# The Essence of Community Within Reform Judaism

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# THESIS DIGEST

The difficulty of defining the essence of the Reform Jewish community is due to the lack of a cogent understanding of the term "Jewish community" through time and the fact that Reform Judaism as a liberal religious system itself lacks for an official definition.

In the course of Jewish history, different forms of Judaism spawned different forms of community, each with a different set of assumptions that could be made of its members; in this, each Jewish community necessarily possessed a discrete essence. In light of the confusion which surrounds the significance of these communities' respective essences, we no longer possess a clear understanding of the term "Jewish community." This in spite of the fact that the term is used flippantly and all the time.

In particular doubt is that to which the term "Reform Jewish community" refers. Where an authoritative definition of Reform Judaism has gone lacking, neither has an official definition been given to the Reform Jewish community. And in the absence of such a definition, the essence of the Reform Jewish community is in doubt and the term itself goes to naught.

By exploring the essence of six significant Jewish communal systems in addition to that of the Reform Jewish community, this thesis attempts to dispel some of this confusion. The conclusions of this thesis address the nature of Reform Judaism's communal structure and the assumptions that can be made about those who identify with the Reform Jewish community.

# The Essence of Community Within Reform Judaism

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# INTRODUCTION

"Wherever Judaism has come to live, in whatever environment it has found itself placed, it has managed in some way to adapt itself to the life which its people were forced to live as citizens of that land day by day. In consequence, in the different countries in which Jews found themselves living in the course of their centuries-long history, they evolved types of Judaism which, while agreeing in their bases . . . , nonetheless, differed from each other in outward appearance and practice in much the same measure as the civilizations or cultures of these various lands differed from each other. These various forms of Judaism had far more in common with each other than they had differences to distinguish them; and yet the differences were quite as vital and characteristic as were the fundamental points of contact; and to understand all Judaism correctly we dare not disregard the differences and consider only that which was common."[1]

With these words serving as a guide, this thesis will attempt to explore that which is both common to and distinct among the essence of communal structures within various forms of Judaism. By definition, differing forms of Judaism spawned different Jewish communities; the communities of no less variety than their forms. The differences among these communities are quite as vital and characteristic as are their fundamental points of contact. And it is in the light of these diverse forms of Judaism, as well as in the light of their attendant Jewish communities, that the Jewish world today grapples with

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[1] Julian Morgenstern, "The Training of the Modern Rabbi," Central Conference of American Rabbis Yearbook (1922), p. 4.

defining what is meant by the term "Jewish community."

The difficulty of defining the Jewish community, let alone the essence of a given Jewish community -- even for a Jewish community which seeks to define itself -- is due to the lack of a consistent understanding of the meaning of Jewish community through time; even as historic Jewish communities have had far more in common with one another than they have had differences to distinguish them.

The task is made all the greater for liberal Jewish communities -- the Reform Jewish community in particular. The problem is particularly acute for the Reform Jewish community as the Reform Jewish religion lacks for an official definition. Nonetheless, the Reform Jewish community is a recognizable religious and social entity, and is oft acknowledged to be the stream of contemporary Judaism with which most American Jews identify.

Due to the fact that Reform Judaism has never been officially defined, any and all efforts to define the essence of the Reform Jewish community are at their best controversial, and at their least, self-serving. Where an official definition of Reform Judaism goes lacking, neither can there be an official definition given the Reform Jewish community.

And yet, in spite of its lacking an official definition, it is clear that the Reform Jewish community is one of the most significant and innovative Jewish communities in the world today. Indeed, the reader him- or herself may well identify with the Reform Jewish community and therein find

religious fulfillment. And yet, in spite of what any one of us may believe to be true with regard to the essence of the community, in the absence of an official definition which reveals Reform Judaism's and therein the Reform Jewish community's essence for all to see, there can be no true knowledge of this community, neither by others nor by its own members. Such nescience can only be harmful as Reform Judaism struggles with the problem of creativity in a world rapidly changing, ever rushing toward novelty.

This thesis will attempt to redress this problem; by exploring that which "Jewish community" has meant to different persons at different times, this thesis will posit a definition of the essence of community within Reform Judaism. This thesis will define the Reform Jewish community's essence by first attempting to understand the nature and meaning of the term "Jewish community" in general -- both in a philosophical and an historical context. And then, having once reached a satisfactory understanding of the nature and meaning of the term "Jewish community" within the historical frame of Judaism, this thesis will turn its attentions from Jewish communal structures qua community, to the communal structure and self-definition of the Reform Jewish community in particular.

In seeking knowledge of the Reform Jewish community, it will be necessary to arrive first at a working definition of Jewish community and only then of Reform Judaism; for only with such definitions in hand, can one expect to address the essence of the community which identifies itself with

Reform Judaism. Toward this end, particular attention will be paid to six Jewish communal structures: the communal structures of Pentateuchal, Prophetic, and Orthodox Judaism, and the communal structures proffered by Ahad Ha'am, Mordecai Kaplan, and Alvin Reines.

From the vantage points provided by these six Jewish communal structures, a discrete definition of the Reform Jewish community's essence -- as well as the implications of this communal definition for all who would be identified as Reform Jews -- will be broached.

# CHAPTER 1

To enter into a discussion around the term "Jewish community," one must understand what is meant by the terms "Jewish" and "community." In the following chapters, a definition of both terms will be sought and an exploration of Jewish communal structures will be undertaken. This exploration will seek to merge both an historical and religious understanding of the terms. To this end, the idea of "Jewish community" will be explored.

This culturally pregnant term "Jewish community" has been employed throughout Jewish history to describe the specific religious and communal structures that ~~have~~ defined that which collectives of Jews have shared in common. And these definitions of Jewish community have oft been laden with authoritarian overtones. Interestingly, within the disciplined context of philosophy, however, the term "community" is used loosely; and then to describe any sort of relationship common to two or more individuals.[2] It is this philosophical definition of community that this thesis shall employ. A community is a relationship common to two or more individuals; and a Jewish community is a relationship common to two or more Jews.

The term "community" is also employed by philosophers to denote a particular human group or society; and it is used to refer to organizational

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[2]Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology, "Community."

systems.[3] In the religious and culturally specific context of the Jews, the term "community" has been used to describe both the shared beliefs, practices and ideals around which Jews have formed communal systems and too the organizational structures of the same. Jewish communities are at once many splendored and highly organized.

As a result of the diffuse realities of history, geographic locales and political situations in which the Jewish People have lived, Jews have been forced to fashion communities that necessarily varied one from another. The historian Ellis Rivkin ascribes the wide variety of Jewish communal structures to that which he terms Judaism's "unity principle," namely that each successive communal form within Jewish history represents a solution to the problems posed by changing historical circumstances.[4] "Jewish history gives evidence," Rivkin writes, "not of the triumph of a single form, belief, or set of practices, but [rather] of the proliferation of many forms, beliefs, and practices -- as many as [communal] survival necessitated."[5] And as Rivkin suggests in his book The Shaping of Jewish History, the Jewish People's commitment to unity does not end with unity, rather it ends with diversity.[6]

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[3] Ibid.

[4] Ellis Rivkin, The Shaping of Jewish History. (New York: Chas. Scribner's Sons, 1971) p. xviii.

[5] Ibid., p. xx

[6] Ibid., p. xviii

And thus the attendant misunderstanding around what is meant by "Jewish community."

Rivkin posits that, without exception, the definition and structure unique to every Jewish community to date has been a response to the wider culture within which the Jews of these communities found themselves. To illustrate the point, Rivkin writes, "in virtually every [age], Jews fashioned forms and structures of bewildering variety,... [each an] ... individualistic response to changing historical circumstances."[7] Indeed, Rivkin notes, the unity principle has been so successful that, Jews throughout the world today enjoy a wide variety of communal identities. . . Among them, religious, humanistic, secular and nationalistic Judaisms.

Let us explore the essence of five of the more ideologically significant Jewish communal structures from Jewish history: (1) the Pentateuchal religious community, (2) the Prophetic community, (3) the Orthodox Jewish community, and Jewish communities as envisaged by (4) Ahad Ha'am, and (5) Mordecai Kaplan; for by way of contrast, each will offer a degree of insight into the essence of community within Reform Judaism. A sixth communal structure, Alvin Reines' Polydox Jewish community, will be treated as well, for Reines' contribution to Jewish communal structures is radically new and grew out of his personal experiences within and his formal studies of Reform Judaism and the Reform Jewish community.

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[7] Ibid., p. xvii

The six communities and the members of these same communities are most oft referred to as "Jewish." This is appropriate, for the communities both identify (or identified) themselves within an unfolding chain of Jewish history.

We begin with the Pentateuchal and Prophetic Jewish communities. The Pentateuchal community dates to circa 2000-1700 BCE and is identified with such Biblical/Pentateuchal figures as the Patriarchs and Matriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Leah and Rachel and with Moses. These earliest paradigmatic members of the community are called "Hebrews" and not Jews. In fact, both the Pentateuchal and Prophetic communities predate the history of the term "Jew," and thus their members were never called Jews themselves. In these instances, the term Jew is an anachronism.

The general name for the members of the Pentateuchal community other than Hebrew; the name given those persons associated not with the Patriarchs, but with Moses, is "Israelite." And in the whole of the Pentateuch, the terms Hebrew and Israelite are the names given to the members of the Pentateuchal community, who at any time later in history would be called Jews the term "Jew" does not appear in the whole of the Bible.

The term Jew came into parlance late into what is referred to as the Prophetic period and only after the division of Israel's United Monarchy in 926 BCE. The United Monarchy of ancient Israel was established under the reign of King David in 998 BCE and it lasted until the death of David's son

King Solomon in 926 BCE. It is with the United Monarchy's division into two nations, Israel and Judah, that the first hint of the name Jew is proffered. The people of the Northern Kingdom (Israel) were known as Israelites, following the nomenclature by which Mosaic community was known. The people of the Southern kingdom (Judah) were known as Judeans; and it is from the word Judean that the word Jew eventually evolves.

At first, "Judean" referred exclusively to the citizens of Judah, as in the Book of Jeremiah (c. 639-587 BCE). But in time, the term Judean or Jew came not to refer to the citizens of Judah alone, but rather to all who were members of what has been called the "Pentateuchal religious community."[8] The use of the term Jew in this manner, without regard for where these members of the Pentateuchal religious community made their home, first appears some 1500 to 1800 years after the legends ascribed to Abraham -- the paradigmatic, first member of the Pentateuchal community -- were to have taken place; use of the term Jew in this context may be found in such late Books of the Bible as Daniel and Esther (c. 198-168 and 134-104 BCE, respectively).[9]

The fundamental principle which both Hebrew and Israelite members of the Pentateuchal religious community share is a belief in the God Yahweh. Later traditions retroactively ascribe to this community the shared belief that

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[8] Alvin Reines, "Fall Issue," Polydoxy vol. 3, no. 1 (Autumn 1977).

[9] Ibid.

all recorded in the Pentateuch is true, premised upon the belief that the Pentateuch is the infallible, immutable, word of God, revealed in covenant to Moses on Mount Sinai once and for all time. And so, it is a steadfast allegiance to Yahweh, and therein to Yahweh's Sianaitic Covenant, which binds all members of the Pentateuchal community together. It is this that is the shared essence of the Pentateuchal "Jewish" community.

The Prophetic community of Israel is yet another community whose identity centers around an allegiance to, and an unyielding faith in, Yahweh and the Sinaitic covenant. The Prophetic community dates to between the eighth and the sixth centuries BCE. But the Prophetic community's roots lay in the social, religious, and political experiences of still earlier communities. Specifically, the Prophetic community is defined by transition. The roots of its communal definition are to be found in earlier Israelite communities' transition from a communal slave culture in Egypt to a nomadic clan-based culture in the Wilderness of Sinai. In the case of the Prophetic community, the transition is from a nomadic clan-based culture to an agrarian society forced to contend with new religious and political demands in their new home, the Land of Canaan.[10]

The Israelites' settlement of Canaan in about 1200 BCE transformed the Israelite people from an otherwise nomadic clan-based culture to an

[10] Levi Olan, Prophetic Faith and the Secular Age. (New York: KTAV Publishing, 1982) p. 28-29.

agriculturally based community. And in time, this transformation saw the religious life of otherwise simple nomadic Israelites give way to an elaborate cult, led by an elite class of priests vested with supreme religious authority. Originally a community of families with a sense of kinship at its center, once in Canaan, the Israelite community grew into a more stratified society, one in which the rich were set apart from the poor, and religious duties were under the purview of a special priestly caste. The changes that came with Israel's shift from the nomadic life to a life dominated by Canaan's agricultural demands affected every aspect of Israel's communal identity.[11]

The new communal identity agrarian life carried brought on a new moral climate as well; familial kinships gave way to relationships premised upon economics and power. Prosperity was dependent upon the fertility of the soil and the largess of the ruling class, rather than an attendant deity traveling with them in the Wilderness. And in time, the old moral code gave way to new communal mores as the Israelite community came to farm alongside men and women who worshipped a god other than their own Yahweh. As the family livelihood was now dependent upon favorable harvests, it grew tempting to ignore the covenant fashioned at Mount Sinai, to discard the pentateuchal relationship their community had long enjoyed, in favor of worshipping Baal, the god their neighbors understood to be responsible for ensuring the soil's fertility.

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[11] Ibid., p. 29

The initial protest against such a flagrant breach of faith and the moral decay that was believed would surely follow in its wake came from a group of men who spoke in the name of Yahweh, the Israelite's god. These men -- the Prophets of Israel -- understood themselves to be divinely charged, and their mission to be simply the transmission of Yahweh's will. They took to their divine authorization matter-of-factly. And theirs was a calm, serene certainty; for among the Prophets of Israel there was never any doubt as to the source of their prophecies.[12]

The Prophets of Israel warned of forsaking Yahweh, both for its cosmic consequences and, too, the threat of moral decay. Specifically, the Prophets decried the Israelites' desire for a king to rule over them, for the prophets feared that such an unprecedented and brazen move as erecting a monarchy to rule over Israel would undermine the religious and political interests of the Israelite community. Yahweh alone supplied the principle of national unity, the Prophets argued. Worship of Yahweh had welded the Israelite tribes into a nation, and Yahweh had kept Israel intact against the military and cultural onslaughts of the surrounding peoples. The equation between Yahweh and Israel may well have grown obscured, but the deep-seated truth should never be lost sight of -- that between Israel and Yahweh was a kinship

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[12] Leo Bergman, "The Reaction of the Prophet to His Mission" (Rabbinic Thesis, Hebrew Union College, 1940), p. 11,12.

and a covenant.[13] This alone was the link which bound Israel to her past, and which provided the Israelite prophet his mandate and raison-d'etre. It is in the name of preserving the Israelite community that the earliest Prophets of Israel first rose up.

Indeed, from the 10th to the 8th Century BCE, there were prophets in Israel who spoke vigorously and continually against the abandonment of the covenant made at Sinai, and who strongly condemned the monarchy's feared acceptance of the values and ways of their Baal-worshipping neighbors; all spoke in the name of the Israelite God Yahweh.[14]

The Israelite Monarchy created a stubborn problem for the Pentateuchal religious community of the pre-literary prophets. Samuel, who is described in the Prophetic literature as both a prophet and a judge, was the first in a long line of prophets to remind Israel of the Sinaitic Covenant made with Yahweh and to rebuke for their moral turpitude the men who ultimately occupied Israel's throne. In spite of Samuel's eventual support of the Davidic monarchy in response to the military threat posed by the Assyrians to the north, as Samuel had cautioned, the Kings of Israel steadily sought to free themselves from the divine authority of God.[15] This in spite of

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[13] Moses Buttenweiser, The Prophets of Israel from the Eighth to the Fifth Century, (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1914), p. 48.

[14] Olan, Prophetic Faith, p. 31.

[15] Rivkin, Shaping of Jewish History, p. 5.

the fact that Israel's allegiance to God is precisely that which had long defined the community.

The importance of the Israelite Prophets to our understanding of the Israelite community lies in the fact that as the menacing approach of Assyria to the north became more real, and Israel and Judah's call for a monarchy became more pronounced, the prophets' message was synchronous with the social and moral decay of the state. The center of the prophets' message was always the same: Israel, having forsaken Yahweh the national God, had sinned and for that would be punished.[16]

In time, as the Israelite monarchy asserted its independence and divorced itself from the God of Sinai, the definition of Israelite community necessarily changed. In time, there was a movement from the prophets of the 8th, 9th and 10th centuries BCE (the pre-literary prophets), who preached of Yahweh as a national deity, to the prophets of the 6th, 7th, and 8th Centuries BCE (the classical prophets), who spoke of Yahweh in the transcendent terms of ethical monotheism. This shift was the direct result of the changes Israelite society continued to undergo in the wake of first the establishment and then the subsequent fall of Israel's ill-fated monarchy. And yet in all cases, ever were the prophets spokesmen for Yahweh's covenant with Israel.

However, in the shift between the pre-literary to classical phases of

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[16] Alfred G. Moses, "Universalism and Nationalism in the Prophets" (Rabbinic Thesis, Hebrew Union College, 1901), p. 43.

Israelite prophecy, between the 10th and 6th centuries BCE the role the national prophet served within the community changed as well. For the purposes of this thesis, it is the community in the Classical Period of Israelite prophecy that we shall refer to as the "Prophetic community."

"In ancient Israel, religion and patriotism, or the nation and Yahweh were indissolubly united. The prophets . . . acted in a capacity that was sanctioned by precedent and held to be an integral part of the national religion. The warrant of the outspoken and honest prophets to speak in the name of Yahweh, the national god, was never questioned nor denied."[17] Indeed, the prophets' unbridled candor placed them in direct opposition to the national political and religious currents that circulated at that time. In addition to being the spokesmen for ethical monotheism, the Prophets of Israel were forced to defend Yahweh in the face of a nation's ire.[18]

The prophets held that as a deity concerned with morality, Yahweh simply could not be held to the limits of a national deity. Where Yahweh was once understood to be the national God of Israel, Yahweh was now understood to be a universal god, and Yahweh's claim was a universal claim. And it is on this basis that the prophets laid chief stress upon the moral and spiritual phases of Israel's relationship with Yahweh, never losing sight of their relationship's cardinal feature -- the direct kinship Yahweh shared with

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[17] Ibid., p. 36.

[18] Olan, Prophetic Faith, p. 32.

Israel. No prophet wished to sever Yahweh from Israel; and none did so.[19] Just the same, the prophet was not always popular; indeed, it was the prophets' fate to be rejected. And yet, it was the prophets' relentless insistence that Yahweh's covenant was necessarily independent from the political conventions of the day, that provided their warrant for opposing the people and establishing the mandates of the Prophetic Community.

Of note is the fact that the prophets of this period were beholden to neither king nor priest; they were independent men who, at times, went to great lengths to assert their independence. They held no positions of political leadership, and yet were not free agents either. While the prophet was neither in the service of the state nor the Temple cult, neither was he wholly independent either. The prophet was a moral exhortant of Yahweh, a viceroy of the spirit that moved him.[20]

The Prophet Elijah in the Book of First Kings states the prophetic position clearly, paraphrasing, 'The God Yahweh is single, absolute and omnipotent; hence the king must be subordinate to Yahweh's spokesmen, the prophets. No compromise is possible. It is not possible for Yahweh to settle for partial sovereignty, for he exercises all sovereignty. Yahweh is God of all economic functions, not some. Yahweh is the God of sheep-raisers and cattle-raisers; the God of wandering nomads, of the rain and the dew, of the soil's

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[19] Moses, "Universalism and Nationalism in the Prophets," p. 50.

[20] Olan, Prophetic Faith, p. 40.

fertility. And Yahweh is God of all political functions. Thus saith the Lord.'[21]

And yet, in spite of the prophets' ostensible objectivity, "from the outset it must be emphasized that the prophets, each and every one of them, loved their native country with a fervor and devotion of which [we] can scarcely have any notion. For them, as indeed for the man of antiquity in general, personal existence was unthinkable apart from the life of their country."[22] Prophecy was national in its origin, character and function. And men such as the Prophets of Israel "had the nation constantly in view."[23]

The Book of Ezekiel describes the prophet's mission as dictated by Yahweh, to be a "watchman to the house of Israel (33:7)." And it is in this context, as Yahweh's watchmen/spokesmen, that the prophetic message affirms the following general principles: (1) The prophets did not consider themselves to be innovators, bringing Israel a message unrelated to earlier periods of Hebrew/Israelite history. Specifically, their prophecies were rooted in the nomadic period of Israel's history. The prophets' message was essential, for the dazzling accouterments of the Canaanite experience distracted the people from the basic values indigenous to their simple origins.

Recognizing and seizing upon the moral confusion which followed the

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[21] Rivkin, Shaping of Jewish History, p.7.

[22] Moses Buttenweiser, "The Prophets and Nationalism," Central Conference of American Rabbis Yearbook Vol. 37 (1927) : p. 5.

[23] Moses, "Universalism and Nationalism in the Prophets," p. 37.

shift from the simple nomadic life to the new complex urban society in which Israel now lived, the Prophet declared his message to a changing Israelite community in terms they could understand. Simply: the prophets' duty was to hold the fabric of Israel together.

It could be asked whether by prophesying their message as having been revealed by Yahweh at Sinai, the prophets sought, in the face of a changing community, to secure their own position; or whether the prophets' concern was the national concern. Clearly, it was the latter. The prophets were first and foremost enthusiasts for Israel. To a man, the Prophets of Israel had the sanctity and cohesion of Israel in view, but still was their counsel confirmed by the sanction of Yahweh.[24] That is, in point of fact, what made the prophets' words prophecies. And it was the Israelites's steadfast allegiance to Yahweh and Yahweh's Covenant, understood in the age of the Prophets of Israel to be a universal message of ethical monotheism, that comprised the essence of the Prophetic "Jewish" community.

The essence of the Pentateuchal and Prophetic communities have much in common, and yet they are dissimilar. Both communities shared an allegiance to Yahweh and Yahweh's covenant; and yet, the Prophetic community understood their relationship to Yahweh differently than did their earlier Pentateuchalists, and so the communities are independent of one another, and the respective essences of the communities are distinct.

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[24] Ibid., p. 41.

# CHAPTER 2

In spite of the certainty of the Prophets of Israel vis-a-vis Yahweh's covenant with the community; and in spite of the clear definition of the Pentateuchal community's nature before it, namely an unflagging allegiance to the Sianaitic Covenant, still the term "Jew" is nowhere defined within the Pentateuch itself. And therefore, neither the Pentateuchal nor the Prophetic communities offer the means by which we might determine what makes a community Jewish; and neither do the Pentateuchal nor the Prophetic communities tell us what defines and who has the right to be recognized as a Jew by a Jewish community today.[25] It is not until the 2nd century BCE that this problem is addressed. Ironically, the problem of Jewish nomenclature and definition is first addressed by a community known as the Pharisaic community. The irony of this community's addressing this problem lies in the fact that the early Rabbinic leadership of the Pharisaic community was diametrically opposed to the understanding of God and the cosmic order held by the Pentateuchal community, the members of which the name Jew originally, yet retroactively, had referred.

The Jewish community most diametrically opposed to the Pharisees were known as the Sadducees. The members of this group were in essence modern day Pentateuchalists; they revered the Written Law above all else,

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[25] Reines, "Fall Issue," Polydoxy.

believing only in that which was written therein, namely a cultic practice of animal sacrifice centered around the Temple in Jerusalem, and a rejection of all Biblical interpretation. The Pharisees, in contrast, centered their religious practice around the synagogue and prayer and a means of Biblical interpretation known as the Talmud or the Oral Law, to which they ultimately subordinated the Pentateuch.

In all fairness to the Pharisees and all Jewish communities subsequent, the first definition of the term Jew was not made by the Pharisees themselves. Rather, the first definition of the term Jew was based upon the principles the Pharisees employed in their legal writings; and these Pharisaic principles are those against which all subsequent modes of Biblical interpretation -- and definitions of the term Jew -- are measured. In their official writings, the Pharisees never specifically employed the term Jew to refer to the adherents of their religious system; and they rarely mention the term even in general use. Instead, the Pharisees understood themselves -- like the Israelite Prophets before them -- as "Israelite," and hence it is not the name Jew, but the name Israelite to which they lend definition. However, when the term Jew does finally come into use, it is the Pharisaic definition of what makes for an "Israelite" that is thereafter understood to be, by any other name, that which makes for a Jew.[26]

The first Jewish community to identify as "Jewish" according to the

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[26] Ibid.

Pharisaic definition will anachronistically be referred to as the Orthodox Jewish community. The term "Orthodox Judaism" was coined only in the 19th Century in an effort to distinguish the Orthodox Jewish community from the Reform Jewish community. Orthodoxy rejected the reforms made in the name of Reform Judaism, and took for itself the retronym "Orthodox Judaism."

Following the Pharisaic rules for defining an "Israelite," Orthodox Judaism lays down the following definition for a "Jew": 'A Jew is a person who is born of a Jewish mother, or a person who has been converted to Orthodox Judaism by an Orthodox rabbi.' From this succinct definition of Jewish privilege, the Orthodox Jewish community roundly circumscribes itself. Where the Pentateuchal and Prophetic communities had neither clear means of determining who precisely a "Jew" was, who properly bore the name "Jew," nor who had a right to be recognized as a "Jew" by a "Jewish" community, the Orthodox Jewish community knows no such difficulties. Within Orthodox Judaism these distinctions are clear: A Jew is either a person born of a Jewish mother or one who has been converted to Orthodox Judaism.

But where the Orthodox definition of Jewish communal status is succinct, it is premised upon an authority structure imposed from above and leaves no room for the autonomous individual. For within the Orthodox definition, the man or woman born of a Jewish mother is never permitted

the opportunity to exercise a choice as to their willingness to accept Orthodox Judaism and further, there is no means provided for the Orthodox Jew to rid him- or herself of their Orthodox obligation and name; there is no means of definitively leaving the Orthodox community.

As with the original Pentateuchal religious community before it, Orthodox Judaism asserts both the infallibility and the immutability of what is held to be God's revealed word to Moses on Mount Sinai. Simply, Orthodox Jews understand themselves to be bound by an eternal covenantal relationship secured by Moses and God at Mount Sinai. What's more, in addition to the covenantal relationship secured by the Pentateuchalists, the Orthodox Jewish community understands itself to be heir to the Pharisaic tradition as well.

The Orthodox community weds itself at once to the Sinaitic Covenant of the Pentateuch and the oral, interpretative traditions of the Pharisees. To be a member of the Orthodox Jewish community is to be "subject to a binding, compulsory, and irrevocable obligation. This obligation is that [the Orthodox community] must obey the rules and regulations laid down in the Talmud and post-Talmudic legal works, which are recognized by Orthodox Judaism as ultimate commandments of the deity."[27]

Heir to both Pentateuchal and Pharisaic Judaism, then, the Orthodox Jewish community is but a single example of a Jewish community within an

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[27] Ibid.

unfolding world of Jewish communal possibilities, rather than the paradigm against which all subsequent Jewish communities need be measured. Akin to the communal definition of the Pentateuchal and Prophetic communities before it, Orthodox Judaism's definition of community, too, is insufficient for any group of persons beyond its borders. For Jews that do not accept Orthodox Judaism's exclusively internal belief system as binding, there must yet be Jewish communal definitions to be explored.

The fourth Jewish communal structure we shall explore is that proffered by Ahad Ha'am. Born Asher Zvi Ginsberg in the Russian Ukraine in August of 1856, Ahad Ha'am was born into an Orthodox family of high station, and was formally schooled in a most pious religious environment. Later in life, after leaving his parents' home, Ginsberg took to combining his traditional Jewish training with secular studies, in many cases taking the onus for his education upon himself.

In time, Ahad Ha'am developed a philosophy, which in contradistinction to Orthodox Judaism's highly communal structure, was highly individualistic. Indeed, Ahad Ha'am's philosophy of community was an amalgam of Orthodoxy's fundamental beliefs and the "theory of evolution, which he accepted unquestioningly as the key to the interpretation of the phenomena of social and national life no less than those of the physical

universe."[28]

In 1896, at the age of forty, Ahad Ha'am took a job as editor of the Hebrew monthly *Ha-Shiloah* and for six years used his position as editor as a "platform for the discussion of the contemporary problems of Judaism."[29] Eschewing his high literary and political station, Ginsberg approached his task as an ordinary Jew;[30] the nome de plume Ahad Ha'am, in fact, means "One of the People." The problem which captivated him most was whether the Jewish People should be defined and described as essentially a nation or a religion. In a decisive break with his Orthodox upbringing, and yet in keeping with his understanding of Judaism as first and foremost a collective of people united by a national and cultural identity, in answer to this question, Ahad Ha'am stood squarely with the nationalists.[31]

And yet, to fully appreciate from whence Ahad Ha'am spoke, it would be well to look to the days following the pogroms of 1881. For it is here that Ahad Ha'am made his greatest contribution to Jewish thought. It is during this period, in long pieces of analytic reportage that he wrote from the

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[28] Leon Simon, Ahad Ha-am: A Biography. (London: East and West Library, 1960) p . 279 -280.

[29] Arthur Hertzberg, ed., The Zionist Idea: A Historical Analysis and Reader. (New York: Atheneum, 1977), p. 249, 250.

[30] Simon, Ahad Ha-am: A Biography., p . 280.

[31] Ibid., p. 281.

recently founded few colonies in Palestine, that Ahad Ha'am made his initial mark within the politically charged Jewish debate. Here he compared the high flown verbiage of early Zionism with its paltry and often ill conceived practical achievements.[32] Unlike the Zionist leaders alongside whom he lived, "Ahad Ha'am was uncompromising in his insistence that efforts to bring the Jewish People to realize their capacity as a dynamic nation needed to be done slowly and with great care. Above all, he suggested that the true meaning of *Hibbat Zion* (the Lovers of Zion Movement) was not to be found in mass action but in the cultural revival and modernization of the Jewish people."[33]

In Ahad Ha'am's view, the essential activity of the Jewish nation was an expression of the people's distinctive character and spirit in thought and action, that which might be termed Jewish individuality. Ahad Ha'am read Jewish history and the Prophetic tradition in particular, to suggest a doctrine of Judaism's superiority over other cultures and nationalities; and he read Jewish history and literature as the embodiment of the Jewish People's highest aspirations as a national group. Ahad Ha'am's conception of the Jewish People as a national, cultural group, and of the relation between the Jewish nation and the international human family as one in which each nation's life is an attempt to embody in its own particular fashion ideals

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[32] Hertzberg, The Zionist Idea, p. 250.

[33] Ibid.

which are common to humanity as a whole, is pivotal to his philosophical and religious outlook."[34]

As Ahad Ha'am's views called for a revival of Jewish spiritual culture and modernization -- a Jewish communal renaissance of sorts -- his ideas were branded as agnostic by the very community from which he had originally come, the Orthodox Jewish community. And yet, "on the other hand, the conservatism of his thought, in practical application, made him the target of many of the younger and more rebellious voices...who found him too traditionalist in temper."[35] And in truth, Ahad Ha'am's ideas were rejected by the bulk of the Zionist movement as well, and he never held any office within Zionism. For Ahad Ha'am, true *Hibbat Zion*, true love of the Jewish people, was not merely a part of Judaism, nor was it something appended to Judaism. Rather, for Ahad Ha'am, true *Hibbat Zion*, was the whole of Judaism, but specifically with the national unity at the focal point.

But still, in spite of all that was spoken against him, Ahad Ha'am spoke of Jewish community in a way like none other. Having come of age in the Orthodox community, Ahad Ha'am was uniquely qualified to point out its weaknesses. Divorcing himself from a tradition and communal definition which he felt had "fossilized,"[36] Ahad Ha'am held that the Jewish people's

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[34] Simon, Ahad Ha-am, p. 281, 282.

[35] Hertzberg, The Zionist Idea, p. 250.

[36] Ibid., p. 253.

greatest hope lie not in the autocratic and pietistic demands of the Orthodox model of community, but rather in the regenerative spirit of Jewish learning and culture, writ large.

In a letter to Judah Magnes, the future chancellor and president of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, dated September 8, 1910, Ahad Ha'am writes, "Experience...has shown that the Synagogue by itself, as a House of Prayer exclusively, cannot save Judaism, which unlike other religions, does not depend on prayer...We have to make the Synagogue itself the House of Study, with Jewish learning as its first concern and prayer as a secondary matter...And the spirit of the teaching must be different, to suit [our] altered conditions...[W]e must introduce [teachings] better suited to modern requirements. But learning -- learning -- learning: that is the secret of Jewish survival.

"Judaism is fundamentally national," he continued, "...[and] clearly, if you want to build and not to destroy, you must teach [Judaism] on the basis of the nationalism with which it is inseparably intertwined. [T]his is to say, that it is possible to be a Jew in the national sense without accepting many things in which religion requires belief."[37]

And so, Ahad Ha'am suggests that one can participate fully within the Jewish community and, indeed, can contribute to the Jewish community by identifying with it in a national, rather than a congenital or religious sense.

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[37] Ibid., p. 261.

In this, Ahad Ha'am breaks with the Orthodoxy of his birth and reformulates the way in which Jewish community need be defined. For Ahad Ha'am, Jewish community -- the purest and truest expression of the Jewish national spirit -- was to be defined in light of a national regenerative spirit of Jewish learning and culture.[38] For Ahad Ha'am, there was no autocratically correct expression of Judaism, rather it was for the Jew to be engaged with other Jews in a national process of "learning -- learning -- learning;" this Ahad Ha'am believed defined the essence of Jewish community and to wit, the secret of Jewish survival.

The fifth Jewish communal structure we shall explore is that posited by Mordecai Kaplan, the intellectual father of the Reconstructionist Jewish Movement and community. Born in Eastern Europe's Pale of Settlement in 1881, Mordecai Kaplan immigrated with his parents to the United States at the age of nine. While his early education was Orthodox Jewish, his high school and college years were heterodox and secular. Influenced by public education and modern conceptions of the Bible, Kaplan sought throughout his life to harmonize a strong Jewish religious identity with the modern world about him.

Throughout his life, Kaplan sought a reformulation of both Judaism and Judaism's understanding of community. Kaplan conceived of the Jewish

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[38] Simon, Ahad Ha-am, p. 281, 282.

religion and all its attendant parts -- Jewish history, literature, music, culture, community, et al. -- to comprise a "civilization," as opposed to Ahad Ha'am's conceptualization of the Jewish People as a nation. Ahad Ha'am approached the Jewish community from a nationalist perspective; Kaplan approached the Jewish community from a religious perspective.

Akin to Ellis Rivkin, Kaplan understood Judaism ever to be in a state of evolution. And the definition, maintenance and constant reconstruction of this constantly evolving, religious civilization is that to which Kaplan dedicated his life's energy and work. "What Jews need is a philosophy of Jewish life which will make ... clear to every Jew the character and status of the Jewish people," Kaplan decreed, "[Jews] should know what they are, whether race, religion, nation or folk."[39]

Further, "the present anarchy in Jewish organizational life must be ended. Jewish communal organization should be created to bring order out of the social and spiritual chaos in American Jewish life.... [Indeed] there is a need for a clearly defined regimen of Jewish religious habits and practices which shall be consonant with the requirements of American life and with the pace of modern existence. "[40]

The hallmark of Kaplan's reformulation of Judaism is its rationalist

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[39] Kaplan, Mordecai, "The Jewish Reconstructionist Movement," (pamphlet) New York: Reconstructionist Press, p. 5.

[40] Ibid., p. 7, 9.

and democratic tone. Where Ahad Ha'am was influenced by his East European background, Kaplan fully adopted an American sensibility. His religious conceptions of Judaism were true for himself, and were offered as but possible understandings of how to live a Jewish life in community with others. At no time did Kaplan hold his beliefs up as eternal truths. In point of fact, Kaplan believed it to be incumbent upon each and every Jew to struggle with and solve life's complexities for him- or herself, much as he understood it to be incumbent upon each and every American to participate in the electoral and political processes.

Holding the survival and enhancement of the Jewish People as the only element in an ever-changing Judaism which is both permanent and distinctive,[41] Kaplan pushed no religious agenda save for understanding Judaism in its totality as that which defined the community, or in Kaplan's language, "the civilization of the Jewish People." The community must define Judaism; Judaism shall not define the community.

Here then, is the crux of Kaplan's understanding of Jewish community. The Jewish community must be so constructed to include all Jews who wish to identify themselves with the Jewish people, regardless of what their personal philosophies might be.[42]

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[41] Mordecai Kaplan, Questions Jews Ask: Reconstructionist Answers. (New York: Reconstructionist Press, 1956), p. 3.

[42] Kaplan, "The Jewish Reconstructionist Movement," (pamphlet), p. 8.

Kaplan's reconstruction of Judaism -- in contrast to the Orthodoxy of his youth -- relies upon the tradition and history of the Jewish people as its guides, and then leaves it in the hands of the Jewish People to arrive at how best to name and address the problems of their day. Kaplan was an American Jew who wrote for an emancipated Jewish people; he sought to "steer a course between the Scylla of assimilation, on the one hand, and the Charybdis of ghetto isolationism, on the other."[43] Further, Kaplan understood that living fully emancipated lives within two civilizations (Jewish and American) presented new realities and concerns to Judaism.

And it is for this reason that Kaplan intended Reconstructionist Judaism to be that Jewish movement which would "cut across party lines and obliterate many of the boundaries that separate Jew from Jew, without doing violence to the distinctive philosophies of religious and other groupings in Jewish life."[44] He intended the Reconstructionist Movement to be the movement within Judaism which would "enable Jews to live comfortably within two civilizations...[for in this way,] Jewish tradition and culture [would] not only serve as an inspiration for Jews in their own life," wrote Kaplan, "but [would] contribute much of value to the totality of *American* life."[45]

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[43] Kaplan, Questions Jews Ask: Reconstructionist Answers, p.32.

[44] Kaplan, "The Jewish Reconstructionist Movement," (pamphlet), p. 11-12.

[45] Kaplan, Questions Jews Ask: Reconstructionist Answers, p. 39.

It was Kaplan's belief that the promulgation of Jewish civilization would be possible only when Judaism evolved into something in which Jews wished to take part, when Judaism evolved into something Jews wished to experience. In point of fact, Kaplan maintained that "the satisfactions [of] Jewish civilization must be experienced, in order [that they] be appreciated."[46] Always at the fore of Kaplan's work was a desire to sustain and enhance the Jewish community. To this end, he sought the reconstruction of the Jewish religion through the cultivation of Jewish civilization. And indeed, it is this ideal of Jewish civilization which is, and has been since its inception, the rallying cry of his Reconstructionist Movement.

The Jewish communal ideal to which Kaplan dedicated his life was altogether different from any and all Jewish communities heretofore known. Fully an American, Kaplan believed that the American-Jewish community need necessarily be fashioned within the crucible of both civilizations, and that it necessarily be the product of both.

As he believed that Judaism was an ever-changing civilization, Kaplan held that the only permanent and distinctive characteristics of Judaism were her survival and enhancement. And it is for this reason that Kaplan believed the members of a community alone are in a position to define the essence of their Judaism.

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[46] Ibid., p. 8.

# CHAPTER 3

The vacuum created by the absence of an official definition of Reform Judaism has been filled by temporal definitions of Reform Judaism, and therein of the Reform Jewish community; each has been posited by members of the Reform Jewish community at different times. For the serious student of Reform Judaism and the Reform Jewish community, these definitions are, in the main, mere anecdotes and do little to further cogent understandings of Reform Judaism as a liberal religion; therefore, to cite these definitions would be to engage in sociological fancy rather than serious philosophical discourse.

The notable exception among those proffering definitions of Reform Judaism as a consistently liberal religion is Dr. Alvin J. Reines. Raised in an Orthodox Jewish home, Reines was ordained a Reform rabbi at the Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion in 1952, where he is currently a professor of Jewish philosophy.

Since first philosophically engaging Reform Judaism as a religious system in 1963, Alvin Reines has made it his life's work to examine, define, and explain Reform Judaism's nature and essence. Reines has gone about his work with great ardor and has himself originated a means of understanding liberal religion in general and Reform Judaism in particular that is wholly new. The term Reines coined and currently employs to describe his unique understanding of the state of affairs within all true liberal religious systems is "Polydoxy."

Describing liberal religious systems in general, Reines has written that, "Polydoxy is a religious or philosophy-of-life ideology whose essential principle is that every person possesses an inherent right to ultimate self-authority over his or her psyche and body... Accordingly, every person possesses an ultimate right to determine the religious or philosophic beliefs she or he will accept, the observances she or he will keep, and the morality she or he will follow."[47*]

And continuing, here describing a liberal Jewish religious system, Reines writes, "Polydox Judaism is a religion of ultimate personal freedom. In Polydox Judaism, persons have the right to accept only those beliefs of whose truth they are convinced, and to keep only practices whose observance they find meaningful. All other beliefs and practices may rightfully be rejected... The fundamental principle of the Polydoxy may be stated in terms of a covenant, the Freedom Covenant: 'Every adherent of Polydox Judaism pledges to affirm the freedom of all other adherents in return for their pledges to affirm her or his own.' Equally binding in Polydox Judaism is the corollary of the Freedom Covenant: 'Every person's freedom ends where the

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[47] George M. Pemberton, Jr. editor, Polydox Forum, (Polydox Confederation, Winter 1983, vol.1, no. 1), p. 1.

* As Polydoxy is a "philosophy-of-life ideology," the Polydox model allows for the existence of as many Polydox religious communities as there are non-orthodox religious systems; each Polydox religious system and community is designated and differentiated one from another by the names their adherents take for themselves, ie. Jew, Christian, Muslim, Unitarian-Universalist, etc.

other person's freedom begins.'"[48]

Alvin Reines' definition of Polydox Judaism, as well as of the Polydox communal structure cannot be separated from a cogent understanding of his understanding of Reform Judaism; this because Reines' Polydox structure was conceived as a direct response to Reform Judaism's ostensible inattention to its core liberal foundation. Indeed, it is Reines' frustration with and antipathy for what he feels is Reform Judaism's betrayal of its liberal nature which is the basis for his Polydox model for liberal religious systems.

To appreciate Reines' understanding of Reform Judaism as a liberal Jewish religious system, one must first examine Reines' understanding of Judaism as a religious system generally. For Reines, Judaism is a "discrete religious continuum composed of religious systems recognizably or accidentally similar [one to another]..., but which are nonetheless distinct [each from the other]."[49] Judaism is not monolithic. Pentateuchal, Prophetic, Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist, Reform, and ethical-humanist Judaisms, by ways of example, are each distinct religious systems and, further, may each be found along Judaism's "discrete religious continuum."

The Jewish continuum, comprised as it is of various streams of Jewish belief and communal definition, is a composite of many Judaisms, composed

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[48] Reines, "Polydox Judaism: A Statement," p. 48.

[49] Alvin Reines, "Reform Judaism," Meet the American Jew. (Broadman Press, 1963), p. 36.

of what Reines has termed both matrix and emergent religions. "Matrix religions are those religious systems which immediately precede a new religious system..., bequeathing to it various extra-essential elements, either ideational or symbolic. [And] emergent religions are the new religious forms [which are given life by the matrix religion]... [In this,] Orthodox Judaism is the matrix religion of Reform Judaism; [and] Reform Judaism is an emergent religious [system] with respect to Orthodox Judaism;"[50] this because Reform Judaism came forth from Orthodox Judaism.

Noting that Reform Judaism emerged from the world of Jewish Orthodoxy is not novel; but the way in which Reines understands these two Jewish systems in relation one to another is profound. Where some have described Orthodox and Reform Judaism as " fraternal twins, born... to rebel against their premodern parentage,"[51] Reines describes Orthodox and Reform Judaism's relationship one to another as akin to that between parent and child. And as children having children of their own become parents, so too, in time, will today's Reform Judaism be the matrix religion for new emergent Judaisms further down the road. And therein, as the emergent religion itself becomes a new matrix religion, ever spawning new religious emergents, Reform Judaism may be identified as an aggregate of religious systems, and

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[50] Ibid., p. 37.

[51] Martin A. Cohen, "When is Reform Judaism?" Lecture: Temple Beth Emeth, (Brooklyn, New York; May 31, 1987), p. 14.

itself a religious continuum.

According to Reines, like a child in relation to a parent, Reform Judaism arose only gradually out from its matrix religion Orthodox Judaism. The fundamental issue between Orthodoxy and Reform, such that the latter had necessarily to be spun off from the former, being the different relationship Orthodox and Reform Judaism enjoyed vis-a-vis the revelatory documents unique to the Jewish continuum (ie. the Bible and Talmud) and the Jewish people themselves.

Orthodox Judaism maintained (and to this day, does still maintain) that these documents were direct, verbal revelation from God and that no change is permissible in the structure of the obligations they impose whatsoever. Reform Judaism, in contrast, maintained that the Bible and Talmud were products of a dynamic or natural revelation, each revealed over time as subsequent generations came to understand the documents and themselves; and it is for this reason that Reform Judaism holds change to be ever permissible as dictated by conscience and reason.[52]

Reform Judaism's denial of verbal revelation necessarily constituted a denial of any and all absolute ecclesiastical authority; and Reform Jews -- again in contrast to the adherents of the orthodox matrix religion -- are under no obligation to submit to -- and no leader within the Reform community has the authority to impose -- the obligations as laid out for Orthodox Jews by

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[52] Reines, "Reform Judaism," Meet the American Jew, p. 37.

Orthodox rabbis in the Bible, Talmud and post-Talmudic Rabbinic codes.

It is this break from Orthodox Judaism which crystallizes for Reines that which he understands to be the two-fold essence of Reform Judaism: (1) An acknowledged and avowed denial of the Bible, Talmud and Rabbinic codes as divine verbal revelation, true and enduring for all time; and (2) the principle of ultimate freedom: that, in the absence of an absolute ecclesiastical authority, one may and will subscribe to different views as their individual conscience, beliefs, and reason dictate. In short, Alvin Reines asserts that the essence of Reform Judaism is "an abiding source of unity amidst the diversity of persons and ideas that constitute the Reform Jewish community, and a safeguard to its people that they will have the freedom necessary to realize... dignity and full [personal] growth.[53]

Based on this understanding of Reform Judaism's essence, Reines deems Reform Judaism akin to Jewish Polydoxy. And it is into the vacuum created by Reform Judaism's lack of formal definition that Alvin Reines offers the Jewish Polydox structure.

To this end, Reines has written, "Reform Judaism has never been formally defined [nor have] its essential principles [been] determined... The absence of a definition that would give Reform Judaism principles and direction was one of the urgent and fundamental reasons for establishing Polydox Judaism. Polydox Judaism provides liberal Jews with an avowed,

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[58] Ibid., p. 43.

clearly formulated [and consistent] liberal Judaism."[54] And then as if to secure his raison d'etre for suggesting that reform Judaism be understood as a Polydoxy, Reines maintains that, "the fundamental principles [of Reform Judaism are in fact] identical with those of Polydox Judaism."[55] That is, in the absence of an official definition of Reform Judaism to the contrary, Reform Judaism is none other than a Jewish Polydoxy; the two are synonymous, their terms interchangeable.

While Reines' assertion as to Polydox Judaism's (and therein Reform Judaism's) essence may appear bold, it is not nearly as audacious as it might appear on first blush. Reines' description of the liberal state of affairs in Reform Judaism is consistent with the views of the leadership within the Reform Movement, as evinced in writings of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and the Central Conference of American Rabbis.

In What Judaism Offers for You: A Reform Perspective, published by a joint UAHC-CCAR Commission, one reads, "The belief in individual freedom is deeply rooted in Jewish history which, in part, is a chronology of a people's fight for personal freedom."[56] And in Gates of Mitzvah: A Guide to

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[54] Alvin J. Reines and the St. Louis I.C.J. Research Society, "Questions and Answers on Polydoxy," (Institute for Creative Judaism), Question 22.

[55] Alvin Reines, "Polydox Judaism: A Statement," Journal of Reform Judaism, (Fall, 1980), p. 51.

[56] David Beilin, What Judaism Offers for You: A Reform Perspective, (New York: UAHC-CCAR Commission on Reform Jewish Outreach, 1992), p. 5.

the Jewish Life Cycle, published by the CCAR and edited by the CCAR's current president Rabbi Simeon J. Maslin, one reads, "[N]ot all Jews need to do the same thing... Reform Judaism maintains the principle of individual freedom; each Jew must make a personal decision about the Judaism which has come down through the ages... Reform Jewish philosophy is... built on the twin commitments which each Jew ought to have, [namely] the commitments to Jewish continuity and to personal freedom of choice."[57] Having described Reform Judaism, then, in keeping with other Reform Jewish authorities, and having defined it as a Polydox Jewish religion, Reines turns his attentions to the essence of the Reform and/or the Polydox Jewish community.

Addressing the fundamental purpose of Jewish community generally,[58] Reines explains the Jewish community's fundamental purpose as "providing Jews with Jewish religion," and he continues, "It is clear that in the historical past, Jewish communities... [have] always maintained that their particular Jewish religious systems provided the fundamental purpose and justification for their communities' existence... It is [therefore] my profound conviction, that no Jewish community can continue to exist in the long term as a Jewish

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[57] Simeon J. Maslin, ed., Gates of Mitzvah: A Guide to the Jewish Life Cycle. (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1979), p. 4.

[58] Reines, "Polydox Judaism: A Statement," p. 50.

entity without providing its members with a relevant Judaism."[59] Reines holds that individual Jewish religious systems -- each distinct one from the other -- provide the fundamental purpose and justification for the existence of their respective Jewish communities.

Reines holds Polydoxy to be a religious ideology of ultimate personal freedom; and Polydox Judaism to be a Jewish religion whose fundamental principle is the freedom of its adherents to believe and practice in concert with their own beliefs and value-systems. According to Reines, Polydox Judaism is the first "Jewish religious system, [to affirm as its fundamental purpose], the ultimate religious freedom of its adherents;"[60] and Polydox Judaism should here be understood to refer to the ideal within Reform Judaism. It is ultimate freedom, therefore, which distinguishes the Reform Jewish community from every other Jewish community heretofore known.

In determining that which unites this unique Polydox/Reform Jewish community then, Reines goes to great lengths to distinguish between the Polydox Jewish community and the Reform Jewish community -- this in spite of the fact that he asserts in other places that the fundamental principles of Reform Judaism are identical with those of Polydox Judaism.[61]

For Reines the Polydox Jewish community is an association of persons

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[59] Ibid.

[60] Ibid., p. 49.

[61] Reines, "Polydox Judaism: A Statement," p. 51.

who "come together in a formal relationship to pursue in association with one another their commitment to the Polydoxy Principle [the Freedom Covenant] and who [opt to share] the name Jew."[62] * Membership within this community is based solely upon one's claiming the name Jew for him or herself and affirming the right of others to claim and define the name as well; indeed, it is the taking of the name "Jew" which differentiates a Polydox Jew from a Polydox adherent at large. And it is the Polydox Jewish community's identifying itself as a "Jewish community," which distinguishes the Polydox Jewish community from any and all other Polydox religious communities. The essence of the Polydox Jewish community, then, is (1) the shared name "Jew" and (2) a common commitment with others who so identify to the principles of Polydoxy, namely ultimate freedom.

In spite of Reines' assertion that Polydox and Reform Judaism share the same fundamental principles; that the two are otherwise one, membership criteria for the Reform Jewish community is quite different from that of the Polydox Jewish community. And thus it would appear that the definition and essence of the communities are different. The members of the Polydox Jewish community share the name "Jew" as well as a common commitment to principles of religious and personal freedom, ie. the Freedom Covenant.

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[62] Pemberton, Polydox Forum, p. 1, 5.

* The only definition of the name "Jew" that would be suitable for a Polydox adherent would be one in which the name "Jew" does not abridge the individual's right to freedom and self-determination.

In spite of the fact that Reines has termed Reform Judaism "a religious pluralism [where] contrary ideas [are] expressed with only partial agreement in the total area of religious concern being required of its adherents,"[63] affiliation with the Reform Jewish community, in contradistinction to affiliation with the Polydox Jewish community, requires something other than claiming the name Jew and affirming the religious freedoms of others. Membership in the Reform Jewish community requires an overt act of affiliation with the institutions of the Reform Jewish Movement.

This is to say that the man or woman who understands him or herself to be a "Jew" and, too, believes in the principle of ultimate freedom is by any other name an adherent of Polydox Judaism (read Reform Judaism). And yet, according to Reines, one is not a Reform -- in spite of one's beliefs and self-understanding -- until they have been granted membership within the institutional bodies of the Reform Jewish Movement: The Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, and the Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion.

Reines writes, "[T]he one act necessarily performed by all Reform Jews is overt affiliation with the Reform Jewish community."[64] Reines can make this assertion, as he defines the terms "Reform Jew" and "Reform Jewish community" in relation to the institutions of the Reform Jewish Movement.

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[63] Reines, "Reform Judaism," Meet the American Jew, p. 32.

[64] Ibid.

And it is for this reason that a Jew who otherwise understands him or herself to be a Reform Jew; who otherwise understands him or herself to be a member of the Reform Jewish community, but who lacks an affiliation with any one of the institutions of the Reform Movement is, according to Reines, not a Reform Jew at all, but rather a Polydox Jew. And in this way, Reines maintains that, even as Polydox Judaism and Reform Judaism share identical fundamental principles, the essence of the Polydox Jewish and Reform Jewish communities are different.

# CHAPTER 4

In contrast to the clearly defined communal structures of Pentateuchal, Prophetic and Orthodox Judaism; in the face of Ahad Ha'am and Mordecai Kaplan's efforts to reconceptualize the ways in which Jewish community need be conceived, and in spite of Alvin Reines' definition of membership within the Reform Jewish community, still Reform Judaism's communal structure has no official definition. Further, Reform Judaism itself lacks an official definition. And yet still it seems that a claim may be made as to that which constitutes the essence of both Reform Judaism and the Reform Jewish community.

It has been asserted that "the essence of Reform [Judaism lies] in its reach;" and that "[Reform Judaism] is most true to itself in its changing, growing, reaching and fighting."[65] And indeed, as Reform seeks to synthesize all that Judaism has been to date with the religious, cultural and intellectual freedom enjoyed by its adherents, the essence of Reform Judaism is ever- "changing, -growing, -reaching and -fighting." But this requires explanation.

Efforts to describe Reform Judaism in the past have relied upon contrasting it with Orthodox Judaism; and oft relied on the passe and glib assertion that where Orthodoxy had grown rigid in its approach to modern

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[65]Sheldon Blank, Prophetic Thought: Essays and Addresses. (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1977), p. 111.

life, Reform Judaism sought to fuse tradition and modernity. Those who made this claim suggest that Reform Judaism differs from Orthodox Judaism in tenor only; and that the difference between Reform and Orthodoxy is the degree to which each hides from or grapples with the wider world's changing mores and times. The assertion that Reform is no more than a synthesis of Jewish tradition and modernity, suggests that Reform Judaism is nothing more than a watered-down orthodoxy; and belies a misunderstanding about what Reform Judaism truly is and, too, belies a sense of the inauthenticity which currently plagues many within the Reform Jewish Movement and the wider Reform Jewish community who insist on defining Reform Judaism by what it is not. For too long Reform Judaism has been described as an antidote to Orthodoxy. So then, where Reform Judaism has long been described as a synthesis of tradition and modernity, this author would like to suggest that Reform Judaism be understood rather as a synthesis of Jewish history and personal autonomy.

The cogent synthesis of the whole of Jewish history, when coupled with the autonomy every Jew by virtue of his or her birth enjoys, is that for which Reform Judaism allows. Within the context of this definition and for the purpose of this thesis, "the whole of Jewish history" refers to an ongoing chain of Jewish tradition, philosophy and culture to which all who identify as Jews are heir; it is the treasure trove from which all Jews are entitled to draw, so to fashion Jewish lives of meaning. And "the autonomy every Jew by

virtue of his or her birth enjoys," refers to the inalienable right to freedom and personal conscience granted to every man, woman and child by virtue of their humanity.

In coupling Judaism with autonomy, Reform Judaism radically undermines the authority structure of Orthodox Judaism -- namely the Torah and Talmud's infallible and divine status. Ultimately it is left to the individual member of the community to fashion for him- or herself that which Judaism will be for them. In this, Reform Judaism's relationship to traditional Jewish authority structures is commensurate with Kaplan's conception of the same -- but with a twist. Where Kaplan suggests that the community shall determine what Judaism shall look like, and not the other way around, Reform Judaism suggests that the individual shall be the ultimate arbiter of what Judaism shall be; each Jew will fashion a conception of Judaism their own making.

The historical realities out of which Reform Judaism emerged and from which it today draws religious inspiration is coupled with the personal autonomy of every Reform Jew. In this, the radical freedom Reform Judaism introduces into the discrete religio-historical continuum of Judaism rewrites and forever changes Judaism's understanding of religion; heretofore, Judaism was premised upon an unswerving loyalty and an unquestioned obedience to all that is both Jewish and older than oneself.

By challenging this premise, indeed by defying it, Reform Judaism redefines the way in which the essence of Judaism need be conceived. The

irony of building the foundations of a religious system on the shifting grounds of radical freedom is no small matter; at any given moment, that which defines Reform Judaism's essence is changing and uncertain. And ironically perhaps, it is this, the ever changing nature of Reform Judaism which is its only permanent and distinctive quality. Were the opposite true, Reform Judaism would be another orthodox Judaism, albeit a new orthodoxy, perhaps a "liberal orthodoxy," but an orthodoxy nonetheless. The confluence of all that has comprised Judaism to date (Jewish history) and the freedom of each individual (personal autonomy) is that which defines Reform Judaism.

Having described the essence of Reform Judaism as a synthesis of history and autonomy, a difficult description to dispute on the basis of fact over emotion, let us turn our attention to the essence of community within Reform Judaism. What is the defining quality or characteristic shared by those who freely identify with Reform Judaism? And given the radical freedom of every individual, what is the role of community within the Reform Judaism as a religious system? In short, what is the essence of community within Reform Judaism?

In order to treat the essence of the Reform Jewish community, it will be necessary to distinguish the Reform Jewish community from the Reform Jewish Movement, the institutional religious body with which it is most often confused.

The Reform Jewish Movement is comprised of three institutional

bodies: the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC), founded in 1873; the Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR), founded in 1875; and the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), founded in 1889. Together the membership of these three institutional bodies comprise the Reform Jewish Movement, the largest, most clearly identifiable group within the Reform Jewish community. But a preponderance of opinion to the contrary, the Reform Jewish Movement is not synonymous with the Reform Jewish community. While the Reform community is oft taken to imply the Reform Jewish Movement, in point of fact, the Reform Movement is but the Reform Jewish community's greatest subset.

Since the it's inception, the Reform Movement has consistently, and yet erroneously, been understood to be one and the same with the Reform Jewish community. By force of its own inertia and at the hands of its capable lay and rabbinic leadership, the Reform Movement has grown into one of the most auspicious religious bodies on the world's religious stage. And yet, the success of the Reform Movement, to which the Reform community can point with such pride, has left confusion and pain in its wake.

Due to the fact that conventional wisdom has so long held the Reform Movement to be the totality of the Reform Jewish community, the Reform community's largest, most visible subset has come to speak for a collective larger than itself. This has meant that generations of Reform Jews, and many who otherwise understand themselves to be Reform Jews, have been forced

to define their religious identity in light of the self-understanding of the Reform Movement. Indeed, this is what Alvin Reines posits when he relies upon institutional membership within the Reform Jewish Movement to determine who is and who is not a Reform Jew.

But Reines is not alone in suggesting thus; and his suggestion is made all the more commonplace and troubling by the fact that Reform Judaism lacks anything resembling an official definition outside of non-binding pronouncements of definition put forth by the intellectual and political leadership of the Reform Jewish Movement; note that these pronouncements carry no weight, as every Reform Jew is always free to disregard whatsoever they choose. And in the absence of an official definition of Reform Judaism as a religious system and of the Reform Jewish community as a communal structure, the Reform Jewish Movement alone has stepped into the void; and one is easily lead to believe that the Reform Movement authoritatively speaks in the name of the Reform Jewish religion, and that the Movement represents the entire Reform Jewish community -- a notion which is patently false.

Assuming that the Reform Movement's dues-paying membership has ceded to the Movement's leadership the right to speak on their behalf, the Reform Movement may, of course, do so; but the Movement's leadership may speak for its membership only and none other. By no virtue does the leadership of the Reform Movement have the right to address the concerns of

all Reform Jews; and by no virtue does the Reform Jewish Movement have the right to address the concerns of the entire Reform Jewish community. It does not represent them. The religion of Reform Judaism is available to all who would claim and define it for themselves; its definition and explication is the purview of no one person or movement, regardless of how powerful these persons or institutions might grow to be.

But the reality of Reform Judaism's institutionalization remains. And like all institutions, the Reform Jewish Movement has a vested interest in consolidating power and influence. Let us explore how it is that even in the wake of Reform Judaism's institutionalization, even in the wake of its consolidating power, still an official definition of Reform Judaism eludes us.

There are three principal reasons that Reform Judaism lacks an official definition. Tautologically, the first lies in the approach Reform Judaism as a religious system takes to authoritative statements. While Reform is heir to the entire span of Jewish history and tradition, its approach to authority is radically different from all Jewish religious systems that have come before; its relationship to traditional Jewish structures of authority is decidedly new. An official pronouncement as to the essence of Reform Judaism, or a statement which delineates the beliefs and practices by which Reform Judaism may be identified, is, in point of fact, anathema to the religious foundation upon which Reform Judaism is premised.

Where Orthodox Judaism accepts the Torah and the Talmud as binding and true, Reform Judaism holds a priori that every individual possesses an inalienable right to determine for him- or herself that which will they will hold to be authoritatively true. Reform Judaism understands neither a text, nor a doctrine, nor any entity outside of one's own conscience and intellect to be necessarily and authoritatively binding over any of its members, until they themselves accept it as such. And it is this liberal state of affairs, which makes stating an official definion of Reform Judaism all but impossible.

And yet, this has not stopped the Reform Movement from offering such statements; the latest in this series of pronouncement is What We Believe... What We Do... : A Pocket Guide for Reform Jews, prepared by Rabbi Simeon Maslin, the current President of the Central Conference of American Rabbis in which Reform Jewish beliefs and practices are offered as dogma; none of which, in and of themselves, carry any authoritative weight. More intellectually honest, then, and less hurtful to those Reform Jews who do not yet appreciate the strength of their own autonomy, would be a pocket guide whose author set out to *suggest* practices and beliefs, rather than to decree them. Perhaps the title of such a program would be more in the lines of: "What *I* Believe... What *I* Do..."

A second reason that an official definition of Reform Judaism eludes us may be found by looking to the ways in which Reform Judaism and the Reform Jewish Movement developed within the United States. In Western

Europe, and principally in Germany from the late 18th century until the latter half of the 19th century, reforms within Judaism were limited primarily to liturgic and esthetic innovation; and there was no organized Reform Movement per se. As Reform Judaism took shape on these shores in the mid-nineteenth century, however, under the able and visionary leadership of Isaac Mayer Wise in concert with many more liberal rabbis and leading religious figures, changes were more dramatic and came more quickly; forces coalesced to institutionalize this relatively new Reform Judaism in the form of an organized Reform Jewish Movement. And yet, from the Reform Movement's inception, only the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the last of the three principal Reform institutional bodies, was dedicated in name as specifically a Reform Jewish institution.[66]

The Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the Reform Movement's constituent congregational body in contrast, was established principally to preserve Jewish identity in America; and on that basis, every known congregation in the Western and Southern United States was invited to join this new union; even Cincinnati's two Orthodox congregations.[67] And it is for this reason that the Union of American Hebrew Congregations lacks the word "Reform" in its title.

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[66] Michael A. Meyer, Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 276.

[67] Ibid., p. 260.

The goal of the Union was threefold: to establish a rabbinical seminary, to publish proper books for religious schools, and to adopt a code of ritual practice; all three of which were in an effort to permit American, and not Reform Judaism per se, to flourish.[68] And tautologically, the Hebrew Union College was established to train rabbis to serve within member congregations of the Union; again, at the time of the institution's founding, these congregations were not necessarily committed exclusively to Reform Judaism; and the word "Reform" was omitted from the name of the rabbinical school. And finally, the Jewish Institute of Religion (which merged with Hebrew Union College in 1922) was founded by Steven S. Wise independent of the Reform Movement.

As might be expected, given the diversity of the Reform Movement's early supporters and patrons, and given Reform Judaism's nonauthoritarian approach to religion (even as the Union originally sought to adopt a code of ritual practice), keeping this fledgling liberal religious enterprise afloat, and keeping all on board, was onerous work. Always there was the risk of alienating some of the more traditional congregations by ceding to more liberal reforms; or in other cases the risk of jeopardizing the support of some more liberal-minded rabbis by granting their traditionally-minded colleagues greater latitude to rule on that which would transpire within the Reform rabbinate. But the greatest threat was always the declaration that Reform

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[68] Ibid., p. 260.

Judaism's essence ultimately provided for the autonomous decision of every individual; that at the end of the day, no congregational union could ever authoritatively enforce Jewish belief or practice upon any one in the name of Reform Judaism. And yet, the framers of the Unions' constitution went as far as they could towards making exactly this declaration.

At the insistence of a number of its founding congregations, the Union of American Hebrew Congregation's original constitution curtailed its own authority to dictate practice and belief, therein guaranteeing the absolute autonomy of each and every member congregation. To that end, Article VI of the Union of American Hebrew Congregation's constitution reads:

> Nothing in this constitution or the By-laws shall be construed so as to interfere in any manner whatsoever with the mode of worship, the school, the freedom of expression and opinion, or any of the other congregational activities of the constituent congregations of the Union.

Clearly, a fear of alienating the original membership of the Reform Movement's congregational union is in part that which made stating an official definition of Reform Judaism such forbidden grace. Quite simply, rather than risk alienating some within their ranks and therein weakening their nascent Union, the earliest leaders of American Reform Judaism eschewed a fixed dogma, and pointedly rejected defining their religious beliefs institutionally. In point of fact, it was never the intention of any of the institutional bodies of the Reform Movement to speak to religious matters on behalf of an entire religious community; rather the Movement sought to

provide a structure within which American Jews, in concert with one another, might fashion a personal mode of Judaism, which synthesized the entirety of Jewish history and ultimate religious freedom.

But still there is a third principal reason that Reform Judaism lacks for an official definition or statement of its essence. Where it was once the fear of the early architects of the Reform Movement that stating a definitive corpus of belief would surely alienate those on the liberal and traditional margins of Reform Judaism, today the leadership of the Movement fears offending those who are beyond the margins of Reform Judaism.

Ironically, the third reason Reform Judaism lacks for an official statement of its essence is no longer a fear of alienating those who are within and yet on the margins, (although such a statement might well bruise the more sentimentally naive among us), but rather there is a fear of alienating those who do not so much as identify with Reform Judaism; those who are beyond the community, and yet whose approval the leadership of the Reform Jewish Movement craves nonetheless. Where the leaders of the Reform Movement once feared that the early Reform Movement would break apart if it stated its beliefs and essence too autocraticly, today there is a fear among the Movement's leadership -- lay and rabbinic leadership alike -- that by officially defining Reform Judaism, they risk writing the Reform Movement out of the ranks of mainstream Judaism. The fallacy in this line of thinking, of course, is that in spite of the best efforts of these Reform Jewish leaders to keep Reform

Judaism's essence out of print, the essence of Reform Judaism -- the radical autonomy of every individual -- is easy to see, and those who would deny Reform Judaism legitimacy on this basis have already ruled. To these minds, Reform Judaism and the Reform Movement have long been beyond the pale.

And so there are three principle reasons that Reform Judaism lacks for an official definition. The first reason being that an authoritative and official statement of the religious beliefs and practice of Reform Judaism is anathema, if not non-sequitur to its understanding of self as a nonauthoritative religious system; the terms of Reform Judaism are being defined and redefined every day; this is Reform Judaism's hallmark of freedom.

The second reason being, given the historic roots of Reform Judaism in this country, the Reform Movement's earliest pioneers held off defining Reform Judaism so that they might organize a union of congregations and thereby build and fund a seminary; in so doing, they secured the Reform Movement's hallmark of congregational autonomy.

And finally, the third reason that Reform Judaism lacks for an official definition is a current and pernicious fear which pervades the leadership of the Reform Movement. This fear is that by officially stating the essence of Reform Judaism, the Reform Movement will alienate itself from the rest of the Jewish world; it is a fear that an official statement of Reform Judaism's liberal religious essence will stigmatize the political and communal clout the Reform Jewish Movement currently enjoys on the world's religious stage.

This final reason for Reform Judaism's lacking an official statement of its essence is perhaps the most insidious, for in the Reform Movement failing to define Reform Judaism, religious and ideological integrity is sacrificed for political expediency. And further, by virtue of its silence on this matter, the Reform Jewish Movement masks the fact that it is not one and the same with the entire Reform Jewish community.

This tacit misappropriation by the Reform Movement of the mantle of the Reform Jewish community carries with it attendant dangers. As long as the Reform community in toto is defined by only its largest part, there will be those who will find that where the Reform Jewish community is one in which they would otherwise have been comfortable, in point of fact, they are not made welcome. This is no idle philosophical musing. As of the summer of 1994, there is precedent for the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, on behalf of the Reform Movement, ruling on the probity of a congregation's expression of Reform Judaism, and of denying their right to understand themselves as a Reform Jewish congregation.

In this case, a congregation applied to join the Reform Movement, yet the congregation's religious expression was found lacking; this, in spite of the fact that the congregation is led by an ordinee of the Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion, a member in good standing of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, and that the congregation has been characterized as "a group of intelligent, responsible, educated Jews in serious

search of the spiritual substance of their Jewish identity."[69] Further, the policy statement of the congregation includes a list of goals which include: "To provide meaningful religious services, to continuously examine our concepts by critical reason, to make changes to meet the test of reality, [and] to participate in Reform Judaism."[70] And yet, in spite of the congregation's clear self understanding, their application to identify as a congregation allied with Reform Judaism was denied by the powers-that-be within the Reform Jewish Movement.

Reform Judaism and the Reform Jewish community, like any other religious system and community, requires institutions. But a question as to whether the religion's institutions are there to further the needs of the religion or whether the religion is to be tailored to suit the religious institution must be asked. In the case of Reform Judaism, the choice seems to have been in favor of the latter option.[71]

The Reform Movement's current role as arbiter and gatekeeper for the entire Reform Jewish community is problematic. Given that many Jews who are expressing a form of Judaism which would otherwise be understood to be Reform Jewish, and yet which is currently not validated by the religious

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[69] Eugene Mihaly, "Qualifications for Membership in the Union of American Hebrew Congregations," (Rabbinic Responsum, 1990) ,p. 1 - 2.

[70] Ibid., p. 4.

[71] Jakob J. Petuchowski, "Reform Judaism's Diminishing Boundaries," Journal of Reform Judaism. (Fall, 1986) p. 18.

establishment; and given the current reality within the Reform Movement -- that for all intents and purposes, a congregation which practices Reform Judaism, but which is not granted membership in the UAHC cannot in good conscience feel itself entitled to the name Reform -- a redress of the current situation is required.

A clear and unequivocal definition of the Reform Jewish community is required. The definitions must be one that validates those persons who otherwise understand themselves to be within the community, and yet who have otherwise been told by the Reform Movement that they are not entitled to call themselves Reform Jews; that they may not comfortably identify as that which they truly are.

Recall that Alvin Reines attempted to address this problem. Reines had stated that the fundamental principles of Polydox Judaism are identical with those of Reform Judaism, and yet when it came to defining the Polydox and Reform communities around those same fundamental principles, he equivocated. In Reines' Polydox model, the Polydox Jewish community is an association of persons who come together in a formal relationship to pursue their commitment to the Polydoxy Principle of freedom and wish to have the name Jew. However, in spite of the fact that the fundamental principles of Polydox Judaism are identical with those of Reform Judaism, according to Reines, the Reform Jew cannot utilize the same definition. The Reform Jewish community is not defined as an association of persons who come

together in a formal relationship to pursue a commitment to the principle of religious autonomy and wish to have the name Reform Jew.

In contrast to his definition for the Polydox Jewish community, for whom communal membership was defined in terms of a commitment to a common ideal, Reines defines the Reform Jewish community in terms of membership in the institutions of the Reform Jewish Movement. Reines suggests that "the body of persons...referred to as the Reform Jewish community...is affiliated with one of Reform's three formal institutions: the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), the Reform rabbinical association; the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC), the Reform congregational association; and the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR), the Reform rabbinical seminary. Any member of the CCAR, any member of a congregation affiliated with the UAHC, and any member of the HUC-JIR faculty or student body [is a member of the Reform Jewish community]. (Membership applies as well for the World Union for Progressive Judaism, which includes the several Reform congregations existing outside of America, and with which the UAHC is affiliated.) Also recognized [within the Reform Jewish community] are those Reformers who lived in the eighteenth century prior to the establishment of these Reform institutions."

And "inasmuch as the constitutive factor in being a Reform Jew, according to [Reines'] membership definition, is affiliation and not doctrine,

religious thought will be Reform Jewish so long as the one who professes it is a Reform Jew. Hence a Reform Jewish system of thought and belief will be the religious thought or beliefs of any person who is a Reform Jew, that is, any person who is a member of the Reform Movement. And the phrase, Reform Judaism, as the generic term referring to the religious systems of all Reform Jews, will be the aggregate of religious systems subscribed to by Reform Jews... Thus, Reform Judaism refers to an assemblage or aggregate of systems rather than to some one system that is an integrated and unified whole."[72]

"The great values of the definition by membership for the preservation of the freedom of a liberal religion is apparent," writes Reines, "for it includes within its scope every member of the [Reform Jewish] movement."[73] But what of those who are denied membership in the Reform Movement? And more to the point, what of those who are denied membership within the Movement on the basis of their thoughts or beliefs, their belief in the principles of Polydoxy? Reines holds that, in spite of what these persons may or may not believe, in spite of how they understand themselves, and in spite of the Reform Jewish institutions to which they may once have belonged, but do no longer, these persons are by rights not *Reform* Jews, but are rather Polydox Jews. For Reines, membership in the Reform Jewish community

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[72] Alvin Reines, "Meet the American Jew," p. 30-31.

[73] Alvin Reines, "Meet the American Jew," p. 31.

requires membership in the Reform Jewish Movement; here, then, for Reines the Reform Jewish community *is* the Reform Jewish Movement.

To this authors mind, Reines' definition of communal membership for Reform Judaism fails on two counts. First, it denies the autonomous Jew the right to understand him- or herself as he or she sees fit; the Jew who thinks of him- or herself as Reform Jewish is not a Reform Jew, according to Reines, so long as he or she does not enjoy membership in one of the Reform Movement's three major institutions. And second, Reines' definition of communal membership grants to the leadership of the Reform Movement alone the authority to decide who shall be or not be a Reform Jew; and this state of affairs is no better than the Orthodox rabbinate alone possessing the authority to decide who shall be a Jew; it flies in the face of the autonomy Reform Judaism ensures every person. Under Reines' definition of the essence of the Reform Jewish community, one can imagine a state of affairs in which all persons who share a given belief have their membership within the institutions of the Reform Movement revoked and are thereafter denied the right to understand themselves as Reform Jews.

It is, therefore, the belief of this author that membership within the Reform Jewish community can not be defined as Reines defines it. Rather, membership within the Reform Jewish community must be defined by that which we shall identify as the essence of communal membership.

What, then, is the quality or characteristic which distinguishes the

The radical freedom, which according to Reform Judaism every individual enjoys, provides each and every Reform Jew with the authority and right to fashion Judaism after their own image. And too, each and every Reform Jew possesses the right and authority to call that which they fashion, Reform Judaism, and themselves Reform Jews; no matter how incongruous or offensive to the leadership of the Reform Jewish Movement or to any other person their beliefs or practices appear to be. The religious system known as Reform Judaism is as broadly defined as Reform Jews are open-minded.

Once one accepts that given their inalienable autonomy, Reform Jews have both the right and authority to choose that which they will and will not believe and practice, one sees that their can be no absolute certainty as to what is common in belief and/or practice between any two Reform Jews. To the point, there is neither a single belief nor ritual act common to all Reform Jews; their is no single *mitzvah* in the torah that all Reform Jews share. In short, Reform Judaism is that which Reform Jews say it is, and so long as those who freely identify as Reform Jews remain tolerant of the freedom enjoyed by all other Reform Jews, then the system remains dynamic; to fail to remain tolerant of others' autonomous decisions is to fall into the role of an orthodox authority, which is anathema and foreign to Reform's religious system.

What, then, is the quality or characteristic which distinguishes the

members of the Reform Jewish community from all others? What do the members of the Reform Jewish community share such that they understand themselves to be in communion one with another? Former Hebrew Union College Professor Jakob Petuchowski offers that "the one thing all Reform Jews. . . have in common is the fact that they are not Orthodox."[74] And yet, we can not be certain of even this, for there may well be a Reform Jew who understands him- or herself to be as well an Orthodox Jew. So let us not state that which we know about what Reform Jews share in the negative, but let us state it rather in the affirmative.

For while it is true that none can be certain as to what any two Reform Jews believe, so long as Reform Jews identify and understanding themselves to be "Reform Jews," then this we know about them. And at the end of the day, we can be certain that there is something by which all Reform Jews may be identified, and which all Reform Jews share: and it is their name. The essence of communal membership within the Reform Jewish community, then, is the common name "Reform Jew."

This alone we know for certain all Reform Jews share. It is the name "Reform Jew" that is uniquely common to each and every member of the Reform Jewish community.

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[74] Petuchowski, "Reform Judaism's Diminishing Boundaries," p. 23.

# CONCLUSION

It is the conceit of every generation to believe that theirs is unique and eternal, the hinge between past and future on which history swings. With regard to the generations' conceit vis-a-vis the definition and essence of Reform Jewish community, it should be clear, that in the course of history, Jewish communities have taken different shapes and forms as circumstances dictated. At various times, they have operated under different political rule, physical constraints, and religious and cultural preconceptions. Indeed, in the sweep of Jewish history, there has been no single definition for the term "Jewish community" of which we may authoritatively speak; rather there have been many different Jewish communities, some of which have come to be hailed as model or parade examples of what community once was. But in the whole of this time, as no two persons are identical one to the other, so have no two Jewish communities been identical one with another. And as extrapolating from a single individual's experience onto the whole of humanity is folly, so too is determining from a single Jewish community the essence of all Jewish communities is folly.

According to Roland Warren a sociologist at Brandeis University, communities for which there is no official definition, a community such as the Reform Jewish community, exist only in the behaviors and attitudes of its members; to writ, the Reform Jewish community exists only in the patterns of its members' interactions. According to Warren, as the Reform Jewish

community lacks an official definition, it is necessarily reduced to defining itself by that which its members have in common. And in this respect, the Reform Jewish community is analogous to a small, informal group of friends.[75] As a result, the definitions and assumptions one might make about the Reform Jewish community can not be arrived at a priori or by looking at a Reform manifesto of belief. The essence of the Reform Jewish community can be informed only by that which is real for the "small, informal group of friends" which ultimately comprise the community.

Having earlier distilled the essence of the entire Reform Jewish community down to a common name, it might appear that we have successfully addressed the essence of the Reform Jewish community. And yet, in point of fact, this is not the case. For while individual Reform Jews may share no more than a name in common with members of the entire Reform Jewish community, these same Reform Jews live and fashion their understandings of Reform Judaism within smaller, more homogenous Reform Jewish communities. And for practical, if not theoretical discussion of the Reform Jewish community, it is of these more localized Reform Jewish communities that we must speak.

And the question is then, not what may we say about the essence of the Reform Jewish community at large, but what may we say about the essence of

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[75] Roland L. Warren, The Community in America: Third Edition. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1978), p. 9.

these local Reform Jewish communities? To answer this question, let us review that which was determined to be the essence of the Reform Jewish community writ large.

As was stated, the essence of the Reform Jewish community in its widest sense is simply this: "An autonomous identification with the Reform Jewish community; the common name 'Reform Jew.'" However, as has been stated, for practical purposes this tautology is an incomplete statement of the essence of the local Reform Jewish communities in which Reform Jews live. That is, the fact that all Reform Jews autonomously chose to identify as Reform Jews does not fully describe that which Reform Jews who live and practice Reform Judaism in proximity to one another share. Members of more homogenous Reform Jewish communities, specifically congregations and small *havurot*, necessarily share more in common than the fact that they all autonomously chose to identify as Reform Jews.

To these more intimate communities, the statement "All Reform Jews share the name 'Reform Jew'" is of no more consequence than the statement "All Reform Jews share the gift of life." For while both of these statements are true, they do not fully describe the essence of a given Reform Jewish community or congregation.

While it is true that the statement "All Reform Jews share the name 'Reform Jew'" describes the essence of the entire Reform Jewish community, given Reform Jewish communities each have an essence that can be described

in greater detail and which will include more common characteristics among its members than merely the fact that they are all Reform Jews. The amount of information available as regards a given Reform Jewish community's essence is typically in inverse proportion to the size of the community. The fewer members a community has, the greater is the likelihood that its shared essence will be more detailed and specific; two people will have more in common, than will two hundred.

And as no two Reform Jewish communities could ever be comprised of an identical membership, so could no two Reform Jewish communities ever be defined by the same essence. Every Reform Jewish community, as defined by those persons who autonomously identify as members of that community, possesses a discrete and unique essence. And as the composition of a given community changes, so too does the community's essence change. When a person joins or leaves a community, the essence of the community changes too. And to accurately describe the essence of a given Reform Jewish community, the community's essence should be determined in such a way that each and every member has an equal opportunity to share in that which the community reflects.

While members of a given Reform Jewish community may share even a great deal in common with one another, only members of the Reform Jewish community under discussion may speak authoritatively about that which comprises the essence of their own community. No one outside a given

Reform Jewish community has any authority whatsoever to define the community's essence. And too, no one within the community has the authority to impose his or her own definition of the community's essence upon any of the other members. It is incumbent upon each and every autonomous member of a Reform Jewish community to define for him- or herself that which they hold Reform Judaism and the essence of the Reform Jewish community to be; and then to share and contrast their definitions with others within the community. For in the process of sharing and contrasting their individual understandings of Reform Judaism and the Reform Jewish community's essence, the members shall determine that which their understandings all have in common -- that which, in fact, is their religion's and their religious community's common essence.

As the members of Reform Jewish communities seek to validate their fellow members' authority to define Reform Judaism for themselves, the community as a whole invites a gamut of personal and collective responses and difficulties. This is the price and reward of the religious freedom enjoyed by Reform Jews. It is the hallmark of Reform Judaism. The creative and religious diversity this freedom engenders is an exciting challenge to the religious and existential uncertainty which characterizes the contemporary scene.[76] Indeed, it is in an effort to address religious and existential

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[76] Eugene Mihaly, "Halacha: Discipline and Reform Judaism," Central Conference of American Rabbis General Assembly Address, June 18, 1975.

uncertainty; it is in an effort to seek a meaningful expression of Judaism, that Reform Jews seek community in the first place.

As individual Reform Jews join in community with one another, they are engaged in a struggle to arrive at that which they believe, both individually and collectively; And in this, Reform Jews are confronted with a similar problem to that of the Prophets of Israel. In their religious search, Reform Jews seek conviction, if not authority. For with no dogmatic tests, no catechism, no authoritative texts to which Reform Jews might turn to cede their freedom, Reform Jews are bound together in their pursuit of a common ideal.[77]

And to determine the essence of the Reform Jewish community, of any Reform Jewish community, the members of the community must see themselves as engaged in the pursuit of a common ideal. And what is that ideal? The ideal must be a meaningful religious expression, howsoever those in pursuit choose to first individually and then collectively express it. It is this quest after the meaning within life that is Judaism's most ancient and enduring value; it is this that is Judaism's most current and pressing interest.

Both the Reform Jewish community in its broadest sense and Reform Jewish communities that are comprised of as few as two members function best when they maintain a delicate balance between ancient values and

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[77] Sheldon Blank, Prophetic Thought: Essays and Addresses, Hebrew Union College Press, 1977, p. 20,21.

current interests; the needs of the autonomous individual and the needs of the community as a whole. In today's world, being Jewish is no longer a condition, rather it is an option. And the Jewish community, under the banner of Reform Judaism, has no more urgent nor pressing interest than the energetic pursuit of its values. But of note is the fact that within the Reform Jewish community, membership rosters and Reform Jews' common values are ever-changing. So too, then, must definitions of the essence of Reform Jewish communities change. The idea that a community's essence will be forever in flux can be difficult for some to accept; some are threatened by this prospect. It is the tendency of many to want to preserve that which they have today for fear of no longer possessing it tomorrow.

Dr. Julian Morgenstern, former President of the Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion, addressed this tendency when he delivered the following words to the 1922 General Assembly of the Central Conference of American Rabbis.

"It is not our task to preserve Judaism. It is Judaism's task to preserve us, to keep alive our faith, to satisfy our spiritual hunger and to guide us steadily forward along the pathway of the life of right living and true worship which the Jew has ever known. . . . Our task, therefore, is not, as I conceive it, to keep Judaism alive, because it is still very much alive and needs no revivifying assistance from us. Our task is rather to guide the development of Judaism... [to] adapt it consciously, positively and constructively to our life and needs... to create a true and positive and growing and animating Judaism."[78]

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[78] Morgenstern, "The Training of the Modern Rabbi," (1922), p. 6.

In concert with one another, this is the task of the members of every Reform Jewish community; indeed, it is the incumbent task of every Reform Jew. What this task will yield to Judaism's evolutionary journey, and more to the point what this will yield to the evolution of various Reform Jewish communities' essences, no one can tell.

That which is shared by the members of a specific Reform Jewish community, that which is the community's essence will be determined by the persons involved in the guiding and development of the community under discussion. That which is common to all members of a specific Reform Jewish community will be determined by those members that are involved in the "conscious, positive, constructive and animated" communal search for meaning.

To know a Reform Jewish community's essence, then, is to be aware of all that is common to the members of the Reform Jewish community in question.

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