

Recharging Reform Judaism Conference: Three Challenges

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Welcome to the second Recharging Reform Judaism Conference.

We meet at one of the most consequential times in modern Jewish history. The world has changed dramatically since we last convened one year ago. The skies of Jewish life are cloudier, the horizons, darker. We had not planned to gather this year, but the cascading impacts of October 7 on Israel and world Jewry, convinced us that the hour demands intense and focused attention by the North American Reform movement. You will hear a broad diversity of views during these two days. We purposely designed the conference towards this goal in both content and form. Take advantage of the many breakout sessions and informal settings to learn, engage and debate.

It will be good for us to spend these two days together, to find comfort, consolation and strength in each other's embrace. We are still traumatized. The cataclysm is so profound that it will take years to fully understand. Time froze. It is still October 7. We have not yet moved on. Our anguish is too raw, our fear and uncertainty too pervasive. The battles are still raging. Israelis are still dying. Palestinians, too. There are still an estimated 120 hostages held in Gaza dungeons, alive or dead. Tens of thousands of Israelis are still refugees in their own national home. Formal commissions of investigation have not yet been established. Responsibility for the catastrophes of October 7 has not been examined, assigned or assumed. The political reckoning is sure to come. Before us are years of recovery.

This is an existential moment, not only for Israel, but for us in North America. We are in the midst of a great ideological struggle, the outcome of which will determine whether liberal Judaism will thrive in the diaspora, or will fracture and shatter into a thousand pieces. The question before us is the same one that splintered the Reform movement a century ago and almost broke us. Are we truly committed to Jewish peoplehood? If so, what are our obligations flowing from that commitment? Are we truly committed to the Zionist idea and the State of Israel? If so, what are our obligations?

We thought that we had resolved these tensions by mid-20th century, in the aftermath of the Holocaust and upon Israel's founding. We didn't. October 7 revealed to us that our central values, principles we have stated and restated for decades, are under intense pressure from without and within.

From without, the West is increasingly hostile to Jewish identity. It is not only Israel. Judaism, itself, is under withering ideological assault, and hence the Jewish state is the focus and the target of this hostility. It was inevitable that the rise and spread of identity politics would place the Jew on the wrong side of virtue. Some of us have been warning for years that the abandonment of Western liberal values is always bad for Jews. When we forsake Martin Luther King's understanding of liberalism, to judge people not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character; when we elevate feelings over facts, bias over evidence, group entitlement over individual merit, cancelation over debate: When we dismiss liberal values as rooted in white privilege, oppression, colonialism and racism, we have betrayed liberalism, and undermined the very foundations that made the West dominant and Western Jews secure. The passions unleashed by an illiberal state of mind threaten both the West and Western Jews. History teaches that once Jew-hatred becomes normative it portends social decay.

From within, while most American Jews are committed to Israel, and consider the Jewish state an important component of their own Jewish identity, the younger the generation, the greater the

opposition, not only to specific policies of the Israeli government, but to the very existence of this, or any, Jewish state.

Hard questions confront us, challenges made more difficult by the presence of extremist elements in the Israeli government that are outside the mainstream of normative Jewish and Zionist values, and are an embarrassment to most of the world's Jews. I hope that in our plenums and workshops we discuss the impact of the current government on American Jews, especially younger ones who have come of age knowing, essentially, only right-wing Israeli governments.

I will address three broad challenges of the many we will engage over the next two days. We owe each other a blunt and candid discussion, first, because the times call for it, and second, out of respect, affection and concern for our movement. Since we represent the large plurality of North American affiliating Jews, the responses we formulate will impact dramatically on the future of North American Jewry.

1.

What have we taught our youth? What are the ramifications of this new period of Jewish history on how we will instruct our youngsters going forward?

In December 2023, over 1,200 current members and alumnae of the Union for Reform Judaism, mostly young, signed a letter to the movement's leadership demanding we support an immediate ceasefire. It is, of course, appropriate to debate whether and when a ceasefire should come into effect. It is legitimate, even desirable, to criticize Israeli policies. Many of us do this regularly. It is proper, even necessary, to mourn the loss of life, dislocation and misery of Palestinian civilians, despite our ubiquitous underestimation of their widespread support of, and collaboration with, Hamas. To bring attention to this human suffering is not anti-Semitic, or necessarily anti-Israel. Judaism does not rejoice in, or glorify, the deaths of our enemies, let alone, non-combatants, even if inflicted in a just war.

But the most revealing part of the letter was the signatories' responses as to why they signed it. Over and over again, they mentioned the URJ's complicity in genocide, ethnic cleansing, the oppression of the Palestinian people, and Israeli apartheid and colonialism. They expressed no doubts, no complexities, and no qualms. Their righteousness was self-evident to them, as was the moral culpability of those who disagreed. They accused the Reform movement of violating the principle of *tikkun olam* — repair of the world — that we, their rabbis and educators, supposedly taught them in our synagogues, schools, youth groups and camps.

They expressed no Jewish warmth, nary a word of sympathy for Israelis, or compassion for the murdered, brutalized, sexually assaulted and kidnapped of our own people. There was no gratitude or grief for Israeli soldiers their age, who laid down their lives protecting the people of Israel. It is as if all Jewish solidarity, empathy, responsibility and mutuality were stripped from these young Jews. And, according to them, it was we Reform clergy and educators who taught them these values.

We thought that we were sensitizing young Jews to the Jewish obligation of social repair — *le'takken olam be'malchut shaddai*. We thought that we were conveying the principle of Jewish universalism — *ve'nivrechu vecha kol mishpechot ha'adama* — all the families of the earth shall bless themselves through you. We thought we were teaching *gemilut hassadim* — acts of lovingkindness. We thought we were instilling our yearnings for peace and justice and righteousness and truth — *shalom, tzeddek, mishpat, emet*. We thought we were emphasizing the equal dignity of all human beings, each created *be'tzelem Elohim* — in the image of God.

But for many of our youngsters, the Jewish spirit was dribbling away while we thought we were passing it on.

Had we known that five years, 10 years, after b'nai mitzvah some of our own graduates would be leading anti-Zionist campus protests in the name of the very Jewish values they said they learned from us — now, looking back, would we have changed anything in our curricula and other identity-building efforts? Did we intend for our young people to lead anti-Zionist Passover Seders at university encampments in so called “liberated zones” — liberated from Zionists? Had we known, would we have focused more on *ahavat Yisrael* — love, commitment and responsibility for the Jewish people — the place where everything Jewish starts, without which nothing Jewish can be fully understood?

Sadly, I think that many of the anti-Zionist Gen Z Jews are lost to us, at least for the foreseeable future. I say this with great pain. I hope I am mistaken. Personally, I welcome any Jew, whatever are their views, to come and speak with me. I would love for a young activist to sit me down and tell me all the reasons I am wrong, and give me an opportunity to respond. I do not cancel any Jew. We welcome all Jews for membership in our synagogue. No one inquires about their beliefs or practices. But I fear that many of the anti-Zionist Gen Z's will not return in the coming years. Part of their critique is against the Jewish establishment, especially synagogues and rabbis, who they feel are collaborating with immorality.

But whether or not they return to us in the short or long term, it is not too late for the generations to come. Do we have a plan for them? Does the current crisis change our assumptions and approach? How do we want young Jews to turn out in five, ten and twenty years: Anti-Zionist congregants and leaders of Reform synagogues, or proud Jews who, in the true liberal spirit, have strong and diverse opinions about everything, including Israel, but who are committed to the Jewish people and the Jewish state?

We can forge a new path. We have much to work with. Along with the alienation of what is still a small part of the Jewish community, we are also seeing a strong resurgence of Jewish interest, affiliation and identification. And within Gen Z we have some of the most charismatic, dynamic, brilliant young Jews. Crises often bring forth attributes we never knew we had. History creates great people and great leaders. We have some awe-inspiring young Jews; we will meet several of them today and tomorrow. So poised. So articulate. So courageous, compelling and captivating that one wonders who produced such people, and how. Why did we not pay enough attention to them before? In their hands lay the future of American Jewish life.

What did they receive that others did not? That is the question before us at the dawn of this new Jewish age. How are our schools, camps and youth groups going to change? What Jewish values will we emphasize moving forward?

2.

Speaking of the next generation of Jewish leaders:

Are we comfortable with the ordination of anti-Zionist Reform clergy? Of course, we must define what we mean by Zionism, and, personally, I believe we should construct the biggest, most open tent we can. We are pluralists. We cannot sustain a large diverse movement without ensuring expansive space for differing views, opinions, beliefs and values.

But principles require parameters; beliefs require boundaries. Otherwise, we believe nothing. If we are a Zionist movement, especially at a time when Zionism is under such pressure from without and within, is it conceivable that we would be ordaining anti-Zionists to lead our congregations in the future? Is there a future for such a movement? What are the prospects for a community of Jews that distances itself,

ideologically and practically, from the vast majority of the world's Jews? And in such periods of hostility, and with other liberal seminaries wavering on their Zionist commitments, should we not place at the center of our ambitions, the training of leaders equipped with the deepest possible love for, and understanding of, Israel, Zionism and Jewish peoplehood?

I am not opposed to anti-Zionist Jews receiving support from anti-Zionist clergy and educators. If a community wishes to hire such leaders, bless them. But why our movement? Let us leave that to other seminaries. Let us stand for the principles we have stated and restated since the mid-20th century: We are a Zionist movement. We are committed to the centrality of Jewish peoplehood. We are theologically, philosophically and practically devoted to the Jewish state — not uncritically — but unconditionally. Can we not agree that among the central aims and purposes of our seminary is the ordination of clergy dedicated to these principles? Those who are antagonistic to our values are, of course, entitled to their views, but aren't we also entitled to define for ourselves what we believe?

If we can agree on these basics, we can debate the best methods to achieve our objectives. If we cannot agree on the fundamental principles, I fear for the wellbeing of North American Jewry. Those who abandon Jewish peoplehood, whether by word, by deed, or by neglect; those who turn their backs on Israel, the most eloquent expression of Jewish peoplehood in our times — will be as leaves falling from the tree of Jewish life. For what are the prospects of the continuity of the people, if the people is not committed to its own distinctive continuity, and does not even agree philosophically that it is a legitimate objective and a social good? Is it possible to sustain the Jewish people without being committed to the Jewish people? Can Judaism exist without Jews?

3.

What should be our response when the social justice movements we have been part of, and helped found, fund and lead, clash with core Jewish values? How should we respond when the price of admission to groups addressing climate change, female empowerment, racial disparity, minority rights, poverty, interfaith relations, is for Jews to check their Zionism at the door, discarding our own identity and abandoning our own people? How should we respond to the passionate loathing and seething hatreds of Israel from some of our partners? Should we continue working with them for the greater good? Should we succumb to their demands? Should we leave and try to find other partners?

Have we asked our partners the most basic questions: What business do progressives have supporting those who oppress women, gays, minorities and Christians? Why do so many young Americans support Hamas which is opposed to everything we in the West believe? Why do young adults, especially, who are so acutely sensitive to the assignment of moral accountability, fail to assign moral agency to Palestinians? Why treat them as passive victims bearing no political or moral responsibility for their actions?

How to explain the failure of university administrators to enforce their own policies? Is it just the uneven quality of leadership, or does their willingness to tolerate anti-Jewish and anti-Israel environments on their campuses, in violation of their own codes of behavior, a window into the mindset of administrators, DEI functionaries and faculty members? Was the refusal of so many universities to issue any moral guidance on Hamas' brutality simply a localized failure of leadership on the part of individual presidents and administrations, or does it point to deeper failings of higher education? Why couldn't they find the simple human compassion to identify with Israeli victims, let alone condemn the perpetrators, even before Israel responded militarily?

Is there a moral rot at the core of the very institutions that have been entrusted by us to teach and preserve Western liberalism?

When we established the Religious Action Center in 1962, within a short period of time, we became participants in, and leaders of, the struggle for civil rights. Parts of the two great legislative acts that helped define the 60s — the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 — were drafted in the conference room of the Religious Action Center. I heard this story many times from my father. Martin Luther King and a multitude of other civil rights leaders were frequent visitors to the RAC. They were invited to use the conference room as a sort of home away from home. They set up offices in the heart of Reform Judaism whenever they were in Washington.

The RAC was founded to advance the liberal values of justice, inclusivity, tolerance, respect, human dignity, love, unity and peace. It sought to make our movement actors, rather than mere observers, in the great civil rights struggles of our times. Its founding vision included this statement:

“Shall we continue to debate a guide for ritual observance without at the same time debating guides for moral behavior? Shall our congregations devote their energies to increasing membership dues and not to increasing concern for world peace? Shall we, who bitterly resented the silence of most of the churches of Nazi Germany, ourselves remain silent in the face of injustice and inequity in our society?”

And along with that universal vision, the Religious Action Center also clarified that Jewish universalism is grounded in Jewish particularism: “We Jews have earned the right to define ourselves,” the RAC proclaimed. “We define ourselves as a people. The Jewish people has, in turn, created a Jewish state. The State is our symbol of hope.”

Especially after the Six Day War, the RAC became our most vocal and insistent advocate for Zionism in the social justice community, at a time when many of our partners abandoned Israel because, like today, they thought that Jewish particularism is backward, unbecoming — un-Christian of us — and that Zionism was too ethnic and parochial for modern liberal Jews. Zionism is social justice, the RAC responded: *Tzedek tzedek tirdof* — justice, justice you shall pursue — *le’ma’an tichyeh ve’ya’rashta et ha’aretz asher Adoni Elohecha noten lach* — so that you may live and inherit the land that God has given you.”

From the beginning the RAC insisted that Judaism’s universal aspirations emerged from, and are a result of, Jewish particularism, a function of Jewish peoplehood, not its negation. “For us Jews, wrote Abraham Joshua Heschel, “there can be no fellowship with God without the fellowship with the people, Israel. Abandoning Israel, we desert God.”

Will we allow others to lecture us about Jewish values? They think it is their place to teach us what we do not know about Judaism? How should we respond to the very people who react so forcefully to anyone who is not part of their minority group voicing opinions about the lived experiences of such minorities, but who allow themselves to define for Jews what constitutes good Judaism and bad Judaism, good Jews and bad Jews — or as Congresswoman Omar said — “pro-genocide and anti-genocide Jews?”

Jews get to define Judaism. Others get to decide whether they accept us as we see ourselves.

In this week’s Torah portion we read:

Im bechukotai telechu ve’et mitzvotai tishmoru

If you walk in My ways and safeguard My commandments —

Va’eshbor motot ulchem ve’olech etchem komemiyut —

I will break the bars of your yoke and lead you to *komemiyut*.

That word — *komemiyut* — is one of my favorite Hebrew words. Whenever I read or hear it, waves of emotion flow through me. It is impossible to fully translate. First, because it is mentioned only once in the Bible, in our parsha. And second — any translation will inevitably miss its full meaning. *Komemiyut* — implies upright, proud, having dignity. In the context of the verse in Leviticus — it implies possessing the attributes of those freed from oppression and slavery.

Think of the imagery: I will break the bars of your yoke — that is — the heavy planks placed on beasts of burden that bend them to our will. Once removed from the slave, the effect is to release the human being, previously bent over in submission, to stand upright, proud, and with a sense of self-esteem. Mentioned in the context of national liberation, *komemiyut* implies the restoration of collective Jewish dignity through liberation and self-determination.

The verse from this week's parsha is the source of one of our most moving daily prayers:

Va'ha'vi'enu le'shalom me'arbah kanfot ha'aretz ve'tolichenu komemiyut le'artzenu... Bring us home in peace, O God, from the four corners of the earth, *ve'tolichenu komemiyut* - and guide us — be by our side — as we walk upright, free, with dignity - to our land.

We are blessed to live in this era of the liberation of the Jews. For millennia, we yearned, prayed and died for the right to live free, in our own land, the Land of Zion, and Jerusalem. Freedom is hard, especially for a people deprived of sovereignty for two thousand years. We have learned that exercising collective power is fraught with ethical and moral dilemmas. But Jewish history has proven conclusively that it is better for Jews to have the power to defend ourselves, while struggling with its moral use, than to be powerless and at the mercy of the dark lords. October 7 revealed what our enemies wish to do to us on a grand scale, irrespective of our personal beliefs, if they ever acquire the power to execute their murderous aims. Had even the most fervent American peace activist found themselves in one of those border communities on that awful day, they, too, would have been slaughtered in their beds, brutalized and sexually assaulted in the fields, or viciously taken hostage. No one would have asked their views.

For the first time in two millennia, we are free. God has broken the bar of our yoke and granted us *komemiyut* — national dignity. Let us brace ourselves to our duties and so bear ourselves as to prove worthy of the great and awesome gift.

Baruch ata Adonai, ha'bocher be'amo Yisrael be'ahava

Praised are you O God, who has chosen your people, Israel, in love.