

wish to draw nearer to Judaism.

**What impact have 30 years of outreach had on the movement and its synagogues?**

**Kahn:** We better understand the heart of the stranger — including the Jewish stranger. We have made strong efforts to welcome and support diversity in our synagogues because that is where the real work of outreach and membership happens — every day, face-to-face bringing the “outsider,” inside.

**Olitzky:** Outreach has transformed the way large segments of the Jewish community look at those who have intermarried — from problem to challenge to opportunity. Now it’s more about raising Jewish children. The movement disproves the canard that intermarried families “dilute” Judaism, because the movement has most successfully welcomed the intermarried while simultaneously moving toward more ritual practice and Jewish spirituality.

**How do you respond to critics of outreach who contend that limited Jewish resources would be better allocated to strengthening the core rather than reaching out to the periphery?**

**Olitzky:** I like to quote Rabbi Harold

Schulweis who is fond of saying “either/or” questions are not good for the Jewish community. Both are important and today’s Jewish community has adequate resources to build core institutions with innovative programs that reach the periphery. Besides, the so-called “core” and “periphery” are porous. We may be in the core today and the periphery tomorrow. Our own family members may not be with us in the core — should we abandon them? Walls

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*We may be in the core today and the periphery tomorrow.*

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don’t work anymore in American society; we need ramps into meaning and values so that people choose to be with us.

**Kahn:** We can do both. The programs we’ve developed for non-Jews have proved invaluable to tens of thousands of born Jews who are also seeking knowledge of their tradition. We do not have to make decisions about who can be welcomed and who must stay behind. Like Moses, we travel with a “mixed multitude” and are the richer for it.

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## Doing God’s Work in the Public Square

*Peter Knobel*

Reform Judaism is inexorably linked with liberalism in the United States. Tolerance, the defense of the rights of minorities against the tyranny of the majority, and the building of effective institutions are key features as is its commitment to providing for the basic needs of the human being and conditions that sustain and enhance human life. Religiously, Reform Judaism identifies with two prominent narratives: The story of creation in which humankind is created in the image of God, and the Exodus narrative that identifies the liberation from Egyptian bondage as a paradigm for human liberation.

Liberalism supports freedom of conscience and makes religion a private matter. It defends the free flow of ideas in society. It speaks with the voice of secularism and it has difficulty invoking the voice of God. This establishes a conflict with religion’s claim to speak for God. Religion only speaks for God when it defends a pluralism of ideas. Reform Judaism is passionate about freedom; ironically this often means that Reform Jews perceive religion as irrelevant

because the ideas of freedom and dignity do not seem to need religious sanction to be compelling. In addition, Jewish texts, rather than being the source to support these ideas often seem like an afterthought.

Religious vocabulary is difficult for many Reform Jews because it is often identified with the voices of intolerance emanating from the “religious right.” Ironically, when a television news show wishes to discuss gay and lesbian marriage, it often pits a liberal politician like Barney Frank against a conservative Christian like the late Jerry Falwell. The media does not perceive of liberal religion as speaking with the same authority as conservative religion.

When reading Jewish tradition and text through the lens of liberalism, Reform Judaism offers a powerful and inspiring critique of society and promotes a vision of a world of justice and compassion. Reform Judaism identifies *kedusha*, holiness, with ethics and interprets sacred texts that speak with a xenophobic or non-egalitarian voice as not representing the Divine will. It is to the

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prophets that Reform Judaism turns when it is looking for a model of activism on behalf of the oppressed and disenfranchised.

Jews, well represented in liberal causes, are often unaware or consciously deny that the source of their liberal values is Judaism. The establishment of the Religious Action Center in Washington was and is a profound statement that Reform Judaism is committed to translating religious values into societal norms. The separation of religion and state protects the right of the liberal religious voice to be heard. Politics is the means for enshrining our values in legislation. It is in our profound commitment to democracy that Reform Judaism has entered into the arena of lobbying and coalition building. Liberalism has both made this possible and at the same time made it difficult. If religion is a private matter, what is its place in the public square? The mandate to bring the voice of Judaism from the pulpit to the halls of Congress is dismissed by many liberal Jews as eroding the wall of separation and imposing a religious view on society. The challenge, then, is to demonstrate that our conception of society is derived from the call of God to Abraham and Sarah. "Called by God" is a difficult concept for Reform Jews, but this belief — that we are doing God's work — is essential to the religious nature of Reform Judaism.

In his book *Freedom's Power: The True Force*

*of Liberalism*, Paul Stark reminds us that religious faith in a liberal society is imposed from within. True liberal religion is tolerant of difference and makes for a cooperative social order. Reflecting on Stark's book, Stanley Fish points out that this can potentially eviscerate religion, defining a religion as extremist if it seeks to impose its worldview on society. The challenge of liberalism for Reform Judaism is: Does it have a mission to impose on society through democratic means?

Reform Judaism's recent turn toward spirituality and inwardness is a reflection of its discomfort with a religion of social and political activism, borne out of a profound distrust of fundamentalist religions that do horrific things in the name of God. Liberal Judaism argues that the antidote to fundamentalism is not secularism; it is a liberal religion that speaks in the name of a God in whose image each human is created, who assigned to humankind the role of being stewards of God's creation, and who demands that we love the stranger as we love ourselves. Reform Judaism's true contribution to American society is to speak truth to power, to eschew self-righteousness, and to never confuse its mission or its project as anything less than a Divine mandate to repair the world. Liberalism has given us opportunities to be religious activists in a pluralist democratic society. 

## Reform's Torah

Daniel G. Zemel

Reform Judaism is the most integrationist of the religious denominations — open, welcoming, religiously nonjudgmental. We are knit into the fabric of American culture. We do not promote separation. Our children go primarily to public schools and this is not,

our mainstream — interfaith, gay, transgender, uncertain.

The mainstream of Reform Judaism is a torrent of differences flowing in many directions, but all agreeing on certain basic principles, including the holiness of human life and the fundamental right of freedom for all humanity. We are Jewishly committed religious liberals who study, pray, and live our faith every day.

The current trend in the Reform "movement," dating back to the 1960s or 1970s, is toward more Hebrew, ritual, and traditional customs, fueled by the ubiquitous contemporary American search for "meaning." There is an implicit assumption that for Jews that meaning is found in more Jewish tradition. Teaching and encouraging our congregants how to build booths on Succot, tie the proper knots for their and their children's *talesim*, or even refrain from mundane errands as a way

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*American Jews can and should be today's prophets.*

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on the whole, a problem. We see ourselves as fully American and fully Jewish.

We welcome people who lack Hebrew knowledge, familiarity with traditional customs, and certainty as to religious belief. If someone is seeking to try out or return to Jewish identity, Reform Judaism is a place to begin. If a person is outside the traditional mainstream, he or she could well be within