

HOW "RELIGIOUS" IS THE REFORM JEW?

A Sermon Delivered

by

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at

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It is our pleasure this evening to extend a sincere and, I hope thoughtful welcome to these families who have recently become affiliated with our Congregation.

In extending this welcome, however, I think all of us should be aware that in Judaism it is not entry into a congregation that makes one Jewish. Synagogue affiliation makes one's Jewishness more meaningful. When Hillel, a first century Palestinian Rabbi, said "Do not separate thyself from the Congregation" he meant that to alienate oneself from the Congregation would be to cut one's self off from the sources of learning and tradition and social involvement with like-minded co-religionists. One cannot be educated or Jewishly pious in isolation.

Joining a congregation has long been the expression of identity with Jewish life.

The time was when the synagogue was the primary institution of the community. The synagogue functioned as a school, a place of prayer, a social center, a philanthropic agency and a legal court. As such it became for each community an expression of that community's particular needs and views.

Not so today. Today our large metropolitan centers contain hundreds of thousands of Jews who have not and will not ever affiliate with the organized congregation.

Yet the synagogue still has a unique and specific function to provide religious education, a place for regular worship and social expression for its members. Former functions of the synagogue in satisfying other community needs have now been assumed by specialized agencies with particular competency in those areas of service.

It is also true that in each community of any size at all in our land there are congregations representing differing views of Judaism and its practice.

Orthodoxy, Conservatism and Reform dominate the American scene whatever differences of theological position or ritual practice there may be within each of these groups.

What then is the particular Challenge of Reform?

There is no turning from the fact that to join a Reform Congregation is not an easy step for those reared in the comfortable and more definitive atmosphere of Traditionalism represented by Orthodoxy or Conservatism.

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With these there is associated in many minds:

Loyalty

Jewishness

Observance

Piety

Age-old ritual respectability

To leave these for what mistakenly appears to be an ill-defined deviant and less exacting pattern of faith sometimes takes nerve and courage.

Yet tonight I would like to suggest something for all of us who call ourselves Reform Jews. It is that to be a Reform Jew is perhaps to ask that one be the most discriminating and carefully pious Jew in all of our long history.

If this sounds like over-statement, I trust that it will not when I have explained what I mean and what I hope you will accept as the obligations of Reform Judaism.

Let me begin by calling your attention to the fact that if you have come to Reform Judaism because you think ours is minimal Judaism -- you have chosen wrongly.

The Reform Jew is not less "religious" but differently "religious" than his non-Reform brethren.

The thoughtless and the ill-informed use the word "religious" generally to indicate acceptance of the obligation to practice rituals and ceremonies - whether these be honored in the observance or what is more common in the breach.

To say: "I'm not religious; I'm a Reform Jew" is to indicate total ignorance of any kind of Judaism. Religious and non-Religious Jews are not divided by Reform or Traditionalism, but by attitude and behavior.

Having said this, we must spell out what I would consider the major attitudes wherein Reform remains true to itself.

First: I believe Reform Judaism insists that ritual and ceremony, insofar as this is a limited part of religion, be coupled with reason.

It has mistakenly been said that Reform looks with disdain upon ceremony.

Not at all. What we do say is that a ceremony or ritual, in whatever setting it is practiced, must be consistent with our reason and our spiritual and intellectual integrity.

We have deliberately dispensed with many ancient customs and ceremonies. We have done so because we will not find a sacred place within our practice for superstition or for the ritual expression of ideas which no longer reflect the belief of contemporary Jewry in heart or mind. What we do not accept is of equal importance with what we do.

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We do not agree that the voice sung is more acceptable to God than the voice spoken in prayer. We do not think that priestly traditions are relevant to modern thought. We do not believe that evil spirits must be frightened away from the marriage altar or that the first born must be redeemed from God's possession. We do not believe that the angel of death hovers around the home of the departed or that the spirits of the dead are reflected in mirrors.

What we do not accept as a basis of our faith enforces and emphasizes what we do believe. And in the ceremonies we do retain we hope to find an enriched Jewish life because what is symbolized by our prayers and blessings, our holidays and festivals, our symbols and sacred objects is meaningful and relevant to our aspirations. They dramatize our present ideals of Judaism.

This leads me to the second fundamental of Reform.

It is that our belief must be coupled with a quest for knowledge.

For us it is not enough to perform a ceremony or to recite a prayer or to observe a festival simply and solely because our grandfathers did. If what they did is acceptable to us, then we and they are linked by an eternal quality and value of Judaism. If what they thought is no longer consistent with our thought, then it is better we sought spiritual truth for ourselves. We cannot be ignorant of Jewish History and Philosophy, Poetry and Literature. But again, what we do not believe is as important as what we do. Careful and honest discrimination is demanded. It is a matter of fundamental traditional belief, for instance, that a personal Messiah will come to redeem our earth from its bondage to evil and suffering. It is a basic doctrine of traditional Judaism that bodily resurrection will accompany the messianic age. Knowledge of our world and indeed of the origin of these beliefs of ancient times makes them unacceptable to us. Why then repeat the phrases empty of conviction?

Our belief must be grounded in knowledge of Torah, of the values of our Faith, the teachings of our sages and then the integration of what we know of the world in which we live.

Lastly, Reform Judaism emphasizes that both our ceremony and our theological doctrines must be directed toward ethical action.

For us the last test of religion is what it does to the man who professes it. We refuse to make of Jewish practice however ancient it may be an end in itself. We know that surely traditionism concurs. But, I think, Reform is more clearly insistent and outspoken about this historic Jewish views.

In this sense we emphasize prophetic teachings of righteousness over legalism or ritualism for its own sake.

God is reality not only in relationship of man to Him, but just as importantly of man to man.

Of what value a Bar Mitzvah if the Bar Mitzvah boy is not motivated to become an ethical man? Of what meaning a consistently prayerful Jew who becomes a scavenger in his business or profession? What is the meaning of Confirmation if those who confirm their faith in one moment forget it in the next? Of what value is the beauty of marriage if the sanctification is a "kiddushin" of bride and groom but not of husband and wife through the years?

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I hope you begin to see that the real demands of Reform are quite more serious, quite more difficult to resolve and quite more formidable than many suspect.

We raise difficult questions. We are not content with easy answers.

It is not easy to "Reform" anything --- least of all our Judaism. But who says religion should be easy? And if religion is not vital and relevant it is useless.

This week's Sedra tells the Story of Abraham and the three strangers who came to his tent. Strange, alien and unexpected were his visitors but he went out to meet them. Their visit ended in blessing. Let us act courageously toward the challenges that come to comfort us, toward the unexplained and the strange. Let us act honestly and openly and with integrity let us welcome every new truth that comes to our tents.

Let every precious ceremony be coupled to Reason and to honest emotion that it may dramatize the unique Jewish views of goodness and truth among men, peace and righteousness among nations.

Let our belief be coupled to knowledge of Torah and may our ethical teachings lead us to righteous action. Then ours will be a Faith that is religion at its best because it will bring us and our children to our best.

This, then, is our Faith: a Judaism of home and synagogue and daily life that preserves the essential doctrines of our heritage, cherishes its meaningful observances of ceremony and festival and, by wedding mind to heart, allows our profession of Judaism to point the way to an ethical and righteous life among men in service to God.

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