving as cantor emerita following my retirement in June and remaining part of this wonderful Jewish community even as we all move forward with health and love. May will mark the 30th anniversary of my ordination as a cantor from Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music. We have been on an amazing journey!

During the 1980 election campaign, Ronald Reagan famously asked, “Are you better off now than you were 4 years ago.” Tonight, I'm going to ask, “Is Reform Judaism better off now than it was when I joined it 30+ years ago.”

I want to look at where Reform Judaism was when I was ordained in 1993, where it is now, and what we can do to bring back some of its luster.

Please raise your hand if you consider yourself a Reform Jew. Raise your hand if you don't know. Now ask yourself, “why are you a Reform Jew,” or, better yet, “why am I affiliated with a Reform Jewish congregation?”

When my family was choosing a synagogue back in the 1980's, there were two reasons: most of the Jews we knew were members of the United Jewish Center, and I wanted to sing in a synagogue choir to learn more Jewish music. We hadn't grown up within the Reform movement; our parents were Conservative Jews. In fact, we knew nothing about Reform Judaism. But we wanted a Jewish community, and we made our decision. When

he heard that we were joining a Reform congregation, my father, z"l, who rarely entered a synagogue, asked me if our next step was joining the Communist party. I had no idea what he was talking about.

In the late 19th Century, Reform Judaism had deliberately distanced itself from the-then normative Jewish worship and ritual practices. "Oriental" *chazzanut* was replaced by pipe organs, hymnals, church-like congregational singing. Reform Judaism gave *halachah* – Jewish law – a voice, it would not give it veto power. Reform Judaism prided itself on its heritage of promoting prophetic justice. Unlike Orthodoxy or even Conservatism, a fundamental principle of Reform Judaism was the belief that Reform Jews would be Jewishly educated and therefore be able to make autonomous decisions about their ritual observance.

The Union for Reform Judaism says this, "The great contribution of Reform Judaism is that it has enabled the Jewish people to introduce innovation while preserving tradition, to embrace diversity while asserting commonality, to affirm beliefs without rejecting those who doubt, and to bring faith to sacred texts without sacrificing critical scholarship."¹

Over the past 30 years the Reform Movement has consistently stood at the forefront of protecting the rights of all Jews, Jews around the world, as well as the rights of all oppressed people. We have condemned antisemitism in all its forms and supported Israel's right to exist as a free nation and criticized her government. The Reform Movement laser focused on *tikkun olam*, social justice activity. Social action committees sprang up across Reform congregations, in great part thanks to the Boomer generation.

In 1993, officiating interfaith weddings was a hot button issue within the Reform Movement. I sat on the fence for many years – not a comfortable place to be, to be honest – until I realized that I simply had to perform them. I couldn't justify the hypocrisy of welcoming interfaith families into my congregation and my religious school, and then denying them the privilege of being married within a Jewish framework.

In 1993 it was unthinkable that gay and lesbian Jews could wed each other under a chuppah, much less in a civil ceremony. I sat back on that same uncomfortable fence until I witnessed the love a gay colleague felt for their partner and was hit by this thunderbolt: Who was I to deny that the relationship these two people shared are deserving of the ritual of *kiddushin*, of holiness in marriage.

My learning at HUC-JIR DFSSM was an exercise in head spinning Remember that "oriental chazzanut" that the original Reformers decried? While we were learning the

¹ <https://www.hrc.org/resources/stances-of-faiths-on-lgbt-issues-reform-judaism>

grand organ-accompanied music of the 1950's to 1980's, we were also learning "oriental" *chazzanut* that supposedly had been rejected by the early Reform rabbis. HUC cantors were going to be the guardians of the western European music that had been all but decimated during the Shoa. We were expected to be able to perform everything from the Renaissance to the 1990's, the first generation of synagogue clergy people to have to know it all and use it all. At the same time, Reform Jewish camping was flourishing. The music – based on the folk music of Pete Seeger, Arlo Guthrie, and Peter, Paul, and Mary – was all guitar accompanied. No more all-Hebrew lyrics, the music of NFTY – the North American Federation of Temple Youth from 1972-1989 – combined Hebrew and English. As campers came back to their synagogues, they demanded to hear their music. With the help of their cantors, myself included, campers and teens broke down the barrier between what they heard at home and what they heard at camp. Their rabbis, cantors, and educators brought home the lessons of informal education to synagogue Hebrew schools.

And yet accompanying oneself with a guitar for student services at HUC was radical. I remember a teacher suggesting that I not accompany myself with my guitar because I might look awkward when I placed it in its stand and took it up again. A few years ago, playing guitar was mandatory at HUC.

When I came to the United Jewish Center, Shabbat and High Holy Day services were accompanied by an organ. A guitar on the bimah on the High Holy Days was unthinkable. And yet within a few years, I abandoned the organ for a piano, and then for a digital keyboard; and here I am with my guitar and digital keyboard.

We were making Judaism relevant and meaningful to new generations of Jews. Worship services would no longer have a choir in a loft high above the bimah, rabbis and cantors came down from their exalted perches, took off their robes and huge headdresses, and sat within congregations.

We were a movement of constant change grounded in tradition, guided by principles of Torah learning, love for the people Israel and the state of Israel, constantly renewing our understanding of God and *tikkun olam*.

There was a problem, however.

Do you know the joke about the mice in the church attic? Priests couldn't get rid of them, pastors couldn't do it, only the rabbi succeeded because, as the joke goes, they gave the mice a bar mitzvah and weren't heard from or seen again. I know you're chuckling, but even in the Reform movement – a movement that prided itself on

nurturing teens and encouraging them to be active workers in social justice and synagogue life – our mice were disappearing, too.

As hard as we cantors, educators, and rabbis tried, we struggled to keep kids in our religious schools after their b'nei mitzvah. And when the kids left Hebrew school, parents were leaving with them. Think about the people that many of you knew when your own kids were in Hebrew school; I'd lay good money that many of them left because they didn't "need" the synagogue anymore. What was so frustrating for us was that we knew that post bar and bat mitzvah learning was where the real action and in-depth learning happened. The only problem was that we couldn't convince parents that Hebrew "high school" had as much value as and coexist with soccer, baseball, and dance.

Present company excepted, liberal Judaism developed a massive divide between older Jews – those who had grown up believing that the synagogue could be the center of Jewish life – and parents of religious school kids. The Jews in the middle range chose to bring their bodies, time, and funds elsewhere.

Where are we now?

Let's be real: the Reform Movement leadership immediately went into overdrive when we went into COVID shutdown. Because Reform Jews had the ability to use the internet on Shabbat and Festivals, our worship services never stopped. There were weekly, sometimes daily, workshops for Reform congregations on best practices for online services and programs, and – when things loosened up in 2021 – similar workshops on blending in-person and online services and programs.

But everything changes. Even baseball, America's game, has changed. Never mind the ridiculous prices of tickets or food. Major league baseball realizes that the games are just too damn long. There's not enough offense to entertain the fans. Younger fans will not sit for 4-hour baseball games. Baseball used to be America's game – football is now. Football – on tv at least – is action, action, action. Will it bring fans to the stadiums? Maybe, it's hard to know.

Attendance at Shabbat and festival services is dwindling here and throughout the Reform movement. Membership is down. Synagogues are merging. Reform Judaism – like many liberal Christian denominations – is having an identity crisis. Being the movement of social justice and worship and music innovation doesn't cut it anymore. The elders of the Reform movement are tired, the young people are too busy, and the middle range are looking for meaning elsewhere.

So, all that said, what are we going to do about it? What can we do to make Reform Judaism in the greater Danbury community not only viable but powerful? Or better yet, what are **you** going to do about it? All of you here are the people that will make or break both Reform Judaism and the UJC.

If I were a Joel Osteen type, I'd make a pitch for prosperity theology: using the pulpit to convince people that God's will for us is financial blessing and that the more (money) you give to the UJC, the more divine favor you will receive. Now **that** would make one heck of a Rosh Hashanah sermon, don't you think?

But I'm not Joel Osteen, so let me offer a few thoughts on how you – and I – can turn this ship around.

Remember how Reform Judaism's original intent was that all Jews should be educated enough to make their own educated religious choices? Learn. Educate yourself and your family. Talmud, Torah, midrash is not just the purview of Orthodox Jews; they belong to all of us. Find a Starbucks study partner and spend a few minutes each week grappling with our sacred texts. They may have been written thousands of years ago, but they are as alive today as they were when they were first carved into the tablets. If you don't know where to start, ask me.

Don't believe if when Christians tell you that the God of the Hebrew Bible is not loving, or that Christianity has supplanted Judaism, or that Christians have a lock on religious values. Take the words "Judeo-Christian" out of your vocabulary. It's not a "thing;" it never **was** a thing; it was co-opted by Christians to make Christianity seem more mainstream. And above all, it denies – on purpose – the third point in the Abrahamic religion triangle, Islam.

Don't believe it when Jews make fun of Reform Jews as "Judaism light." Don't believe it when you hear that you aren't religious, or not "as religious as" someone else. That is nonsense. I know a lot of Reform Jews here in this building tonight who are deeply Jewishly religious. Shift the language to "observant:" more or less observant, not more or less religious.

Bring your Jewish friends to the UJC.

Welcome Jews of color – and don't ask them if they've converted simply because they're not white Ashkenazim – and make sure that this synagogue continues to be a safe place for people of every gender and sexual identity.

Those of you who are part of interfaith families already know this but tell your friends and family that Reform Judaism and the United Jewish Center welcome them with open arms. While there are rituals that someone who is not a Jew cannot perform, there are many ways to be part of the family of Jews. Don't rule out the possibility that someone of a different faith may at some point want to explore Judaism. And yes, your grandkids will be Jews.

Which leads me to this: we liberal Jews have been yelled at, lectured, chastised, mocked, etc. because our grandkids won't be Jews. Older friends (and I'm one of you), strengthen Reform Judaism by knowing this: your children's and grandchildren's Judaism will look very different from yours. But they **will** be Jews. And they will be **Reform** Jews.

Thirty years is a long time, and we have a proud history. May 5783 continue that history so that we can go from strength to strength.

L'shanah tovah tikateivu, may we be inscribed for a good year!