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Reform Judaism for our Generation
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Good *Yontiff*. Of all the presidential candidates' bloviation, one common message gives me hope. Both wholeheartedly support our Movement. How do I know? Both have declared repeatedly, "We need reform, in Washington and throughout the land." I couldn't agree more. Okay, so maybe it was selective hearing on my part but I will tell you that we do need reform—Reform Judaism that is. Why? Because it is a Movement of change and is best prepared to lead American Jewry through the 21st century.

Allow me to share an example. Where is it possible to worship with five thousand people who are singing, dancing and feeling the presence of God? At an evangelical tent revival? No, in this case it was at a Shabbat service. Last December, I was among the congregation at the Shabbat service during the Union for Reform Judaism's National Biennial Convention. I prayed with five thousand joyful Jews. I sang with two cantors, a choir and a band. I sang and prayed in an exuberant and technologically savvy environment—Jumbotrons, projected subtitles and all. This service is replicated every other year, when the delegates to the URJ's Biennial Convention gather to learn, pray, share, create, and bond. These conventions are inspiring; participating lay leaders and professionals share great ideas. We return to our home congregations with new knowledge, new program models and new ways of thinking. The enthusiasm that follows a Biennial can inspire change within our congregations.

Change is happening here at Temple Beth El, our corner of the Reform world. Ideas first introduced at the national level are finding their way to San Pedro. We are reforming our worship; we are reforming our culture of learning; we are reexamining some long dismissed ritual practices, including thinking about how and what we eat. All of this is taking place within our congregational laboratory. Some ideas will remain within our four walls; some might even transcend the synagogue and reach into the home.

Few of us go to Biennial; but those who do are responsible for harnessing its potential and sharing its best practices with our congregation. During four days of Biennial, for example, we choose from a couple hundred learning opportunities. Our challenge; how do we create small-scale *yeshivot*, learning centers, here for people to learn and study Jewish texts regularly? During four days of Biennial, we choose from a diverse array of worship opportunities. Our challenge: how do we maintain our vibrant worship culture, filled with music and poetry that touches our souls, while not becoming complacent? Biennial feels like camp for adults. Our challenge, how do we create a camp-like experience for adults and children where everyone is invited to live in a holistic Jewish environment for a weekend? The URJ's Biennial highlights the best of what Reform Judaism offers. National initiatives are launched at Biennial; some of the best

discussions of issues central to Reform Jews and the Reform Movement occur at Biennial. Our task is to bring the best of what our Movement offers to Temple Beth El.

Now I know that many here weren't raised attending a Reform synagogue, or any synagogue for that matter, and it was not necessarily Reform ideology that attracted you to Temple Beth El. So let me share a few observations about our Movement and practices that I hope will give you a better understanding of the issues at the heart of Biennial, issues that speak to core values of the Reform Movement and that have inspired some change for Temple Beth El.

First of all, what does it mean to be a Reform Jew? Do we focus on what we do, or what we don't do? I want to shift the mindset from, "I don't do x,y or z, therefore I'm Reform," to "I think critically about important issues of faith, ritual practice, ethical behavior, mitzvot and the larger Jewish community. Therefore I am a Reform Jew." Our ideology is about doing, not "not doing." We examine core Jewish principles, and determine how to apply them to our own lives and to the life of the community through a thorough process of study and experience.

What does it mean to be part of the Reform Movement? Our congregation is an affiliated member of the Union for Reform Judaism, the governing body that leads the largest Jewish denomination in the United States. Today the URJ has over 900 affiliated congregations and 1.5 million members, and it's still growing.

For thirty years, the Reform Movement has been the standard bearer in welcoming and integrating intermarried families into our communities. Our Movement and our synagogue honors the non-Jewish partner who has made a commitment to his or her family to maintain a Jewish home, participate in synagogue life, and experience the richness of Judaism.

The advocacy arm of the Reform Movement, the Religious Action Center, continues to fulfill a modern day prophetic role. Led by a true social justice hero, Rabbi David Saperstein, the RAC speaks out on behalf of the powerless and disenfranchised, taking positions, not always popular, on the pressing moral issues of our day.

Our Movement has devoted significant resources into creating a more robust culture of learning. The Union for Reform Judaism's Department of Lifelong Learning produces wonderful material that aids our own learning and much of it is available at the click of a mouse. This complements the broad spectrum of lifelong learning available at our congregation.

The Reform Movement is known for innovation, especially in the realm of worship. Reform synagogues continue to experiment with worship by helping worshippers discover increased spiritual richness through liturgy, music, rhythm, meditation, sharing and silence. This is what Reform congregations, including ours, offer.

Today, our programs and services are comprised of Jews and non-Jews from diverse backgrounds. Some are more ritually observant while others are not; yet when we come into our Reform synagogues we seek to find common ground that appreciates our different expressions of Judaism.

Our outreach to intermarried families and gay and lesbian individuals and families; our prophetic call to justice; our deepening commitment to Jewish learning; our diversity of worship; and our openness to different viewpoints are hallmarks of contemporary Reform Jewish practice and ideology. You will find these values expressed here at Temple Beth El.

Over the past few years, I've worked with our leadership and my colleagues to implement some changes. I've done so by applying core Reform values. Autonomy and "personal choice thorough knowledge" are two ideological foundations of Reform Judaism. We are not *halakhic*, meaning that we don't consider ourselves obligated to observe traditional Jewish law in the same way an Orthodox Jew does. Our autonomy also means we lack communal norms. So we have to be creative by providing diverse and engaging opportunities to explore the fullness of Jewish expression through worship, learning, *tikkun olam*—repairing the world, and social networking. We've been successful, as every year finds more members of our community availing themselves of our offerings and being drawn closer to each other.

We know that the Reform Movement today, nationally and here at Temple Beth El, is different than it was a generation ago. If you grew up here you know the importance of Temple Beth El to you and your family. You know, too, how it has adapted to meet the changing needs of the congregation. The suburban Reform congregation of my youth might have been similar to Temple Beth El. Nobody wore a *kippah* or *talit*; not even the rabbis. I didn't either when I became a Bar Mitzvah. The rabbis did wear robes, however. We had a professional choir, accompanied by an organ, and led by a soloist with a lovely voice. He might have been Jewish; I'm not sure. The services were comfortable for many but droll to me. They lacked passion, energy, warmth. They were formal; everyone dressed well; all the men wore ties. For me, the best part of Shabbat services was the *oneg*.

Today, the clergy members there and here wear a *talit* and a *kippah*. We don't wear robes (except on the High Holy Days); our High Holy Days choir is comprised of devoted volunteers who sing beautiful and offer difficult arrangements that we listen to; but during the year, our music is much more participatory. Our Shabbat services are warm and meaningful. On most Friday nights, women wearing *kippot* outnumber men wearing ties. Communal worship has changed in the past generation. There's more variety, less formality, more individuality, more joy and more meaning. Our current generation of spiritual seekers desires this. It is played out at a Biennial and in our own community.

One common thread joining most Reform synagogues is our *siddur*, our prayerbook. Do you remember the *Union Prayer Book*? It was used in Reform synagogues from the late 1800s until 1975. For some the UPB remains your preferred *siddur*. In 1975 we

transitioned to *Gates of Prayer*, the large blue *siddur* that provides multiple service options; different themes for different moods. Following our lengthy use of an interim gender-neutral *Gates of Prayer*, the Reform Movement introduced *Mishkan Tefilah* last December, at the URJ Biennial. It is a modern *siddur* for a contemporary Reform congregation. I prayed from it for the first time at that five thousand-person service. Combining the new *siddur* with new music signaled an exciting change in our Movement's worship.

A few months ago our Board of Directors approved the purchase of *Mishkan Tefilah*. Since then many in our community have prayed using *Mishkan Tefilah* and they really like it. I look forward to introducing it to the congregation on Friday night, October 24. This *siddur* will reenergize our worship. It allows for a new level of communal participation and individual reflection. Its poetry is diverse and beautiful. It is much more flexible and user friendly. For example, all Hebrew prayers are transliterated. *Mishkan Tefilah* better meets the needs of our worshippers and will complement greatly our current worship. Our regular Friday night service and our other varieties of worship continue to touch a broad spectrum of spiritual seekers. This, my friends, is an exciting change.

Worship at Biennial, just as our worship at Temple Beth El, continually evolves. So too, does our Torah School evolve. We have a wonderful program. Many schools a generation ago weren't this good. I don't recall my religious school experience fondly. One vivid memory is of the humorless assistant rabbi coming to the classroom with a stopwatch in hand, timing our recitation of the prayers. Even though I could speed through *v'ahavta* in about eighteen seconds, I didn't learn much about it. You'll be glad to know that at Temple Beth El we don't measure a child's progress with a stopwatch.

On a given Sunday or Thursday, most of our children appear to be happy as they bound into the building ready to learn, pray and develop friendships. Imagine ten years from now hearing your children reflect on how much they enjoyed Torah School? What a difference a generation makes.

Nevertheless, our learning culture cannot be limited to Torah School, and despite an increasingly robust adult education program, there is little integration between our Torah School and adult learning. Can you imagine a learning culture that transcends the child-centered learning of Torah School and adult learning during the week, and blends them together?

About fifteen years ago my home congregation joined a new project developed at the Hebrew Union College called the Experiment in Congregational Education, or ECE. This project explored congregational learning in an entirely new way and transformed the learning culture of that congregation. Terms like "Congregation of Learners," and "Lifelong Learning" emerged from the ECE project.

I'm not sure what it was like here in the 1970s and 1980s, but at my home congregation I don't recall much substantive adult learning taking place. As a young adult, that culture

changed, as it has throughout the Reform Movement in the last twenty years or so. The congregation began to offer serious adult learning opportunities. Its suburban Boston location enabled it to attract scholars from local universities to teach adult education courses. Just think if one of the professors in our own Taus Lecture Series came to Temple Beth El to teach a 4-6 weeks course? The change at my home congregation was spurred because of its participation in ECE. Our work then transformed the culture of the congregation by turning it into a congregation of learners.

Fifteen years later, Temple Beth El has become an ECE congregation. As part of an ECE project called ReImagine, a dedicated group of congregants has explored elementary and early middle school education at our congregation. This year several congregants will collaborate to create a model of learning based within our Torah School that will also have a component to attract congregants who currently do not have a direct tie to the school. Imagine a learning environment where children, their parents, grandparents, and adults who have no children in our Torah School can probe Jewish ideas deeply within a sacred intergenerational community? My experience at two other ECE congregations that implemented its principles successfully excites me about the potential for transformation here. I believe more of us will be inspired to increase our depth and breadth of learning, communal participation, and the personal meaning that is derived from it.

The Reform Movement continues to evolve. Our worship has evolved; our Jewish literacy has increased. We're here in part because of the worship and learning initiatives launched at the national and local level. In recent years, an interesting shift has taken place. More Reform Jews are reexamining ritual practices that had once been virtually dismissed. Some of these have created tension within the Movement and synagogues. One of these practices is *kashrut*, or keeping *kosher*.

We know that food is a critical component for most synagogue programs, right? But how often are our dietary decisions guided by text, tradition and Reform ideology? When was the last time we conducted a serious discussion about Jewish dietary practices within our Reform synagogue?

One of the learning sessions I attended at Biennial featured a panel of Reform rabbis: One advocated a traditional approach to *kashrut*, another advocated a radically modern approach to *Kashrut*. Think to eat only organic and free range meat products, including pork. Following their spirited debate, a person asked, "How can I encourage people in my congregation to begin discussing this issue?" My radically modern colleague quipped, "Serve bacon at an *oneg*; that'll start a conversation." We haven't served bacon at the *oneg*, but some of us have begun to have a conversation. The overarching question is how do we as individuals, as a Movement, and as a congregation view this particular issue? Is it relevant to our personal and communal life? What guidelines do we set for ourselves, and for our community?

In my own case, my guidelines are influenced by our ancient tradition and a modern understanding of the issues. And they have developed over time. However, my practice is

admittedly inconsistent. I am not bound by *halakha*, traditional Jewish law, so everything I eat becomes an exercise in the personal decision making process. That's Reform. Nevertheless, what and how I eat is on my mind, continually for a blend of ritual, health and ethical reasons. I'm sure I share these considerations with others. Whether we don't eat pork, or mix milk and meat, eat only organic meat or are vegetarian or vegan, every time we think about what we eat, and make a choice, we affirm the Reform value of autonomy in the personal decision making process of eating.

Today I believe that a discussion about Jewish dietary practices is not limited to Orthodox and perhaps Conservative synagogues. A conversation about what we eat is appropriate for a contemporary Reform Jewish community and synagogue. Ritually motivated considerations are important; so too are the ethical considerations: working conditions, fair labor practices, workers rights of how our food gets from the farm to our dinner tables. That's a discussion for another sermon.

Over the past several months, a group of us have engaged in a spirited discussion about Jewish dietary practices. We've explored the meaning and relevance of *Kashrut*, traditional Jewish dietary practices, as they apply to our contemporary Reform community. Next month we'll expand the conversation during a two-session workshop that will explore a Reform approach to Jewish dietary practices. I invite you to study this issue with me and share your thoughts about how individuals and a congregation should or should not consider a Jewish dietary practice that is informed by our Reform tradition.

I've shared tonight several areas where the Reform Movement of today is changing and how these issues are playing out at Temple Beth El. We are strengthening our worship; we are creating a congregational culture of learning; we are exploring the way we think about eating. All of this is taking place within our congregational setting; some of these ideas might even transcend the synagogue and reach into your homes. Many of our initiatives come from the ideas gathered at the URJ Biennial; they are integral parts of a national Reform Jewish identity. Of course, we adapt national trends to meet our local needs. Yet we remain part of a national Movement that is meaningful and relevant. To be a Reform Jew means to study, learn and apply our tradition as passed down through the ages, from Mount Sinai to this very moment. We will continue to change. We will reform. Our Movement and our congregation will be very different thirty years from now; I do not know what changes are in store in the decades ahead, but I am excited to be part of the process that will explore and continue to initiate change.

Amen