

Reform Judaism: An Outsider's Perspective

Neil Gillman

My first professional encounter with the Reform movement began over a decade ago with a phone call from Barbara Shuman who was then the lay-chair responsible for running the movement's summer study *kallot* — five days of intensive study and prayer on university campuses in different parts of the country. After telling me that she had read *Sacred Fragments*, she invited me to teach at the upcoming *kallah* at Brandeis University.

I vividly recall that exchange. "I'd love to come," I replied. "But you know, we're Reform." "I'm still interested." "It's a UAHC program." "I realize that." I saw what was happening and took the lead. "Do I have to drive on Shabbat?" "Of course not, it's all on

movement will eventually become."

On a scholar-in-residence weekend, I am typically asked to lead the Torah study that precedes the Shabbat morning service. The contrast between the sparkling exchanges that take place around the table at Torah study and the deadly pallor of the sanctuary service that follows — typically a bar or bat mitzvah "by invitation only" service (and the Torah study folk long gone home) — is painful.

But the davening at the *kallot* is a joy — all in Hebrew with glorious music. Almost everyone wears a head covering and most don a *talit*. Here and there, I see participants wearing *tefillin*, and am, invariably, asked to teach someone how to put them on. But this movement, which has stressed informed individual decision-making, often has its worshippers reciting liturgies that the editors of the prayerbook have amended because they have decided that modern Jews cannot believe the traditional formulae. And the Torah reading is a burden. The chanting becomes a recitation — with widely varying degrees of skill — of a few verses selected randomly from the weekly portion, again without explanation. These are missed educational opportunities.

This past summer the study *kallot* were reduced to one, and I gather they are an endangered species. Why can this movement, demographically the largest in the American Jewish community, only muster 75 students for an intensive study experience? (I am, of course, painfully aware that my own Conservative movement does not have even one!) Also discouraging is the chasm that persists between the elite and the "masses" who attend Shabbat morning services. There is no "trickle down" and that service has become the prisoner of the bar/bat mitzvah crowd — not an unfamiliar pattern. What about the davening needs of the Torah study people?

The good news is that the movement is returning to Hebrew and to traditional ritual forms; *Mishkan T'filah* is a major step in that direction. Hopefully, the strengths of the elite group may eventually be felt throughout the movement. Religious movements are cumbersome. In so many significant areas, Reform has turned on a dime. That can be a source of gratification and should also serve as a model for the rest of us.

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campus." "Do I have to eat non-kosher food?" "No. There are veggie options at all meals." "So what's the problem?" "Well, we're Reform! We use *Gates of Prayer*." "I understand, but is there a problem if I put on *talit* and *tefillin* and use my own prayerbook?"

That *kallah* was but the first in a series of *kallot*, weekends at Reform congregations, and now, a stint as scholar-in-residence at the Skirball Center for Adult Jewish Learning at Manhattan's Temple Emanu-El (where most but not all of my students are affiliated with Reform Judaism).

I teach in these settings as I teach adult education classes in Conservative congregations. In both cases I use the same material that I use with my undergraduates at JTS. My students have a solid base of Jewish knowledge and they handle theological issues with a degree of sophistication — because they handle complex intellectual issues in their professional lives. In the recent *kallah*, focusing on Abraham Joshua Heschel, I was not surprised to see that most of the students were familiar with his writings; they care, they read, and they are engaged.

These students are the elite of the Reform lay community. A rabbi at a *kallah* made that point explicitly: "You men and women" — there were about 75 of them in the room — "are what we hope the rest of the Reform

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