



Judaism in America: Critical Impressions

| Marmor, Dow

A Reform Judaism view of issues between the three major branches of Judaism: Orthodox, Conservative and Reform/Liberal.

Judaism in America

Critical Impressions

Jewish labels are misleading. What was considered Liberal Judaism in Germany is often described as Reform in Britain and Conservative in North America. The equivalent to British Liberal Judaism is supposed to be Reform on the other side of the Atlantic. And then we have "Progressive," used for combinations of the above.

Based on this description, members of Reform congregations in England should join Conservative congregations when they go to live in the United States. But those who do, are often disappointed and very soon switch to Reform temples. The reasons for the confusion are several.

Although most British Jews find the American Reform ambience very strange, especially at prayer - due to the prayerbook, with its peculiar English, the music and the bare-headed men - they are less maladjusted there than in the Conservative synagogue. The situation on the west coast of the United States, where everything is more "left," may be different, yet the generalization holds. If you are a member of a Reform congregation in Britain, you will likely end up in a Reform one in America. Although, on paper, you may think you are closer to Conservative Judaism, you will be more at home in American Reform, despite its similarities to Liberal Judaism in Britain.

This brings us to the malaise in Conservative Judaism: its theology is often at odds with its practice. Although its basic tenets are, non-fundamentalist and close to Reform, its constituent bodies tend to model themselves on modern Orthodox counterparts seeking to fill the place that is being vacated by neo-Orthodoxy. Conservative Judaism may think trefah, yet it eats not only kosher but, nowadays, even glatt kosher.

As Orthodoxy has gone more to the "right," it has squeezed out the moderates in its ranks. Rabbi Irving Greenberg, the celebrated Orthodox moderate, may receive an enthusiastic reception at the annual conference of Reform Synagogues of Great Britain, but he is often shunned in Orthodox circles. There seems to be no room for his open and tolerant approach in a world increasingly dominated by extremism.

Conservative Judaism has sought to fill the middle ground Orthodoxy seeks to destroy. As a result, its synagogues have become more Orthodox: traditional prayerbooks are replacing those published by the Conservative movement; English has virtually disappeared from its services; two days of festivals are usually observed; and kippot are always worn by men in the shul building, not only at services. As I was writing this, a Conservative colleague called to say that he and his wife will be pleased to come to dinner, but could the meal be without meat. Although they do not question the kashrut in our home, they observe the Orthodox tradition of not eating meat during the nine days before Tisha b'Av. It is not something one would, until now, have expected from a Conservative rabbi.

Services in American Conservative Synagogues are often close to the minhag of the United Synagogue in London as it was before it went "right." Significantly, the "cathedral" of Conservative Judaism in Britain, the New London Synagogue, is at pains to remind us that it is the custodian of that British minhag "tradition," and not an American importation. For very good reasons, it does not even like the term Conservative. Like its satellite congregations, it is a much greater threat to Anglo-Jewish Orthodoxy, to whose adherents it offers a more moderate alternative, than to Reform, to whose members it looks very much like the Orthodoxy they reacted against in the first place. From my Canadian perspective, the few Reform Jews who seem attracted to this middle-of-the-road Judaism reflect nostalgia rather than theology.

When such people cross the Atlantic, they may, at first, be fooled by the "progressive" nature of Conservative Judaism. Only a part of the weekly sidra is read on Shabbat, the car park is open and men and women sit together. But they soon discover that it is far from Reform in Britain and that the rabbi has very strong Orthodox leanings, especially if he is a product of the Jewish Theological Seminary, which, for a long time, has been on the right of the movement.

Lately, however, there has been a remarkable shift, at least in one important area. The Seminary has agreed to ordain female rabbis and invest female cantors. By that, it has greatly modified its orientation and placed itself, inadvertently perhaps, in the Reform camp, despite all halachic arguments in favour of female rabbis. It is unrealistic to court Orthodoxy in the present religious-political climate in Israel and the Diaspora and, simultaneously, put females on a Beit Din, a Jewish court of law.

This step came as a severe blow to many Conservative Jews who were anxious to keep their distance from Reform in hope of being accepted by Orthodoxy. This hope is particularly strong in Israel. There, although the Orthodox establishment attacks both movements as if they were one, Conservative Jews expect to gain some recognition if they do not associate with Reform more than is necessary for the semblance of preserving kelal Yisrael, Jewish unity. Hence the spectacle of the Orthodox establishment in Israel treating Conservative Judaism as if it were Reform, while Conservative Jews try to appear as Orthodox as possible, sometimes even surreptitiously pointing an accusing finger at Reform.

Ordination of women by the Seminary has not only given Orthodox opponents all the ammunition they need, but it has precipitated a potential breakaway of the right wing of the Conservative movement. This may lead to further polarization: one side joining Reform, the other replacing modern Orthodoxy. What sociologists have predicted for some time - the possible breakup of Conservative Judaism despite its numerical strength - may now come about. Recognizing that a religious movement cannot exist without a consistent theological stance, and that the middle ground in religion is invariably shaky, experts have predicted polarization. We have no reason to rejoice, for the prediction only reflects the tendency to replace clear thinking with confused doing, and so move to the right.

In religion, you can be crazy, even lazy, but not hazy. It seems that Conservative Judaism is paying a price for its haziness so that even the alleged laziness of Reform seems more attractive.

The reason why the ordination of women has contributed to the potential split in Conservative Judaism must be sought in the remarkable growth of American Reform. Despite theological weakness and a tendency to anarchy, Reform has made enormous strides in the recruitment of members and rabbis, in building institutions and in initiating projects.

Much of this is due to the emergence of women as lay and rabbinic leaders of the movement. Conservative Judaism saw that it was losing many of its best people to Reform because egalitarianism and feminism are central issues in contemporary America. In the choice between possible atrophy and probable polarization, it chose the latter. It is too early to tell if it was worth it. Most of those who join Reform congregations today are young families who grew up Conservative but no longer feel at home there. It is doubtful whether the presence of Conservative women rabbis will be sufficient to reverse the trend.

The influx of members with more traditional backgrounds is affecting Reform. Much of the swing to the right - acceptance of kippot and tallitot as legitimate options at prayer, kashrut at Synagogue functions, greater stress on Hebrew and the study of texts; and observance of second day Rosh Hashana in some places - has been initiated by these new member families. Of course, this has often given rise to tension within congregations between "the young upstarts" and "the old guard," but not on the same scale as the rift in the Conservative movement. Reform has been strengthened by the tension and it speaks today with greater confidence than ever.

The reason why some Reform Jews should nevertheless be tempted to flirt with Conservative Judaism is not difficult to discern. They fear anarchy in the Reform movement and the danger of minimal observance among its members. It is a legitimate fear that none of us can ignore. However, the remedy may be worse than the disease. It seeks to cure one extreme - everybody making Shabbos for themselves - with another - Orthodoxy determining how Shabbos should be made. It may be easier to fight Reform anarchy from within than to seek to replace it with rigidity. Self-scrutiny and self-criticism are helpful in trying to make Reform not only relevant but authentic. Imitation of other movements will polarize us just as Conservative Judaism became polarized when it tried to imitate Orthodoxy.

As American Reform has grown in strength, it has become more open to self-scrutiny. There is an acute awareness of the danger of anarchy and a growing insistence on religious content, not only popular form. It is this that has made Reform so exciting for me. I will suffer the liturgy for the sake of the search and I can endure the empty pews because of the full classrooms.

The more I observe American Reform and work within it, the more conscious I become that it runs the risk of becoming a sect, which, in time may be relegated to oblivion. But I can also see that it contains the possibility of becoming the normative Judaism of tomorrow. To participate in the endeavour on behalf of the latter option is exhilarating.

Originally entitled "How Women Hoisted Reform into the Lead" when it appeared in Manna (Autumn, 1987)

© Copyright 1994 by Rabbi Dow Marmur from his book: On Being a Jew: A Reform Perspective, published by Holy Blossom Temple, 1950 Bathurst Street, Toronto, ON, Canada M5P 3K9, 1994. Used with kind permission of the author.