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The Meaning of Reform

Allow me to introduce you to Abraham Geiger, the Father of Reform Judaism.

The year is 1830, and young Geiger is an enthusiastic university student in Bonn, Germany. He comes from a traditional Jewish home, having mastered the Bible, the Mishnah, and the Talmud. So now, he seeks out Germany's leading scholars in Arabic to feed his fascination with ancient religious texts. He is a promising student, and though he initially hopes to become an academic, he will become one of the most prolific and influential rabbis in Germany and throughout the world.

Allow me to introduce you to one of Geiger's classmates, Samson Raphael Hirsch. Hirsch, like Geiger, has a traditional Jewish background and has also sought out the University of Bonn for its groundbreaking modern scholarship. Hirsch is a brilliant student who hopes to become a successful rabbi even though his family wants him to go into business. Luckily for all of us, his dreams come true, and, like Geiger, he becomes one of the world's foremost rabbinic authorities.

And allow me to introduce you to one more promising university student in 1830. This time, we move from Germany to Bohemia, which is today's Czech Republic. Here we find Zacharias Frankel, yet another product of a traditional upbringing, in line to become the first Bohemian rabbi to receive a university diploma.

Early in their careers, each of these three men institutes significant reforms in their Jewish communities. Inspired by 19th century aesthetics, they establish basic expectations for synagogue decorum. No more haphazard davening or chaotic prayer, each man moving at his own pace. Rather, we pray together, as one congregation. As well, these rabbis all decide to deliver their sermons in German, acknowledging the importance of communicating with common people who may not be able to follow a discourse given in Hebrew. In fact, going to synagogue becomes more about the uplifting ethical message heard in the rabbi's sermon than about praying itself. This, too, is a new development in Jewish worship. In these ways, each of our young rabbis, through aesthetic design and moral leadership, attempts to harmonize Jewish life with modernity.

Geiger, Hirsch, Frankel. Comrades, colleagues, and – briefly – friends.¹ But as each of them grows in sophistication and influence, each of them carves out his own distinct approach to the relationship between Judaism and modernity. In time, they part ways, and their disciples carry on their beliefs to this day. As I mentioned, Abraham Geiger is the father of Reform Judaism. Samson Raphael Hirsch is the founder of Modern Orthodoxy. And Zacharias Frankel, always endorsing the middle road, is the first president of the Jewish Theological Seminary in Breslau and, subsequently, Conservative Judaism.²

That’s right: Reform, Conservative, and Modern Orthodox Judaism all came from the same place at the same time from people with similar backgrounds and experiences. Each movement is a Jewish response to modernity, growing out of a common milieu of traditional Judaism in response to the rapidly changing modern world. (And, in case you were wondering, Ultra-Orthodoxy was also founded in the early 19th century by Moses Sofer in present-day Slovakia. It was a reaction to these modern forms of Judaism, making it the youngest Jewish movement of the four.)

Tomorrow afternoon, right after our midmorning service, the Lifelong Learning Committee will lead an interactive study session on all the major Jewish movements in America today. Tonight, though, I want to look deeply into our own movement, to discuss the meaning of Reform. Even though more American Jews are Reform than anything else, it’s perhaps the most misunderstood denomination.³ And that makes me sad. Because for me, coming to know what Reform Judaism really stands for changed my life, and I believe that Reform has the potential to change all of us, every single day.

I grew up in a Reform community in Roanoke, Virginia. Now, Southwest Virginia isn’t home to many Jews, and the people in my community were for most intents and purposes identical to members of the smaller Conservative synagogue. Things weren’t too different at the University of Virginia. While our Hillel did have separate Reform and Conservative services, there were few differences in the beliefs and practices of Reform and Conservative Jews. I always identified as Reform, but

¹ According to the article about him in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, “In Bonn Geiger became acquainted with his future Orthodox adversary S. R. Hirsch, whom he greatly admired at the time, setting up in conjunction with him and several other young men a circle for developing the art of preaching.”

² Cf. Michael Meyer’s *Judaism Within Modernity: Essays on Jewish History and Religion*: “However much American Reform Judaism was a response to its particular social context, the basic principles it has espoused since the middle of the nineteenth century are those put forth by Abraham Geiger and the other German Reformers—the idea of progressive revelation, the historical critical approach to Jewish tradition, the centrality of the Prophetic literature. Similarly, Conservative Judaism remains committed to the concept of a flexible, historically interactive Jewish law that was espoused in Germany by Zacharias Frankel. And modern American Orthodoxy has for many years drawn upon the writings of Samson Raphael Hirsch, especially his idea that belief in the divinity of the Written and Oral Law, along with practice of all prescribed rituals, does not conflict with full participation in the political and cultural life of a modern nation” (108).

³ Cf. “A Portrait of Jewish Americans: Overview” by the Pew Research Center, p. 10. Available: <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2013/10/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey-overview.pdf>.

there wasn't any particular reason. I just *happened* to have grown up in a Reform community.

It wasn't until I started rabbinical school that I encountered Conservative and Orthodox Jews who practiced and believed differently from me. Rabbinical students from other denominations challenged me to articulate what I really believe, and I had to do some serious research to learn about my own movement. And I was truly inspired by what I found. I fell in love with Reform Judaism all over again, and this time, I called myself Reform not by accident but by choice.

To me, the principles of Reform Judaism are compelling and inspiring, and I also happen to believe they're correct. You don't have to look far to observe that the process of reform is intrinsic to Judaism; our people and our culture have been changing since the very beginning. Even within the Torah itself, we see the evolution of practices and understandings, and the entire rabbinic legacy is predicated on the notion that change is essential to what it means to be Jewish. As I mentioned before, Abraham Geiger gave rise to the movement we know today as Reform, but the *process* of Jewish reform has been around since Day One.

That process of Reform led to the birth of our movement, which grew into a religious system that guides modern Jews toward a moral and spiritual life. Geiger and his colleagues devoted their lives to building a substantive Judaism of Reform, striving to define what Reform *is* rather than what it *isn't*.

Too often, I hear Jews of all denominations describe Reform Jews as "just Reform," as if to say that a full, authentic Judaism is Orthodox while Reform practice is slimmer, lighter, less substantial. I can see Geiger turning in his grave every time someone calls herself "just Reform." And it's the same with the "spectrum" metaphor, where Orthodox Judaism is depicted as one end of a spectrum and Reform as its polar opposite. But Jewish life is *not* arrayed on a spectrum; Orthodoxy isn't *more* than Reform, and it isn't *opposite* to Reform; it's simply different. There are much more fitting metaphors than a spectrum. We may think of different locations on a map, different paths to a destination, or different answers to a question. Let's keep in mind that Reform Judaism is exactly as old as Conservative and Orthodox Judaism – if not older – and that every branch of Judaism today, including Reform, grew out of the same root system. Reform is an ongoing process, an inspired approach to sacred living. Not a variation of other, "more authentic" forms of Judaism.

"Okay, Rabbi, so what *is* Reform Judaism?" I'm so glad you asked.

First thing's first: Reform communities are open and inclusive. Looking around the room this evening, you can find people who grew up Reform and people from other movements, people who were born Jewish and people who converted, non-Jews who

are members of Jewish families, and people of no professed religious tradition who have traveled their own path to this holy congregation. Reform Judaism affirms that *every* person, regardless of background, practice, or belief, should be welcome in our communities to connect with one another and with God. The president of our movement, Rabbi Rick Jacobs, has said, “it is an axiom of Reform Judaism that we do [the] work of inclusion every day.”⁴ Reform Judaism, then, includes you, “all of you” (Deut. 29:9) – members and guests, old-timers and newcomers alike – simply by virtue of your being here tonight.

Because of this openness and the diversity within our movement, it’s impossible to say “all Reform Jews” believe or do any particular thing. Nevertheless, there are two basic principles that I believe are vital to Reform Judaism, two pillars that support our community philosophically and give it the substance and stability that have endured for almost two hundred years. Perhaps in your daily life you encounter people who ask you what Reform Judaism is or why you’re Reform. Well, here’s an answer for you: Reform Judaism is about *progressive revelation* and *informed choice*.

Let’s start with progressive revelation. Our friend Abraham Geiger brought this concept to the fore of Reform ideology.⁵ Here’s how it works in a nutshell: We affirm that God spoke – metaphorically – with our ancestors and that our holy texts are records of these revelations. At the same time, we also affirm that we can still find divine truth in our lives today, giving us access to new truths that may overrule earlier ones.

In pre-modern Judaism, revelation was understood to have happened only in the past. Revelation happened at Mount Sinai with the giving of the Ten Commandments. It happened with the Prophets in ancient Israel. It happened with the Oral Tradition that was handed down by the rabbis. But God no longer speaks with human beings – that’s why we have to treasure and revere and obey the records of revelation left to us by our ancestors.

Progressive revelation teaches something different. For Abraham Geiger, revelation could happen at any time to anyone (although, he believed, Jews were predisposed to revelation more than other groups). Geiger called revelation “the close relation between the [human spirit] and the Supreme Spirit, ... an illumination of

⁴ “The Genesis of Our Future,” 2013. Available: http://urj.org/about/union/leadership/rabbijacobs/?syspage=article&item_id=109240 .

⁵ The concept of progressive revelation was advanced by some scholars of Judaism prior to Geiger, most notably Nachman Krochmal (1785-1840). However, Geiger, through his unparalleled scholarly and communal influence, popularized this view of revelation and brought it into the mainstream of budding “Reform” theology. See Meyer’s *Response to Modernity* p. 155 and the “Modern Jewish Philosophy” section of the “Revelation” essay in *Encyclopedia Judaica*.

individual spirits by the power that fills everything.”⁶ In other words, revelation is an ongoing relationship, rather than a singular event, and it continues to this day.

Geiger believed that Moses and the Prophets and the Rabbis were all parties to revelation. When those ancient figures communed with God, they wrote down what they experienced in the language of their time. Thus, the Torah and the Bible and the Talmud are all *products* of revelation, but they were not *directly revealed*; these texts are *not* the Word of God, as they are classically understood to be in Conservative and Orthodox Judaism.⁷ Rather, they are human creations, and we must try to understand them in their own contexts, acknowledging that they are fallible.

Now, here’s the most important part: Progressive revelation teaches – unlike pre-modern Judaism – that revelation did *not* stop in the past. Why would it? I’d wager that many of us here tonight have had what we’d call a moment of insight, an instant where we perceived something to be true without having to think about cause and effect. There are artists in the room who are inspired to express new ideas, and there are lawyers who have found new ways to make the laws of the land relevant in people’s lives. Parents discover new ways to connect with their children, and children are surprised to discover one day that they suddenly see the world like their parents. These are small moments of revelation, of accessing higher truth without being told what to do.

Reform Judaism teaches us that we can trust these moments of insight and inspiration. Our own spiritual discoveries are just as valid as the ones that came before us. We have the authority to guide our own practice without obligation to generations of centuries and millennia past. In other words, we must balance the truth we receive from the past with the truth we perceive in the present. This is the second major principle of Reform Judaism: *informed choice*.

This term was coined by the most prominent Reform theologian of the twentieth century, Eugene Borowitz, whom I had the honor to call my professor at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion.⁸ Reflecting on the human origin of Jewish

⁶ “Israel’s Native Energy” in *The Rise of Reform Judaism*, ed. W. Gunther Plaut (1963), p. 126.

⁷ Michael Meyer writes in *Response to Modernity*, “No less than for Samson Raphael Hirsch, faith was for Frankel the ultimate determinant of truth” (85).

⁸ Cf. “Commentary on the Principles for Reform Judaism” (2004) <http://ccarnet.org/rabbis-speak/platforms/commentary-principles-reform-judaism>: “After an abortive attempt to create a Platform based on papers written by a sampling of colleagues, Robert Kahn, President of the Conference, asked HUC-JIR Professor Eugene Borowitz to write a paper on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (1875). Reflecting its time, the Centenary Perspective spoke of the need to secure the survival of the Jewish people, but confidently outlined what the Reform Movement had taught the Jewish world in its hundred years, and called on Reform Jews confront the differently perceived claims of Jewish tradition by “exercising their individual autonomy, choosing and creating on the basis of commitment and knowledge.” It led to the phrase “informed choice” which along with “autonomy” became the watchwords of Reform Judaism.” Michael Meyer, in

thought and practice, Borowitz wrote, “Understanding the essential humanity of Jewish ritual endows us with the right to decide which traditional acts we shall still do or not do. More excitingly, it empowers us to create the new rites needed to express better our present-day Jewishness.”⁹ In other words, Torah may be wrong, Talmud may be wrong, even your rabbis’ sermons may be wrong, believe it or not – because each of them was written by human beings. Therefore, we have every right to determine whether to follow their advice or not.

Now, this doesn’t mean we can do whatever we want. Remember, our holy texts of the past were truly records of divine encounter, so we can’t simply toss them in the trash. Yes, we have the authority and autonomy to *choose* – but we must do so only after we are *informed*. We approach the holy texts of our tradition with respect, and as we struggle to understand them, we may find that they are still relevant. If so, Judaism invites us to make them part of our daily lives. If not, we may in good conscience set them reverently aside.

You don’t have to keep kosher if you can justify what you *do* eat with sound reasoning. You don’t have to observe Shabbat as long as you’ve taken the time to consider the meaning of a day of rest before rejecting it. You don’t have to follow any particular Jewish practice or custom ... but you are encouraged to learn about them before turning away.

And this goes in the other direction, too; it’s not just about what you decide not to do but also what you decide to do. On Yom Kippur, we hear קוֹל דְּמַמָּה דְּקָה, the still, small voice that confronted the prophet Elijah with the powerful spiritual question: *Why are you here?* (I Kings 19:13). Reform Judaism asks us this same question: Why are you here at Kol Nidre services? If you had a special meal before services, why? And if you are fasting today, again: why? It’s not enough to say “Because I always have” or “because it’s tradition.” Reform Judaism wants us to go further, to be able to say, “This is important to me, and here’s *why*.”

It might sound exhausting, reflecting so intently on the decisions we make both large and small. And you’re right – it is! The Reform way is *not* the easy way. It pushes us to learn constantly, to always try to become more informed in order to make wiser choices, more ethical choices, choices that expand our awareness and improve the world. This is, ultimately, the mission of Reform Judaism.

personal correspondence (Oct. 1, 2014), likewise confirms that “informed choice” is “certainly a postwar expression, which I associate with Eugene Borowitz.”

⁹ *Liberal Judaism* (1984) p. 411. Borowitz continues, “The strongly positive attitude to ritual I reflect in these pages is not intended to infringe on your personal freedom to choose for yourself. I am not writing to tell you what you *must* do but only to help you make **your own informed, conscientious choice**” (emphasis added).

It's up to us to make our informed choices *mean* something to others and to ourselves. Every ritual, every moral, every action should point toward redemption ... and if we conclude that a practice or teaching is pointing the wrong way, it's upon us to change it. That's the message of progressive revelation and informed choice. That's the message that Abraham Geiger shared with his colleagues Samson Raphael Hirsch and Zacharias Frankel. That's why we gather tonight to observe the Day of Atonement, a day dedicated to thoughtful reflection on how we can reform our own lives to come closer to our spiritual aspirations.

As the music, prayers, and intentions of Yom Kippur cleanse our spirits and guide our hearts, let us add to them the stirring words of the father of our movement. Abraham Geiger speaks to each of us when he writes:

“Beloved pilgrim, do not continually look backwards, ... do not continually keep your eyes on the past. ... You must draw from the living present and labor in it. If we do not labor and produce from the innate spirit within us as it is linked with the spirit of Revelation, who shall...?”¹⁰

The spiritual quest of Reform Judaism is upon us, each of us, to grow and change, to reform inwardly and outwardly in the new year.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם - Blessed is the Eternal One, the God of Abraham.

Amen.

¹⁰ Quoted in Harvey Hill's "Science of Reform: Abraham Geiger and the *Wissenschaft des Judentum*" in *Modern Judaism* (2007) 27 (3), p. 341.