



## Op-Ed: Reform Judaism must move beyond ‘personal choice’

By Leon A. Morris · May 12, 2011

SAG HARBOR, N.Y. (JTA) -- Change is afoot in American Reform Judaism. A new president of the Union for Reform Judaism has been selected. The movement has launched a series of nationwide public forums to discuss its future. Hundreds of Reform rabbis have endorsed a plan toward achieving greater efficiency in the movement's institutions.

Rethinking dues structures, using technology more effectively and sharing best practices are all worthy things to focus on for American Jewry's largest religious movement. But what Reform needs most is an ideological reorientation that seeks to close the enormous gap between its stated ideals and the conventional practice of its adherents. Toward that end, Reform needs to retire once and for all the phrase that has become synonymous with the movement itself: "personal choice."

No one today disputes the fact that the ultimate authority lies within the self. Each of us knows intuitively that we are free to make our own decisions about every area of our lives, chief among them our religious practice. Teachers from all denominations of Judaism appeal to notions of "relevance" and speak in terms of "personal meaning." Everyone acknowledges the supremacy of what Steven Cohen and Arnie Eisen coined as "the sovereign self" in their groundbreaking study "The Jew Within."

But trying to build a movement on the basis of this term is like trying to build a nation around the assertion that "it's a free country." Of course, we would say, but there is so much more that follows. A 21st century Reform Judaism can no longer afford to have "personal choice" as its core principle because it eclipses other more central Jewish values that are needed now more than ever. Rather, personal choice must be seen simply as a given and the starting point for a variety of commitments we make.

Personal choice is a seductive motto because it can confer a seemingly ideological veneer upon the most haphazard and unreflective religious decisions. Convenience can easily be masked as commitment. In addition, personal choice undermines the notion of standards of any sort, making anything defensible and everything an equally valid choice.

It is noteworthy that even the official standards of the Reform movement itself are routinely disregarded because "personal autonomy" trumps them. Volumes of thoughtful responsa and guides to Jewish practice, mostly unknown to Reform laypeople and too seldom consulted by the rabbis, gather dust in libraries because such literature is often at odds with a Reform Judaism for which personal choice is the central value.

Additionally, personal choice diminishes the significant role of the larger community. Many of us affiliate with religious institutions out of a desire to overcome a sense of isolated individualism. People increasingly are looking to communities of faith in order to be a part of something larger than themselves. Many of us are even willing to expand our own practices or adapt our own proclivities in order to participate within a larger community that gives us meaning and purpose.

We understand that belonging comes with expectations and responsibilities that emerge from those relationships that help us

to mark time, to celebrate and to give to others. And any forward-looking religious movement must come to terms with the fact that the religious communities experiencing the most growth and the greatest dynamism today are those that make real demands upon its members.

Finally, personal choice may sound as though it is predicated on a high level of knowledge to be able to make such decisions. But the impetus for learning is greatest when one feels claimed by what one studies, and when there is a degree of engagement that joins the hand with the heart. While impossible for we post-modern Jews to read a classic text without a “hermeneutic of suspicion,” we are unlikely to do much serious learning without an accompanying “hermeneutic of embrace.”

Put more simply, a disproportionate emphasis on personal choice has “dumbed down” our movement. While sometimes marketed as “informed choice,” this rarely has meant more than learning a snippet of a classic text about a particular issue rather than the kind of immersion and wholesale commitment that ongoing learning requires.

In general, we Reform Jews have not yet distinguished ourselves as sufficiently conversant with the vast literature of our biblical and rabbinic past. An increased commitment to Jewish study that leads to greater practice would build upon and greatly expand the many opportunities for “lifelong learning” that have flourished in Reform synagogues over the past two decades.

While the greatest success of the American Reform movement has been its ability to reach out to the most peripheral and unaffiliated Jews and bring them closer to Jewish life, it now needs to simultaneously build a committed core of learned and deeply engaged liberal Jews whose lives revolve around the Hebrew calendar and who are immersed in the study and application of Jewish texts.

While Reform has distinguished itself in its commitment to social justice, now it must meet the challenge of grounding those commitments within a broader religious life that joins together the ethical and the ritual, the global and the local, the societal (repairing the world) and the interpersonal (repairing oneself). And for all of Reform’s emphasis on creativity, an increased commitment to study and practice will deepen and expand the creative impulse, allowing for a flourishing of new commentaries, music, art and poetry.

If we can move personal choice from the very center of Reform Judaism, other more worthy and urgent Jewish values can take center stage. On both the ritual and the ethical spheres, we will make possible more meaningful engagement, increased creativity and deepened commitment.

A departure from “personal choice” as our motto will allow us to experience a richer, fuller liberal religious life -- one that is passionate, inspiring and moving, one that matters ultimately and allows “Reform Judaism” to mean so much more.

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