

## Reforming Our Ritual Lives

Rosh Hashanah 2009- 5770

Let me start with a simple question. What do you remember about Rosh Hashanah services 30 years ago? If that is too long a time then reflect back upon the first Rosh Hashanah service you can recall. Were they the same, similar or extensively different from what you have been experiencing here? Are you the same person you were 10, 20 or 30 years ago? Are all your values the same? Do you hold strongly to the same beliefs you had then? Do you observe the same rituals now that you observed then?

For many of us the answers to these questions are both yes and no. Very few of us are exactly the same as we were in the past. There is a good chance that many of our values have remained constant but at the same time, especially since I am addressing a congregation of Reform Jews, one would suspect that some of our ritual practices have changed while other traditions have remained constant.

For example, we might still believe that it is important to fast on Yom Kippur, kindle Chanukah lights or participate in a Passover Seder. Yet some people like me have adapted and changed our Seder rituals, such as using a different haggadah text, placing an orange on the seder plate to express a value of inclusiveness for all Jews or filling a Miriam's cup of water to

recognize both Miriam the prophet as well as the role of women in Jewish life. Others may have added Shabbat rituals to their weekly life and still others may have stopped doing rites they once deemed as important.

Our changes in behavior may reflect belief or faith and again they may simply be a matter of simple action done with little thought. While some of us believe in *God*, in whatever way we choose to interpret that word, others struggle with the question of *God's* existence and still others totally reject such a belief in any context.

One of the great gifts of Reform Judaism is that it provides certain levels of autonomy in determining how we shape our Jewish lives. There are acceptable variations or discrepancies between ritual practices, held beliefs and the nature of our faith. That does not mean it is a free for all where anything goes. But it does mean that within certain parameters, choices can be made. The wide variations of belief in *God* [or not] generally do not rule one out of the umbrella of Reform Judaism. We also understand that Reform Judaism does not ask us whether there is Shabbat or holidays within our tradition but rather how we frame our celebration of these days.

Reform philosophy also attempts not to be judgmental in regards to the ritual practices of others. Some of us might say the motzi each time we eat a meal and others might not. Some of us may observe some forms of kashrut in our lives or in our homes while others may not find meaning in those guidelines. There are also many levels of observance at Passover and the rituals of a Seder. But I truly doubt that anyone here would accept a practice at a Seder where we say the motzi over a ham sandwich. Most of us would judge that to be not only inappropriate but just plain wrong. This points out to us that even in a liberal context of progressive Judaism most of us have borderlines that determine what is acceptable and what is not. How did we get to the perspective that Judaism is shaped beyond the strict interpretation of the Written and Oral Torah?

We can see some of this in the development of Reform Judaism and especially in its American expression to which we are the heirs. Some of the foundational philosophy was based on the teachings of Moses Mendelssohn, an 18<sup>th</sup> century German Jew who entered the realm of modernity and enlightenment while trying to maintain his Jewish heritage. He wrote that Jews needed to "adopt the mores and constitution of the country in which you find yourself, but be steadfast in upholding the religion of your fathers,

too. Bear both burdens as well as you can." It was extremely difficult for many to carry out the words of Mendelssohn and preserve an Orthodox observance of Judaism. Of his own 6 children only two retained their Jewish identities.

In order to prevent the mass exodus of enlightened German Jews from their religion, Reform Judaism started to adapt the "religion of your fathers" more in keeping with the general style of German life of that time. That same process has been part of the development of Reform Judaism here in this country where Reform has flowered into the largest stream of Judaism today.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise was the most important individual in the formation of the institutions of Reform Judaism here in the United States. He founded the Union of American Hebrew Congregation, now the URJ, the Union of Reform Judaism, in 1873. It still remains the organizational structure for congregations in the Reform movement. Other organizational models he initiated were the Hebrew Union College to train American rabbis in 1875 and the Central Conference of American Rabbis in 1889. He also introduced choral singing as well as Confirmation to replace

Bar Mitzvah as early changes from the more orthodox model of Judaism that existed in his time.

His vision was to create a new Judaism that reflected the new American entity in which he and his fellow Central European Jews could entrust to the next generations of American born and educated Jews. He thought there could be a unique American Judaism that was embraced by all. This vision was framed in an environment and time when the influence of the Eastern European Orthodox was minimal. Additionally, many of the original Sephardic community which predated the Central European immigrants had a more adaptive way of living within the culture of the general society even though the rabbis held to halachic principles. Wise believed they would easily accept his point of view.

It did not take many years for Wise's vision to be shattered at one event as his Reform perspective was deemed inappropriate to a significant number of Sephardic and Eastern European Jews. The occasion was the celebration of the first graduating class of the Hebrew Union College in 1883. These were the first strictly American trained rabbis who would begin to serve the growing American Jewish population. (Although Isaac Leeser established the Maimonides College in Philadelphia in 1867 to train rabbis it failed and closed its doors by 1869.)

There are variations of the story as to who created the menu and authorized it for the celebration on that day. Some claim it was the caterer. Others believe that Rabbi Wise was involved. A third thought was that members of the Cincinnati Jewish community planned the event to honor the newly ordained rabbis. This event is referred to as the "Tref(a) Banquet."

This was a time when it was difficult to get kosher food and the bigger question of how to be a true American, who is Jewish was on the minds of many. This was also the beginning years of the massive immigration coming from Eastern Europe. This is a fine example of crossing traditional lines of Jewish observance in trying to adapt to the modern American culture of the day.

To get a fuller understanding of what caused the uproar I'd like to share the menu of that banquet. This event was at a time when more formalized dining for grand events was the norm. The Jewish community was struggling to be accepted in mainstream American society; a goal some would say was not reached until post-WWII. Cincinnati Jewry was also attempting to be seen as sophisticated as East Coast Jewry. We should also note that there were very different attitudes towards pork products and

shell fish as well as the mixing of meat and dairy. There were mistakes in the spelling of numerous French words which made parts of the menu difficult to translate. [I'd like to thank Janine Fried for some assistance in translating and interpreting the menu.] Furthermore, there was little concern for kosher and non-kosher wine.

1. First course: Little neck clams on the half shell w/ Amontillado sherry
2. Soup: Consommé Royal w/ Sauterne
3. The next course called "Poissons which translates as fish seems to be off a bit: Filet of beef (not exactly a creature of the waters) with mushrooms, soft shell crabs American style with Duchess Potatoes and shrimp salad w/ St Julien ( a Bordeaux)
4. Sweet breads with peas French style w/ "Deidsheimer"
5. A course entitled "Relevee" which might refer to a small portion: Chicken Viennese (fried) with asparagus sauce and potatoes vinaigrette and Pate of creamed frogs and cauliflower (Some believe that to be frogs legs.) w/ "Punch Romain"
6. Roast: Pigeon in a pastry shell Tyrolean style, perhaps a pigeon pie and salad w/"G.H. Mumm Extra Dry" champagne
7. Hors D'Oevres (at a seemingly strange place in the meal): Some type of poultry in a small pastry cup, with olives, something called "sardelles" and a tomato-mayonaise item

8. Sweets: Ice Cream and assorted and ornamented cakes

9. Followed by a variety of cheeses and fruits with black coffee and "Martell Cognac"

I hope you appreciate that I am not delivering this sermon on Yom Kippur. Yet in all seriousness I want you to think how you would react if you heard today that this was the menu for a major Jewish event? What would you think if a Reform congregation or organization served these foods at a banquet? My guess is that even though the overwhelming number of Reform Jews do not observe strict kashrut, this list of culinary delicacies would seem somehow inappropriate in an official setting, although many of us might choose these foods in a private setting, except perhaps the frog pate in cream and cauliflower.

Here at Temple Sinai certain religious practices have changed over the years. When I arrived it was actually a discussion as to whether or not we should offer tallitot to worshippers at our services. Then it took a few years before an appropriate cabinet for the tallitot was created. We have changed our policy towards Kashrut in recent years. Not only were pork products and shell fish excluded from the Temple but after much discussion and wrestling we established that dairy and meat products would not be

served together at public events open to all congregants. People still have the freedom to offer such combinations at private parties.

It is not only Reform Judaism that reflects and struggles with changes in practice. Just recently Conservative rabbis have established new requirements on kashrut insuring ethical treatment of workers and appropriate protection against extensive animal cruelty.

During this summer a discussion has emerged also in the circles of Conservative Judaism in regards to their desire to be more welcoming to intermarried couples who choose to affiliate in their congregations. A letter (July 17, 2009) was sent in response to an article in "The Jewish Week," a New York City newspaper entitled "Conservatives End Push to Convert Intermarrieds" (July 10, 2009) by Dr. Raymond B. Goldstein the International President and Rabbi Steven C. Wernick, the Executive Vice President and CEO of United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. They maintained that "For years Conservative congregations have welcomed non-Jews and not-yet- Jews, although we continue to maintain the desirability of conversion." They continued stating the desire of the movement is to reach out to intermarried families with open arms, acknowledging that while

conversion is a "preferred outcome," it is not always possible. However they say that reaching out and welcoming these families is always possible. This differs from our own policies where we make no preference on our behalf that anyone converts. We welcome all as they come to us.

In reality I ponder on how many changes we can make before we destroy the essence of Judaism. This question of course is answered differently on a wide ranging spectrum from strict orthodoxy through the various streams and movements and even into the opinions of those who identify with their Judaism through Jewish humanism, culture or secular Zionism.

Are you aware that in the beginning of the 20th century there were Jewish organizations, such as socialist or communists that held Yom Kippur dances? I myself have suggested half joking that we have Tisha B'Av barbecues. Not out of disrespect for the destruction of the Temples but acknowledging that modern Judaism could never have developed if the Temple sacrificial cult remained. What has also taken place is that this holy day which was almost never commemorated at Reform synagogues or summer camps is now getting much more attention in some locales. But if we discuss

various changes I still believe we would not suggest bread at a seder. That still remains over the line.

Other changes that the movement has confronted over the years are such things as egalitarian participation and women rabbis. That is now a fundamental given in Reform circles. We have also seen changes in the areas of same sex marriage ceremonies, patrilineal descent and ritualized interfaith marriages.

Any one of us might wrestle with the principles of Judaism we hold dear and want to preserve even against the pressures of a changing world around us. This is especially true for rabbis who are serious in the ongoing process of Reform Judaism. Certainly there are times when adaptations, reforms and even changes are deemed appropriate. But I imagine as I stated before, that all of us have lines we would not cross both in terms of ethical mitzvot and ritual mitzvot.

Additionally, Reform Jews cherish a sense of autonomy in making Jewish decisions regarding practice and faith. Some of that autonomy lies within the informed and educated choices made by each individual. Other choices are guided by our synagogues, our rabbis and our greater movement.

As a Reform rabbi I am continually wrestling with decisions regarding traditions and practices. What are those areas that we need to foster? What will be best in the lives of our congregants and still preserve the Jewish future? How will we create the next generation of Jews; not only those born into our community but those who are committed to insuring its future? How will we continue to be connected to the entire people of Israel?

Perhaps the most difficult issue for me over the years has been the question of whether or not it is Jewishly permissible to perform an interfaith wedding. When I started my years in the rabbinate, in the mid-1970's the answer seemed clear. Over the years I have wrestled with this question in many different situations. However, time after time, in my inner core I felt I could not perform such a ceremony. This has not always been an easy choice but it was my sincere belief. While many in this congregation disagreed with this position from the day I was hired in 1986 I still had support including the position of the Rochester Board of Rabbis. Additionally the board of trustees, even when a majority might have preferred another choice still showed me great respect and deference to allow me to continue my position.

This has been the one ritual decision I have struggled with the most over the years and still do to this moment. When we interviewed assistant rabbis in the past they needed to know that this was a decision that had to be adhered to at Temple Sinai.

The usual arguments have been debated internally. Do we drive our young adults away from Judaism? Are we creating families which within a generation will have even a greater ambivalence to Judaism and the Jewish people? For over 2,000 years these marriages were frowned upon in our culture and yet here in the freedom of the United States, the percentages have risen to 50% or more. Some now see the most important element resulting from these marriages as being whether or not the couple will raise a next generation of Jewish children.

Please listen very carefully as I state a new position in regards to this ritual. While I still do not feel comfortable doing such ceremonies and I will not perform them myself, I am allowing the other rabbi serving this congregation, in this case Rabbi Sapowith, the freedom to follow her own conscience. After extensive discussion with her and knowing her position on this matter, she will now officiate at some interfaith weddings. The couples will have to agree to establish a Jewish home and raise their children as

Jews. She may have other requirements in regards to learning. There will be no co-officiation with other non-Jewish clergy. She will set her own standards for these ceremonies and therefore will not fulfill every request that comes her way.

This is a new development not only at Temple Sinai but for the entire Rochester Jewish community. It involves ritual practice that one should not call good or bad. Even when not performing a ceremony no value judgment was ever made towards the couple or the family, it was only a Jewish ritual decision. Yet it is one that is still of great concern to me and is debated in the progressive Jewish world and within my heart. This new step provides one more option in fostering Jewish life in our community.

As we enter this year, 5770, our commitment to the future of our congregation and the Jewish people is first and foremost in our minds. May we all act to strengthen our community even as we are respectful of the religious variations we practice in our Jewish lives. Hopefully, the informed decisions we all make in shaping our practices will lead to a flourishing Jewish future for us in Rochester and wherever these new families establish their homes. May we be blessed as we go from strength to strength.