

Not Majesty, Not Might,
Not Mystery, but Morality:
The Evolution of the Prophetic Voice
in the Reform Movement

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Thesis Summary

The Reform Movement has long championed prophetic literature as a basis for an ethical and moral emphasis over a strict adherence to *halakha*. The early Reformers sought to balance the post-Emancipation modern world with Judaism, allowing for integration and participation in way that had not been allowed previously. Early German Reformers sought to realize the vision of the prophets as an ethical mandate, to guide Jewish life as *halakha* had for so many centuries before. American Reformers also followed this vision, creating institutions whose missions reflect such balances. These institutions and the visionaries within them used the voice of the prophets as a beacon of light for the world.

This thesis chronicles the use of the ethical prophetic mandate throughout Reform history, in institutional resolutions, sermons, and educational material. It is split into six chapters, including an introduction and conclusion. Most of the research material is made up of primary sources spanning the history of the Reform Movement as well as secondary sources concerning the prophetic verses and historical context.

Introduction

The first time I visited Temple Emanu-el of the city of New York, I was truly in awe. The sheer power and intricacy of the exterior was nothing compared to my first walk down the center aisle toward the magnificent ark. I had heard the family lore from a young age; my great-great grandfather was one of the founders of Temple Emanu-el and so I felt a connection beyond that of a first-time visitor. Unable to take my eyes off the expansiveness, as I walked into the building, when I walked out onto 65th street, I looked to the building across the street, 838 Fifth Avenue. In impossibly large letters, chiseled into the side of this also impressive structure, spanning almost half a city block were the words, “DO JUSTICE, LOVE MERCY, WALK HUMBLY WITH THY GOD.” I was again, in awe, to see these words from the prophet Micah permanently inscribed on this New York City building. I had heard these words many times, in a sermon or two, in a NFTY program about social action, at Eisner Camp during *limud*. These prophetic words were all over my experiences as a Reform Jew.

I learned later, in subsequent visits, that 838 Fifth Avenue had been built as the “House of Living Judaism,” the headquarters for the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, when it moved from Cincinnati to New York in 1951. The institutional body of Reform Judaism had literally chiseled these seminal words into the side of their building, serving as a reminder for all who passed by, of the centrality of the prophetic voice of ethics in Reform Judaism. It is the vision behind these words and other such prophetic verses that have inspired

this exploration into the evolution of the prophetic voice through the Reform Movement.

The Reform Movement has long championed prophetic literature as a basis for an ethical and moral emphasis over a strict adherence to *halakha*. The early Reformers sought to balance the post-Emancipation modern world with Judaism, allowing for integration and participation in way that had not been allowed previously. Early German Reformers sought to realize the vision of the prophets as an ethical mandate, to guide Jewish life as *halakha* had for so many centuries before. Abraham Geiger (1810-1874), a rabbi in Germany and a central figure in the early Reform Movement, wrote,

Of course, Israel is not like a stone which endures through millennia, rigid and unchangeable, which is then smashed and broken apart when the elements sweep over it...No, Israel is wise; its life is a life of knowledge. It was not the outward, rigid law that made Israel indestructible; it was the winged message of the prophets that rendered Judaism inviolable. The lightening flashes of the spirit did not emanate from Sinai only; they flared forth also from Israel's great men, the prophets.¹

Geiger's vision of a modern Judaism sought not only a balance with modernity but also with the voice of the prophets and the voice of the rabbis.

American Reformers also followed this vision, creating institutions such as the Union of American Hebrew Congregations in 1873 and the Hebrew Union College in 1875 and the Central Conference of American Rabbis in 1889, whose missions reflect such balances. These institutions and the visionaries within them used the voice of the prophets as a beacon of light for the world. Reform Jewish leaders hear the voice of Isaiah, urging Israel to be a light to the nations

¹ Meyer, Michael A., and W. Gunther Plaut. *The Reform Judaism Reader: North American Documents*. New York, NY: UAHC Press, 2001. 8-9.

and understood their sacred responsibility to those less fortunate, the factory workers in the early 20th century who fought for unionization, the struggling families during the Depression in the 1930s, the Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe during and after the Holocaust, the African Americans fighting for Civil Rights in the 1950s and 1960s, the Soviet Jews persecuted for their Judaism behind the Iron Curtain, women fighting for equality, and gays and lesbians seeking equal rights under the law. Reform Judaism looked outward, to the greater world and followed these ancient voices towards justice.

The prophetic mandate demands introspection, self-improvement and communal obligations. Ethical behavior is also about integrity. God, through Amos, reminds Israel that empty action, ritual without intention or integrity is worthless and unacceptable. As the world changed, Reform Judaism evolved, to fit the needs of its congregations and congregants, looking inward as well as outward. It seeks to educate and inform not solely to make the outside world a better place, a prophetic vision of the world to come, but also for each individual to grapple with his or her place in this vision. The materials created to teach the youth of the movement play an important role not only providing a sense of history and technical, concrete knowledge, but also in shaping future generations to heed the words of Micah and the like in their own lives and in the greater world.

The voice of the prophets guided the creation of the Reform Movement and in its evolution became the central mission for many Reform Jews. The idea of *tikkun olam*, repairing the world, has become synonymous with Reform Judaism and the collective actions of the movement through its history speaks louder than even these important prophetic words. This thesis attempts to

chronicle the use of the ethical prophetic mandate throughout Reform history, in institutional resolutions, sermons, and educational material.

I have chosen three prophetic verses, which can be found throughout the history of the Reform Movement in many different places. Whether in sermons confronting the social evils of the day, or urging congregants to take action for the betterment of the world; or in educational materials aimed at the youth of the Reform Movement to inform and provoke thought and deed; or the statements put forth by the institutions of Reform Judaism, advocating for change and speaking out against injustice, the ethical voice of these ancient prophets have greatly impacted the American Reform Movement. The cry of Amos against corruption and greed, the plea of Isaiah toward the light of God and the succinct yet powerful call of Micah for a life of justice and mercy, remain ever relevant and continue to take on new meaning as Jews confront new problems, new evils in the world.

This thesis is split into four chapters. The first provides an understanding of these prophets and the specific verses, Micah 6:8, Amos 5:24 and Isaiah 49:6 in their own contexts. The concerns of these prophets in their own time provides the basis for a modern exploration of their words.

The second chapter seeks to understand the role of the prophetic voice in American Reform institutions through an analysis of the resolutions passed by these bodies. Resolutions include the creation of the Commission on Social Action, strong statements about Civil Rights, Nuclear Proliferation, Hunger and a response to the attacks on September 11, 2001.

The third chapter chronicles the prophetic voice from the pulpit. The role of the rabbi through the Reform Movement has changed and evolved, yet the prophetic mandate remains a constant reminder through time and space of the potential of Judaism to seek justice and righteousness in the world.

The fourth chapter analyzes the youth magazine, "Keeping Posted." This publication was created by the education department of the UAHC beginning in the middle of the 20th century and continuing through the 1980s. It provides an interesting glimpse into the educational philosophy of the Reform Movement through several decades and highlights the importance of educating the next generation in our great ethical tradition.

The words on the side of 838 Fifth Avenue still remain, even though the building has since been turned into high-end condominiums. Each time I pass by, I am reminded not only of the rich history of the Reform Movement but also of the great ethical voices of the prophets, which have guided Jews for centuries. At times hard to hear, these voices are our legacy and have evolved with us, as we continue the work of fulfilling the vision of a better world.

Micah, Amos and Isaiah

“Prophecy is not simply the application of timeless standards to particular human situations, but rather an interpretation of a particular moment in history, a divine understanding of a human situation.”²

Abraham Joshua Heschel

The voices of Micah, Amos and Isaiah are known throughout the world as instruments of moral instruction. The Prophets of the Bible acted as God’s mouthpiece, reprimanding, discouraging, and chastising the people of Israel and urging them to behave better so as to make good on the promise of covenant: to lead righteous lives. The lives of the prophet were not glamorous or magical but rather a lonely existence of worry, concern, and fear of what an angry God might do. But each prophet also found hope in the possibility of a renewed relationship between the Israelites and God. Each prophet confronted different concerns within the community; societal ills, political corruption, economic greed, as well as changing external political realities, new rulers, exile and return. The prophets remained true to their role in spite of them all and continued to believe in a God who would allow the people to ask for forgiveness and return to their God.

For centuries, scholars have studied the place of the Prophets in history and religious thinkers have discussed their theology. Reform Jews, again and again, have referenced the prophets in order to fashion a modern code of ethics. In this chapter, I will focus on three Prophetic verses that have wended their way into the very fabric of Reform Jewish history and explore how they were

² Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Prophets*. New York: Harper & Row, 1962. xxxvii.

understood in their original context. In subsequent chapters, their trajectory will be tracked.

Micah 6:8

הִגִּיד לְךָ אָדָם מֶ-טוֹב וּמֶ-יָהוָה דּוֹרֵשׁ מִמֶּךָ כִּי אִם-עֲשׂוֹת
מִשְׁפָּט וְאַהֲבַת חֶסֶד וְהִצַּנֵּעַ לֶכֶת עִם-אֱלֹהֶיךָ:

“He has told you, O human, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: Only to do justice, and to love goodness, and to walk modestly with your God.”

Reform Jews have used this verse in countless settings. It has been preached in numerous sermons, chiseled into the sides of buildings, and used as a prod to bring justice to the world through centuries of struggle and strife. It is a concise and poignant summary of the essence of how one should live life; enacting justice, cherishing goodness and compassion and striving to emulate the ways of God.

Micah was a prophet during the reigns of Kings Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah of Judah³, the Southern Kingdom, and a contemporary of Isaiah.⁴ Scholars date Micah’s life to the latter half of the 8th century BCE and into the early years of the 7th century.⁵ The explicit references to the Babylonian exile date the compilation of the book to the post-monarchical period.⁶

³ Micah 1:1

⁴ Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Prophets*. New York: Harper & Row, 1962. 124.

⁵ Berlin, Adele, Marc Zvi. Brettler, and Michael A. Fishbane, eds. *The Jewish Study Bible*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. 1205.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Despite this most famous verse, the Book of Micah consists of a mix of prophetic visions of destruction and the ravages of exile, alongside a hope for the return of the people to the ways of God. Chapter 6 begins with Micah pleading for the people to listen to him and thereby God; “Hear, you mountains, the case of the Lord...”⁷ Verses 3-5 are spoken by God, in first person. God beseeches the people, wondering how they could have forsaken the God of Israel. They are reminded of the exodus from Egypt, the great leadership of Moses, Aaron and Miriam and the blessings of Balaam, in an effort to reform them. An inner monologue follows in which Israel questions how to get close to God once again and achieve redemption (verses 6-7). Verse 8 provides a modest solution, reminding Israel that God has provided an answer, “Only to do justice, and to love goodness, and to walk modestly with your God.”⁸

The medieval commentator, Don Isaac Abravanel, interprets the triad of articulated behaviors as a graded series of obligations: the first being the demands of justice, which refers to the formalities and externals of the civil and criminal law; the second being the need for loving-kindness, which he says refers to the acts performed according to the spirit of the law, beyond its fixed or formal features; and the third element, *hatzne’a lekhet*, to walk modestly, refers to the inwardness of true piety, hidden from the world-at-large.⁹ This interpretation expands the simple statement by explaining it in terms of action. It is not simply a nice phrase to be inscribed on a building or used in the abstract, but rather a way of living that is intentional, with *kavanah*.

⁷ Micah 6:2

⁸ Micah 6:8b

⁹ Fishbane, Michael A. *Haftarot: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2002. 249.

The great 20th century philosopher, Franz Rosensweig, understands this verse as a reminder of the longstanding relationship between God and Israel. “He perceives two teachings here: the first refers back to the affirmative ‘good’ of existence repeated in Genesis 1; the second refers to the covenantal obligations given at Sinai. In this view, the prophet alludes both to the creation and to the revelation of the Law in his instructions.”¹⁰ The final phrase, “to walk modestly with your God,”¹¹ is therefore the result of creation and revelation.

Abraham Joshua Heschel attempts to understand Micah as a complex human being. He has compassion for the plight of the prophet, whom he describes as “a lonely man.” His standards are too high, his stature too great, and his concern too intense for other men to share.”¹² But he continues by saying, “Together with the word of doom, Micah proclaims the vision of redemption.”¹³

Rabbis, both ancient and modern, have written many complicated interpretations of Micah 6:8, but the simplicity of the verse speaks for itself. It goads us to act in a humane way with humility. As Heschel puts it, “Micah here offers the listener not a formal legal dispute but an impassioned plea for a return to relationship.”¹⁴ Heschel concludes,

Among the great insights Micah has bequeathed to us is how to accept and to bear the anger of God. The strength of acceptance comes from the awareness that we have sinned against Him and from the certainty that anger does not mean God’s abandonment of man forever. His anger passes, His faithfulness goes on forever.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 249.

¹¹ Micah 6:8b

¹² Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Prophets*. New York: Harper & Row, 1962. 127.

¹³ *Ibid*, 128.

¹⁴ DeBlosi, Nicole L. "How Good: Micah 6:1-8." Final Paper, Bible 411. Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion, 2010. 13.

There is compassion in His anger, when we fall, we rise. Darkness is not dismal. When we sit in the darkness, God is our light.¹⁵

Amos 5:24

וַיִּגַּל כַּמַּיִם מִשְׁפָּט וְצִדְקָה כְּנַחַל אֵיתָן:

“But let justice well up like water, Righteousness like an unfailing stream.”¹⁶

Amos was a prophet in the 8th century BCE in the Northern Kingdom, known as Israel. The book opens with a description of Amos as a sheep breeder from Tekoa in Israel under the reign of Kings Uzziah of Judah and Jereboam son of Joash of Israel.¹⁷ It was a period of great strength and wealth for Israel, as the Assyrians and Syrians were both in weakened states. King Jereboam II used this to his advantage and began accumulating wealth and land.¹⁸ “When Amos appeared in the North there was pride, plenty, and splendor in the land, elegance in the cities, and might in the palaces.”¹⁹ With all this prosperity, Amos is concerned with the moral character of his people. In fact, much of the Book of Amos describes the social and political evils of the Kingdom of Israel.²⁰

Chapter 5 begins with Amos bemoaning Israel’s dissention, namely, her refusal to live in the ways of God. Verse 4 proclaims, “Seek Me, and you will live,” and follows with explicit consequences for turning away from God. Exile is

¹⁵ Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Prophets*. New York: Harper & Row, 1962. 128-129.

¹⁶ NJPS

¹⁷ Amos 1:1

¹⁸ Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Prophets*. New York: Harper & Row, 1962. 128-129. 32-33.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 33.

²⁰ Berlin, Adele, Marc Zvi. Brettler, and Michael A. Fishbane, eds. *The Jewish Study Bible*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. 1176.

compared to fire, which will consume, a darkness without the hope of light and water from the sea that will destroy the land. This powerful imagery is a haunting reminder of God's omnipotence and capacity for anger. Verse 14 again pleads with the people, "Seek good and not evil, that you may live."

As of verse 21, God, speaking through Amos, berates Israel for its empty ritual, saying, "I will not accept them; I will pay no heed to your gifts of fatlings."²¹ God is not satisfied with ritual for the sake of ritual; the pungent odor of sacrifice has no meaning. God instead desires, "justice [to] well up like water, righteousness like an unfailing stream."²²

The water imagery has an almost calming affect, allowing the reader to not only understand the words, but picture them and even feel them. The preceding verses do not have the same affect; God speaks of the hot, burning altar, the empty rites.

The biblical scholar, Shalom Paul explains, "God demands justice and morality and not the minutiae of the cult: Not rite but right is demanded; devotion not devotions."²³ He continues, "Ritual per se, with all its paraphernalia and panoply, simply cannot substitute for the basic moral and ethical actions of humans. When these are lacking, religious life, with all its ritual accouterments, becomes a sham. What is required above all else is justice and righteousness. The proper divine-human relationship is based upon a correct human-human relationship."²⁴

²¹ Amos 5:22

²² Amos 5:24

²³ Paul, Shalom M., and Frank Moore. Cross. *Amos: A Commentary on the Book of Amos*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991. 188.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 192.

God's anger arises from unfulfilled expectations and disappointment in the greed that was rampant during the reign of Jereboam II. The people were seduced by materialism and worldly prosperity and forgot about serving God with acts of justice and righteousness.

Heschel explains,

Did Amos speak as a champion of ethics?...Amos insisted that it was God whose call he followed and whose living word he carried. There is a living God who cares. Justice is more than an idea or a norm. Justice is divine concern. What obtains between God and His people is not only a covenant of mutual obligations but also a relationship of mutual concern.²⁵

Isaiah 49:6

וַיֹּאמֶר נָקַל מִהְיוֹתִי לִי עֶבֶד לְהַקִּים אֶת-שְׁבִטִי יַעֲקֹב וּנְצִירִי [וּנְצוּרִי]
יִשְׂרָאֵל לְהַשְׁיב וּנְתַתִּיךָ לְאֹר גּוֹיִם לְהִיּוֹת יְשׁוּעָתִי עַד-קֵצֶה הָאָרֶץ: ,

"For He has said: 'It is too little that you should be My servant in that I raise up the tribes of Jacob and restore the survivors of Israel: I will also make you a light of nations, that My salvation may reach the ends of the earth.'"²⁶

This verse is found in Deutero-Isaiah, that is, the second half of the Book of Isaiah, chapters 40-66. Deutero-Isaiah, or Second Isaiah as he is known, was a prophet in the 6th century BCE during the Neo-Babylonia Empire and the Persian King, Cyrus. It was a period of uncertainty, given the rule of a new, powerful foreign ruler. Isaiah emerged to provide comfort to his people in the wake of the

²⁵ Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Prophets*. New York: Harper & Row, 1962. 38.

²⁶ NJPS

Babylonian exile.²⁷ Although there is a single book of Isaiah, scholars since the nineteenth century have divided the book into two sections. The content of the latter half reflects a post-exilic time period where redemption, comfort and a strong sense of monotheism exist.²⁸ Second Isaiah provided this comfort in reaction to the Babylonian exile, a generation previous as well as the rise of Cyrus and the hope that the exiled may be allowed to return.²⁹

In chapters 49 – 57, Isaiah is hopeful about a return to Zion and the possibility of a renewed community there.³⁰ In fact, scholars believe these chapters were written in Jerusalem once the exiles had begun to return. Isaiah speaks of his own journey and the possibility of redemption in the return.³¹ As of Chapter 49, Isaiah pleads with the people to listen to him and understand his purpose as a prophet. He urges them to heed God's promise that Israel will be lifted up by God and restored as *l'or goyim*, "a light of nations," or figuratively translated as, "the agent of good fortune of the nations."³² The prophet describes his job as the following: "And now the Lord has resolved – He who formed me in the womb to be His servant – To bring back Jacob to Himself, that Israel may be restored to Him."³³ "Second Isaiah not only conveys the Lord's invitation and commitment to every man on earth; he proclaims that God has sworn that all

²⁷ Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Prophets*. New York: Harper & Row, 1962. 184-185.

²⁸ Blenkinsopp, Joseph. *Isaiah 40-55: a New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. New York: Doubleday, 2002.

²⁹ Berlin, Adele, Marc Zvi. Brettler, and Michael A. Fishbane, eds. *The Jewish Study Bible*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. 782-783.

³⁰ Berlin, Adele, Marc Zvi. Brettler, and Michael A. Fishbane, eds. *The Jewish Study Bible*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. 784.

³¹ *Ibid*, 882.

³² NJPS, note on Isaiah 49:6

³³ Isaiah 49:5

men will worship Him.”³⁴ Israel will help guide the rest of the world toward the worship of the God of Israel and therefore bring peace to the whole world.

This is a message of universalism, though one in which Israel has a special role to play. Through its righteous behavior it will be a light unto the nations, who will in turn worship Israel’s God

The phrase, *or l’goyim*, (a flipping of the actual words of this text) is seen several times in Isaiah and has been interpreted in countless ways throughout history. It is repeated to remind Jews, in every age, of the sacred relationship between God and Israel. Whether interpreted literally, as is often the case in relation to the political actions of the modern State of Israel, or figuratively, as when Reform Jews imagine themselves as “a light to the nations” while in the Diaspora, this phrase continues to goad Jews into creating a better world.

The words of our prophets ring true today as we act to bring about justice and, righteousness in the framework of our covenantal relationship with God.

³⁴ Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Prophets*. New York: Harper & Row, 1962. 195.

The Prophetic Voice in Reform Institutions

“Reform Jews are committed to social justice. Even as Reform Jews embrace ritual, prayer and ceremony more than ever, we continue to see social justice as the jewel in the Reform Jewish crown. Like the prophets, we never forget that God is concerned about everyday and that the blights of society take precedence over the mysteries of heaven. A Reform synagogue that does not alleviate the anguish of the suffering is a contradiction in terms.”³⁵

Rabbi Eric Yoffie, 1998

The institutional entities of Reform Judaism – including but not limited to the UAHC/URJ, HUC, and the RAC evolved over the course of the twentieth century. As the needs of congregations and individual Reform Jews change, so too did the representative bodies. There is a symbiotic relationship between Reform Jews and their prized institutions; at times the institutions created and enacted the vision for the greater movement and at other times, they have struggled to keep up with the vision of the people.

The mandate to fulfill the moral principles of Judaism is central to Reform Jews. Over time, social action has become institutionalized into the framework of the movement. Through, for example, the creation of the Commission on Social Action, the Religious Action Center as well as the countless resolutions and statements made on subjects ranging from hunger to nuclear proliferation. The ethics of the prophets expanded from the realm of the individual, sermon, or passionate rabbi/lay leader to the fabric of the movement. It energized multiple generations of Reform Jews and allowed them to express their Judaism in new and increasingly relevant ways. Reform Jews played roles in major human rights campaigns throughout the 20th century, affecting social policy and American law.

³⁵ Rabbi Eric Yoffie, speech to UAHC Executive Committee, February 1998

There can be no doubt that the ferment of social action from the 1950s-70s has receded, but *tikkun olam*, repairing the world, remains an integral part of Reform Judaism, which has caught on throughout the Jewish world.

This chapter provides a look at many of the documents issued officially by institutions of the Reform Movement, primarily the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC)/Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) as well as the rabbinic body, the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR).

How do Reform institutions understand their role vis-à-vis the issues of the day? What are the concerns of each age and how is the ethical mandate understood in relation to them? How does the prophetic voice and the understanding of this voice find its way into these statements? What does that tell us about Reform Judaism?

Prophets and Platforms

Beginning in 1869, the rabbis of the Reform Movement have composed a series of statements reflecting the contemporary beliefs of the Movement. All but the first statement were aptly named “platforms” and have guided American Reform Judaism from its inception, striving to reflect the time in which they were composed. These five platforms composed in 1869, 1885, 1937, 1976 and 1999 show a clear evolution of thought, historical context, belief and practice. Some changes were radical, while others, more mundane?.

The prophetic voice is detected in these important documents and often acts as moral guidance. The early Reformers, in their academic study of Judaism, sought to return to the original text, the Tanakh, rather than rely solely on the

Rabbinic interpretation that had accrued. Their emphasis on universalism, as influenced by the Enlightenment, led to a rediscovery of the prophetic message as a universal code of morality. Although the earlier Reform statements do not overtly use terms like “social justice” or “social action,” they do call for a greater acknowledgement of universal issues of communal obligation and sense of mission toward the whole world population.

The Philadelphia Principles of 1869

In 1869, the radical Reformer, Rabbi David Einhorn, composed The Philadelphia Principles. This strongly worded document set out seven articles, which firmly separate Reform Judaism from European Orthodoxy. Written in German and adopted by thirteen rabbis³⁶, this original statement of principles differs from those that will follow, both in style and content. Einhorn defines Reform Judaism in opposition to past Jewish beliefs of messianism, Jewish hierarchy, resurrection, Jews in the diaspora, Hebrew and particularism. His principles are not statements of what Reform Jews believe but rather what Reform Jews do not believe. Einhorn’s radical leanings are evident.

“Article 1. The Messianic goal of Israel is not the restoration of the Jewish state under a son of David, nor the continued separation from other nations, but the union of all men as children of God acknowledging His unity, and the oneness of all rational beings and their call to moral sanctification.”³⁷

³⁶ Meyer, Michael A., and W. Gunther Plaut. *The Reform Judaism Reader: North American Documents*. New York, NY: UAHC Press, 2001. 196.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

The centuries'-old Rabbinic understanding of messianism is dismissed in a single sentence, as Einhorn calls Reformers to rely on their rationalism and sense of morality. Although not explicitly mentioned, it is prophetic morality that is championed and given new life by early Reformers. The messages of the prophets were seen as universal, not particular to Jews alone.

The Philadelphia Principles was the first, yet least known, set of statements that sought to define Judaism in America, and it set the stage for the platforms that followed. The influence of the Enlightenment and the emphasis on universalism is clear in this original set of principles. Although Einhorn sought to reach beyond a particularistic vision of Judaism, he was also influenced by Isaiah's call for Israel to be a light unto the nations, "a bearer of the highest idea of mankind."

"Article 5. The selection of Israel as a people of faith, as a bearer of the highest idea of mankind, is to be emphasized as strongly as it has been in the past, but only to the accompaniment of equal emphasis on Israel's universal mission and of the equal love of God for all His children."³⁸

The Pittsburgh Platform of 1885

Eight. In full accordance with the spirit of Mosaic legislation, which strives to regulate the relation between the rich and poor, we deem it our duty to participate in the great task of modern times, to solve, on the basis of justice, righteousness, the problems presented by the contrasts and evils of the present organization of society.³⁹

³⁸ *Ibid*, 197.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 199.

The Pittsburgh Platform is often considered the first official platform of the Reform Movement due to its more moderate author, Kaufmann Kohler and its longevity. It reflects a more conservative approach to Reform ideology than the Philadelphia Principles and becomes the foundational document for the period of Classical Reform that would last well into the 20th century.⁴⁰

The Pittsburgh Platform recognizes the struggles of modernity and advocates for the fair and just treatment of all those in society. It is not only a reflection of the time in which it was written but also the mantle upon which Reform Jewish ideology is based. It is clear that the ethical mandate of the prophets is central to these early American Reformers as they compose the foundational principles of the movement.

The Columbus Platform of 1937

Fifty-two years after the Pittsburgh Platform was written and adopted, a new generation of rabbis gathered in Columbus, Ohio to adopt a new set of principles to reflect their contemporary understanding of Reform Judaism. In the fifty years that separated the Pittsburgh Platform and Columbus Platform, the world had changed. The relative prosperity and economic growth of the late 19th and first decade of the 20th century had given way to the First World War. The inhuman conditions of urban factories led to the rise of the workers' movement, as well as federal legislation to protect their rights and prevent tragedies like the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911. American workers, both Jews and non-Jews, banded together to fight for these protections and many

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 197.

rabbis of the day spoke strongly with the voice of the prophets, in favor of more workers' rights and unionization. After the Great War, America seemed to stabilize until the Crash of 1929, which led to a decade of extreme financial instability, the Great Depression. With the collapse of global finances and war looming once again in Europe, the 1930s were a precarious time for Americans. Yet the rise of Hitler and other dictatorships in Europe throughout the decade also provided American Jews with great worry for their many relatives still living in Europe. It is in this political, financial and social instability that The Columbus Platform was written.

The beliefs outlined in Pittsburgh no longer spoke to the community and their most present needs. The Jewish world was changing, too. The possibility of a modern state of Israel, the need for a Jewish refuge and the ever-growing Zionist movement in Europe, Palestine and America caused much debate among the rabbinic leaders of the Reform Movement. The previous two statements of principles stood clearly against a return to the land, renouncing the rabbinic messianic understanding. Yet as waves of *aliyot* to Palestine and Zionist fervor grew, the leaders of the Reform Movement made a crucial change in policy, both continuing to affirm the diaspora as well as "the obligation of all Jewry to aid in its [Palestine's] upbuilding as a Jewish homeland by endeavoring to make it not only a haven of refuge for the oppressed but also a center of Jewish culture and spiritual life."⁴¹

While previous statements had centered on the obligation of Reform Jews toward the greater world population and the ideals of justice and righteousness embedded in Mosaic legislation, the Columbus Platform speaks specifically to

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 201.

the contemporary issues of the day: poverty, tyranny, social inequality, prejudice, exploitation and work place inequity.

Judaism seeks the attainment of a just society by the application of its teaching to the economic order, to industry and commerce, and to nation and international affairs. It aims at the elimination of man-made misery and suffering, of poverty and degradation, of tyranny and slavery, of social inequality and prejudice, of ill-will and strife. It advocates the promotion of harmonious relations between warring classes on the basis of equity and justice, and the creation of conditions under which human personality may flourish. It pleads for the safe-guarding of childhood against exploitation. It champions the cause of all who work and of their rights to an adequate standard of living, as prior to the rights of poverty. Judaism emphasizes the duty of charity, and strives for a social order which will protect men against the material disabilities of old age, sickness and unemployment.⁴²

Unlike previous platforms, the hardships of the day, the inequity faced by congregants and the greater public alike, are addressed using prophetic language. Author, Samuel S. Cohon, HUC Professor of Theology⁴³, begins this statement by clearly stating that “Judaism seeks the attainment of a just society by the application of its teaching.” Reform Jews are informed by a rational understanding of universal morality that must be wedded to Jewish teachings of morality, evoked by the Prophets. Reform Jews must hearken to:

- The voice of Amos, urging Israel toward justice and righteousness, “But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.”⁴⁴

⁴² *Ibid*, 201.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 199.

⁴⁴ Amos 5:24

- The voice of Isaiah, “Learn to do good. Devote yourselves to justice; aid the wronged. Uphold the rights of the orphan; defend the cause of the widow.”⁴⁵

This refrain, along with countless others of similar sentiment throughout Jewish tradition, were applied to the social and economic ills facing contemporary Reform Jews. The voices provided the undergirding for a social justice movement that would captivate and come to define Reform Judaism in the second half of the 20th century.

A Centenary Perspective, San Francisco, 1976

In 1976, Dr. Eugene Borowitz was the primary author of a new set of principles, created to celebrate the bicentennial of the United States as well as the centenary of the UAHC in 1973 and HUC in 1975.⁴⁶ Much had happened in the world since 1937, including World War II and the Holocaust, the creation of the State of Israel, the war in Vietnam, the Six-Day War and Yom Kippur War in Israel, the protest movements of the 1960s, Civil Rights, nuclear proliferation, the Cold War between the United States and the USSR, to name a few. In the four decades since the Columbus Platform, the world had changed dramatically.

The needs of Reform Jews had also changed as social consciousness and activism became the centerpiece of the movement. The voice of the ancient prophets motivated the movement as a whole, as well as individuals, towards real action in the realm of American and world politics, and social justice. This

⁴⁵ Isaiah 1:17

⁴⁶ Meyer, Michael A., and W. Gunther Plaut. *The Reform Judaism Reader: North American Documents*. New York, NY: UAHC Press, 2001. 196. 203.

new platform reflects these changes and outlines a more detailed set of principles speaking to the most contemporary ideology of Reform Judaism in the 1970s.

VI. Our Obligations: Survival and Service:

Early Reform Jews, newly admitted to general society and seeing in this the evidence of a growing universalism, regularly spoke of Jewish purpose in terms of Jewry's service to humanity. In recent years we have become freshly conscious of the virtues of pluralism and the values of particularism. The Jewish people in its unique way of life validates its own worth while working toward the fulfillment of its messianic expectations.

Until the recent past our obligations to the Jewish people and to all humanity seemed congruent. At times now these two imperatives appear to conflict. We know of no simple way to resolve such tensions. We must, however, confront them without abandoning either of our commitments. A universal concern for humanity unaccompanied by a devotion to our particular people is self-destructive; a passion for our people without involvement in humankind contradicts what the prophets have meant to us. Judaism calls us simultaneously to universal and particular obligations.⁴⁷

The “obligation” of which this document speaks is both an obligation to the Jewish community as well as to the greater world community. In a post-Holocaust age, Reform Judaism once again confirms its ethical mandate toward all of humanity.

A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism, Pittsburgh, 1999

The most recent set of principles was created in 1999, primarily authored by then CCAR President, Rabbi Richard Levy. It focuses on issues of ethnicity, as the Reform Movement became increasingly diverse, especially after the highly controversial resolution concerning patrilineal descent in 1983 and a new

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 207.

emphasis on outreach. The movement had also evolved; there was an increasing focus on religious practice and a renewed interest in ritual and liturgy. These principles attempted to reflect the newest era of Reform Judaism.⁴⁸

The world had also changed in the two decades since the previous platform in San Francisco. The economic strife of the 1970s led to a certain prosperity in the 1980s and 1990s. The Women's movement had also made certain headway since the 1970s as well as other minority groups like the Gay Rights Movement. Israel had also seen a renewed effort in the peace process, and the outlook remained hopeful. Although the fear of intermarriage in the greater American Jewish population was a large issue of the day, Reform Jews remained committed to welcoming diverse families and individuals. The great era of social action as the cornerstone of Reform ideology was no longer the same as it had been, but Reform Judaism sought to redefine this commitment in a new time, of new concerns.

We bring Torah into the world when we strive to fulfill the highest ethical mandates in our relationships with others and with all of God's creation. Partners with God in **תיקון עולם** (*tikkun olam*), repairing the world, we are called to help bring nearer the messianic age. We seek dialogue and joint action with people of other faiths in the hope that together we can bring peace, freedom and justice to our world. We are obligated to pursue **צדק** (*tzedek*), justice and righteousness, and to narrow the gap between the affluent and the poor, to act against discrimination and oppression, to pursue peace, to welcome the stranger, to protect the earth's biodiversity and natural resources, and to redeem those in physical, economic and spiritual bondage. In so doing, we reaffirm social action and social justice as a central prophetic focus of traditional Reform Jewish belief and practice. We affirm the **מצוה** (*mitzvah*) of **צדקה** (*tzedakah*), setting aside portions of our earnings and our time to provide for those in need. These acts bring us closer to

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 208.

fulfilling the prophetic call to translate the words of Torah into the works of our hands.⁴⁹

The inclusion of Hebrew is the most striking difference in this new platform. The use of the term, “*tikkun olam*,” which had been in use for several decades to describe social action is now codified as such. This statement echoes previous platforms’ commitment to a universal goal of social change. Once again, the affirmation of a “prophetic focus” as the impetus for the obligation to social justice and action is clear.

The prophetic voice remains the constant through the history of the Reform Movement. The interpretation may vary, depending on the time and context, but the commitment of Reform Judaism to the ethical mandate outlined by the ancient prophets remains central.

Institutional Resolutions

Throughout the history of the Reform Movement, the institutional bodies known as the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (now Union for Reform Judaism) and the Central Conference of American Rabbis, have responded to various issues facing Reform Jews and others in the world. The resolutions promulgated by these two institutions reflect the values and concerns of the movement through time. They are also used as teaching tools to inform Reform Jews as well as the greater American and world populations of the ideology and expectations of the Reform Movement.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 210-211.

The prophetic voice can be heard clearly throughout many such resolutions, especially concerning issues of social justice, political concern and greater world issues. The following is a selection of such resolutions, spanning a wide variety of topics, from both the UAHC/URJ and the CCAR, in chronological order.

SOCIAL BETTERMENT⁵⁰

Resolutions adopted by the Central Conference of American Rabbis between 1928 and 1954

1. It is incumbent upon all men to study ills of existing social order and address our God-given intelligence to the extermination of slums, vice, poverty, etc. (1928, p. 81)
2. We challenge the oft-repeated thesis that economic and spiritual collapse is inevitable at the close of a war. If we can rise to moral and spiritual heights, we can make the aftermath of war not evil but good. (1942, p. 109)
3. Since this Conference last went on record in opposition to the then-pending Mundt-Nixon bill and deplored the hysteria against government employees and public figures, there has been a further extension of that hysteria which touches the spokesmen of religion even more intimately. In recent months the House Committee on Un-American Activities has released publicly the names of large numbers of clergymen who are alleged to have signed the Stockholm Peace Petition or otherwise to have cooperated with communist-front organizations. In no case was any effort made to ascertain the real position of these clergymen before publication of their names.

In some instances the names published were those of men who had supported a given organization or cause long before there was any indication that it constituted a communist front or at a time before

it had been "taken over" for such purposes. No distinction was made between such individuals and those who may have supported the same cause knowing the identity and purpose of its sponsors. Despite a rather perfunctory explanation by the Committee that not all names so publicized were those of communist sympathizers, the fact remains that a stigma is unavoidably attached to all such individuals.

The equation of all criticism and reforms with communist is not only a violation of the individual's right to free thought and free speech, but represents a vicious obstacle to all social progress in a democracy.

There is reason to suspect that this may have been a conscious device to intimidate the spokesmen of liberal religion and to discourage their communicants from following them. Because we believe this is to represent a very real danger to the freedom of American thought, we urgently recommend

⁵⁰ *CCAR Resolutions*. Central Conference of American Rabbis. Web. 26 Nov. 2011. <<http://www.ccarnet.org/rabbis-speak/resolutions/all/>>.

the following: That Committees of the Congress be enjoined from publicizing the names of any American Citizens who have not been given an opportunity to defend themselves against specific charges.

That provision be made for the protection of an individual against libelous remarks made by Congressmen on the floor of either the Senate or the House. That members of this Conference refuse to abdicate their prophetic responsibility to expose political, social and economic corruption wherever they may be found. Especially in such times as these, when so many other voices have been silenced, is it incumbent upon us not to be intimidated. We reaffirm the sacred duty of religious leaders and teachers to act as the conscience of society. (1951, pp. 105-6)

4. See Rabbi, Freedom of, Sec. 6 (1953) .

5. Teachers and clergymen who are especially concerned with the moral and ethical principles on which our democracy is founded, have a special responsibility for the preservation of those principles. We are enheartened by the number of our own colleagues who have courageously brought the message of prophetic Judaism to bear on the problems of contemporary society, and we urge this Conference as well as the Union of American Hebrew Congregations to uphold and encourage these men. (1954, p. 55)

DISARMAMENT⁵¹

Resolutions adopted by the Central Conference of American Rabbis between 1931 and 1951

1. To advance the cause of Disarmament, we urge our representatives to strive for a real reduction in military forces, equipment and expenditures on land, in the air and on the seas. (1931, p. 69)

2. We are opposed to private manufacture of munitions of war and armaments and urge the approval of legislation to abolish such manufacture. (1933, p. 56, report)

3. We denounce the vast armaments appropriations of our government and other governments as unnecessary and evil. We demand that our national defense policy be based on defense of our soil, not of our interests. We advocate the extension of the "good neighbor" policy to Japan through mutual reductions in armaments and the revision of the "Open Door" policy in the Far East. Let us assume the leadership in summoning a conference for world disarmament. (1936, p. 66)

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

5. We reaffirm the prophetic position of the Synagogue consistently held throughout the centuries that armed strife is not an essential instrument of national policy and that war should be outlawed. (1939, p. 143)

6. Most fundamental among the prerogatives to be delegated to the UN is the power to control the production and use of armaments. Recent unsuccessful efforts in this direction demonstrate the futility of (1) seeking to accomplish this within a limited group of nations or (2) attempting to control only certain types of armed force. We therefore call upon our government to outline a specific, comprehensive basis for the control and reduction of all armaments through the United Nations. We see no inconsistency between our current policy of continuing to mobilize our military strength in order to meet the present danger and at the same time outlining the basis on which we would be willing, in concert with all other nations, to work toward the effective reduction of armaments. The necessary expedient of the moment must not be confused with a long-range policy of peace; nor must the emergency of the moment be permitted to postpone an immediate effort to plan for a reduction in armament throughout the world. (1951, p. 101)

SOCIAL SERVICE AND THE SYNAGOGUE⁵²

**UAHC Resolution
36th Biennial
January 1939
Cincinnati, OH**

"Whereas the impulse for true social service springs from the basic and cardinal teachings of Judaism traditionally expressed through and by the synagogue, be it resolved that the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, in Council assembled, recognizes that individual Jewish responsibilities include the duty to support the synagogue and the obligation to uphold its position in the spiritual, cultural, philanthropic, and other beneficent activities of Jewish life."

ESTABLISHMENT OF A SOCIAL ACTION COMMITTEE⁵³

**UAHC Resolution
39th Council
March 1946
Cincinnati, OH**

"Resolved that the U. A. H. C. Executive Board establish a Social Actions Committee to deal with the suggest to our affiliated congregations ways and means of applying and implementing the prophetic teachings of our Religion.

⁵² *Union for Reform Judaism Resolutions*. UAHC/URJ. Web. 26 Nov. 2011.
<<http://urj.org/about/union/governance/reso/all/>>.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

This Committee should cooperate with the social justice Commission of the C. C. A. R. and serve either separately or jointly in carrying out the imperatives of our faith. The Union suggests the employment of a full time Director for this joint Commission."

CIVIL RIGHTS⁵⁴

Resolutions adopted by the Central Conference of American Rabbis between 1949 and 1965

1. See Civil Liberties.
2. No effective legislation in the area of Civil Rights has passed the Senate of the United States since 1875. No effective Civil Rights legislation is apt to pass the Senate of the United States until the right of a small, willful minority to veto the proposals of the majority has been removed. The filibuster is an obstacle to democratic procedure. We therefore call upon the Senate to establish procedures and rules which, while carefully safeguarding the rights of the minority, will set reasonable limits to debate. (1952, p. 180)
3. October 1952 will mark five years since the President's Committee on Civil Rights issued its report, "To Secure These Rights." In anticipation of that anniversary we respectfully ask the President to reconstitute his Civil Rights Committee for the purpose of evaluating our progress. (1952, p. 180)
4. See Congress, U.S., Sec. 1 (1949, pp. 129-30) .
5. The Central Conference of American Rabbis views with satisfaction the historic decision of the United States Supreme Court which outlaws segregation in the field of public education. We hail this ruling as a profound victory of our prophetic tradition and as eloquent expression of the faith of all Americans in the basic justice of our democratic system. We call upon our colleagues and the congregations they serve to assist in the swift and harmonious implementation of this decision which reaffirms America's position as leader in the free world. (1954, p. 106)
6. We commend the Freedom Riders, who, in the words of our President Bernard J. Bamberger, have "subjected themselves to discomfort and danger in the name of a great ethical principle." We call upon the Department of Justice and all other appropriate agencies of government to translate into action the ideals thus called so forcefully to our national conscience. (1961, p. 146)
7. We reaffirm our 1961 resolution supporting volunteer civil rights workers in the Southland. We ask that their safety be ensured by law enforcement

⁵⁴ *CCAR Resolutions*. Central Conference of American Rabbis. Web. 26 Nov. 2011. <<http://www.ccarnet.org/rabbis-speak/resolutions/all/>>.

authorities, and that if necessary by Federal intervention when local enforcement has broken down. We believe that those who are obviously guilty of crimes against humanity ought not to be permitted to go unpunished. (1965, p. 118)

SOCIAL JUSTICE (TEACHING)⁵⁵

Resolutions adopted by the Central Conference of American Rabbis in 1951

1. Your Commission on Justice and Peace acknowledges with humility that its greatest failure to date has been in the area of implementing the social idealism of our people within our own congregations. With exceptions as notable as they are rare, we have limited ourselves to lofty pronouncements, but have not devised ways and means of teaching the practical application of these pronouncements to our people or of activating them in the search for a more decent society.

The practical work we do in our communities and even more the non-partisan political activity to which we can stimulate our congregants as an expression of their Jewish prophetic zeal will be both a manifest of our sincerity and a determinant of our effectiveness. We have always properly insisted that Judaism is a way of life. This must be as true in the areas represented by this Commission as with respect to ritual observance and to ethical conduct generally.

We would urge most strongly, therefore, that a major program in next year's Conference schedule be devoted to the reporting in detail of successful committees on public affairs already in operation within our Congregations and specific practical proposals for the extension of such activity among the groups which the members of this Conference have the high privilege of serving. (1951, p. 107)

PEACE⁵⁶

Resolutions adopted by the Central Conference of American Rabbis in 1957

While we applaud the efforts currently being made to reduce the threat of war through such programs as mutual disarmament among the great powers, we regret the basing of such efforts upon the menace of nuclear conflict and the

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

inevitable annihilation of mankind rather than upon the positive foundations of a cooperative peace which alone can produce a society capable of survival.

We call, therefore, upon all men everywhere to reaffirm allegiance to the ethical and spiritual values implicit in the prophetic ideal of universal peace and brotherhood, and to proclaim, once again, the relevance of these teachings to the challenging complexities of international relationships. (1957, pp. 109-10)

SOCIAL ACTION COMMITTEES⁵⁷

**UAHC Resolution
49th General Assembly
November 1967
Montreal, Quebec**

Seventeen years after the establishment of the Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism there remains a significant number of our congregations without social action or community affairs committees. We find this incongruous, particularly at a time when the religious aspect of our society is being challenged to more relevantly bring to bear its great prophetic message on the problems of our world.

We, therefore, urge the establishment of a social action committee in each of our congregations. Where such committees already exist, we call upon them to intensify and expand their activities.

We further urge that congregational boards of trustees, as well as the leadership of our various regions, take a more serious interest in and make a greater commitment to the work of their social action committees, both congregational and regional, so that the unfortunate gap which presently exists between them can be quickly closed.

DISSENT⁵⁸

**Resolutions adopted by the
Central Conference of American Rabbis in 1968**

1. Acting out of commitment to the prophetic ideals of justice and peace, and acknowledging the duty of the individual to act in accordance with the highest ideals of morality, we hereby express our support of those who conscientiously dissent from the policy of our government in Vietnam and who refuse to cooperate with that policy.

⁵⁷ *Union for Reform Judaism Resolutions*. UAHC/URJ. Web. 26 Nov. 2011.
<<http://urj.org/about/union/governance/reso/all/>>.

⁵⁸ *CCAR Resolutions*. Central Conference of American Rabbis. Web. 26 Nov. 2011.
<<http://www.ccarnet.org/rabbis-speak/resolutions/all/>>.

We further resolve that we set up draft-counseling services in our synagogues in cooperation with peace groups such as the Jewish Peace Fellowship. (1968, p. 128)

CIVIL RIGHTS AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE⁵⁹

**UAHC Resolution
Board of Trustees
May 1968
New York, New York**

We reaffirm our commitment to the concept of human dignity. Poverty and discrimination are inextricably related. Racial justice is inseparable from economic justice. What is at stake in the struggle to achieve equality of treatment for the individual are the spiritual values of our civilization, the economic well-being of our nation and the moral leadership of America in a multi-racial world. While urging positive enforcement and vigorous administration of civil rights laws, we recognize the need to proceed beyond mere legal guarantees to the assurance of real equality and economic opportunity for every American. This will require not only compliance with laws, but fresh initiatives by government as well as by individual citizens and voluntary organizations.

The elimination of poverty is a highly complex task. Many new and creative programs were initiated and developed in recent years, but because of the magnitude of the task and the experimental approach required, errors of judgment and setbacks were to be expected. The difficulties that have been experienced should help provide a more realistic understanding of the task before us. Rather than deter, they should stimulate us to greater effort and commitment.

This national commitment must recognize that the fight against poverty and discrimination requires a truly comprehensive, coordinated approach of all segments of society, public and private, and the extensive investment of much more financial resources. We take cognizance of various proposals calling for some form of minimum income maintenance and we urge immediate study of various proposals to arrive at an effective, equitable method of providing for all Americans an annual minimum income with dignity.

As Jews, we strive to perpetuate a tradition which recognizes that help to fellow human beings is a matter of right, not a matter of charity. We, therefore, welcome and support public programs designed to develop human and material resources to which all citizens are entitled in an enlightened society as a fulfillment of communal responsibility. We commend support of national, state and local programs which incorporate the following principles and are designed to facilitate their realization.

⁵⁹ *Union for Reform Judaism Resolutions*. UAHC/URJ. Web. 26 Nov. 2011.
<<http://urj.org/about/union/governance/reso/all/>>.

1. Among the goals of our society should be the assurance of adequate food, clothing, housing, medical care and education for every family and individual.
2. Those goals can be achieved through programs of full employment at adequate wages for those able to work, adequate compensation and retaining opportunities for those who are involuntarily unemployed, and improved social security and other direct financial aid for those who are dependent or are incapable of work.
3. Public welfare funds should be distributed in an equitable fashion, maintaining adequate standards applicable throughout the nation and assuring the recipient of respect for their human dignity. Punitive measures which discourage or deprive welfare recipients from obtaining benefits to which they are entitled must not be imposed. Procedures which discourage welfare recipients from obtaining sufficient employment to leave the welfare rolls must be eliminated.
4. Society is responsible for guaranteeing to every man the right and opportunity to join with others to organize for the pursuit of common economic and social objectives, and to have equal protection of these rights under federal and state legislation.
5. The disadvantaged should be encouraged in their efforts to achieve dignity and self-respect by establishing indigenous organizations to pursue their goals.

We recognize the responsibility of the private sector and especially of religious institutions in the efforts to achieve equality. We encourage our regions and congregations:

1. to participate in and cooperate with local anti-poverty programs, with due regard to the principle of separation of church and state;
2. to undertake concrete initiatives in the area of no-profit housing with other like-minded groups. In this connection, we commend the New York Federation of Reform Synagogues for its forward-looking co-sponsorship of the UPACA housing project in Harlem, which is a commitment to rehabilitate the housing in one section of the racial ghetto;
3. to assume responsibility, where possible, for constructive and ongoing social action programs under Jewish auspices in the inner city, similar to that of the Chicago Federation's Jewish Council on Urban Affairs;
4. to pledge their resources to equality of opportunity in employment through such programs as "Project Equality", an interfaith community project in which religious institutions pledge to do business only with companies which have affirmative equal opportunity employment practices;
5. to go beyond the abstractions of intergroup relations to specific involvement in tutorial programs, home visits, urban-suburban exchanges, dialogues and other efforts designed to establish personal contacts;
6. to commend NFTY and various UAHC regions for the Mitzvah Corps programs which have been conducted in several cities through which

Reform Jewish young people have rendered community service toward racial justice and the improvement of community life. We urge expansion of these vital projects. We also commend the Pacific Southwest Region for establishment of its Center for Volunteer Service to encourage individual Reform Jews to make Judaism relevant through personal participation in community work.

Addendum

We oppose all racial, religious and economic ghettos and all racism, white or black.

We welcome the report of the President's National Advisory Commission on Disorders. By telling us that "white racism is essentially responsible for the explosive mixture which has been accumulating in our cities since the end of World War II", it removes once and for all whatever illusions white Americans may have held about themselves. We urge our constituents to study carefully the report and its findings and to express their support for its recommendations. We urge (1) support for the Housing and Development Act of 1968; (2) legislation that will create meaningful jobs in vitally needed public services for those people able and willing to work but who are unable to find employment in the private sector; (3) repeal of the restrictive welfare provisions adopted in the last session of Congress; (4) supplemental appropriation for the Office of Economic Opportunity. We urge support for the current Poor Peoples Campaign, in accordance with the attached resolution adopted by the national Commission on Social Action on March 25, 1968.

The crisis of American life challenges us as we have never before been challenged in our entire history as a nation. Our response must be massive and immediate if we are to fulfill our prophetic role and recreate the structures of human dignity to which we as a faith and a people are so long and so deeply committed.

WORLD PEACE AND NATIONAL PRIORITIES⁶⁰

UAHC Resolution 50th General Assembly October 1969 Miami Beach, FL

WHEREAS Judaism first evoked the vision of world peace, our prophets dreamed of a day when nations would convert the swords of war into the plowshares of peace. Our Jewish history and tradition constitute an indomitable affirmation of life. "I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse...Therefore, choose you life, that you mayest live, you and your seed." (Deut. 30:19)

The debate over deployment of an ABM system illuminated the fundamental question now facing the American people: How may our national priorities be

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

reordered so as to utilize our resources toward the solution of the grave problems which beset us?

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED:

1. We reaffirm the prior positions of the UAHC, advocating international cooperation, arms limitation and control and primary utilization of our economic and technical resources for the amelioration of poverty and the fulfillment of human needs.
2. We urge our government, and particularly the United States Congress, to reduce military expenditures so that more of our funds can be made available for the fulfillment of human needs at home and abroad.
3. We urge upon this country and all nations engaged in the armaments race a cessation in the deployment of ever deadlier weapons systems, such as the ABM and MIRV and their Soviet counterparts, which tend to escalate the international arms race and to cancel each other out at higher and higher levels of cost and danger as they proliferate. We would urge our government to take all necessary steps to achieve agreement with the Soviet Union in the conference between those nations beginning in Helsinki on November 17, to the end that there be a cessation of the arms race, that there be reached an accord whereby the two greatest nations in the world will forswear the use of strategic weapons as a matter of national defense.
4. We are encouraged by the successful negotiation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty of 1968 and its ratification this year by the United States Senate. We look forward to its early ratification by all signatory nations and ultimately to its acceptance by all the nations of the world.

Hunger⁶¹

Resolution Adopted by the CCAR at the 86th Annual Convention in 1975

WHEREAS we are heirs of a prophetic tradition which ever sought to repair the damaged world, and

WHEREAS in our efforts to restore the world to sanity we affirm the following position which we take knowing full well the complexity of such an issue but knowing also that we cannot be silent, and

WHEREAS the hungry of the world are our concern,

BE IT THEREFORE RESOLVED that we call for the issue of world hunger to be given high priority in our synagogue and communal institutions and urge our congregations to incorporate in their educational programs teaching about the presence of hunger in the world and the Jewish response to hunger, and to limit

⁶¹ CCAR Resolutions. Central Conference of American Rabbis. Web. 26 Nov. 2011. <<http://www.ccarnet.org/rabbis-speak/resolutions/all/>>.

food waste in our congregational activities and life-cycle events, we urge public policy which will effectively cope with the hunger crises and raise funds for relief organizations; we encourage the endorsement of the personal pledge of conscience of the Joint Commission on Social Action of the UAHC-CCAR; we call on our governments to contribute whatever resources are at their disposal to the world community, including population planning, either directly or through the United Nations; we join and participate in the Interreligious Coalition on World Food Crisis.

THE BUDGET AND SOCIAL WELFARE⁶²

**UAHC Resolution
56th General Assembly
December 1981
Boston, Massachusetts**

Judaism has always demanded that its moral values be applied to the practical problems of society: "The earth and its inhabitants are the Lord's." Our prophets viewed the earth, its resources, and the wealth derived from them as a sacred trust, to be shared justly by all.

The purpose of society and government is to provide for such sharing, to insure the security and rights of the disadvantaged and the weak.

Judaism teaches that no economic system is sacred; human beings and human needs are sacred. An economic system deserves to survive only if it effectively provides for the well-being of the least powerful, least advantaged members of society.

While this nation must make sacrifices if it is to successfully control the erosive economic impact of inflation, those sacrifices must be distributed equitably and fairly. The fiscal 1982 budget and proposed further cuts by the administration exaggerate and aggravate the worst deficiencies of our current economic system. It promises to increase the gap between rich and poor, between the advantaged and the disadvantaged. Our economy needs to become more democratic, not less; more concerned with the fulfillment of human needs, not less.

Contradictions in the Proposed Cuts

The current thrust in budget cutting would paper over our social problems without significantly reducing the expenditures of funds. This will eventually result in the raising, rather than the lowering, of the costs of maintaining our society. We call on the administration to address itself to these and other examples of the contradictory effects of budget cuts.

1. Cutbacks in CETA and education funding will result in an increasing number of permanent unemployables in this country, resulting in vastly increased unemployment insurance and other basic welfare funding.
2. Preventive medicine is known to be far superior and less costly than treatment. We decry budget cuts that further limit food subsidies and

⁶² *Union for Reform Judaism Resolutions*. UAHC/URJ. Web. 26 Nov. 2011.
<<http://urj.org/about/union/governance/reso/all/>>.

- Medicaid to pregnant women and infant children. These will be particularly damaging viewed in the context of pending legislation that seeks to deny women access to abortion.
3. Cuts in the allocation of funds for public education, paralleled by proposed tuition tax credits for private schooling, will work to destroy public education in this country. They will leave our poorest citizens uneducated and, therefore, more likely to be in need of government assistance.
 4. Vast increases in military spending with inadequate regard for any possible savings add no new goods to the economy and are, therefore, extremely inflationary. It is inaccurate to claim that increased military spending will address the problem of unemployment, productivity, or stability. National defense is a reflection of the quality and health of the internal society.
 5. Burdens on state and local governments, as well as on nonprofit organizations serving the poor, will increase as the proposed cuts slash existing programs. This will create additional needs, causing social turmoil in our cities, with all that portends for intergroup relations.

We conclude that pitting one social group against another by limiting sorely needed funds will produce overall social unrest. Increases in crime and social maladjustment will obliterate savings and will adversely affect every social class. An angry and polarized America is dangerous to group relations and specifically to Jewish security in America.

Resolution:

The UAHC believes that the federal budget cuts that have been enacted by the Congress:

1. Place an unfair burden on the unemployed, the poor, the near-poor, minorities, the elderly, and children, who will have to bear the brunt of these proposed severe cuts. In particular, since the majority of people living below the poverty line are women, we are deeply concerned about a national fiscal policy that will lock women into the cycle of poverty and will offer no relief for the future. It is a pernicious idea that somehow the poor or public assistance to the poor is the cause of our economic problems and that solutions at their expense are permissible.
2. Result in disparate increases in some areas, such as the military budget, which are often at the expense of critical core social programs.

The UAHC Calls Upon:

1. The government to reassess its economic policies and its budget based on the concerns delineated above. In particular, we are concerned about the severe cutbacks in the areas of job training, food aid subsidies, housing assistance to the elderly and disabled, Medicaid, medical and nutritional aid and information to pregnant women and infant children, and funds for public education.

2. Our congregations to create or join existing coalitions on the local level to advance this effort. Such coalitions could be with other religious groups, labor organizations, minority groups, civil rights organizations, and senior citizens' groups. We especially urge a concerted effort with Jewish welfare agencies whose own programs now stand imperiled by the proposed budget cuts.
3. We call on our government to make every effort to encourage risk capital to greater investment in an ever-expanding American economy, and to encourage American labor to greater productivity so that the traditional leadership of American industry in technological and economic expansion can be promoted for the welfare of all.

Budget and Social Welfare⁶³

**Adopted by the CCAR at the 93rd Annual Convention in New York City,
June 27-July 1, 1982**

Judaism has always demanded that its moral values be applied to the practical problems of society. "The earth and its inhabitants are the Lord's." Our prophets viewed the earth, its resources, and the wealth derived from them as a sacred trust, to be shared justly by all.

The purpose of society and government is to provide for such sharing and to insure the security and rights of the disadvantaged and the weak.

While this nation must make sacrifices if it is to successfully control the erosive economic impact of inflation, those sacrifices must be distributed equitably and fairly. Recent and proposed budgetary cuts by the Administration exaggerate and aggravate the worst deficiencies of our current economic system. They promise to increase the gap between rich and poor, between the advantaged and the disadvantaged. Our economy needs to become more democratic, not less; more concerned with the fulfillment of human needs, not less.

Contradictions in the Proposed Cuts: The current thrust in budget cutting would paper over our social problems without significantly reducing expenditures of funds. This will eventually result in the raising, rather than the lowering, of the costs of maintaining our society. We call on the Administration to address itself to these and other examples of contradictory effects of budget cuts:

1. Cutbacks in CETA and education funding will result in an increasing number of permanent unemployables in this country, causing vastly increased unemployment insurance and other basic welfare funding.
2. Preventive medicine is known to be far superior to and less costly than treatment. We decry budget cuts which further limit food subsidies and

⁶³ *CCAR Resolutions*. Central Conference of American Rabbis. Web. 26 Nov. 2011. <<http://www.ccarnet.org/rabbis-speak/resolutions/all/>>.

Medicaid to pregnant women and infant children. These will be particularly damaging, viewed in the context of pending legislation which seeks to deny women access to abortion.

3. Cuts in allocation of funds for public education, paralleled by proposed tuition tax credits for private schooling, will work to destroy public education in this country. They will leave our poorest citizens uneducated and, therefore, more likely to be in need of government assistance.

4. Vast increases in military spending with inadequate regard for any possible savings add no new goods to the economy and are, therefore, extremely inflationary. It is inaccurate to claim that increased military spending will address the problem of unemployment, productivity, or stability. National defense is a reflection of the quality and health of the internal society.

5. Burdens on state and local governments, as well as non-profit organizations serving the poor, will increase as the proposed cuts slash existing programs. This will create additional needs, causing social turmoil in our cities, with all that portends for intergroup relations.

We conclude that pitting one social group against another by limiting sorely needed funds will produce overall social unrest. Increases in crime and social maladjustment will obliterate savings and will adversely affect every social class. An angry and polarized America is dangerous to group relations and, specifically, to Jewish security in America.

Resolution: The CCAR believes that the federal budget cuts which have been enacted by the Congress:

A. Place an unfair burden on the unemployed, the poor, the near-poor, minorities, the elderly, and children who will have to bear the brunt of these proposed severe cuts. In particular, since the majority of people living below the poverty line are women, we are deeply concerned about a national fiscal policy which will lock women into the cycle of poverty and will offer no relief for the future. It is a pernicious idea that somehow the poor, or public assistance to the poor, is the cause of our economic problems and that solutions at their expense are permissible.

B. Result in disparate increases in some areas such as the military budget which are often at the expense of critical core social programs.

We also call upon:

A. The government to reassess its economic policies and its budget based on the concerns delineated above. In particular, we are concerned about the severe cutbacks in the areas of job training, food aid subsidies, housing assistance to the elderly and disabled, Medicaid, medical and nutritional aid and information to pregnant women and infant children, and funds for public education.

B. Our colleagues to create or join existing coalitions on the local level to advance this effort. Such coalitions could be with other religious groups, labor organizations, minority groups, civil rights organizations, and senior citizens groups. We especially urge concerted effort with Jewish welfare agencies whose own programs now stand imperiled by the proposed budget cuts.

C. Our government to make every effort to encourage risk capital to greater investment in an ever expanding American economy, to encourage American labor to greater productivity, so that the traditional leadership of American industry in the use and promotion of technological and economic expansion can be promoted for the welfare of all.

On Hunger and Food Banks⁶⁴

**Adopted by the CCAR at the 94th Annual Convention of in Los Angeles,
March 13-16, 1983**

One of the most significant *mitzvot* in our tradition calls upon us to feed the hungry and clothe the naked. Despite this prophetic mandate, experts in the area of poverty and hunger inform us that malnutrition in America, which had been eliminated in the late 1970's, in large part because of poverty and food-stamp programs, has re-emerged. They cite Reagan Administration budgetary cuts, especially pressure upon the Department of Agriculture by the Office of Budget and Administration, as the main reason for the increasing levels of illness, infant mortality, and starvation in American households.

We see repeated examples of farmers, supermarkets, and corporations being prevented from distributing their surplus foodstuffs to those in need. We learn about the plight of millions of impoverished families and individuals being denied food stamps and medical care where once they were available. We know of many cases such as the court order demanding that Department of Agriculture officials spend unused funds to feed 47,000 poor women and children in Georgia and New York. We view the long lines of people waiting for supplies from local synagogue, church, and civic food banks. We hear the fears expressed about increased malnutrition and starvation if food and medical projects are returned to State governments by the Federal government, considering that such efforts were created because of individual States' inability and/or unwillingness to provide for their impoverished citizens and residents.

In 1975, the Central Conference of American Rabbis resolved that the issue of hunger be given high priority by synagogue and communal institutions. In 1981, the Pacific Association of Reform Rabbis urged its constituent members to create "food banks" and similar projects for collection and distribution of nourishment and clothing within their local communities. In 1982, the Central Conference of American Rabbis decried budget cuts which further limited foods subsidies and health care.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that because conditions have only grown worse since the passage of these resolutions, and since the future portends even greater hardships for the poor, we urge the CCAR membership to reinforce and strengthen those guidelines enumerated in 1975 and 1981 for education and action. Further, we urge our membership to create "food banks" and food collection and distribution projects and to work in cooperation with other religious and civic organizations to share our bounty and our blessings with those who lack the essentials of life: food, clothing, medicine. and shelter.

PREVENTING NUCLEAR HOLOCAUST⁶⁵

**UAHC Resolution
57TH General Assembly
November 1983
Houston, Texas**

This Union, from its inception, has taken seriously the Jewish obligation to "seek peace and pursue it." We have consistently sought to apply the prophetic vision to the urgent contemporary issues of war and peace. Thus we have supported efforts to achieve effective international treaties to limit armaments and in recent years to speak for stable arms control to curb the threat of the nuclear arms race. We have expressed our growing alarm at unchecked nuclear proliferation and we have expressed our horror at both the dangers and the intolerable waste involved in the nuclear arms race, which is exhausting much of the world's resources and impoverishing hundreds of millions of our fellow human beings. At the General Assembly of the UAHC in 1981, we urged upon the United States and the USSR a mutually agreed upon freeze on the testing, production, and deployment of nuclear weapons. Since that time, public support for a multilateral freeze has grown in the United States and throughout the world. The moral issues of the nuclear arms race have been subjected to a searching scrutiny, dramatized by the pastoral letter of the American Roman Catholic bishops and by the UAHC Religious Action Center's outstanding publication, *Preventing the Nuclear Holocaust*.

However, the momentum of the nuclear arms race has not yet been reversed. Negotiations languish and an entirely new and more destabilizing generation of awesome weaponry is now being introduced. Both sides are developing a new generation of destabilizing, deadly accurate "first-strike" weapons that increase the likelihood of nuclear war. The history of attempts at arms control in the twentieth century tells us conclusively that lasting progress in arms control cannot succeed in an atmosphere of military confrontation and hate but can succeed only if there is ongoing progress toward increased mutual understanding and trust.

The deployment of such highly accurate weapons capable of destroying the land-based missiles that constitute the base of the Soviet nuclear deterrent might pressure the USSR to adopt a "launch-on warning" policy or in time of crisis even

⁶⁵ *Union for Reform Judaism Resolutions*. UAHC/URJ. Web. 26 Nov. 2011.
<<http://urj.org/about/union/governance/reso/all/>>.

launch a preemptive strike. Such weapons are contrary to America's security interests.

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED THAT the Union of American Hebrew Congregations:

1. Calls upon our congregations in the United States and Canada to intensify their efforts at peace education, with special emphasis on study courses based on the UAHC Religious Action Center's excellent book, *Preventing the Nuclear Holocaust*, published in March 1983. We urge their forming and participating in interreligious coalitions to strive for arms control and for a reversal of the nuclear arms race. As Jews, we are called upon to witness God's dominion and to vouchsafe the future of all the children of God.
2. Urges the United States Senate to ratify the Peaceful Nuclear Explosions Treaty, the Threshold Test Ban Treaty, and SALT II, all of which were negotiated between the Soviet Union and the United States and agreed to and signed by both governments.
3. Calls on the United States and the USSR to renew the 1972 treaty limiting antiballistic missile systems.
4. Urges the administration to proceed with negotiations of a multilateral Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which would prohibit the detonation of any nuclear weapon or device for test purposes.
5. Calls on the United States, the Soviet Union, and all other nuclear powers to forego temporarily the testing, production, and deployment of first-strike weapons and call for serious negotiations to be conducted for the purpose of permanently eliminating their testing, production, and deployment.
6. Calls on the United States to delay the deployment of the proposed ground-launched Cruise Missile and Pershing II Missile until we have exhausted good-faith efforts to negotiate successfully a treaty on intermediary nuclear forces (INF).
7. Calls upon all nations having nuclear capabilities to negotiate a treaty prohibiting the testing, production, and deployment of space-based weapons and of earth-based and atmosphere-based weapons that are designed to attack targets in space.
8. Calls upon the United States government to cease public statements that promulgate the dangerous illusion that society can survive a nuclear war.
9. Calls on the governments of the United States and the Soviet Union to move from their current posture of confrontation and invective to good-faith negotiations at the highest levels to reduce tension and to increase mutually beneficial economic and cultural relations. The government of the United States should take such actions in consultation with its allies.

On Preventing Nuclear Holocaust⁶⁶

**Resolution adopted by the CCAR at the 95th Annual Convention in New York,
June 18-21, 1984**

The Central Conference of American Rabbis, from its inception, has taken seriously the Jewish obligation to "seek peace and pursue it." We have sought to apply the prophetic vision to the urgent contemporary issues of war and peace. Thus, we have supported efforts to achieve effective international treaties to limit armaments and, in recent years, to speak out for stable arms controls to curb the threat of nuclear annihilation. We have expressed our growing alarm at unchecked nuclear proliferation and expressed our horror at both the dangers and the intolerable waste caused by the nuclear arms race, which is exhausting much of the world's resources and impoverishing hundreds of millions of our fellow human beings.

In 1982, we urged action toward a bilateral freeze of the testing, production, and deployment of nuclear weapons, and in 1983, we called upon the United States to ratify the SALT II treaty, negotiate further reductions in nuclear arsenals, complete a comprehensive test ban treaty, and declare a policy of no first use of nuclear weapons.

Fear of nuclear war has again substantially increased during the past year as the United States and the Soviet Union have poured billions of dollars into new weapons production and brought all arms reduction negotiations to a halt. The moral issues of the nuclear arms race have been subjected to a searching scrutiny, dramatized by the pastoral letter of the American Roman Catholic bishops and by the UAHC Religious Action Center's outstanding publication, *Preventing the Nuclear Holocaust: A Jewish Response*.

However, the momentum of the nuclear arms race has not yet been reversed. Negotiations languish, and an entirely new and more destabilizing generation of awesome weaponry is now being introduced. Both superpowers are developing a new generation of destabilizing, deadly accurate, "first-strike" weapons that increase the likelihood of nuclear war. The history of attempts at arms control in the twentieth century tells us conclusively that lasting progress in arms control cannot succeed in an atmosphere of military confrontation and hate, but only if there is ongoing progress toward increased mutual understanding and trust.

The deployment of such highly accurate weapons, capable of destroying the land-based missiles that constitute the base of the Soviet nuclear deterrent might pressure the USSR to adopt a "launch on warning" policy or, in time of crisis, even to launch a preemptive strike. Such weapons are contrary to America's security interests.

Therefore, be it resolved that the Central Conference of American Rabbis:

⁶⁶ CCAR Resolutions. Central Conference of American Rabbis. Web. 26 Nov. 2011. <<http://www.ccarnet.org/rabbis-speak/resolutions/all/>>.

1. Call upon our congregations in the United States and Canada to intensify their efforts at peace education, with special emphasis on study courses based on the UAHC Religious Action Center's excellent book, *Preventing a Nuclear Holocaust*, published in March 1983. We urge their forming and participating in interreligious coalitions to strive for arms control and for a reversal of the nuclear arms race. As Jews, we are called upon to witness to God's dominion and to vouchsafe the future of all the children of God. The Central Conference of American Rabbis suggests each member consider implementing the program of "Rainbow Sign: A Jewish Project to Prevent Nuclear Holocaust";
2. Urge the United States Senate to ratify the Peaceful Nuclear Explosions Treaty, the Threshold Test Ban Treaty, and SALT II--all of which were negotiated between the Soviet Union and the United States and agreed to and signed by both governments;
3. Call on the United States and the USSR to renew the 1972 treaty limiting anti-ballistic missile systems;
4. Urge the Administration to proceed with negotiations of a multilateral Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which would prohibit the detonation of any nuclear weapon or device for test purposes;
5. Call on the United States and the Soviet Union, and all other nuclear powers, to forgo temporarily the testing, production, and deployment of first-strike weapons and to enter into serious negotiations to be conducted for the purpose of permanently eliminating the testing, production, and deployment of these weapons through a mutual, verifiable agreement;
6. Call on the United States to delay further deployment of the ground-launched Cruise Missile and Pershing II missile until we exhaust good-faith efforts to negotiate successfully a treaty on intermediate nuclear forces;
7. Call upon all nations having nuclear capabilities to negotiate a treaty prohibiting the testing, production, and deployment of space-based weapons and of earth-based and atmosphere-based weapons designed to attack targets in space;
8. Call upon the United States government to cease public statements that promulgate the dangerous illusion that society can survive a nuclear war;
9. Call on the government of the United States and the Soviet Union to move from their current posture of confrontation and invective to good-faith negotiations at the highest levels to reduce tension and to increase mutually beneficial economic and cultural relations. The government of the United States should take such actions in consultation with its allies.

Our Economic Commitment to America's Poor⁶⁷

UAHC Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly November 30 - December 3, 1995 Atlanta

Background Judaism teaches us that poverty is destructive of human dignity and that helping people in need is a matter of fundamental principle, not an act of charity. From the time of the prophets, we have acted upon principle and adhered to the dictate, "There shall be no needy among you." (Deut. 15:4) Maimonides taught that the highest degree of tzedakah is to enable a person to earn his or her own livelihood.

In the rulings of our sacred texts, and in the implementation of those rulings during the 1,500 years of the self-governing Jewish community, the government or the public sector played a central role in achieving social justice. By Talmudic times, every community was mandated to have schools for rich and poor alike, as well as money, food, dowry, and burial funds to complement private tzedakah. By the Middle Ages, these protections had grown into a broad range of societal programs encompassing, as well, protections for the sick, the elderly, the immigrant, and the stranger.

The Bible explicitly granted protection to the ger -- the so-called stranger, i.e. the non-Jew who chose to live in the Jewish community, abiding by its non-ritual laws but not converting to Judaism (whose legal status was precisely that of the legal immigrant in America today). In the Talmudic mandate of "mipnai darkhei shalom" (for the sake of the paths of peace), the tradition required that non-Jewish minorities in our communities be granted the social welfare benefits that our tradition granted to Jews. The notion of equal treatment by the society for all those in need gave powerful acknowledgement that societies were called by God to be just and that Jewish security was bound up with stability in the societies in which we dwelled; and stability required justice. "The sword enters the world because of justice delayed and justice denied," Pirke Avot warns us.

These values and these concerns resonate with those of the United States that led to the development, since 1933, of a federally guaranteed safety net for the needy. With all their limitations, these social programs have lifted the crushing burdens of hunger, poverty, illness, and illiteracy from the shoulders of scores of millions of Americans.

Over this period, the UAHC has acted upon our ideals by advocating for children, the poor, the disenfranchised, the elderly, the sick, the disabled, and the "stranger among us." We affirmed that the amelioration of poverty for the old, the young, and the sick is a societal obligation not of charity but of justice (1965); we called for full employment programs (1965); for social welfare entitlements (Board of Trustees, 1965) for public housing (Board, 1965); for day care, family planning, health and legal services (1971); and for income maintenance assistance programs "wholly or largely financed by the federal government with clear standards of nationwide application to assure equitable treatment and uniform administration" to meet the basic needs of: all those who were unable to work

⁶⁷ *Union for Reform Judaism Resolutions*. UAHC/URJ. Web. 26 Nov. 2011.
<<http://urj.org/about/union/governance/reso/all/>>.

because of age and disability; those unable to find work; and those working with an inadequate income. (1971).

In 1973, we urged the Congress to reorder budgetary priorities to improve and enlarge social programs that move the poor forward, and ensure that "social progress will not be lost in the name of economic policies which discriminate against those who are impoverished." And finally in the face of the cuts implemented by President Reagan in 1981, the UAHC opposed cuts in education, job training, food subsidies, preventive medical care, housing assistance to the elderly and disabled, Medicaid, and the Women and Infant Children program; opposed policies that "place an unfair burden on the unemployed, the poor, the near-poor, minorities, and the elderly and children;" and concluded: "It is a pernicious idea that somehow the poor, or public assistance to the poor, is the cause of our economic problems and that solutions at their expense are permissible."

Once again, political circumstances require that we affirm this mandate. The Congress is proposing a variety of legislative measures that, if enacted, would combine to further exacerbate the dire situations daily faced by so many of America's most vulnerable. This new agenda not only proposes large cutbacks in programs that serve the poor, but also would radically change the entire system through which these programs are funded and provided. The effect of these changes would be to abandon the concepts of a guaranteed safety net for these vulnerable segments of our society. The proposed changes and our responses to them involve several interconnecting issues: reforming the welfare system; transferring programs for the poor from entitlements to block grants; balancing the federal budget at the expense of programs that serve the poor; and rewarding work through the minimum wage and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). Currently 20 percent of the budget relates to programs for those in need. Forty percent of the proposed cuts would come from those programs. We recognize the importance of prudent fiscal reforms and welfare reform, but these reforms should not be made on the backs of the most needy.

In the past several weeks, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, the National Council of Churches, and the Congress of National Black Churches all have passed resolutions opposing the welfare and budget proposals emanating from Congress as being too severe in the burdens they impose on the poor.

THEREFORE, in consonance with the Union of American Hebrew Congregations positions adopted in the past, and because of the moral consequences of the proposed changes in the economic structures of our nation, the UAHC resolves to:

1. Call upon the United States government to maintain its responsibility to ensure an adequate, federally guaranteed safety net to protect our nation's most vulnerable populations, and calls on the Congress not to pass and the President not to sign legislation that fails to meet this test;
2. Oppose legislation that would end entitlement status for programs that protect those in need, such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), Food Stamps, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and Medicaid;
3. Oppose the use of block grants to the states when such grants are used to end entitlement programs or as a means to decrease the obligations of the federal and state governments to the poor, the sick, the elderly and the disabled;

4. Advocate welfare reform that strengthens families, protects human dignity, provides job training and opportunities, encourages and rewards work, and builds public/private partnerships to overcome poverty;
5. Oppose reductions in the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), in order to maintain support for those working their way out of poverty;
6. Support deficit reduction and efforts toward a balanced budget generally, but oppose deficit reductions or tax cuts at the expense of programs that serve the needs of our most vulnerable populations;
7. Call upon members of our congregations to work in their states and local communities for policies and programs that meet the needs of these vulnerable populations; and
8. Call upon our congregations to plan now for expansion of their social service projects to help those left in need as a result of withdrawal of government support.

**NORTH AMERICA'S REFORM RABBIS PASS RESOLUTION IN RESPONSE
TO TERRORISM AND THE ATTACKS OF SEPTEMBER 11⁶⁸**

November 2001

CCAR Resolution Affirms Support for the People of Israel

BACKGROUND:

New York, NY - (November 7, 2001) - The Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), the representative organization of nearly 2,000 Reform rabbis in North America and throughout the world, the largest group of Jewish clergy, has passed a resolution on terrorism and the attacks of September 11, 2001.

The resolution:

- Decries all acts of terrorism and supports the military efforts of the United States to eradicate the causes and manifestations of terror, recognizing that military means alone will not defeat terrorism and that a coordination of military, diplomatic, political, economic and religious and cultural means must also be utilized.
- Calls on the U.S. government to be sensitive to the millions of innocent people in Afghanistan.
- Affirms support for the people of Israel; rejects any notion that the U.S. government should retreat from its support for Israel in response to the September 11 attacks; and calls on President Bush and leaders of nations in the coalition against terrorism never to appease coalition partners by undermining Israel's attempts to defend its citizens.
- Calls for the reaching out in friendship and concern to the North American Muslim community and rejects any attempts to stereotype members of that community.

⁶⁸ *CCAR Resolutions*. Central Conference of American Rabbis. Web. 26 Nov. 2011. <<http://www.ccarnet.org/rabbis-speak/resolutions/all/>>.

- Asks the leadership of the Muslim community worldwide to speak out forcefully against terrorism, including terrorism against the citizens of Israel.
- Calls on the governments of the United States and Canada to be ever vigilant of freedoms and to safeguard the respect for privacy and the entitlement of all to due process of law.

The full text of the Resolution is as follows:

The events of September 11, 2001 and those which have followed compel us to put forth this Resolution.

WHEREAS:

1. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the subsequent acts of bioterrorism have brought immense pain and sorrow, shattering our sense of an invulnerable America;
2. Many in our own congregations and institutions have been touched personally by these barbaric and inhumane acts. We as rabbis have been called on to minister to the bereaved and the suffering, to lead our communities in prayer, to rekindle the flames of hope and optimism;
3. The North American Muslim community, Sikhs and other South Asian minorities have become victims of vengeful racial bias and hatred;
4. New anti- terrorism legislation, if misapplied, could jeopardize the civil liberties of American citizens;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED:

1. We will never forget the events of September 11, 2001 or those who died that day, including the passengers and crews of the hijacked airplanes and those thousands in the World Trade Center Towers and the Pentagon. We honor the more than three hundred firefighters, police officers, and emergency and rescue personnel who bravely and heroically perished trying to save others. We will continue to reach out in whatever ways possible to the families of those who died and bring them consolation.
2. We decry and denounce all acts of terrorism, the use of force or violence against innocent civilians for political purposes. We abhor war, but we cherish freedom and security. Thus we support military efforts of the United States to eradicate the causes and manifestations of terror wherever they grow, especially the Al Qaeda organization led by Osama bin Laden and its worldwide web of training camps. We also recognize that military means alone will not defeat terrorism. A coordination of military, diplomatic, political, economic, religious and cultural means must also be utilized.
3. We call on our government to be sensitive to the presence of millions of innocent people in Afghanistan. While our military continues targeted bombing of terrorist sites, we support supplying relief to the millions who are suffering.

4. We reject any notion that our government should retreat from its support for Israel in response to the September 11 attacks. We affirm our support for the people of Israel and their quest for peace. We stand in awe of their inspiring national spirit in the face of decades of continuing violence, bloodshed and terrorism.
5. We call on President Bush and the leaders of the nations who have joined the coalition against terrorism never to appease coalition partners by undermining Israel's attempts to defend its citizens. Our government must not mute its opposition to the policies of any coalition partners that support terrorism or deny human rights.
6. We reach out in friendship and concern to the North American Muslim community. We categorically reject all attempts to stereotype our Muslim brothers and sisters with such racist clichés as "Muslim mentality" and "Arab character." We condemn vandalism and desecration of Islamic mosques and attacks on life and property of those who are, or are thought to be, of Arab descent, including the Sikh community.
7. We call on the leadership of the Muslim community worldwide to speak out forcefully against terrorism, including terrorism against the citizens of Israel, and urge our rabbinic colleagues to reach out to Muslims in their own communities to open dialogues for the sake of peace and understanding.
8. We call on the governments of the United States and Canada to be ever vigilant of our freedoms and to safeguard the respect for privacy and the entitlement of all to due process of law so that in responding to terrorism we do not, out of fear, sacrifice our cherished liberties, handing the terrorists the very victory they seek.
9. We pledge ourselves to continue to engage in communal prayer and dialogue in order to bind up the wounds of our country and our world so that Judaism's enduring vision of peace and justice may be fulfilled. As teachers of the prophetic promises we reconsecrate ourselves to the speedy fulfillment of the prophetic vision of the day when "justice will roll down as waters and righteousness as a mighty stream," when all shall "sit under vine and fig tree with none to make them afraid."

The Prophetic Voice in Sermon

“Reform Judaism more than any other kind of Judaism emphasizes not majesty and not might and not mystery but morality, as the garment in which is clothed he whom we in our human language call God.”⁶⁹

Rabbi Emil G. Hirsch

A good sermon can speak to the hearts and minds of a congregation while capturing the essence of the time and place in which it is composed and delivered. A good sermon can speak to an individual as well as a community. A great sermon can do all of these things as well as remain relevant through time and space.

The style, length and content of sermons within the Reform Movement have predictably changed with the times. Just as liturgy and even sanctuary architecture changed to fit evolving ideology and congregational needs, lofty language and heavy-handed mandates have given way to story telling and an increased sense of informality. Prophetic messages “from on high” have slowly transformed into relational models and personal meaning-making. Thirty minute sermons are mostly relegated to the High Holidays while *divrei Torah* are often heard on Shabbat.

The following is a collection of sermons highlighting the evolution of the prophetic voice at different times in the 20th century. The development of language and style are abundantly evident. The content provides a glimpse into the concerns of the community and the rabbi, as well as the period in which it was written and delivered. The ethical mandate of the prophets echoes

⁶⁹ Hirsch, Emil G. “Theology of Jewish Reform Judaism,” *The Jewish Preacher: Rabbi Emil G. Hirsch*. Comp. Myron A. Hirsch. Naples, FL: Collage, 2003. 109.

throughout, reminding the listeners of their unique responsibility toward each other and the greater world.

The Message of the Prophets to Society and the State⁷⁰
A Paper presented to the Pacific Coast Unitarian Conference
Rabbi Jacob Voorsanger⁷¹
San Francisco, CA
1899

Rabbi Jacob Voorsanger of Congregation Emanu-El in San Francisco offered this message to a conference of Unitarian Christians in 1899. In it, he speaks of the message of the prophets and the challenges he sees in contemporary religious life in relation to the prophetic message; the struggle of heeding the ethical mandate in the face of the new comforts of modernity.

The title of the subject assigned me for discussion is rather a strange one. Rabbis are not ministers of the Gospel. The word is identified with the teachings and the messages of Christianity. I could use the word only in its old Anglo-Saxon sense, "Good spell" that is a good talk. We need such a good talk occasionally; some bold, rugged preaching that will present things as they are and not as we fancy them to be.

The old prophets of Israel, upon whose messages you have built the foundations of your faith, were the boldest talkers in the world. Their awful⁷² eloquence has had no match in the preaching of any other time. Nor was their mission a pleasant one. Not one of them, from Samuel down to Malachi, enjoyed the popularity of the masses, and the Scriptures give us many an instance of the friction of prophets with priests and kings. They were stern old moralists, these prophets, who fitted not in the incongruous conditions of their times, and whose idealism is perhaps a trifle too much for any period, including our own.

⁷⁰ Voorsanger, Jacob. *Sermons and Addresses*. Comp. Otto Irving Wise. New York: Bloch, 1913. 176-184.

⁷¹ Rabbi Jacob Voorsanger (1852-1908) was born in Amsterdam, and he immigrated to the United States in the early 1870s. He served San Francisco's Congregation Emanu-El from 1889-1908, and served as assistant rabbi for that congregation from 1886 to 1889. He was also a professor in the Semitics department at the University of California.

Source: Voorsanger, Jacob. *Sermons and Addresses*. Comp. Otto Irving Wise. New York: Bloch, 1913.

⁷² The prophets acted as the mouthpiece of God, often transmitting messages of disappointment and destruction as well as hope for the future. Their powerful words could alienate or inspire but the ethical expectation remained a constant.

The ethics of the Old and of the New Testament present a complete system of moral discipline designed to place man on earth as the true representative of God.

Man's conduct must be an expression of the divine motive of the universe. The perfection of such conduct is a great undertaking which appalls some of us, and for which most of us have no stomach.

Who cares to spend his life in ascending the mountain of the Lord? It is pleasant enough down below in the valley; the teeming multitude is there; Israel spread out in its tents, and the sight is gratifying.

The world has little patience with mountaineers who, one at a time, climb the steep heights of ideality to find God and the possible perfection of humanity. Do they reach the summit?

Perhaps there is no satisfaction in a condition of complacency, such as must be his who has attained his desire and realized his ideals; but there ought to be great satisfaction in struggle. He who struggles is a greater man than he who either wins or loses. Struggle is the most eminent characteristic of a brave manhood.⁷³ It is nobler struggle against sin than to have wholly overcome it. It is braver, better, to struggle for truth than to possess it.

In the struggle for perfection lies the promise of man's rise from the low depths in which he wallows; let us idealize about the millennium as our loftiest passions direct, it is not here yet, and I prefer it to come, according to the prophet's dictum, "at the end of time"; not until then.

For, mark you, man's salvation lies in the trials and tribulations through which he must pass in order to attain the kingdom of heaven; when he reaches that his efforts will cease; and, speaking for myself, that is not a good thing. The struggles of life make it glorious, not the successes or failures thereof.

That may be singular philosophy, quite out of harmony with the complacent theology of the period that pats the Lord on the back for being a good sort of God; and that, in loudly proclaiming the divine character of its ism, gives a certificate of bad character to all the world that hath no palate to taste the blessings of that ism.

One of the mistakes of the times and not of our times alone is the substitution of theology for religion, that is to say, an insistence that the facts and experiences of human life and society are to be determined not by the standard of ethics but by a human interpretation made authoritative by ecclesiastical organization.

⁷³ The prophets certainly understood this struggle in their own lives as well as in the life of Israel. The struggle to uphold the covenant and be in partnership with God is the struggle of all of our lives. This struggle is what pushes us to action in the face of the evils of the world.

Now I say that God reveals truth, not opinions. The prophets of Israel were neither theologians nor philosophers nor ecclesiastical theorists, or exegetes, nor, I fancy, was Jesus of Nazareth much of an ecclesiastic the narrowness of whose opinions would minimize his love for his fellow men, or what is worse, would excite him to a hypocritical expression of pity that one is unwilling to be saved by the narrow channels of his particular theology.

The pulpit needs to be a bit more prophetic, a little less theological.⁷⁴ Theology never yet saved man; prophetism, that is to say, the idealism of religion, on the contrary, has injected the moral struggle in the life blood of the world.

Your concrete theological systems, planning the subjection of the human will on the line of the older hierarchies, will share the fate of all human opinions, and doubtless suffer the fate of a supererogation of being absolute, divine truth; but as long as the world struggles toward higher ideals, and seeks its happiness in the harmonization of all human relationships, the prophet will be remembered.

Churches will die because their activity is too circumscribed, but God's truth in sight of those who eternally struggle for it is bound to live forever. And that is why the prophet, unhonored in his own land, becomes the immortal seer whose words bear interpretation for all time.

Let me give you what I believe to be the key to prophetic activity, and for the purposes of this instruction, you may apply it as well to the teachings of the founder of Christianity, who was a Jew and was permeated with the Messianic tendencies of his time.

The prophets of Israel watched the decline of some of the mighty empires of antiquity, and were contemporary with the rise of others. They realized the top-heaviness of pagan civilization, saw some of the tremendous structures of human society topple over, and felt that the evolution of society, in one sense at least, is the mighty vengeance of God and nature upon men whose activity is a continuous disturbance of relations between the two.

Politically the prophets had few opinions regarding the aggressive policies of their time morally, they had set up standards by the measure of which every nation, Israel included, was found wanting.

It is a mistake to think that the prophets either founded a faith or a church; their Judaism hath neither a creed, as you understand the word, nor an ecclesiastical authority that subjects man to a concrete discipline of obedience. Their theory

⁷⁴ The prophets may speak of extremes, both positive and negative, but they also provide a practical guide for living the way in which God expects. Voorsanger seems to understand a greater need for practical messages from the pulpit rather than oration concerning the ideology or philosophy of Judaism. The prophets moved Israel to action and continue to move us to action.

was one of life, not of belief; one of practice, not of confession.⁷⁵ They had an ideal of deity wholly revolutionary, if judged by classic, that is to say, pagan standards.

The pagan made his god in the image of man or beast, the God of Israel made man in his image. Between the two conceptions lies a tremendous revolution. The pagan makes God man, that is to say invests him with all the attributes, good or bad, that characterize him or his environments. The Jew, made in God's image, is invested with the attributes of deity, and the burden of moral struggle is superimposed upon him. The prophetic ideal is a man made in God's image, a man who is a son of God, not a perfect man, but a man who struggles to attain to the purity and perfection of God.

The polar opposites of the heathen and the prophetic conceptions of God are the same as regards heathen society and the ideal of the prophets. Heathen society lacked moral stability. There was no struggle toward a better manhood, as the prophet views it. Evil flourishes, the moral standards are very low. There are political power, sturdy courage, great refinement, strong competition, many of those national virtues glorified by the poets of the period, but these are not the highest virtues, and without the tests of justice, equity, and personal purity they cannot endure; they amount to nothing.

Assyria was great in all external attributes. A mighty conqueror, holding its grip on southeastern Asia, it bit the dust. Its libraries and those of Babylonia, dug up from the mounds that dot the Mesopotamian valley, tell a wondrous tale of learning, refinement, culture, and art; ay, we know now that many elements of our present civilization are Semitic, not Aryan.

What of all this? Why did not these mighty empires and the others stand forever? No politician can furnish the answer. Only prophets can.

As Isaiah and Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and the eminent orator of Babylonia viewed the grave contingencies of their times, the grip of empire was weakened by the decline of a moral manhood. That is all, and the all is terrible to contemplate. The ideal commonwealth of the prophets lies in no political direction. The nation of old that, drunk with power, arrogant with fabulous wealth, flushed with victories, entered upon the enjoyment of its strong right arm, forgot that the fibers of its moral constitution were decaying, and in time the structure fell to pieces.

The prophet says that the fiber of morality alone holds nations and their political structure intact. Is that true? It proved true in their time. Is it true today? Now comes their scheme of government. It is summed up in the dignity and purity of manhood. Man must be like his God. He must struggle to become God. He must discipline himself, put himself under restraint, make his ideals the test of the integrity of real conditions. For, this is eternally true, that

⁷⁵ Once again, the emphasis is on action rather than just philosophy. The prophets demanded action and change.

incongruity of social conditions leaves the inference that man as yet imperfectly understands what God really is.

That was the prophet's trouble, to explain God. A heathen god is easily made, as painters and sculptors have proved but a God, the World-Spirit, the harmony of all things, the infinite standard of love, purity, and justice, by which man his affairs and doings shall be measured, that cannot be made neither easily conceived, nor easily lived up to.

But they held to these ideals, these old revolutionists in the face of insuperable difficulties. They drew the plans for the kingdom of God. It could only be inhabited by men who had struggled, men who had overcome their baser passions their low ambitions, their selfish greed; men who had learned to drown the *ego* in the common good, men who did justice, whose law was the law of God, not the law that determined the advantage of some and the discomfiture of others.

And they preached the gospel of the struggle: Personal purity, personal holiness. They said not Believe in me; but I am who I am, do according to my likeness. They condemned not the heathen idol, though they ridiculed it; but they condemned the heathen practices, the low manhood, the impure womanhood, begotten of the low conceptions or the ignorance of the higher mission of life.

Did they believe in the potency of their ideals? Did they have faith in their ultimate realization? If they did, they were wise enough to place their realization at the end of time. From their day to that, from our day to that, lies the struggle. Nations who have attained their ideals of conquest perish and pass away. That is the epitaph on the tombstones of the nations of old and of Spain today.

Nations held together by the struggle for a higher purpose, the struggle for justice, humanity, and righteousness, which are the breath of God upon man's clay-such nations may assist in the perpetuating of the kingdom of God. For really, wherever there is God there is the kingdom, and we need not wait.

But how much of God is there in us, and in our society, and in our moral and political world? To what extent have we struggled toward perpetual ideals, and to what degree have we, who know a bit of these things, directed the pathways of those who do not know and do not understand? Or, are we struggling at all? Are we pleased enough with ourselves to let well enough alone? Or do we flatter ourselves that we live in the most glorious age that ever lived, an eloquent fallacy oft screeched out by our American eagle?⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Voorsanger asks a series of questions, which remain relevant to us even today. Have we forgotten the struggle because of our relative comfort in modern American? Just as the prophetic message continues to be relevant as we face new challenges, so too do we today continue to ward off complacency and apathy.

I dread to answer those questions. I am sensitive of a charge of pessimism. There is much good in this world, and particularly much good in this American republic, and is much easier to criticize than to design plans for the correction of evil. But a preacher, if he is not a mere time-server and a mere taker of his salary is sometimes at least, bound to inquire what has become of these great standards of prophetic ideals which have become the ideals of the Christian world.

If you preach Christianity do you confine yourself merely to the preaching of ideals, or do you also inquire whether your world and mine is at all struggling towards them? That may be an impertinent question; but I, who am sometimes pitied by the orthodox Christians for not having washed in their font of salvation, have some right to inquire into the degree of moral conquests attained by those who claim their religion to be better than mine.

Now let the facts speak for themselves. The struggle of the period is not toward the ideal, that is, not toward God. If it is, the material pursuits of man have nearly obliterated the traces of his ideality. We can perceive no struggle in a national or individual progression toward higher truth or higher life. I am either right or wrong.

If am wrong I would want to know why, nineteen hundred years after the advent of Jesus the Messiah, evil, in all its forms and aspects, still flourishes like a bay tree? I would want to know what people mean when they say Christianity has conquered the earth. If the word means anything at all, it should stand not only, in its general sense, for a proclamation of the existence of God, no matter how theologically interpreted, but also for the living presence of conditions wholly interpreting the presence of God on earth, a God made manifest in the life of man, his world, his morals, his politics, his home, his society, his science, his daily pursuits and industries.

Is God so manifested? Perhaps I am a dreamer and desire impossibilities, or a pessimist who croaks at his people and his times. I am nothing of the kind. But sometimes the suspicion comes to me that there is something wrong in our world. These prophetic ideals are wrong, and the world is irrevocably swept on toward periodical destruction, and nations are naught but the rehabilitated ashes of former times, to again become ashes as fate ordains; or else there is, according to the infallible design of God, a noble destiny for struggling man to which he must attain by his own efforts.

Who is the pessimist? Is it he who punctuates the absence of struggle toward man's God-like destiny, or the materialist who promises humanity a grave and the world a tombstone upon which the hand of God shall write its final condemnation?

I complain because I have faith in God and man. I censure because I have felt something of the noble impulses of mankind in its struggle toward the higher life, in its God-like touch of things dead that became alive as the dried bones in Ezekiel's valley.

I confess to being an idealist. I believe in the integrity of the prophetic ideals. I believe that man should struggle to attain to their degree of beauty and holiness. Therefore the trend of preaching should be, not so much the glorification of God that is wholly unnecessary so far as God is concerned but the punctuating of the low tastes, ambitions, and desires of man, the rugged speech that should teach the world that there are men with courage to warn them that all is not right, all is not right yet.

We know it, and we are too cowardly to confess it. We know that there are ugly blots on our boasted civilization which give the veriest barbarian a poor opinion of our religion. Is our religion identified with the morality of the commonwealth?

Look at some things, then.

Look how people interpret the sanctity of the marriage state. Look how people interpret the sanctity of the home. Notice how much of the crassest ignorance there is alongside of the most exalted science and enlightenment.

Is paganism dead? Then let us account for the existence of all the hells in which humanity disgraces itself and belies the dignity and honor of its mission. Is civilization Christian? Then it ought to be an unmixed blessing. There should be at least the tendency to mitigate evil.

And what is evil? Just the weakness of the individual man? Just the exhibition of the animal within him? Is the atheism of civilization no evil?

And what about the recurrence of those social conditions which make us more and more resemble the systems and structures of olden times?

Really, God is as yet very far off, or else, as is the truth, we still imperfectly understand him, and that is why he is not with us.

What, then, is "our Gospel" to the state and society? I dare not say what the Christian message ought to be; I am not a Christian. But I am a Jew who knows and feels something of the prophetic ideals.

The message of the prophets is: Let God enter into the life of man. Let man struggle toward a higher life. Let him be less animal, more God. Let the good in him show that God is in him. Let him worship God by loving man. Let him expand according to his natural strength, but let that strength be controlled by justice and righteousness. Let the kingdom come; not the kingdom of political conquest; not the kingdom of man's subjection by man; but the kingdom of equity, the kingdom of God made manifest in the lives of his people.

Follow your wonted pursuits; wait not till God has made a new heaven and a new earth. The old earth is God's, only man destroys it by his ignorance of God's purposes for it.

And as to the new heaven, we know little of the old one, though some of our brethren profess to know all about it. The kingdom of God, that is the identification of man with his God, is here; struggle for it, struggle for it, and let all your deeds, personal or national, be the proof that God is no lie and you merely a base-born clod.

Struggle for your manhood, for your national manhood, you Americans, with your great inheritance and your magnificent opportunities. And let the world know that here is the republic that dares to vindicate the ideals of Jew and Christian, and while following out its destiny has the high moral courage to uphold standards beneath which it will please God never march to a grave but to the exalted perpetuity of the noblest nation on earth.

Struggle, struggle toward God and a noble destiny. That is the message of Judaism. He who has a nobler message, let him propound it.

The Meaning of Reform Judaism⁷⁷

Broadcast over NBC in the "Messages of Israel," under the auspices of the United Jewish Laymen's Committee.

Rabbi Louis Wolsey⁷⁸

Congregation Rodeph Shalom, Philadelphia, PA

1942

Rabbi Louis Wolsey of Congregation Rodeph Shalom in Philadelphia, PA delivered this sermon on NBC radio as part of a series of sermons called, "Messages of Israel." This sermon seeks to educate a greater American population about the ideology and philosophy of Reform Judaism, paying particular attention to the evolution of thought and the prophetic mandate that guides such thought.

May I this evening claim the privilege as a humble teacher of Reform Judaism, to make clear to our listeners on this program what is the meaning and purpose of a liberal interpretation of Judaism that now has a history of something like 135 years?

There was a time when men's minds were shackled, when it was not the privilege of man to think out his own religious beliefs. That represents a phase in all human culture, the self-interest of the tyrant or the intolerance of a society that had no respect for the freedom of individual conscience. The ghost of that unhappy period of history threatens once again to trammel the intellectual and religious rights of the individual, in spite of the fact that our sons are now drafted in a battle for human freedom. The word "unity" is being conjugated in all its tenses in the interest of a tyranny against which the free nations of the world have pitted all their strength. We cannot fight for any kind of totalitarianism in the name of freedom. When a speaker within Israel could say that nationalism represents the totality of Judaism and Jewish life, he impliedly speaks in behalf of an ostracism that is the very reverse of freedom. It is an aspect of human thinking against which the democracy of our Western world has always battled, for the essence of democracy consists in its belief that every human being has a right to develop his religious ideas in the light of growing knowledge and experience. We believe that freedom is basic to

⁷⁷ Wolsey, Louis. *Sermons and Addresses*. Philadelphia: Congregation Rodeph Shalom, 1950. 5-9.

⁷⁸ Rabbi Louis Wolsey served Congregation Rodeph Shalom from 1925 until 1947. He was known for his oratory skills. Wolsey saw Judaism as a universal religion and not a nationality and proposed that Judaism be kept out of politics.

Source: "Our History." Congregation Rodeph Shalom. Web. 10 Jan. 2012.
<http://www.rodephshalom.org/our_history/>.

progress, and that progress is the result of the application of freedom to life. To be sure, the right of human beings to think out their honest convictions has been retarded and checked throughout all time. There have always been reactions, but the march of the human spirit toward liberty of conscience is irresistible and inevitable, and so long as man is man, he will believe that his Creator with the unimpeachable right of liberty endows him. He may be wrong in his interpretation — he frequently is — but it is a much higher phase of human culture that man shall be free and mistaken, than to be right and be enslaved.

This applies with particular emphasis to the Jew who, leaving the ghetto of 140 years ago, believed in his right to reinterpret his traditions in accordance with his newer knowledge and his larger experience. It was particularly true of his life in America, where he found a fertile soil for his religious beliefs and expressions, and where the spirit of democracy had given him the liberty to develop his faith and its teachings in accordance with what he believed to be the truth. The Jew has been the beneficiary of that spirit of freedom in America, and he has here developed a religious life under the aegis of a liberal interpretation of religion, which has flourished and become representative of what is finest and noblest in Jewish thinking.⁷⁹ Liberal Judaism though born abroad, experienced its noblest development on the free soil of America. Reform Judaism was an accompaniment of the Jew's entrance into a newer world, where freedom was a sacrament, and here he has abandoned those particularistic ways of life and doctrines that were no longer responsive to his intellectual honesty and his rational assents.

Reform Judaism first and foremost stands for the principle of freedom in religious interpretation and practice. It does not consent to reactions occasioned by the withering situation in Europe. It interprets history as a progressive and forward march of the human spirit and not "in terms of cyclical movements which come full again- and which result only in a slight net advance for mankind". And it refuses to be discouraged by the sporadic reactions of history. We not alone believe there is a better time coming, but we believe in working for it, rather than being pessimistic, defeatist or disheartened.

Reform Judaism believes in the right of developing our religious ideas in accordance with the growing knowledge and experience of man - and that is why it is essentially democratic. Any other position we hold to be authoritarian and, therefore, enslaving.

⁷⁹ Wolsey is championing America as an ideal place for Jewish life to flourish. This sermon was given before the horrible truths of the Holocaust were known, so it is particularly interesting to contemplate the almost naïve hopefulness that Wolsey presents as we understand the events differently now.

Therefore, Reform Judaism stresses the right of reason in the religious life.⁸⁰ We hold it to be of the very essence of historic Judaism to accept what appeals to our sense of the true, and to reject that which does not appeal to our rational assent, or at least to place traditions in their proper alcove in the changing compartments of history. When the pageantry of religion and externalities of custom and ritual have been outmoded by developing thought and experience, we reserve our right in freedom to abandon that which, in our judgment, has outlived its usefulness. All of this may be called "recency", but names are not arguments. They are merely the tools of would-be dictators. When a custom develops merely into a folk-way, then that custom must be appraised for what it really is, instead of being used as a whip to enforce conformity.

Reform Judaism majors the contention that ritual is an effort to develop the spiritual life, and that when that ritual loses its efficiency, it must be rejected or altered. When a tradition is exploited in the interest of imprisoning the spirit instead of releasing it and preserving it, then that tradition must be reinterpreted. This is fundamental to Reform Judaism — yes to total Judaism. It is only those who say what was good enough for yesterday is good enough for today, which defy the freedom of the individual. The presence of tyranny does not mean that freedom is dead.

Therefore, when the democratic spirit entered the life of the Western world and the Jew was permitted to emerge from the ghetto and taste the sweets of a free culture, he very logically left his ghetto habits and customs behind. The newer experience of fellowship and equality and knowledge meant a reinterpretation. That was the very essence of Reform Judaism. It was an accompaniment of the Jew's entrance into the world and the Reform Jew resists any retreat into the obscurantism of the middle Ages. Those who would reconcile freedom with tribalism or ghettoism are attempting the impossible. They are simply discouraged by European relapse — whose day, please God, is temporary.

Reform Judaism, therefore, rejects the doctrine of the exile, We are not in exile. We are not the exploiters of an accident, but the servants of a God-given opportunity. We are not in the world to crawl and cringe, but to stand up in pride and service. We are not here to enjoy luxuries while recommending others to repatriate themselves. We are not signposts telling others where to go, while we remain stationary. We are in the world under God as free men, with the right to live wheresoever we will, "to enjoy the fruit of our labor in peace as have men of every other faith and historic background", and to be to that world an example of the moral life which we have been taught by our prophets and sages. We believe that we can and must live the spiritual Jewish life wherever our lot takes us. We are not discouraged by the unhappy hatreds which the world has visited upon us. We shall not die but

⁸⁰ The role of reason in Reform Judaism began with the Enlightenment and the role of a new sense of scientific study of Judaism. Post-Holocaust, the role of reason in Judaism certainly changed as reason became insufficient.

live and declare the works of the Lord. We believe that that world may yet be redeemed when the world will cover its repentant head with ashes as it bethinks itself of the injustice, which it has visited upon an anointed servant of the Most High.

He misunderstands Judaism who regards it as a static fact. As the Scripture itself reveals a majestic evolution of the human spirit, so Judaism from Moses to the doctors of the Talmud and the thinkers of every succeeding age, has acquired and interpreted the tradition in the light of every new knowledge and discovery of our advancing civilization. The prophet rejected animal sacrifice and the Maccabee annulled the Sabbath in the stress of defensive war. Israel labors and thinks in that Jewish tradition. Every religion does the same. For us the ethical messages of the prophets are paramount to every ritual and ceremonial. The inner life is more important than outward custom-for a clean heart and a right spirit are of the very essence of religion. Dress, diet, priestly purity, ceremonials, genuflections, pageantry, the outward mechanics of spiritual ideas are secondary to the prophetic call-"though ye offer me burnt-offerings and your meal offerings, I will not accept them, but let justice well up as waters and righteousness as a mighty stream." This is the essence of progressive Judaism.

A distinguished publicist has said that for the Jew the alternative is a revived nationalism or assimilation. That is a misreading of both the spirit and letter of Jewish history. The one was a temporary phase and the other is a torturing of a completely benevolent word. That the mission and common sense objective of Jewish life is the preservation of a priceless religious interpretation-priceless for the Jew and priceless for the world does not seem to occur to the speaker-probably because it seems easy to pact with the atheisms of a mad world. Every faith, every form of human culture, thank God, has assimilated. Everything human has been a process of give and take. The Jew has accepted truth in every age of his history; he has contributed immortal truths-and he still does and always will which have made and directed the course of world thought and conduct and he still remains Jew and he always will wherever he happens to be until the coming of the day when the God of righteousness is accepted as Father of all the world.

A prophetic Judaism visions the coming of a distant day when swords shall be beaten into plowshares and it is undiscouraged by a world that still seeks salvation in war.

The word "Jew" is the name neither of race, nation, folk, or ethnological group. In its arterial stream flow the bloods of all peoples and it is, therefore, a universal people with a universal message.

Judaism will live in the conviction that the word Jew is the name of a religious community and nothing else. Politically, he is like the member of every other religious community-a citizen of the country where he was born or where he has naturalized himself. When Jeremiah could say: "Israel is saved by the Lord with an everlasting salvation," Judaism refuses to reject or to

alter that prophetic sentence with a commitment to a mortal secularism or an unwholesome and defeatist assimilationism. Religion and religion only is "the unchanging need" for the Jew and his world. This, according to genuine Jewish thought, is the only way out, is the only authoritative expression of Judaism, and is the complete and undefeated message of Israel. The spiritually minded Jew refuses to be deterred from its message or its way of life.

Each Generation and Its Truths

Rabbi Solomon B. Freehof⁸¹

Hebrew Union College Ordination Sermon on the 75th Anniversary of the College 1950

Rabbi Solomon Freehof was a professor at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, a rabbi at Congregation Kehillath Anshe Maariv in Chicago and a rabbi at Rodef Shalom in Pittsburgh. He was the chief composer of responsa literature for the Reform Movement for almost three decades and his influence on the Reform Movement is immeasurable. He delivered this sermon for the 75th anniversary of the Hebrew Union College in 1950. He chronicles the progression of the Reform Movement through the changing needs of Reform Jews and how the movement responded. He concludes by charging the newly ordained rabbis to remember the ancient words of the Jewish tradition and continue to find relevance in them.

Today a new generation is entering the rabbinate. The Conference of Rabbis meeting in Cincinnati to commemorate the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the College extends fellowship to this new generation of colleagues. We cannot help but think of the older generation that has passed away, especially of David Philipson,⁸² last survivor of the first class of the Hebrew Union College. Thus one generation cometh into the Conference and one generation goeth. May it not be said as the Biblical pessimist complained that in spite of new energies, the world remains the same, unimproved, unchanged. One generation cometh and another generation goeth but the world stands still.

Such a pessimistic forecast would not be unpalatable to youth, for youth is not always optimistic. Indeed the confident books of the past year were written by older men like Eisenhower and Churchill. The pessimistic, heart-broken books were written by younger men like Ira Wolpert and Norman Mailer. Yet generally youth is neither optimistic nor pessimistic. It is primarily emotional. It feels its optimism with great elation and its pessimism with deeper despair. What youth seems to need most is a feeling of security, a confidence that it knows the road along which to go. It is, therefore, the confusion of the modern world, its bewildering meaninglessness which makes this a difficult age for young people. Whether or not the world remains basically the same, as the old king said, the fact is it seems to have changed drastically in our day. It appears to be in anarchy. There is an air of instability everywhere, a feeling of menace, a sense of impending storm.

⁸¹ Solomon Freehof was a great scholar of the Reform Movement. He was a pulpit rabbi in Pittsburgh as well as Chicago and through his many writings, especially concerning Jewish law, became a very influential Reform rabbi. Source: Meyers, Michael A. *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

⁸² David Phillipson was a member of the very first class to be ordained in Cincinnati by the Hebrew Union College.

The rabbinate of past centuries faced in their time a changing world, but they had an immovable rock upon which to stand. Judaism was to them a changeless eternal truth. Its law was revealed on Sinai, its observances derived from God's own word. Their stability was within. Therefore, they could say: "We will not fear, though the earth do change and though the mountains be moved into the hearts of the sea."

But modern rabbis cannot find the same inner security. Our religion, once majestic and eternal, is no longer the same. The Judaism which this new generation knows is itself undergoing change. Its observances and its moods are subject to new analysis and new reform. Then what stability can it offer in this world of impending danger? The young rabbi sets sail on a stormy sea and with only an unsteady compass in his hand.

Yet there is some consolation and not a little reassurance in the fact that even the Judaism of the past was not as monolithic and as unchanging as it seemed. Jewish orthodoxy always struggled to conceal its own change. When, long ago, it had become necessary to abolish a vast bulk of the old agricultural law, these laws were declared to be still valid but only temporarily in abeyance. When completely new customs arose, the ingenuity of the rabbinate was expended to prove that these novelties are not new at all but are implicit in the sacred text. Thus orthodoxy, actually progressive, pretended to be conservative. Our Reform movement, however, was born in times of change and revolution and was proud of its innovations and proclaimed them aloud. Progress is common to all of Judaism; but in orthodoxy it is hidden. In Reform it is boldly displayed.⁸³ Therefore, if we would evaluate Judaism and study its adaptability, it is best to study Reform Judaism where the changes and adjustments are clear and explicit. It would seem valuable to consider some of the main changes which have taken place in Reform Judaism and evaluate their historic validity and their usefulness in this changing world. This week's Scriptural portion is so varied in its content that it can well throw some light upon the variegated phenomenon which our Reform Judaism has come to be. The entire weekly portion from beginning to end suggests a judgment of the changing forms of our faith, and the changing responsibility of all rabbis, the veterans and those most welcome recruits.

A divine command opens the Scriptural portion. Moses is to send messengers to spy out the Promised Land. That Promised Land was to Israel an old memory, a present reality, and a symbol of the future. It was remembered as the land which Abraham, their ancestor, lived. It confronted them now as a difficult task, a land to be conquered and settled, and it soon became a symbol of the future, the image of eternal hope. It as a symbol of hope first to Israel and then to the world.

⁸³ Human beings were created to evolve. Our own story of creation tells the story of Adam and Eve who could not remain stagnant, could not remain where they were. Jewish orthodoxy attempts to stave off any sense of progression but ultimately is unsuccessful because it is human nature to change, to evolve. The Reform Movement has embraced a sense of evolution and change but Orthodox Judaism has not in the same way. Freehof speaks of this resistance to change and his sense of pride in Reform Judaism for its embrace of change.

Not only in the forty years of wilderness wandering, but also through the centuries of medieval exile, Israel's dreams of redemption centered in the promised land. The redemption of Israel and also the deliverance of mankind became associated with the little land. The prophets made it the land of promise for a world-wide hope. Around the Palestine of the future were clustered their visions of a world cured of hate, redeemed from violence, a world rebuilt under the dominion of the eternal God. Not only the symbol of an earthly Paradise, it became even a symbol of the paradise beyond the gates of life. African slaves someday to be transported to an as yet undiscovered America would dream of laying down the heavy burden of life, crossing the deep River Jordan, a symbol of dying and entering as they said, "That Promised Land is where all peace is."

Perhaps what matters most is not these specific hopes but the mood of hopefulness. Perhaps that is Scripture's greatest psychological gift. It taught men to fight down their fears of the future onto the old impulse of fear, the heritage of our animal life, it now added a God-like gift, the ardor of hope. Thus the old Platonic legend spoke of a lost Atlantis; but eighteen centuries later Sir Francis Bacon spoke of the New Atlantis. The ancient Greek envisioned a perfect continent and a blessed land as having existed in the past and now lost forever. But the English philosopher spoke of a glorious land in the future, beckoning us forever. The difference between the glory that was lost, the lost Atlantis, and the grandeur yet to come, the New Atlantis, is the difference which Scripture has made in the life of man. The Promised Land became the symbol of God's promise to man that the whole world can flow with milk and honey, that wars can cease to the ends of the earth, that it can be good and beautiful when men will dwell together as brothers. The Promised Land became God's assurance of a New Atlantis, a world-wide brotherhood. This is what God reveals to Israel in order to enlighten the eyes of the world. To search for this world of promise, to proclaim to the despairing, "Thy light has come," is a basic mandate in Judaism.⁸⁴ It is recorded by implication in the Torah and in clear proclamation by the prophets. There can be no real Judaism without the conviction that God has promised all his children a blessed world and Israel's courage is the symbol of that covenant.

In the medieval philosophic and legal literature, the promised land of the future is not spoke of very much although its light gleams as through the cracks of the door. But when the French Revolution shattered the walls of the medieval world, it spread abroad the light of the ancient assurance. Men began to think again of world-wide enlightenment and world-wide fraternity. Under that spirit, Reform Judaism was born. Reform Judaism, the child or the grandchild of the revolution, rediscovered the old Biblical hope of a world of radiant promise. This became the main mood in early Reform. It wrote and preached of the coming of the perfect world, of enlightened men and women, the conviction that mankind is destined to cross the Jordan into a land flowing with milk and honey. Reform Judaism became the confident Caleb and Joshua and proclaimed to all

⁸⁴ The words of Isaiah 49:6 echo in this passage. Freehof uses the imagery of Atlantis as a metaphor for the Promised Land, the messianic hope and the light of the Jewish people.

the enheartening promise that the land of the future is good and awaits but our resolute march.

Nowadays this grand message is rarely heard in our pulpits or in the world. To the contrary, we often hear that old idealism derided as naïve and delusive. Yet surely it is foolish to laugh at our own former faith. It is bad enough to laugh at the *mistakes* of our youth but to mock the idealism of one's youth is spiritual self-contempt.

Of course, the buoyant Biblical mood is difficult to maintain in the present day of tension and danger. It is easy to mock it and brush it aside. Therefore, it is abandoned by millions. This rising tide of despair becomes in itself a destructive force and contrariwise our inherited world-confidence can be a factor in the strategy of world reconstruction. It is clear that Reform rediscovered and re-proclaimed one of the most *needful* truths, the sense of messianism, the consciousness of a promised land. Jews will not be truly Jews if they are not a repository of world hope and Jewish communities are not really Jewish unless their influence is towards brotherhood and world peace. The new state of Palestine, the promised land itself, will come to its grandest achievement when it will rebuild the troubled, embittered and decadent east into a brotherly, progressive region.

To our world-weary minds it may sound pretentious to speak today, as they did, of the mission of Israel to the world. But at least we may speak with humble resolution of the mission and the mandate of the rabbinate, namely, to resist the fog of the old pagan despair which threatens to re-poison the modern world.⁸⁵ That first emphasis of Reform, its re-emphasis of our ancient world hope, must now be a permanent part of the conviction and the preachments of every successive generation in the rabbinate: -- to lead through this valley of trouble at least to the *gateway* of hope.

The grand mood of promise with which the Scriptural reading begins shifts rather strangely to a technical description of vows and burnt offerings. Yet even in this technical enumeration there breathes characteristic Hebraic spirit. "If a stranger dwells among you," the text declares, "let there be one justice for you and for the stranger." Be generous in your offerings and God will be forgiving unto you and unto the stranger among you. The rights of the poor are repeatedly stressed in the middle portion of this Biblical section. It is as if Scripture is turning its eyes from the distant goal in order to point out the road whereby it may be reached. It warns us that the far-off day of the perfect world is not merely to be wished for but worked for. It must be worked for in a practical way by little acts of daily self-perfection. The same prophets who in ecstatic poetry spoke of the glories of the coming days promised to mankind through Israel, were likewise the ones who denounced Israel for callousness, for

⁸⁵ Freehof speaks of a mission, again alluding to the Isaiah passage in which God calls Israel a light for the nations. The Reform Movement heard the prophetic voice of Isaiah and saw the importance of a modern ethical mandate to fulfill this ancient mission.

selfishness and for social injustice. The promised land will be denied to a sinful generation. You cannot build the perfect future upon the foundation of a corrupt present. Social justice becomes the path to world salvation.⁸⁶ Judaism never lost this great rule of life. In all the post-Biblical periods, in all the vast legal development, justice and mercy were always implicit.

That which was not permanently implied, having been written into Jewish law and life, was destined to become still more explicit. For once more a great change has occurred in the environment in which we live. The industrial revolution has taken place. The factories were build, their smoke darkened the air, and child labor sapped the vitals of a whole generation. Blake, the English poet, described the sordid mill towns of England and asked: ---

“Can we build Jerusalem
Amid these dark Satanic mills?”

The new economic injustice created Socialism. The rebellion of the working class and the struggle toward social justice shifted world interest from the political and international to the economic and the social, and inevitably created a second stage in our Reform Judaism. Less and less were heard the visions of a perfect world. More and more were heard of the urgent needs for social justice. Our Conference sessions were occupied with long and earnest reports from our Commission on Social Justice. During this period, it was chiefly the members of our congregations who established and supported the new instrumentalities for social service and out of that period grew a new type of religious leader in Reform Judaism: the liberal supporter of every ameliorating cause, the leader in civic righteousness, the voice of the oppressed against every oppressor.

Yet somehow even that enthusiasm died out, not because there is no injustice left in the world but because suddenly the governments took up the struggle and became aware now that the fate of al modern government itself depends upon the happiness of its people. The world is not in a struggle for the allegiance of the working classes. Both Communist and Capitalist states seek to convince their people that the government will achieve general welfare and social justice. So nowadays there is a tendency to forget our old personal social enthusiasm, to consider it somewhat amateur and outgrown. But here too it is a mistake to be scornful of our own earlier devotions. Again it is essential to recall that the cry for social justice was not the invention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis. It was simply that our movement, which is always modernist, and always sensitive to the changes of the world, rediscovered, because of our social circumstances, that which was long inherent in sacred Scripture.

If that emphasis has now somewhat faded, it has left as in Scripture itself, its permanent mark on our life and it is an indestructible element in the spiritual

⁸⁶ Reform Judaism reinterpreted the messianic goal by moving away from a strict adherence to ritual and law as set up by the Rabbis and replacing it with a strong belief in the ethical mandate of the prophets. Therefore, social action, living the words of the prophets becomes the path to a messianic age.

equipment of the modern rabbi. No rabbi worthy of the name can be indifferent to the miseries of the world nor shut his eyes from beholding the evil of corrupt government or the cruelties of social injustice. The first stage of Reform Judaism made us idealists. The second made us crusaders. "Justice, justice shall ye pursue," that the rabbinate may truly live.

The Scriptural portion ends with what seems a pathetic anti-climax. After implying world hope in the themes of the Promised Land, and pointing the path towards it, the road of day-by-day social justice, it ends up with what is surely a minor matter, the fringes that are to be worn on the garments. Thus it moves from vision through virtue only to arrive at ritualism.

Yet it is evident that this ritualism was not to be what is scornfully called 'mere ritualism.' The purpose of the garment-fringe is given as follows: -- "That ye may remember and observe My commandments and be holy unto your God." It is evident that our fathers put high value upon the ritualism upon which Reform Judaism in its first stages put a low value indeed.

In the long history of traditional Judaism, ritualism was lovingly and enthusiastically developed and expanded until almost every moment of waking life was signalized by some ceremonial action. Undoubtedly this system of a life completely ritualized, exercised a profound affect upon Judaism through many centuries. It certainly fulfilled the purpose ascribed to the ritual of wearing fringes on garments. It *did* remind our fathers at almost every moment of life of the presence of God, of their debt to God. Not a little of their magnificent psychology triumphs, of their constant sense of gratitude, of their victory over despair can be ascribed to this ritual habit of thanking God even amidst the direst poverty, for every crust of bread. It had a further effect. It helped create a vast intellectual structure. The various observances of daily life were listed in enumerations of the commandments. They were organized into codes. They were studied and re-studied until the religious discipline created an immense legal literature not imposed from above but democratically developed. It was an autonomous, intellectual culture, the like of which the world has surely never seen.

Yet for all this noble organization of the ritual and its intellectual super-structure, the early Reform movement was primarily anti-ritualistic. It considered this ceremonial system to be a trivializing of the noble teaching of Judaism. Even the deep learning involved in the study of it was looked upon as a vestige of intellectual capacity, and an alienation from the broader culture of the modern world. This anti-ritual attitude seemed to be confirmed by events in Orthodoxy itself for in wider and wider Orthodox circles the very spiritual basis of the old ritual rapidly seeped away. Fewer and fewer children of Israel continued to believe that these observances had come to us as a genuine mandate from God. As long as Jews did believe that, as they did for centuries, then all of each day's ritual was truly a pageant dedicated to the Omnipresent, but once they ceased to believe that, it did become mere routine and blind piety. That is why Orthodox Judaism, for all the marvelous structure of its learning and its beautifully elaborated codes of law as tended to fade away. It was because of the *authority* of

the ritual, the sense of the presence of God was departing from the codes, leaving them virtually dust of the earth.

One would, therefore, imagine that the anti-ritual mood of early Reform thus confirmed by the pathetic weakening of historic Orthodoxy would by now have become a permanent attitude of our Reform movement. Yet, strangely, Reform Judaism has recently moved *towards* ritual and ceremony, its third mood, in which we now live.⁸⁷ Why that has happened is not too easy to explain. Perhaps there has been a general shift in world atmosphere from classicism to romanticism and so in the English Episcopal Church there has been a shift from Protestantism to a sort of ritual Catholicism, the drama without the doctrine. But with us there has been another element which tended to bring anti-ritualistic Reform back into the ritual mood. The Zionist movement, the new interest in Chassidism, and a number of similar factors have added a folk-feeling to our theology. We began to be interested not, as hitherto, only in Judaism, but also in Jewishness. The old Biblical emphasis of world messianism and daily social justice no longer seem to satisfy the home feeling, the folk feeling, the sense of Jewish personality. So we have at last arrived at the stage of the third part of Scripture, the “fringes on the garments” and all the ritual.

The place which the Commission of Social Justice occupied in the center of Conference interest is now occupied by the Committee on Ceremonies, and there are yearnings for the new Schulchan Aruchs, codes of religious observances.

It is too early to evaluate this new stage of ours. Undoubtedly it too will leave its permanent blessing, but since we are new to it, it would be wise to be cautious. First, we must be careful not to overvalue the status of our new rituals.⁸⁸ No matter how many ceremonies we may restore or reconstruct or invent, they may at best become *minhagim*, but surely not for a long time, *mitzvos*, Divine mandates. In Orthodoxy, of course, which believed in direct and full revelation of the oral law, the ceremonies *did* become Divine mandates. The later post-Biblical ceremonies were accepted by pious faith as a logical derivation of the implied word of God in Scripture. Underlying the entire Shulchan Aruch are the words, “Thus saith the Lord.” But we cannot believe *that* of our ceremonies or of any ceremonies. And I doubt whether many Orthodox Jews will believe that mandate in its fullness again. So in this new romantic stage of ours, we must never forget that whatever ceremonies we have and will have are accepted and reworked as our own free choice. They will never be to us commandments,

⁸⁷ Although Reform Judaism is not based on a sense of religious or legal obligation, Freehof still fears that the tenants of Reform Judaism could become a type of orthodoxy if not allowed to shift and evolve depending on the needs of the people. He chronicles the “moods” of the people and how Reform Judaism should and can continue to evolve to meet these changing needs.

⁸⁸ This is a particularly interesting comment, sixty-two years later. We continue to define and re-define the role of ritual in the Reform Movement, especially as many leaders and congregants alike have found increasing meaning in more traditional ritual. His fear that ritual will overtake intention is perhaps similar to the fear of Amos and Israel’s empty rituals.

mitzvos, but experimental methods. Therefore we should not rush our own contrivings into a code and give it the ancient and august term, "Shulchan Aruch," which old Israel gave to its God-given code. With such due caution, we can gain greatly from our new romantic interest in the drama of ritual. It must serve us as a challenge to inventiveness, to creativeness, and as a reminder that we are the experimental the growing edge of the *Eitz Chaim*, The Tree of Judaism.

These ceremonial experiments, if we are not too portentous about them if we do not prematurely codify them under the borrowed plumage of historic names, may well beautify and re-inspire our religious life. It may have also another benefit: it may bring us back to an intellectual interest in the vast learning which the old ceremonial observances created in older Judaism. We have been too scornful of that. The great legal literature in the codes in the Novella, in the Responsa, are a deposit of the dynamic spirit of Israel, just as the Bible is. If perhaps this legal literature was not the product of genius and inspiration as the Bible was, it is at least the product of immense talent and devotion. We do not accept the Bible verbally, but search in it for that which can inspire. So we will learn to search the great rabbinic literature and add greatly to the foundation upon which the creative Judaism of the future will be built.

In rabbinic studies the new generation in the Reform rabbinate is not necessarily better equipped than its predecessors. Certainly among the great founders of the Reform movement there were magnificent rabbinic scholars as witness Samuel Holdheim's *Responsum in Atteres Tzevi*. But all the previous generations of Reform were debarred from rabbinic studies almost by principle, but their opposition to the ritual subject matter. This wall is now broken down. The great door of medieval rabbinic learning is open. Let this generation enter in and find waters of joy and wells of salvation.

The world is indeed changing rapidly. Its future cannot yet be predicted. Reform Judaism, which some would prefer static and unchanging, is just now also undergoing another transformation. Yet, let not this new rabbis feel bewildered and insecure. No change in Reform is artificial or willful. No new mood has entered our movement which was not already in historic Judaism. What we have done in all our changes has been to give relevance to many ideas which had existed, as it were, half asleep in our great historic faith. A modernist movement, we have been at our best when we were most sensitive to changes in human life. The vision of the French Revolution inspired us to spy out the land of the future and to restore in brilliant colors the old painting of the promised age. The rise of economic injustice led us to re-voice the Biblical thoughts of mercy and justice to the stranger, the poor, and the orphan.⁸⁹ And now the tragedies of the Jewish world brought us closer to folk movements and reestablished us in a romantic love of the ritual and the drama of our faith. There is still much more left in historic Judaism which in later stages of Reform we may

⁸⁹ As the world changes, for better or worse, we continue to feel a responsibility toward the disadvantaged and those treated unjustly. Reform Jews saw the plight of so many and hear once again the call to action from the ancient voices of the prophets.

rephrase and make relevant for the modern world. The great mysticism, which has run like an unbroken thread all through Jewish history at least from the days of Babylon, has not yet reached our hearts. Perhaps the time is not ripe for it and it cannot be made relevant for the modern world. Judaism is a great ocean and it has been the function of our Reform to bring up from the depths that which each age has needed. There is, therefore, a unity of purpose in all our changes. That unity is symbolized in our institutions of learning. The Hebrew Union College with its faculty and its library, represents Jewish spiritual cultural totality. The Central Conference, with its living contact with a contemporary world represents our constant responsiveness to the needs of the world. To the new generation of rabbis now being ordained, we declare that the statement of Ecclesiastes is not necessarily pessimistic. It need not mean that in spite of the coming of new generations the world stands still, unchanged and unimproved. It means rather that each new generation may be assured that the world still stands! The world of Jewish hope, justice and learning! It stands firm amid change and will continue to endure!

The Place of Social Action in Our Reform Jewish Identity⁹⁰
Rabbi Janet Marder⁹¹
Temple Beth Am, Los Altos Hills, CA
2008

Rabbi Janet Marder of Temple Beth Am in Los Altos Hills, CA delivered this sermon in July of 2008. She chronicles the importance of Social Action in the Reform Movement but also speaks about its influence on individual Jewish identity and Jewish practice. She is concerned that the influence of social action as the sole definition of Judaism has changed the way Jews act in the world and challenges her congregants to look at the role of social action in their own sense of Jewish identity.

Recently I started doing a new mitzvah. New to me, that is. When I come home from a hard day in the trenches of Congregation Beth Am, I'm used to kissing the people who greet me, provided that they're related to me, of course. Lately I've also started reaching up and kissing the mezuzah that's affixed to the entrance of our home.

Kissing the mezuzah is a double-faced mitzvah: it acts like a parentheses around the acts of entering and leaving your house. When you come in you pause, notice that there are words of Torah attached to your doorpost, and think about how you want to act inside your Jewish home. When you leave the house, before you lock the door, hop in your car and drive away, you pause again, take note of the mezuzah and think about how a Jew should behave in the world.

Kissing the mezuzah is a Jewish way of entering and leaving your dwelling-place. This weekend Asilomar is our dwelling-place, and the teachings we share form the Jewish parentheses around all that we do here. We entered our dwelling on Friday night with the words of Rabbi Sarah Wolf, who set before us the challenge of creating a congregational culture of *tzedek*. On Shabbat morning Carol Kantor Douglas challenged us to consider elements of the tradition that do not reflect *tzedek*; and Rabbi Jennifer Clayman traced the evolution of *tikkun*

⁹⁰ Marder, Janet. "The Place of Social Action in Our Reform Jewish Identity." *Congregation Beth Am Sermon Archives*. 27 July 2008. Web. 5 Nov. 2011. <<http://www.betham.org/sermon/place-social-action-our-reform-jewish-identity>>.

⁹¹ In August 1999, Rabbi Janet Marder became Senior Rabbi of Congregation Beth Am. She has been involved in many projects for the Reform Movement.

Source: "Meet Our Team." *Congregation Beth Am*. Web. 11 Mar. 2012. <<http://www.betham.org/about/meet-our-team>>.

olam, the Jewish mandate to repair the world. On Shabbat afternoon we explored many dimensions of the Jewish quest for justice.

And this is Sunday morning, the time when we prepare to leave our shared sacred space and re-enter the world. Before driving off in our Priuses and Volvos we pause on the threshold to reflect together on how we live our lives “out there.”

Here’s my question for today: what role does “social action” play in our identity as Reform Jews?

I’ll start by citing a couple of bumper stickers I’ve recently spotted on some of the vehicles in our very own parking lot. Here’s one, bearing the words of Thomas Paine: “My country is the world, and my religion is to do good” [from *Rights of Man*]. Here’s another one, this time quoting the Dalai Lama: “My religion is very simple. My religion is kindness.”

Different they certainly are: this 18th century American Deist who had nothing but contempt for the Bible, this 21st century Tibetan, devout practitioner of Buddhism. But both of their sayings express the same reductionist impulse: the desire to cut away all the superfluous apparatus of churches and rituals and complicated doctrines in order to get to the core spiritual teaching, the universal message at the heart of all religions: Do good. Be kind. That’s really what life is all about, say the bumper stickers: that simple truth, those basic lessons that we learned back in kindergarten, as Unitarian minister Robert Fulghum reminded us all:

“Share everything. Play fair. Don’t hit people. Put things back where you found them. Clean up your own mess. Don’t take things that aren’t yours. Say you’re sorry when you hurt somebody....Take a nap every afternoon. When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.” And so on, and so forth.

One Jewish example of this reductionist impulse is the famous saying of Rabbi Akiba in the Talmud: “*V’ahavta l’reicha kamocha* -- Love your neighbor as yourself -- *zeh k’lal gadol batorah*: this is the great principle of the Torah” [*Sifra Kedoshim* iv Palestinian *Talmud*, *Nedarim* 9:4].

The prophet Micah made his own attempt: “[God] has told you, O man, what is good, and what Adonai requires of you: Only to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk modestly with your God” [6:8].

A well-known passage in the Talmud [*Makkot* 23b-24a] describes well this effort to fit all of Judaism onto a bumper sticker. Rabbi Simlai, says the Talmud, taught that 613 mitzvot were given in the Torah – 365 negative and 248 positive commandments. The prophet Micah came and boiled these 613 down to just 3 – practice justice, kindness and humility. Then the prophet Isaiah cut them down further to 2, saying: “*Shimru mishpat va’asutzedaka*: Observe what is right and do what is just” [56:1]. And finally, along came the prophet Habakkuk, who reduced

all of Judaism to one single principle: “The righteous shall live by their faith” [2:4].

This effort to distill Judaism down to its essence got its start in the Bible and Talmud, but it became the very hallmark of Reform Judaism. The Reform movement, you see, was based on the idea that there exists an eternal truth at the heart of Judaism, like a pearl at the heart of an oyster.⁹² Unfortunately, the theory goes, over the years our Jewish pearl has become encrusted with all sorts of muck that detracts from its pure and simple beauty. Centuries have passed; Jewish laws, customs and superstitions had proliferated, forming a vast and untidy mess -- but the radiant pearl remains intact within, if only we can search it out.

The earliest Reformers, living in Germany in the first decades of the 19th century, repeatedly focused on the need to extract this Jewish pearl, clean it off, get rid of the muck, and polish it up for the world to see. The metaphor they often used was separating “the wheat from the chaff” or “the kernel from the shell.” Endlessly they debated how one distinguishes wheat from chaff or kernel from shell: what were the essential, eternal Jewish truths, those that hold spiritual meaning for all time; and what were the empty, meaningless husks that could and should be cast away.

You will not be surprised, I think, to hear the answer our Reform forebears reached, The “husk,” the “shell,” the “chaff” worthy of being discarded, said the Reformers, were all Jewish teachings that they deemed irrational, irrelevant or immoral – including most of Jewish law and the Talmud -- as well as those distinctive Jewish rituals that set us apart from others – loosely known as the “ceremonial laws”: practices such as wearing tallis and tefillin and kippah, keeping kosher, going to the mikvah or building a Sukkah.

These practices, perhaps once meaningful in ancient times when the Jewish nation dwelt in the land of Israel, have lost all power to elevate and inspire us today. Observing them, in fact, obstructs our spiritual growth. Hence the leaders of Reform actively discouraged or even forbade such behaviors in their synagogues.

And what was the pearl to be cherished and preserved? The essence of our religion, Reform leaders taught, was a cluster of basic, universal moral principles – universal in the sense that they apply to all people, everywhere and always, and are embedded in each of us as the voice of conscience. Only these “moral laws,” they said, are binding on Jews today.

This, at any rate, was the position arrived at by the most radical branch of Reform Judaism – the one that eventually prevailed in America, to be crystallized in the “Pittsburgh Platform” of 1885 and embodied, later, in the name “Classical Reform.”

⁹² These ever relevant “pearls” of wisdom are the words of our prophets, guiding us today as they have guided Jews through centuries of difficult ethical territory.

Which brings us to the heart of our discussion for today. For over the years, as the Reform movement continued to evolve in America, its leaders came to focus more and more on a particular *aspect* of the moral laws: the duty to create a better, more just society. Nowadays we call this “social action.” Back then they called it “Prophetic Judaism.”

Abraham Geiger, who led the Reform movement in 19th century Germany, seems to have been the first to identify Reform with the teachings of the biblical prophets. For Geiger, the prophets marked the high point in the development of biblical religion. They transcended narrow tribalism and primitive superstition, expressing the timeless ideals and the highest truths of Judaism. The prophets spoke up for justice -- defending the downtrodden, denouncing those who oppressed them, as in the words of Isaiah:

“God will bring a charge
against the elders and officers of the people:
It is you who have ravaged the vineyard
The spoil of the poor is in your houses.
How dare you crush My people
And grind the faces of the poor?” [Is.3:14-15].

The prophets spoke up fearlessly to the rich and powerful, calling them to account before God. Nathan reprimanded King David for his adultery and murder. Elijah charged King Ahab and Queen Jezebel with murder and theft. Micah used graphic, even violent imagery to indict the ruling class:

“Listen, you rulers of Jacob,
You chiefs of the house of Israel ,
You, who ought to know what is just,
Who hate the good and love evil,
Who tear the skin off [the people]
And the flesh from their bones
Who eat the flesh of My people,
Flay the skin off them
And break their bones....[Micah3:1-3]

He attacked wealthy women for selfishly exploiting the vulnerable, seeking pleasure at others’ expense:

“Hear this word, you cows of Bashan
On the hills of Samaria –
Who defraud the poor,
Who rob the needy;
Who say to your husbands,
‘Bring, and let’s carouse!’ “ [Micah 4:1].

The prophets held forth a vision of humanity united as one, as in the words of Isaiah:

"In the days to come,
the Mount of God's house
shall stand firm above the mountains
And tower above the hills;
And all the nations
shall gaze upon it with joy.
And many peoples shall go and say,
'Come, let us go up to the Mount of the Lord,
To the House of the God of Jacob:
That God may instruct us in His ways
And that we may walk in God's paths.'

Ki mitziyon teitzei Torah

For instruction shall come forth from Zion
The word of Adonai from Jerusalem ."
....And they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation;
neither shall they learn war any more.
O House of Jacob, come – let us walk by the light of the Lord. [Is.2:2-5]

The prophets set forth the ideal of universal peace, a return to the harmony of Eden :

"The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
the leopard lie down with the kid...[Is.11:6]

"They shall sit every one under his vine and under his fig tree,
and none shall make them afraid" [Micah 4:4].

Most important, for Geiger and other architects of Reform, was that the prophets seemed to express the Reformers' own disdain for the ceremonies and rituals of Judaism, emphasizing universal ethics instead. Listen to the words of Amos as he brings to the people the message of their God:

"I loathe, I spurn your festivals,
I am not appeased by your solemn assemblies.
If you offer Me burnt offerings – or your meal offerings –
I will not accept them;
I will pay no heed
To your gifts of fatlings.
Spare me the sound of Your hymns,
And let me not hear the music of your lutes.
But let justice well up like water,
Righteousness like an unfailing stream" [Amos 5:21-25].

The prophets, it seemed, spoke for a God who cared nothing for the trappings of organized religion – a God who valued only moral behavior and the pursuit of social justice. In the words of Isaiah:

"What need have I of all your sacrifices?"

Says Adonai.
“I have no delight
 in lambs and he-goats.
 That you come to appear before Me –
 Who asked that of you?
 Trample My courts no more...
 New moon and Sabbath,
 Proclaiming of solemnities,
 Assemblies with iniquity,
 I cannot abide.
 Your new moons and fixed seasons
 Fill Me with loathing;
I cannot endure them.
Though you pray at length,
 I will not listen.
 Your hands are stained with crime –
 Wash yourselves clean;
 Put your evil doings
 Away from My sight.
 Cease to do evil;
 Learn to do good.
 Devote yourselves to justice;
 Aid the wronged.
 Uphold the rights of the orphan;
 Defend the cause of the widow.” [Isaiah 1:11-17]

If these passages sound familiar to us, if some of us have virtually memorized these words, it's because they became a cherished part of Reform liturgy, were quoted in the sermons of countless Reform rabbis, became the proof-texts for generations of rabbinic causes and campaigns in the field of social action.⁹³ Reform rabbis in the years after World War I cited the prophets as they assailed child labor, poor conditions in the slums and forced prostitution (then known as “white slavery”). Prophetic verses were the foundation of their calls for economic justice and a comprehensive program of progressive social legislation, including workmen's compensation, health insurance, pensions, and the right of labor to organize and bargain collectively.

Reform rabbis of the 1950s and 60s quoted the prophets as they immersed themselves in the fight for civil rights and integration. In the following decades prophetic texts buttressed rabbinic stands against the war in Vietnam, as well as rabbinic support for nuclear disarmament, the war on poverty, and the environmental movement.

⁹³ Rabbi Marder must have known I would write this thesis when she wrote this sermon. These words inspired me to take a deeper look into the evolution of these ubiquitous phrases and truly understand how they have affected the social consciousness of the Reform Movement. They are our mandate and have guided us through our proudest moments as a collective voice for change in the world.

I think it's fair to say that many of us who grew up as Reform Jews in that time came to believe that Judaism *was* the fight for social justice.⁹⁴ Social action was the source of our Jewish identity and our Jewish passion. It was in social action, not synagogue worship, that we found inspiration and meaning. I first became aware that Judaism had something to say to me when I was 16 years old and my rabbi, a passionate activist, railed against racism in fiery sermons, and took a family of Vietnamese boat people into his own home.

Social action was about doing, not believing – it didn't involve us in confusing questions about faith and doubt. Social action brought us together with other Americans who shared our ideals to make a better world for all – it didn't require that we set ourselves apart. The Reform movement devoted significant resources to building a "Religious Action Center" in Washington, D.C. – and in so doing taught us that "religious action" meant feeding the hungry, marching for peace, and lobbying on Capital Hill for a range of progressive causes. The Judaism in which I was raised, the Judaism I received at home from my parents, conveyed a message that was not much different from Tom Paine's bumper sticker. Our religion was about doing good, trying to be a decent person, trying to make a better world. But times have changed in the Reform movement. Our focus and emphasis have steadily shifted over the past 30 years. Our hierarchy of values has been re-arranged.

The most recent platform of Reform Judaism, approved 9 years ago in Pittsburgh, states: "We are obligated to pursue (tzedek), justice and righteousness, and to narrow the gap between the affluent and the poor, to act against discrimination and oppression, to pursue peace, to welcome the stranger, to protect the earth's biodiversity and natural resources, and to redeem those in physical, economic and spiritual bondage. In so doing, we reaffirm social action and social justice as a central prophetic focus of traditional Reform Jewish belief and practice."

But that emphatic statement is surrounded by many paragraphs describing other key principles of Reform Judaism, including devotion to Israel and Jews around the world, faith in God, striving for holiness, study of Torah, Hebrew and the "whole array of *mitzvot*," private and public prayer, and a full range of ritual practices, including keeping the Sabbath and festivals. No one, reading this

⁹⁴ I grew up with Rabbi Martin Freedman, a freedom rider from the 1960s who told stories of his participation in the Civil Rights Movement whenever he could. Social action, emphasis on action, was a large part of my understanding of Reform Judaism as a child. However, Rabbi Freedman spoke of his past action and rarely of current concerns that could be tackled in a similar way. I understood social action as part of nostalgia of Reform Judaism, rather than a present day necessity. The stories of our past certainly help inform our future, but they must also be infused into our present, ever pushing toward renewing and recreating the past actions that brought us close to God.

platform, could come away thinking that our religion is simply about doing good, or that social action is the heart and soul of our Judaism.⁹⁵

Wrote Eugene Borowitz, Professor at the Hebrew Union College in New York : "Ethics may be our highest priority, but the ethical is not all one needs to do as a Jew. Today if one asks, "Rabbi, if I do the right thing but don't come to synagogue, I'm a good Jew, isn't that so?" my answer must be, "No." Ethics are indispensable to Jews, but they do not nearly exhaust Jewish duty. Rather our ethics need to be one part of our whole sense of Jewish responsibility." [Borowitz, *Exploring Jewish Ethics: Papers on Covenant Responsibility*, p.370].

Some Reform Jews today still insist that social action must stand front and center, the defining essence of our Jewish life; and that ethics, not rituals, should constitute our Jewish practice. But according to the official statements of Reform Judaism, being a good person is not the same as being a good Jew. Rather, social action and ethics are significant elements in a balanced structure integrating worship, study, and the practice of righteous deeds.

Almost three thousand years ago the leaders of ancient Israel carried on a similar debate. To explore this, let's look at the tension between prophets and priests that occurred in the 8th century B.C.E.

The prophets' attitude toward ritual – i.e. the sacrificial offerings brought to the Temple in Jerusalem– is a complicated subject. Many scholars today believe that the prophets did not actually denounce ritual or call for the abolition of Temple sacrifices. They merely castigated *hypocrisy* – insisting that the performance of religious rites as an empty formality, unaccompanied by ethical deeds, was an offense to God. Many of the later prophets – those who lived during the Babylonian exile or the building of the Second Temple , such as Ezekiel, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi – clearly had a deep devotion to the sacrificial rites.

But Israel Knohl, professor of Bible at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, argues that the early prophets Amos and Isaiah did, in fact, speak against the Temple rituals of their time, asserting the primacy of ethics, arguing that God wants moral behavior and social justice, not sacrifice and burnt offerings. These prophets were strident social critics, decrying the abuses of their time. They also made a direct attack on the priesthood and the worship cult they supervised in Jerusalem. Professor Knohl argues that a circle of priests, stung by

⁹⁵ It is often easy to try to distill Judaism down to the parts we resonate with the most. Rabbi Marder challenges us to remember the depth and breadth of Judaism and our obligation to embrace and struggle with it all. We may find ourselves drawn to spirituality or social action or ritual more than Hebrew or Shabbat or formal study, but she urges us to see the whole picture and how it is all intertwined rather than only that which makes us the most comfortable or satisfied.

this prophetic critique, responded by creating a new body of literature in the Torah. We know it today as the Holiness Code.

The Holiness code comprises the last half of the book of Leviticus, beginning with chapter 17. It is the priestly answer to the prophetic critique. The most famous passage in the Holiness Code begins with a stirring call to the whole Israelite nation: “*Kedoshim tihiyu...* You shall be holy, for I, Adonai your God, am holy” [Lev.19:2].

What follows is a revolutionary attempt to re-define the meaning of holiness. Earlier priestly texts had taught that holiness was achieved only through cultic rituals of purity and sacrifice. The first half of the book of Leviticus describes these laws and rituals at length, in copious detail. We also find such ritual laws in the Holiness Code. But the Holiness Code presents something new. Alongside the ritual laws about the tabernacle, burnt offerings, keeping the Sabbath, and so forth, are a myriad of ethical laws – laws about honesty in business, caring for the poor and the vulnerable, honoring parents, working for justice, loving your neighbor as yourself. The two types of laws are seamlessly interwoven – as if, in fact, they are one and the same divine law.

The Holiness Code, in other words, presents an integrated picture of a holy life: it is a life that includes both ritual and ethical demands. The priestly authors created a new vision of what it means to be a Jew, insisting that God gives us moral and ceremonial duties, and that both, together, make possible a holy community. By following these practices, all Israelites may attain the holiness of the priesthood.

In a similar passage, Psalm 15 asks, “Lord, who may sojourn in Your tent? Who may dwell on Your holy mountain?” The old priestly answer, the one given in the first half of Leviticus, would have been: only the man in a state of ritual purity can enter the Temple, God’s holy place. Only a man who has dunked in the mikvah and avoided contact with any impure thing can come into the Temple.

But Psalm 15, instead, gives a radically new answer, learned from the teachings of the prophets: Who may stand in God’s holy place? “One who lives without blame, who does what is right, and in his heart acknowledges the truth; whose tongue is not given to evil, who has never done harm to his fellow....who stands by his oath even to his hurt; who has never lent money at interest or accepted a bribe against the innocent.”

Here, too, the Levites, the priestly tribe of Israel, declare their loyalty both to the Temple, God’s holy place, with all the religious rituals performed there, and to the prophetic teachings of morality and social justice. They envision both as essential to a full Jewish life.

This unified, holistic vision is expressed later by the Sages of the Talmud, in a famous passage from tractate Shabbat [127a] that has been incorporated into the morning liturgy:

“There are six things, the fruit of which man eats in this world, while the principal remains for him in the world to come. They are: hospitality to wayfarers, visiting the sick, meditation in prayer, early attendance at the Beth Hamidrash (the study house), rearing one's son to the study of Torah, and judging one's neighbor in the scale of merit...”

Here, as well, ethical and ritual *mitzot* – prayer, study and righteous deeds – are blended seamlessly in a single harmonious whole.

Somehow, it seems, the founders of Reform Judaism got things wrong. In separating the wheat from the chaff, in treasuring the moral law and discarding everything else; in making social action the be-all and end-all of their religion, they did violence to the balanced, comprehensive religion created by our ancestors. To be fair, the same sort of distortion occurred in Orthodoxy, which focused almost exclusively on ritual punctiliousness, ignoring the universalistic moral teachings of the prophets.

Our community is paying the price for such distortions today.

In “The Jew Within,” Steven Cohen and Arnold Eisen’s influential study of what matters to today’s American Jews, the authors asked survey participants, “In your opinion, for a person to be a good Jew, which of the following items are essential, which are desirable, which do not matter, and which are undesirable?” 67% of respondents said that “leading an ethical and moral life” was essential to being a good Jew. 7% said that “studying Jewish texts” was essential -- 54% said text study did not matter. 11% said that contributing to Jewish philanthropies was essential – 40% said it did not matter. 19% percent said that “celebrating the Sabbath in some way” was essential – 38% said it did not matter. 18% said that visiting Israel at some point in one’s life was essential – 38% said it did not matter.

Should those statistics bother us? What is lost when our religion is reduced to universal teachings such as doing good and being kind?⁹⁶ God knows the world could use more goodness and kindness – and isn’t Judaism ultimately about making better people and creating a better world?

It is indeed – of that I am quite sure. But the Judaism created by our ancestors was more than a set of generic moral principles shared by all decent people. It is a particular vision of the world, conveyed in its own vivid and particular language and voice.

The lessons of Judaism are encoded in law, embodied in history, embedded in stories, in song and celebration and symbolic action and food. Judaism inculcates moral and ethical principles through intensive, hands-on, multi-sensory education that touches the head, the heart and the hands.

⁹⁶ This is a very interesting question, one that is brought up increasingly as our culture has become a blur of diversity. How do our Jewish values continue to inform our lives even when they are not easy or part of an accepted American cultural norm?

Its revolutionary social vision – of justice, equality, the dignity of all people – is anchored in religious faith, the belief that all human beings carry the image of the Divine and are therefore of infinite, incalculable value; the conviction that the earth belongs to the Lord and we are merely the stewards of God's wealth. Its notion of responsibility is communal and covenantal, binding all of us in a sacred partnership with God in which we patiently mend what is broken, generation after generation.

The Jewish message of hope is based not in reason – there is nothing rational about hope – but on a stubborn and defiant *faith* that there is meaning in this world and a purpose to our lives.

Take away the rituals and ceremonies from Judaism, strip away the color and the symbols and the taste of memory and imagination....and Judaism itself disappears. You can do justice at the ACLU. You can love kindness in the Unitarian Church; you can protect the earth in the Sierra Club. But only in Judaism can you celebrate Shabbat in all its richness and beauty – with candles and challah and wine, with loved ones holding hands around your table; with songs of joy and prayers of peace and words of Torah – the whole intricate tapestry conveying a myriad of lessons – about family and community and learning, about harmony with others and oneself, about creation and recreation, the dignity of all persons, contentment, reflection, humility, humanity, and on and on and on.

Could you learn the ethical lessons of Shabbat without the rituals of Shabbat? Could you learn to fight for freedom without the Passover Seder, or learn to light candles in the darkness without the Hanukah menorah? Could you empathize with the hungry without fasting on Yom Kippur, ponder the fragility of life without sitting in a sukkah, or learn to restrain your appetites without the dietary laws? Could you learn gratitude and humility without prayer, or reverence without putting on a tallis?

I don't think so – not in the same way. You couldn't internalize these lessons so that they become part of the deep structure of your being, embedded in your sensual memory, attached to your most powerful emotions.

Half a century ago the American Jewish writer Will Herberg wrote about the difficulty of creating a culture that transmits ethical and moral values, once you separate those values from the religions out of which they grew. These are his words:

"The moral principles of Western civilization are, in fact, all derived from the tradition rooted in Scripture and have vital meaning only in the context of that tradition. The attempt made in recent decades by secularist thinkers to disengage these values from their religious context, in the assurance that they could live a life of their own, as a 'humanistic' ethic, has resulted in what one writer has called our 'cut-flower' culture.

"Cut flowers retain their original beauty and fragrance, but only so long as they retain the vitality that they have drawn from their now severed roots; after that is

exhausted, they wither and die. So [it is] with freedom, brotherhood, justice, and personal dignity – the values that form the foundation of our civilization. Without the life-giving power of the faith out of which they have sprung, they possess neither meaning nor vitality. Morality ungrounded in God is indeed a house built upon sand, unable to stand up against the vagaries of impulse and the brutal pressures of power and self-interest” [*Judaism and Modern Man*, pp.91-2].

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the British Empire, puts it another way, arguing that we need both social action and religious ceremonies to maintain our vitality – the two reinforce one another in an ongoing dynamic. Study, worship and ritual practice refresh us, giving us strength to persist in the challenging work of *tzedek*. He writes: “Our prayers, texts and rituals hold before us a vision of how the world might be. Our work, service to the community and social life take us into the world as it is, where we make a difference by mending some of its imperfections, righting wrongs, curing ills, healing wounds. The juxtaposition of the two creates moral energy, and when they are disconnected, the energy fails. The holy is where we enter the ideal; the good is how we make it real.” [*To Heal a Fractured World*, p.173].

The holy is where we enter the ideal, the good is how we make it real. And so we return to the threshold, the doorstep, where we prepare to leave our shared space of Torah, prayer and sacred community and re-enter the challenging world out there. It is the *mezuzah* that takes us across the threshold. Not just the sacred teachings it contains but the container itself – a tangible object we can look at, touch and kiss, teaching ourselves with eyes and fingers and lips the lessons that form our identity as a Jew.

This is my Jewish home, says the *mezuzah*. Within this place we act in a certain way – eating in a holy manner, honoring our holy days; welcoming guests, speaking words of Torah, listening with sensitivity, cherishing those we love. This is how a Jew goes out into the world, says the *mezuzah*: faithful to our heritage, performing honest and honorable deeds, standing up for those who have no advocate, sharing the fruits of our labor, refusing to stand by, indifferent, while a neighbor bleeds, seeking peace and pursuing justice. The ritual and the ethical, the good and the holy, the real and the ideal – together we weave them into Jewish lives of significance. Our religion is not simple: it is beautiful and deep, multifaceted, full of meaning, infinitely rich.⁹⁷

That is why, when the great Rabbi Hillel was asked by a pagan to summarize all of Judaism while standing on one foot, he gave an answer that went beyond a bumper sticker. In language concise and elegant, Rabbi Hillel opened a door to

⁹⁷ Rabbi Marder beautifully presents the challenge of living a Jewish life; it is not easy. It is demanding and at times difficult and sometimes challenges us to defy cultural norms. But the possibility of creating meaning out of a chaotic existence, the possibility of creating connection to something beyond ourselves is worth the struggle.

the stranger, offered a glimpse of the riches within, then invited him to come all the way inside. Hillel said: This is the essence of Judaism. "What is hateful to you, do not do to others. All the rest is commentary -- now go and study" (Babylonian *Talmud*, *Shabbat* 31a).

Rosh Hashanah 5772⁹⁸

Rabbi Elyse Frishman⁹⁹

The Nathan Barnert Memorial Temple, Franklin Lakes, NJ
2011

Rabbi Elyse Frishman of the Barnert Temple in Franklin Lakes, NJ delivered this sermon on the morning of Rosh Hashanah in 2011. Unlike the previous sermons, I was in the congregation for this sermon. Rabbi Frishman uses the ethical voice of the prophets to remind her congregants of the importance of maintaining an individual sense of ethical character and decision-making.

In a few minutes, we're entering into the prayer Unetaneh Tokef, which in so many ways marks the passage of time: *Who shall live and who shall die?* (pause) Four centuries ago, Shakespeare gave Hamlet the words that defined the human condition: *to be or not be, that is the question*. This morning, we ask the Jewish question: *to be or to become*.

To be or to become: (slowly) *how are we doing?* Rosh Hashanah celebrates God's creation of the universe, of Life – and we are God's partners. Whether we choose to or not, each of us, each Jew, represents *our people*. When one of us does well, our people celebrates. When one of us doesn't, we all bear the shame. This is family.

And over the years, we've lost that personal obligation to our Jewish family. What I want to talk about with you this morning might surprise you. We need to consider our growing *idolatry*.

Jewish idolatry is the worship of anything other than God. "worship" includes more than prayer. In Hebrew, "worship" is *avodah*, which includes *work* and *service*. Our actions determine idolatry – because to worship the Jewish God is to prioritize mercy and justice, and live in a way that demonstrates the ethics of our covenant. Does being an atheist make you an idolator? Or an agnostic? Maybe – maybe not. It has less to do with what we believe than what we do. I'm not speaking with you about *faith*; rather, our turning away from righteousness.¹⁰⁰

Our lives feel more complicated than ever. Our weak and debilitating economy diminishes our sense of worth. Social networking and technology fill each moment with the expectation that we're always available. Humans have never had to constantly multi-task or be so public. Add to this the normal pressures of

⁹⁸ Reprinted with permission by the author, Rabbi Elyse Frishman.

⁹⁹ Rabbi Elyse Frishman became the spiritual leader of Barnert Temple in 1995. She is also the editor of *Mishkan T'filah*, the new Reform Movement prayer book.

¹⁰⁰ This is an interesting comment because Rabbi Frishman is attempting to separate a personal understanding of God and the way in which the world works from action and deed. The question of the sermon is not about belief but rather a personal accounting of actions and behavior.

life: personal health, juggling carpools and sports schedules, preparing children for college, loss of loved ones, and trying to find time to unwind... But none of this is an excuse for *self-righteous* behavior. None of this gives permission for us to neglect others who are needy. There is no good reason not to live Jewishly, every day, under every circumstance.

(Pause – perhaps hold up photo)

Several years ago, Danny and I joined a NFTY group in Theresenstadt – in fact, three of our young people were on this trip headed to Israel – Matt Kagan, Megan Hess, Laura Galinko... We were in Prague and Terezin to better appreciate the Jewry that had survived the Holocaust and made their way to our homeland. 150,000 Jewish men, women, and children had been held in that showcase concentration camp.

There, the remnants of a secret synagogue had been discovered in a small ground floor storage room. The space was tiny – 15' by 15'. Amazingly, the synagogue was hidden in the wall adjacent to the bakery where bread was made daily for Nazi guards.

From floor to ceiling, the walls were covered with decorative red stripes and stars of David, Biblical verses and prayers. They expressed extraordinary hope: "Despite all that has happened, we will not forget..." One prayer begged God to return from his anger. Another, "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem." On a third wall was the verse in this photograph, *Da lifnei mi atah omeid*, Know before whom you stand."

"Da lifnei mi atah omeid. Know before whom you stand." A profound declaration -- to the Nazis? Or a reminder of Jewish sacred worth despite persecution? These humble words give strength to a people whose persecutors sought to humiliate them.

Know before whom you stand. I ask us today on this sacred High Day: Before whom do we stand? Before whom do we bend our heads with a sense of humility? Before whom do we close our eyes and reflect: what is Your purpose for me? How am I doing today?

SHOW: framed ASHES piece. (Tell story of Temple, western wall, tunnels and ashes).

The Romans are gone, as is every other major civilization that has surrounded our people from the time of our birth. We remain. But it is only because we have kept Jewish wisdom alive through our actions. Its teaching, that we are part of something greater than ourselves, that humility and service are to shape our contributions, has not only merited our existence, it has granted our critically important place in humanity. We've taken pride in the tremendous accomplishments and offerings of our people over the centuries. It's *not* genetic – our achievements are the result of a profound, centuries long, ongoing commitment to education, to questioning, and to ethical action, all grounded in

Jewish tradition. Our rituals, our holidays, our study, our community gatherings all reinforce the ethic of righteous living. This is who we are. This is why we exist.

But are we forsaking this grand tradition? *We say* we are not: we talk about how important it is that our children be good people and give back. But over the years, here are the changes I am observing: our wonderful young people are often rude and self-centered. Their needs – and perhaps, our own needs – seem to come before anyone else. A sense of entitlement hovers.

Even our politics have shifted: Jews could always be counted on to stand up for the invisible, the ones unable to speak for themselves. We do this less, now. We have become more concerned about our own pockets than those of the needy. Why? One answer is the idolatry of materialism – the lure of luxury and, well, fun. The entertainment industry in the United States is exploding in success and wealth. But if this change is good, with all our luxury and fun, why aren't we happy? What's missing from our lives?

Real meaning. We complain about pressure, but we continue to make choices that increase that pressure.

Before modernity, Jews lived in communities that automatically reinforced Jewish values.¹⁰¹ No longer. The blessing of a fully open society does not guarantee ethical behavior or social action.

I could share with you snippets of conversations from this year alone – about dress codes for our sanctuary, about elaborate, self-promoting mitzvah projects, about community service for the sake of school credit, about chewing gum on the pews...

But instead: let me share a key question from a parent last week: "Will my children grow up to be polite and good people?" Why would this parent ask? Because: this parent realizes that very little in the larger world models decency, *derech eretz*. Pick a TV show. Every reality show is about personal fame and fortune. Or about despicable behavior, which we, in some bizarre twist, imitate. There is nothing attractive or appropriate about young girls attending a BM in skin-tight, brief clothing. But values must be *demonstrated, experienced* in order to be absorbed. What do we do? Talk on cell phones when our kids need our attention. Have conversations that they should not overhear but do. Argue at our spouses in front of our children. Use language that's only demonstrates our lack of control.

We are in need of re-direction and re-training ourselves. And the only way I know to do that is to surround ourselves with people who want to change similarly. We need people around us who also try to live in a righteous way. We

¹⁰¹ When Jews lived communally, it was much easier to enforce certain practice, both ritual and moral. There was a certain forgone obligation that was built into the communal norms. After Emancipation and the Enlightenment, Jews were allowed to integrate into larger society and communal and social norms became that of the country in which Jews lived rather than strictly Jewish values.

can't just talk it. We need sacred community. And we need a sacred space to stand as a wall against the enemy of idolatry. We're *the Jewish people*. What does that *mean* to us? *Da lifnei mi atah omeid* –before whom do we stand?

There's a Jewish young singles group called *Jersey Tribe*. The name got my attention– “tribe.” I like that. After all, it stems from our ancestors: Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel and Leah, from whom came Reuben, Simon and Levi, Issachar, Gad, Asher, Naphtali and Zebulun, Dan, Judah, Joseph and Benjamin.

Back in the days of Genesis, 70 of them left famine-stripped Canaan for the pastures of Egypt. Enslaved a generation later, four hundred years passed, and we grew into millions. When we left Egypt and wandered for forty years, Moses organized us by tribe so that we wouldn't fight. When we entered the Promised Land, each tribe was assigned its own territory.

We were a people, yes -- bound by God, and by Torah. But socially we were twelve tribes, not one. If our daughter wed into another tribe, she lost property rights. We warred between ourselves until David united us. He drew us together as allies against shared enemies. He decreed a central capital in Jerusalem and brought the Ark of God to rest there. And he governed with honesty and with God's word. He was deeply spiritual, writing the Psalms.

David's son, Solomon was appointed *by God*, who promised, “Serve only Me, and you will be granted the greatest wisdom ever to grace a king. You will rule with honesty, justice and mercy, and your kingdom will be more blessed more than any before.”

That blessing brought the Israelites unity, prosperity and peace. Because: to worship God meant to uphold mercy and justice.

But when Solomon died, his sons worshipped other gods – they neglected mercy and justice, and they brought ruin. In successive generations, the Israelites fought against one another, split into two kingdoms, and were conquered by the Babylonians. The Temple was destroyed and we were exiled to a foreign land. *We lost our balance and completely fell apart. Even though we had the tools, we had put them aside. So though we called ourselves Jews – and so did everyone else, there was little that was Jewish about us.*

The prophets declared exile to be God's punishment for treachery. If only we returned to God, we'd regain everything: our home, our identity our balance. All God sought was our *ethical* attention. Act justly. Love mercy. Walk humbly.¹⁰² *Teshuvah*, turn around. So we did. And it worked– we became Israelites again, people of the book, people of God. *To be a Jew once again meant to live according to Torah, to God's ethical teachings.*

¹⁰² The use of the Micah 6:8 verse here becomes a refrain. We have heard these words before, they are familiar but this sermon is about reminding us of our path, even if we have strayed.

But idolatry haunted us – alternatively we were distracted by neighboring gods or seduced by the promises of foreign riches. The great prophet Elijah was almost murdered by the Queen Jezebel who assassinated 100 other prophets. Hiding in a cave in the Carmel mountains, Elijah beheld God's Presence. And God assured him – "Don't look for Me in the mighty wind, the earthquake or the fire, but find Me in the still, small voice."

This was a new perception of God – not the mighty God of Torah, at times jealous or angry. Not the God of a sweeping redemption at the Sea of Reeds. Nor the God of Kings who ruled. This was the God of the *conscience*.¹⁰³ The One who spoke softly, as if to say, "Don't look beyond; no need to seek me in the vastness of all. Listen for me in the quietest of places – within your soul, in the hush of a moment. Know Me from the purity of the promise..."

Like a child who grows into adulthood and independence, so God spoke through Elijah: you are My voice, you are My hands. You are my deeds. Live accordingly.

Jewish history is based on the theology that ethical behavior determines our survival. Whether it's good theology or not is one question. Whether it's good *practice* or not – it is.

The Second Temple was destroyed, and our people spread over the Middle East. We took Torah with us, and the rabbis became the new leaders. They realized that no single human is capable of making clear ethical choices daily. We need reminders, and we need community. The Rabbinic contribution to Judaism was of a community defined by ethical and ritual regulation. Idolatry was any practice that diverted you from this.

Empires rose and fell. When persecution subsided, we flourished, deepening the culture of our hosts even as we were influenced by them. Music, literature, science, art, mathematics, philosophy and ethics – all bear the genius imprint of Jews throughout the ages. And in late 19th and 20th century Germany, we thought we had truly arrived. Modernity opened doors to integration and fellowship like never before.

And here we are. Post-Holocaust. Survivors. But living in a very uncertain time – for Israel, for the United States, for the Jewish people.

Da lifnei mi atah omeid.

A Cherokee is telling his grandson about a fight that is going on inside himself. He said, "The fight is between 2 wolves. One is evil: Anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority and ego. The other is good: Joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith." The

¹⁰³ This beautiful interpretation of a prophetic God demonstrates the evolution not only of human beings but also of our conception and needs of God at different points in history. What type of God are we in need of now?

grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, “Which wolf wins?”

To be or to become. To be – or to be Jews. To be – a light to the nations. Return to the prophetic vision of Isaiah, Micah and Elijah: wherever we live, be servants of God. Act justly. Love mercy. Walk humbly. Listen to the still, small voice. Idolatry: We hold *things* too dear. We worship personal comfort and success. We are *not* servants of God. We pit Jew against Jew. We do not act justly enough, or love mercy or walk humbly. We do not listen to the still, small voice. Our own voices are too loud.

The settlers on the West Bank are so blinded by the principle of a Jewish homeland that they threaten to assassinate other Jews who seek peace. They bomb mosques. They murder children. They think they do this in the cause of Judaism. Idolatry.

There is nothing more complicated than the Middle East today. Most political situations have a few factors that determine their outcome. The Middle East chess game is 4-dimensional because it includes the pawn of time – past and future. The Arab Spring continues in Yemen and Syria, and likely in Saudi Arabia. Israel’s alliance with Egypt is shaky at best, and Jordan will face its own internal tensions with its Palestinian constituents. Turkey’s role is critical; Iran builds a bomb; Iraq deteriorates; Lebanon is a tool of Hezbollah. And only because of the Jews could Shiites and Sunnis unite in Lebanon and Gaza to eradicate Israel. The world talks of a Palestinian State while Palestinians themselves can’t agree on terms. Israelis say they want peace and then build provocative, new settlements. Principles are shaped by entitlement and fear. NO justice. No humility. No mercy. Idolatry. Not service to God. Idolatry.

And in our nation? The partisan feeding frenzy begun during the last administration goes wild. No one speaks civilly or thoughtfully. Intelligent candidates speak selfishly and dangerously – Witness one candidate’s irresponsible and dangerous remarks about the HPV vaccine. Issues that are reduced to ridiculously radicalized ideas deflect from what really needs to be discussed. No one listens to the still, small voice. Idolatry.

And at Barnert? I truly think that those who are active participants here have a better chance at managing American idolatry. We influence one another. We hold our vision and mission statement before us at every committee meeting. None of us are better people, *per se*. But we do hold each other to a standard that pushes us to challenge our choices.

And the same is true for our young people who continue here beyond their Bar/t Mitzvah. What they gain by being engaged in teen classes, as teachers’ assistants and in our youth program is a peer group that accepts them without judgment. They share openly about the issues in their lives. In addition to their parents, they have gained at least one other close adult in their lives who offers unconditional support. So when they have tough choices to make: Put a pet to sleep? Drink or not? Break up a relationship? How to help keep a friend from

cutting herself or taking his own life? They frame their ethics through a Jewish lens. They feel safe. And they are leaders, each and every one of them, because they will live by Jewish values. They are our light to the future.¹⁰⁴

We need this sacred community to combat idolatry. Because each of us is influenced by the spiritual and ethical aspirations of those around us. Are we successful? Sometimes. We're still deceptive with ourselves and don't always follow up on what we talk about here. But we're trying. And I'm willing to say with a certainty that those people who have been engaged seriously for several years have grown. I know that I have. *To be – or to become.*

Our prophets taught us: wherever we live – in the Promised Land, or in some other empire or nation, we are to be a light to the nations. To uphold God's expectation of the human as steward of the planet, a creature shaped with free will, and guided to make ethical choices. *To serve.* Idolatry is turning our attention away from one another.

The opposite of humility is arrogance. Arrogance is born from a sense of personal importance and worth. It impacts our politics, our charity, our raising of children. True service is meant to help us regain our balance. True humility includes strong self-esteem, but in a context of community. I know what my place and purpose is, and have the confidence to do for others as I am able. And we need time to assess ourselves regularly. *Shabbat.* Through rest, we honor ourselves, and we honor God's creation. We gain perspective. By saying *no* to the work that will otherwise never end, we protect our souls.

And the nature of that rest matters. Sacred rest is reflected in the quality of our conversations: think about how differently we participate in prayer, Torah and the *oneg Shabbat* than at a bar or restaurant with drink, gossip and politics. Both are stimulating; only one renews the soul. The rituals of Shabbat celebrate family, nature and wisdom. LIFE.

Consider this poem by Wendell Berry: (The Peace of Wild Things, 1985)

“When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and I am free.”

¹⁰⁴ Here, Rabbi Frishman alludes to the Isaiah 49:6 verse but reinterprets it to speak to the importance of imbuing future generations with a sense of values and ethics so they will help create a better future.

There's a story about a kingdom where whenever the king passed away, the new king would be selected by a certain bird. That bird would fly around and around above the heads of all the people until it settled on one person. Whomever the bird landed upon would be the new king – no exceptions.

So the king died, and the bird was sent to fly. After some time, it came to settle on the shoulder of one man – a very poor man dressed in rags, without a penny to his name. None could protest – the law was that he was intended to be king. He was hustled to the palace, bathed and dressed in fine clothing, and crowned king.

He ruled for many years, and he was wise, fair, just and merciful. In fact, he was an amazing king. Everyone loved and appreciated him. But each year on the anniversary of his coronation, he disappeared. For 24 hours, no one could find him. One year, his closest advisor couldn't bear not knowing, and hid under the king's bed before he came in the night before the anniversary. Early the next morning, he tracked the king as he made his way secretly through a tunnel to a hidden chamber. The king went inside and remained there for hours. Finally, the advisor could wait no longer and burst in upon the king – and found him sitting on the floor, dressed in the rags he had first worn.

"Your Majesty! Why are you here, dressed like this! Today is your anniversary, a day for great celebration!"

The king replied, "I dress like this in order to remember never to forget from whence I came. Never to forget any person in our kingdom. Always to remember whom I serve."

What a gift we have to live as *American Jews*.

(Pause) Idolatrous behavior? Impatience and carelessness; squandering our ability to make serious change by acting impulsively. Having access to fuller information and knowledge, yet choosing to act on sound bytes. Not taking the time to learn about the larger picture, but acting rapidly because it fills a personal need to feel good. Not giving more of our time because we're too comfortable. Prioritizing, through our actions, secular values over Jewish values.

On this Rosh Hashanah, we celebrate Life *and* Judaism. We pray with ancient words and sing heartfelt melodies to stir us to remember so that *we won't forget*: What is our purpose? Why are we here? How are we doing? We are the Jews, chosen to serve God, to be an ethical light to the nations,¹⁰⁵ in our politics, in our business, in our schools, our homes, our cars, through social networking and our purchases and our conversations... We remember so that our priorities remain straight. We see ourselves in context. Life is difficult – it always has been and will always be. But there is so much for which we are grateful. Each moment has its blessing.

¹⁰⁵ Rabbi Frishman reminds us of Isaiah 49:6, our communal obligation to be an exemplar to the nations of the world.

From the great 20th century British leader of liberal Judaism, Lily Montagu:
"You and I are not spiritual giants, as was Isaiah . . . but I venture to suggest to you that we can each in our small way feel the contact with God and God's cleaning power operating over our human weaknesses and clearing them away. "We must each enter into our Holy of Holies and there in quietness and in faith work out our relation to the community and indeed to all of humanity."
--("Here Am I: Send Me" 1944, in Umansky's *Lily Montagu*, 128-129).

Today we begin. In this holy sanctuary. And with this prayer: *who will live and who will die, who by fire and who by water?* Who will merely *be* – and who will *become*?

These sermons are mere examples of a great tradition of oration within the Reform Movement. The voice of the prophets rings true in each of these sermons as well as countless others, championing the essence of Reform Judaism, the ethical mandate that urges Reform Jews to confront the evils in the world. Whether further defining the ethical ideology of Reform Judaism for an outside audience, or explaining the prophetic mandate to a new crop of Reform rabbis, or understanding the progression of the ethical mandate in order to determine the next steps, or confronting the evils within, that which prevents each of us from reaching our own potential, these sermons interpret the words of the prophets from a uniquely Reform perspective reflective of their own context.

Whether Micah, Amos, Isaiah, or Jeremiah, the prophets of old confronted Israel with who they were and who they could be. These rabbinic voices through the 20th century have not only spoken these ancient words with new life but also acted in honor of these prophets but continually providing a proverbial mirror for their communities to reflect on the issues of their day and understand their role as partners with God, to act and make change for the better.

“Keeping Posted” – Prophetic Education

As we all know, Judaism is not just a set of beliefs—it is a way of life mapped out by our beliefs. Our belief in the One God is at the same time a call to action. What does God expect of us? Judaism answers: ‘To do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with thy God.’ In Jewish tradition, then, man is a co-worker of God in the creation of His world, responsible to Him for the world’s condition. And among principal religious duties is to put the world in such condition as will meet His demands for justice and peace among men.¹⁰⁶

“Keeping Posted,” 1959

“Keeping Posted” is a UAHC (currently known as URJ) monthly publication for teens that was published and distributed from the mid 20th century until 1989. It was an incredibly important and well-conceived magazine for teens. It provided its readers with scholarly yet age appropriate information on a wealth of topics, including the important role of the prophetic voice in Reform Judaism. Its national distribution provides a good barometer of how the Prophets were being incorporated into Reform Jewish ideology / curriculum in its day. The topics covered in the magazine range from political to spiritual, biblical and rabbinic to modern philosophy and social issues to social action. Each issue followed a different theme, some speaking to the most current issues of the day such as Soviet Jewry in the 1960s and 1970s or the changing political realities of the state of Israel in the latter part of the 20th century. When not focused on current political events, the magazine provided the most contemporary understanding of a number of ethical or moral topics such as keeping kosher or a modern view of the Bible or rabbinic texts. These issues act as an important teaching tool for the youth of the time. They are, so to speak, the blog posts, the twitter feed and the Facebook wall of their era. Its pages were, a space for

¹⁰⁶ Borowitz, Eugene B. ed. *Keeping Posted*. UAHC Press. IV.15 (1959).

dialogue, a call to action, a resource for pertinent and relevant information to Jewish youth across North America. It is informal education written by the most serious, scholarly, well known voice of the Reform Movement, from HUC-JIR professors to highly regarded Jewish authors, Eugene B. Borowitz, Bernard Mehlman, and Al Vorspan, to name a few. “Keeping Posted” spoke to the concerns of teens without talking down to them. It challenged teens to think beyond themselves and contemplate the issues of the day, whether national or international, Jewish or non-Jewish. “Keeping Posted” also spoke to the concerns of teens, issues of person and Jewish identity, what it means to be a good person, and how a teenager can affect change in the world. It was a publication that also reflected the most important values within the Reform Movement connected to the contemporary issues of the day. The voice of the prophets can be found in many issues, not only educating teens about their importance within Reform ideology but also creating a new connection to the prophetic ethical mandate for the next generation.

I will focus on four issues of “Keeping Posted,” which span four decades (1959, 1973 and 1979, 1981). The first three use the prophetic voice within three different contexts and the last is an issue from 1981 whose theme is the prophets.

1959

As historians have documented, the 1950’s were a time of great conformity in the United States. Following World War II, Americans settled back into much needed routine. The social norms of the era that had been stretched beyond their normal limits during wartime, such as women entering the work force or small pockets of racial integration, were nearly forgotten altogether post-

war. The GI Bill, passed in 1944, provided World War II veterans with the opportunity to attend college and purchase homes. As Jewish American veterans took advantage of this bill, the pre-war era of Jewish “ghettoization” in places like the Lower East Side or the Bronx began to change as educated Jews pushed into the middle class. The Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union persisted and early 1959 saw the first spacecraft launched by the USSR and by April, newly created NASA named the “Mercury 7,” the first set of American astronauts; the space race was in full swing. American Jews continued to be concerned about the welfare of Jews behind the Iron Curtain, as news of bans on Jewish practice, ritual and publications reached America. At the same time, Fidel Castro ousted Cuban president, Batista, and began his despotic reign, killing many Batista followers and increasing American fear about the small island so close to American shores.¹⁰⁷

Despite growing international political concerns, the 1950s in America were generally a time of prosperity and growth. The baby boom following World War II continued and the economy was on an upswing. However, the reality of American life for minorities, especially that of the African American population, was growing unbearable. While the 60s would bring greater internal civil unrest, segregation, lynchings and violence against Blacks began to receive attention already by 1959, especially among Jewish groups. The focus of the American Jewish population was split between their own growth, increasing influence and wealth and a continued concern for Jews around the world and the ten-year old state of Israel and the growing societal concerns in America. The

¹⁰⁷ Brinkley, Alan. *The Unfinished Nation: A Concise History of the American People*. Vol. 2. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010.

following “Keeping Posted” issue is part of the fourth volume published. I chose to begin with this issue because it highlights Micah 6:8 and provides a glimpse into the social and cultural milieu of the Reform Movement in the late 50s.

The May 1959 issue of “Keeping Posted” offers a wide selection of topics and is not focused on a single theme. It begins lauding the printing of a Soviet Hebrew prayer book, “the first Hebrew prayer book printed in the Soviet Union since the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917.”¹⁰⁸ The article is hopeful yet cautious as the prayer book contains a prayer for the welfare of the USSR calling it a “defender of peace in the world,”¹⁰⁹ even though the fate of the Jews of the Soviet Union was of great concern.

Following this cover story is a section dedicated to the question, “Who is the Best Jew?” Jews throughout the centuries have asked and answered this question in different ways. How do we measure what being a good Jew is? For previous generations, perhaps a good Jew was someone who adhered strictly to Jewish law as interpreted by the Rabbis. Reform Judaism sought in part, to redefine the answer to this age-old question. The strong ethical messages shouted by the ancient prophets became the mandate of morality for Reform Jews and so the question posed in this issue of “Keeping Posted” reflects these new answers.

We are told that in previous issues, the discussion has been conducted about, “the United Nations, Segregation, Church-State Relations, Jews under Communism, Juvenile Delinquency, Penology, Capital Punishment, Minority Rights, Anti-Semitism, Censorship, Education, Immigration, Israel and Family

¹⁰⁸ Borowitz, Eugene B. ed. *Keeping Posted*. UAHC Press. IV.15 (1959).

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*.

Life.”¹¹⁰ In this issue, the editors wished to examine “*why* Jews should have an opinion on these and so many other problems of our time and society.”¹¹¹

It is a strong message; one of duty but not of halakhic concern, rather an obligation to covenant, a partnership with God and a demand for justice and peace. It is the core of a Reform ethical understanding, guided by the words of the prophet Micah.

The article continues in three sections, “The Jewish Obligation,” “Organized for Action” and “The Role of Youth.” The first section answers a question that continues to plague Jewish social action concerns, “What makes this Jewish?” The answer is somewhat convoluted and refers the reader to the previous articles in this series but concludes that the values of Judaism have influenced the world for centuries and in America, each minority group should be encouraged to contribute their values “to enrich American culture.” Yet each of these sections provides a valuable outline for how Jewish youth can address the concerns of their day. First, the reader is encouraged to see the world through a Jewish lens. The ethical mandate is not simply a suggestion but rather a way of life, a Jewish obligation to the world. Second, the prophets not only spoke of the ills facing society but demanded action as well. The reader is encouraged to act with the knowledge he or she has accumulated. Finally, the reader is empowered, given specific opportunity and suggestions, as the youth of the movement to implement real change. This step-by-step process models in a very concrete way, the responsibility and expectations concerning social action that the Reform Movement had in 1959 of its youth.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

The answer to the question, what makes this Jewish is then, our text and the words of Micah, urging the Israelites to do what God asks of them. These words resonated in 1959 as a connection to a rich tradition of social concern and a guide to Reform Jews toward ethical behavior when faced with the problems in modernity. The early Reformers sought to bring the voice of the prophets to the forefront to provide this ethical basis not a guide of ritual behavior but rather a guide of moral behavior. The problems of each age may differ, but the Jewish reaction must be the same, “do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with thy God.”

The article continues with the Reform organizational response, introducing the newly created Commission on Social Action created “to provide guidance, material and help.”¹¹² Several materials are cited that have already been created on a number of topics such as, religion in public schools, the Arab refugee problem, capital punishment as well as a filmstrip serving as a manual for local social action committees.

The creation of the Commission on Social Action was a powerful step for the Reform Movement because it institutionalized and gave further credibility to the Reform relationship to social action. It was no longer regional or solely synagogue based, social action had become a major concern of a national movement of Judaism. Furthermore, social action was also not relegated to adults, as seen in this issue of “Keeping Posted.” This article is not simply one of education but also a call to action; it is not an accident that the first phrase of the Micah quotation, “*to do justly*” is italicized. The third section, “The Role of Youth” states explicitly, “...the NFTY’s Justice in Action programs are making

¹¹² *Ibid.*

their contribution to setting right some of the world's problems, not only by talking but by *doing*.”¹¹³ It then encourages the readers to decide on important concerns in their neighborhood and begin working on them. Assistance and advice is offered from the NFTY staff.

The article ends with these words,

Social action is Judaism in practice. By giving dynamic vitality to the synagogue, it helps to bridge the gap between prayer and practice, belief and conduct, thus bringing a sense of greater reality to our faith. Participating in it will give you the conviction that the synagogue is as much interested in bettering the future as in preserving its link with the past. It will add immeasurable meaning to the beautiful prayers for democracy, peace and justice in our prayer books.¹¹⁴

The voice of Micah is woven throughout this article both implicitly as well as explicitly and acts as the proof text that Jewish teens should engage in social justice work

1973

The pages of “Keeping Posted” make clear that Reform Judaism pushed a social action agenda targeted to teens, as well as adults, already in the late 50s. This agenda resulted in gestures big and small: UAHC resolutions, the creation of the Commission on Social Justice and then the Religious Action Center, articles in “Reform Judaism Magazine” as well as articles in Keeping Posted. The resolutions and formal declarations were backed by this kind of action in a way that had not happened previously within the Reform Movement.

In early 1973, President Nixon began withdrawing troops from Vietnam, initiating the end of a volatile, bloody war, which took the lives of many young

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Americans. Only a few months later, the disastrous political scandal, Watergate was uncovered and in April, President Nixon resigned. The wake of Watergate left Americans feeling unsure about the future as well as increasingly untrusting of the American government.¹¹⁵

The April 1973 issue of "Keeping Posted" addresses the question, "The good life: What is 'good?'" In a time of particular uncertainty, the magazine poses a question of morality to its teen readers. Rabbi Bernard Mehlman, spiritual leader of Temple Israel in Boston¹¹⁶ at the time addresses the question through the timeless words of the prophets. He acknowledges the timeless nature of the question and reiterates the importance of continuing to ask, what is good, in ever generation, in every age. His article chronicles the Biblical history pertaining to the question and he states, "The prophets of Israel were men shaped by a visionary spirit. They were unwilling to accept the status quo of the religious enterprise and held an unflinching commitment to truth."¹¹⁷ He weaves the voices of the prophets Amos, Hosea and Micah throughout the article, once again providing the teen reader with a series of important proof texts for the importance of the prophetic mandate. He concludes his explication of the prophets saying, "The ingredients of the prophetic program for 'the good life' include acts of justice, kindness, compassion, mercy, honesty and sincerity. They are ingredients for both, individuals and the people."¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Brinkley, Alan. *The Unfinished Nation: A Concise History of the American People*. Vol. 2. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010.

¹¹⁶ Samuel, Edith, ed. *Keeping Posted, The Good Life: What is 'Good'?*. UAHC Press. XVIII.7 (1973).

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

The contemporary concerns of powerful corruption and trustworthiness clearly prompt this teaching about the values shouted by the prophets. The teen reader is encouraged not only to learn the history and the words of these ancient teachers but they are also given tools with which to find relevancy in their own lives in their time. Mehlman acknowledges the struggles of living in the modern world; competing messages of the definition of good and ethical, the emphasis on individualism over core group values but again, the ancient words of the prophets continue guide the ethical character of the Jewish people.

1979

By the late 1970s, President Carter was in the White House and the United States was still battling the Cold War with the Soviet Union. Communism around the world was an ever-present threat and as Ayatollah Khomeini forcefully took over Iran from the Shah in early 1979, anxiety over Middle Eastern despots became an international concern. The large and wealthy population of Jews in Iran was forced to flee, making this event a concern of the world Jewish community as well. American Jews were also embroiled in the plight of Soviet Jewry and pressured the United States government to negotiate with Russia on behalf of the Jewish population.¹¹⁹

The economy was beginning to stabilize after the oil crisis of the early seventies but concerns about the economy and the stability of American life were still present in the minds of many Americans. The 3 Mile Island nuclear accident

¹¹⁹ Brinkley, Alan. *The Unfinished Nation: A Concise History of the American People*. Vol. 2. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010.

in Pennsylvania was another reminder of the internal threat of nuclear power and the dangerous nature of the technology.¹²⁰

In March of 1979, President Sadat of Egypt and President Begin of Israel signed a historic peace treaty, promising much needed stability in the region, especially as concerns over Iran mounted.¹²¹

The September 1979 of “Keeping Posted” featured responses to the question: What is Reform? The cover was a collection of photos, Isaac Meyer Wise, Rabbi Maurice Eisendrath, marching holding a Torah next to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a woman wearing a kipah and tallit and a group of teens, white and black posing together, smiling.



Hirt-Manheimer, Aron, ed. *Keeping Posted, What is Reform?* UAHC Press. XXIV.1 (1979).

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

Al Vorspan, then vice president of the UAHC and Director of the Commission on Social Action wrote an article for this issue, entitled, "Reform and the Prophetic Tradition." To Vorspan, there is an inextricable link between the Prophets and Reform Jews. Above the title of the article are three pictures the caption of which reads, "Young people of the New Jersey Mitzvah Corps spend a summer as volunteers, in New Brunswick, helping the disadvantaged and disabled."¹²²

Vorspan opens his article by crediting the Jews with social action that far surpasses its size:

We Jews represent less than 3 percent of the population of America, yet we constantly play a role out of proportion to our numbers in every great cause for social justice...Many [Jews] feel that the Jewish drive to correct social evil and to advance human rights and social welfare has enriched and helped shape the social conscious of America.¹²³

He continues by voicing the concern that the social action tradition may be waning in intensity and reminds the reader once again of the words of Micah, not by name but by invoking the ubiquitous quote, "do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God."¹²⁴ Vorspan explains that Jew are bound by a covenant to God which is "the charge to seek justice and peace, to be a light unto the nations of the world, a model of righteous behavior, a co-partner with God in building a better world."¹²⁵

He makes a bridge between the vision of the prophetic voice to the reality of the modern world, translating the ancient calls of Micah and Isaiah to the obligation of today's Reform Jews to be involved in the real world, acting out Jewish ideals. He admonishes teen readers that such action does not rest in the

¹²² Vorspan, Albert. *Keeping Posted, What is Reform?* Aron Hirt-Manheimer, ed. UAHC Press. XXIV.1 (1979).

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

hands or mouths of rabbis, but that they, too, are empowered to do the same. He voices the concern that, in a post-Vietnam world, apathy and complacency plague this new decade, the 1970s, dubbing it, like others, “the Me Decade.” As he puts it,

The yearning for social justice is today dismissed by most Americans as a relic of the sixties...Most people are intoxicated with their own heads, careers, families, problems.¹²⁶

Vorspan concludes his article with praise for those who remain devoted to the overarching promise of the Reform Movement, the struggle for a just world.

“Still, other Jews refuse to despair and many still insist that to be Jewish is to devote one’s energies to Jewish causes as well as to apply one’s Jewish values to the great universal goals of disarmament, economic justice, and human rights. They look around, see the pain and injustice in the world, and they insist that Jews—above all—must not stand idly by the blood of all our brothers and sisters.”¹²⁷

In many ways, this article by Al Vorspan could easily be published again in the second decade of the 21st century. The evolution of social justice and the prophetic call to acts of justice also falls victim to time of greater self-centeredness, self-interest and apathy. The problems and triumphs of human nature are cyclical but the prophets experienced this as well. The admonishing voice often rang louder than the voice of promise and change. The prophets are well known for words of doom and destruction, chastising Israel for bad

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

decisions, selfish actions, idolatry of material things and generally not living up to the covenant made with God.

1981

With the start of the new decade, the United States elected a new president; Ronald Reagan defeated Jimmy Carter in November of 1980 and was inaugurated in January 1981, as “The Prophets” issue of “Keeping Posted” appeared. In 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan and through the last years of his presidency, Carter attempted to contain the growing situation in a variety of diplomatic and economic ways, while the country feared the further spread of Communism and the power of the Soviet Union. The situation in the Middle East was also precarious as the Iran-Iraq war began in the fall of 1980. The country looked for change and a solution to the economic crises of the 1970s and elected a new, former Hollywood actor, Reagan.¹²⁸

The special issue devoted to the Prophets begins with a biographical overview of these historical figures. In the words of the Editor, Aron Hirt-Manheimer:

“The great literary prophets shared five basic characteristics: (1) They were solitary, lonely figures who were quite unpopular in their day, hated and denounced by many of the people whose lives they sought to change. (2) They were cast into an inescapable role they did not seek. (3) They arose in times of great social or political crisis. (4) They spoke of the consequences of the actions of

¹²⁸ Brinkley, Alan. *The Unfinished Nation: A Concise History of the American People*. Vol. 2. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010.

individuals or nations. (5) They wrote or dictated to their scribes so skillfully and in language of such astounding beauty that people throughout the ages have read and reread them.”¹²⁹

Although he is clear that the age of prophecy in the traditional sense is over, he claims, “it is never out of season or futile for individuals to stand up against injustice, hypocrisy, racism and other ills of society that we encounter.”¹³⁰ Indeed, the issue contains five articles on the Prophets. Besides providing a historical context for them, the magazine held up the Prophets as models for teen readers.

Harry Orlinsky, a professor of Bible at the New York school of HUC-JIR wrote the opening article titled, “The Prophets: Sense and Nonsense.” He explains the origin of the Hebrew, debunks the misconception of prophets as diviners or ancient psychics, and then writes about the connection between the prophets and their calls for social justice. Orlinsky explains that the prophets “recognized that the covenant with God, like all contracts between two parties, contained two distinct parts: (1) Israel’s obligation to God and (2) God’s obligation to Israel.”¹³¹ The prophets were God’s mouthpiece, reminding Israel of its obligation to the covenant, which included justice within the Israelite community as well as for those with whom Israel interacted. Orlinsky provides a very clear historical context for the prophets, urging the reader to take heed of the origins and therefore, not to “pervert their beliefs and statements.”¹³² As Judaism evolves, texts will always be seen with new eyes, from new

¹²⁹ Hirt-Manheimer, Aron, ed. *Keeping Posted, The Prophets*. UAHC Press. XXVI.4 (1981).

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.*

perspectives, in new contexts. The words of the ancient prophets are still relevant because they still speak to the core of human nature, the reality of the world and the possibility of a better world.

Following Orlinsky's work, Steven Schnur, a contributing editor of "Keeping Posted," adds a new take on the book of Jeremiah, by recasting it in the first person. It reads almost as a series of journal entries, creatively explaining the fears, concerns and worries of the great prophet and telling the story of the siege of Jerusalem and eventual exile of the Jews. It is an article with a particular pedagogy, allowing a teen reader to identify with this ancient character through the use of first person as well as more colloquial language. The anguish of Jeremiah is relatable; the fear of one man in the face of a world of uncertainty perhaps mirrors the myriad of fears held in modernity, during the Cold War and through great economic concerns.

Daniel Polish, who was then rabbi Temple Beth Ami in Maryland and co-editor of a book on the religious bases of social policy, contributes the third article of this issue, "God According to the Prophets." Polish uses a variety of prophetic quotations to reinterpret the understanding of God, from the biblical conception of God to the prophetic conception of God. The God idea underwent a transition between the Biblical books and the Prophetic books as the Israelites were in exile and attempting to understand God outside of the land. God was no longer a just a warrior or vengeful but now a God of comfort, a parental figure, "who cares about the character and the fate of his children."¹³³

Polish explains how the prophets interpreted God in new ways, and he then uses this same logic to continue to understand God in modernity.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

Imitation of God is another way of understanding how ethics is related to belief. The prophets put forward the revolutionary idea that God has moral character. God is righteous and merciful, and we should strive to imitate these holy qualities...Thus, moral behavior is not simply an interpersonal matter, it reflects our understanding of and our faith in God.¹³⁴

He concludes by stating that the voices of the prophets caused an evolution in the concept and understanding of God and therefore greatly influenced the way that God is understood in modernity.

Polish's article pushes his readers to hear the prophetic voice not as a historical relic but a response of a people in need of connection with its God. He writes of a desire to emulate, to live a greater life, to be more God-like, not just due to a legal transaction or even a sense of great protection but a personal responsibility to imitate of the morality of God. This is also the legacy of the prophets and why their relevancy continues.

The emphasis on the moral character of God over the God of law or judgment was of particular interest to the early Reformers, who wished to replace strict adherence to law with a moral obligation to behave justly, as taught by the prophets. In the mid-20th century, Reform Jews undertook a similar effort, undergirding their social action with a God of morality and ethics. They linked the social causes of the day with those of the Prophetic era, when Jeremiah, Micah whoever cried out against poverty and injustice. The biblical prophets provided Israel with new/old ways of understanding God and their relationship with God.

The "Keeping Posted" issue on Prophets also contained an article by Roland Gittelsohn, who was of Temple Israel in Boston beginning in 1953, called

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

“Amos on Wall Street.” Gittelson attempted to bridge the large gap between the ancient prophet Amos, known for his passionate discourse on economic justice, and the troubled United States and world economy. He intersperses the words of Amos with the concerns of the late 1970s and early 1980s, business ethics, the long-standing oil concerns, United States foreign policy, especially in the Middle East and monopolies. After providing the Amos 8:4 text¹³⁵, he states, “The prophet is condemning such specific business practices as using false measures and weights, evading social regulations, charging exorbitant prices, reaping unjustifiably large profits, selling defective goods, taking unfair advantage of the poor. Which of these abuses is absent on today’s commercial scene? Which would escape Amos’s attention and scorn?” For the reader, this article provides concrete modern concerns contextualized through the voice of Amos; a Jewish lens for a modern critique. Along with Amos, Gittelson closes by quoting Isaiah 49:6,

“Is it too little that you should be My servant in that I raise up the tribes of Jacob and restore the survivors of Israel: I will also make you a light of nations, that My salvation may reach the ends of the earth.”¹³⁶

The tribes of Jacob, the Jews, “must be a special kind of nation, a paradigm for others to follow, and exemplar of how the particular and the universal must be

¹³⁵ Listen to this, you who devour the needy, annihilate the poor of the land, saying: ‘If only the new moon were over, so that we could sell grain; the sabbath, so that we could offer wheat for sale, using an ephah that is too small, and a shekel that is too big, tilting a dishonest scale, and selling grain refuse as grain! We will buy the poor for silver, the needy for a pair of sandals.’

¹³⁶ Hirt-Manheimer, Aron, ed. *Keeping Posted, The Prophets*. UAHC Press. XXVI.4 (1981).

merged.”¹³⁷ The voice of the prophet is not just meant, internally, for Israel, but for all of humanity. Reform Judaism seeks to balance the universal and particular, the ancient and modern, looking inward and acting outward. Gittelson teaches that being “a light to the nations” is not simply the ancient expression of covenant with God but a modern necessity as well. He concludes, urging, “With power enough already in our hands to explode the earth, to terminate God’s spirited experiment on this planet, we must act quickly and radically if disaster is to be averted.”¹³⁸ His concern is certainly palpable and is as much a call to action as the prophetic voices he quotes. Is he talking about threat of nuclear war? The prophets concerned themselves with the contemporary issues of the Israelites; and so, too, Gittelson uses similar words to help his readers understand the issues that face them in their world. Like the prophets, he uses strong language, showing how the words can be a call to action and the foundation of moral action. ??

“The Prophets” issue concludes in a lighthearted manner with “On the Streets of the Prophet,” a nod to the comic strip. Joel Lurie Grishaver, an author and educator creates a one-page conversation with Jeremiah, Amos, Hosea, Baruch, Malachi, Joel, Amos and Isaiah, asking of each of them, “¹³⁹Why did you choose to be a prophet.” They each answer that they did not choose this task; they were chosen by God to speak God’s words to the people. Each continues, some complaining and joking about the difficulties of the prophetic life and even picking favorite quotes from each other’s books. Once again, the reader is

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

introduced to the prophets not as a book of the Tanakh, but as human beings, with personalities, albeit modernized considerably.

These few examples from the catalogue of “Keeping Posted” magazines show an evolution of the prophetic ideas from the necessity of the creation of the formal bodies such as the Commission on Social Action on a national level to the every day choices with which each person is confronted. The prophetic voice remains the constant, as the issues of the day take on new meaning and call the reader to action in different ways. Whether issues of global economic crisis, war, racism, injustice, and the most minute of moral decision, the prophetic voice resonates through time and space. The Reform Movement continues to reinterpret these voices, using them as a moral compass, acting out the covenant through this action, rather than only as ritual. The voice of the prophets helps to bridge the divide between particular and universal, as Jews look to the problems in the greater world as well as within the Jewish community. Finally, it cannot be overlooked that this magazine is a single example of how the Reform Movement sought to educate its youth about the necessity of understanding the legacy and relevancy of the prophets.

Conclusion

The prophets present many messages. One can read through the prophetic books of the Tanakh and only hear negative messages; the doom and destruction that have befallen our people on many occasions, the disappointment of God in our errant behavior, the punishment that will surely follow if Israel is unwilling to turn, to return to God. Yet, the early Reformers, in their quest to find relevance in ancient text, to unshackle themselves from the bonds of strict rabbinic Judaism, found new life in the voice of the prophets. The voices of Amos, Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah et al became a renewed connection to an ancient sense of morality and ethical behavior, which spoke again in an age of increasing moral confusion. Our prophets speak to the problems of modernity, of class struggle, economic strife, xenophobia, and empty ritual and continue to provide a connection to our sense of covenantal obligation to God as well as improving the world in which we live.

Through the chapters of this thesis, I have shown the ways in which the Reform Movement from its inception has implemented the prophetic voice in a variety of ways. Through the loud voice of institutional resolutions, the Reform Movement has chided the ills of society and championed the values of justice like the prophets of old. These resolutions guide the way that individual Reform Jews understand their place in the greater movement and have led to incredible change and progress. Rabbis, from their pulpit, have used their voice to move their congregants toward action as well. These rich and varied voices employ the message of the prophets on a local level, urging congregants to further

understand their important role in social justice. Although the issues change, the voice of justice and righteousness remains the constant as Reform Judaism continues to tackle the most important issues of the day. The prophetic voice can also be heard loudly in the way the movement has sought to educate the next generation of Reform Jews. The monthly magazine, “Keeping Posted” is a single example of the way in which teens have been taught to understand their integral part in transforming the world. Though the needs and desires of Reform Jews have evolved through the history of the movement, the importance of the ethical mandate, upon which Reform Judaism was fashioned, has remained of utmost importance. The concerns of the day have been seen through the eyes of Amos or Isaiah or Micah.

The Reform Movement began with a strong tie to the ethical mandate of the prophets as a somewhat nebulous basis to a values system and over time has become institutionalized in new ways, responding to the issues of the day and the needs of the people. The creation of the Commission on Social Action or the Religious Action Center not only speaks to growing need but also to an evolution in the ways in which the Reform Movement understands the prophetic voice. It remained a personal and communal set of ethics but was also expanded in new ways to address national problems on a national level. Today, this evolution has continued as the spectrum of diversity within Reform Judaism has increased. The need to look inward and uphold a sense of personal ethics as well as communal action has been renewed, as we read in the powerful words of Elyse Frishman’s High Holiday sermon. The issues that face our country and the world, economic injustice, Islamophobia, concerns over safety in Israel, human rights, marriage equality, and a myriad of others still require our attention as a

community. Evolution and change is inevitable but not necessarily easy and the concerns about the waning importance of social justice within the Reform Movement reflect a generational evolution.

What is the future of the prophetic voice in the Reform Movement?

Sydney Schwarz, in his book, Judaism and Justice: The Jewish Passion to Repair the World states of the evolution of prophetic values,

Those values included: compassion for others; a respect for the dignity of all of God's creation and creatures; the obligation to be pursuers of peace; the warning not to ignore the suffering of others; a requirement to seek harmonious relationships with non-Jews; the need to love the stranger in your midst; and seeking that which is right and true. Jews internalized these values so deeply that even as modernity weakened the tie between most Jews and their heritage, the attitudes and behaviors implicit in these values manifested themselves as ethnic ethos.¹⁴⁰

The voice of the prophets is not simply part of our tradition, words from the pulpit or in a statement but rather the essence of our ethnic identity as well. The Reform Movement has made these ethical mandates such an intrinsic part of Reform Judaism, that even without a formal structure, young Reform Jews and self identified Jews still participate overwhelmingly in social justice even if it may look different than it has in the past.

The changing role of Jewish identity also plays a part in the evolution of the prophetic voice because it is not simply how rabbis use the prophets to call congregants to action but also how each congregant or each Jew understands the

¹⁴⁰ Schwarz, Sidney. *Judaism and Justice: The Jewish Passion to Repair the World*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2006. 240.

prophetic mandate as time passes. Synagogue goers and secular Jews alike heed the call and connect it back to their Judaism in some form. It has become part of the Reform Jewish milieu and no matter how connected or not connected one is to formal Judaism, the push to make the world a better place has found its way into the consciousness of modern American Judaism.

There is concern on the parts of some that the social action component of Judaism has become wholly secularized and many, especially of a younger generation are no longer linking their Jewish selves to their social action selves. While time will continue to tell, I believe it is still a triumph of Reform Judaism that even those who do not believe they are connected to any sense of formal Judaism still enact these important values. Schwarz understands this growing gap between affiliation and what could be understood as Jewish-based acts as an opportunity to expand the definition of Jewish identity as well as covenantal relationship.¹⁴¹ Young Jews may not be interested in formal connection in the same ways but their actions still speak of a connection to the ideals of something greater.

I think our next challenge in keeping the voice of the prophets alive for future generations is not simply preaching about it but aiding in the formation of a continued Jewish identity that does not need to solely be expressed in a formal setting. We are all members of a sacred covenant, one that connects us together and connects us to God. How we each understand that relationship has changed over millennia of history and will continue to do so for millennia in the future.

We should and will continue to preach and teach our ethics in our synagogues and organizations because they are our most precious values; they

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

reflect our relationship with God and our responsibility to that relationship. But we can also continue to understand the needs of our changing and growing community and move outside of our traditional settings and partner with new organizations or groups. The voice of the prophets is not ours alone and our work to make the world a better place should be inclusive. We look inward as individuals, working hard to be better people, to heed the call in our own lives. We also look outward, in our communities and toward the larger world, working together to achieve the vision of the prophets.

These three prophetic verses of Amos, Micah and Isaiah have become ubiquitous for Reform Jews not merely because they have been used so often throughout Reform history but also because they continue to speak to us. They remain relevant because we still see the ills of world society, the oppression, the injustice, the inequality and our hope is the hope of the prophets, that justice will roll down like an unfailing stream, that we can do justice and love goodness and walk with our God, that we can strive to be a light to all people and reflect this light onto the world.

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