

The Continuing Blessings of Classical Reform Judaism

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Two weeks ago, on a night when our worship was “Classical style,” I offered a sermon about the changes that have come to Reform Judaism in recent decades. Tonight, as we worship in a contemporary style, from *Mishkan T’filah*, I am speaking about the continuing blessings of Classical Reform Judaism.

The scheduling could seem ironic – or worse, nonsensical. If we have monthly Classical Reform services, shouldn’t I be speaking about its beauties on one of those nights? And wouldn’t a congregation like tonight’s rather here justification and support for services in this style? Shouldn’t the new rabbi seek to appease each segment of the community before I ask anybody to be more accepting of views they don’t naturally share?

Congregation B’nai Israel, though, is not American political life. Thank God. The last month’s Washington antics were worsened by the “echo chamber,” as pundits call Americans’ preference for news outlets and opinion pieces that propound views they already hold. If liberals only watch MSNBC or read the New York Times – or if Conservatives only watch Fox or read, well, the editorial page of the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette – none of us is going to learn very much.

In our own situation, my hope is that, over time, those who particularly appreciate Classical Reform Judaism will come to welcome changes. And tonight, my prayer is that congregants who may be tempted to dismiss or deride the ways of Reform’s past will come to greater appreciation of the heritage of this congregation and others.

In the late 1990’s, the President of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, Rabbi Richard Levy, insisted on the abolition of the Pittsburgh Platform, the first great articulation of American Reform Judaism in 1885. He gathered our rabbinical organization in Pittsburgh once again in 1999 to adopt new “principles.”

That original Pittsburgh Platform was something of a Declaration of Independence for American Reform Jews. Those founding rabbis declared more than a few traditional rituals to be no longer relevant, dismissed as no more than “a system of training the Jewish people for its mission” in ancient Israel. The founders would accept in the modern world “only [Judaism’s] moral laws, and . . . only such ceremonies as elevate and sanctify our lives, but reject[ed] all such as are not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization.” The Platform further speaks of the Jewish people exclusively as a religious group, not granting any special holiness to the Land or the People of Israel.

Nobody could doubt that, by 1999, the views of Reform Rabbis – indeed, of most Reform Jews, had changed. At the same time, I was appalled by Rabbi Levy’s demand that the original Platform be abolished.

First, and most importantly, the Pittsburgh Platform had already been superseded – not once, but twice. The “Columbus Platform” of 1937 restored a sense of Jewish peoplehood to Reform Judaism, along with a burgeoning commitment to Zionism. The “Centenary Perspective” of 1976 called upon Reform Jews to reengage with traditional ritual, “choosing and creating on the basis of commitment and knowledge.”

More troubling to me than Rabbi Levy's call for a reform of Reform was an address by Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf, now of blessed memory. Rabbi Wolf was a giant of Reform Jewish intellect and a fierce fighter for social justice. He was also extraordinarily kind to me personally on numerous occasions, and I revere his memory. And yet, in Pittsburgh, in 1999, Rabbi Wolf lashed out at our Movement's founders. They had, in his mind, thrown out the proverbial baby with the bath water, the "baby" in this case being the deep meaning of traditional Jewish ritual; the "bath water" being ancient and medieval practices grounded in patriarchal sexism and prejudice. Rabbi Wolf's address, as I recall it, accused our Reform founders of having caused rampant assimilation, generations whose children and grandchildren would not perpetuate Judaism – and, the worst crime of all in the minds of many, leaving behind a Jewish ritual that had become cold and impersonal, not inspiring the Jewish soul.

Our patriarch Abraham, in tonight's Torah reading, is even more concerned about throwing babies out with bath water. He challenges God not to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, if doing so will "sweep away the innocent with the guilty." Perhaps our Reform founders did overreach. As the Reform rabbinate made clear in 1937 and 1976, as times changed, more "innocents," more "babies," if you will, were identified and saved: Jewish peoplehood, Zionism, and even more than a few traditional rituals.

But Classical Reform Judaism was not, and is not, all "bath water." Those who critique Classical Reform Judaism are dishonest if they reduce it to rejection of ritual and abandonment of critical aspects of the Covenant. Not every plank of the Pittsburgh Platform is "guilty," worthy of being swept away with the innocent.

Perhaps the greatest glory of Classical Reform Judaism was and is its commitment to social justice. The ultimate paragraph of the Pittsburgh Platform concludes: "[W]e deem it our duty to participate in the great task of modern times, to solve, on the basis of justice and righteousness, the problems presented by the contrasts [of rich and poor] and [the] evils of the present organization of society." The pursuit of social justice remains the hallmark of Reform Judaism. Whether it was protection of workers in sweatshops, the Civil Rights Movement, or the struggle for compassionate, comprehensive immigration reform and equal rights for gay, lesbians, and transgendered people today, Reform Judaism has been and remains on the front lines. We owe that legacy to those who shaped the Classical tradition.

Moreover, Classical Reform Judaism saved countless Jews for Judaism. Worship with decorum, English prayers, and sitting together as families in the synagogue, advances we take for granted, are the legacy of rabbis who realized that Jews would abandon our tradition for the baptismal font without an opportunity for modern Jewish worship.

To be sure, the definition of what is "modern" worship will change over time. The organ was a modern, popular instrument in the 19th Century. Last week, though, in an Installation service that was essentially not Classical Reform, you heard two of the great liturgical works of the Classical tradition. David Bauman sang and played *Shalom Rav* to a melody composed by a high-art Canadian Jewish composer. The music of the anthem, *Tzaddik Katamar*, was bequeathed to us by Louis Lewandowski, whose 19th Century artistry, composed for organ and choir, has inspired congregations of every stream of Judaism. This year, on the High Holy Days, we added a liturgical piece, *Retzei*, to the repertoire of our magnificent professional choir. Its composer is a contemporary Reform Cantor, Stephen Richards, writing in the style of Classical Reform Judaism. Congregants resonated to the piece, whether they typically prefer Classical Reform or the more contemporary style.

In 1999, new principles were adopted for Reform Judaism. I can't find much in the document with which to disagree. Ultimately, though, Rabbi Levy failed in his cherished endeavor: The Pittsburgh Platform of 1985, relegated to history long before Rabbi Levy came along, remains as vital to an understanding of Reform Judaism as does its 1999 successor. Classical Reform Judaism has not been abolished. Instead, the legacy of its founders remains in a Judaism that is alive and growing, ever changing and new.

Let us heed Abraham's call tonight. Just as God would not destroy the innocent with the guilty, so may we preserve those aspects of our Reform heritage that continue to bless us. Let Classical Reform Judaism continue to call upon us change the world on the basis of justice and righteousness. And let us ever praise our God, in English as in Hebrew, with reverence and majesty.

Amen.