



Assertive Judaism

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Five fundamental issues that challenge Reform Judaism today: tradition, the non-Jewish world, continuity, personal fulfilment and spirituality.

Assertive Judaism

Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut's five phases of Reform Judaism point to five fundamental issues that still challenge us.¹ Each arose in response to given historic situations, but now they are all part of our Reform agenda. Reform Judaism is today preoccupied with questions about tradition, the non-Jewish world, continuity, personal fulfilment and spirituality.

What follows is an attempt to respond to each of them, not defensively and apologetically, but assertively.

Tradition

How do we assert Reform Judaism in the face of the demands of tradition? In the same way as the founders of our movement set out to do it. Through careful study of the sources, they showed that Reform belongs to the mainstream of Judaism. We must not justify our existence by pointing to the shortcomings of other religious movements in Judaism, especially Orthodoxy. Instead, we must repeatedly stress the authenticity of our own position. We are at least as much the heirs of the prophets and sages as any other movement in Judaism. That we differ from others does not mean we must defend ourselves, or attack, because our understanding of Judaism implies and affirms pluralism. There are many ways to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; ours is one of them. Reform education must provide the evidence. However, the fact that our educational endeavours concentrate so much on children makes that virtually impossible. Of course, the children are our future, the guarantors of continuity, but Judaism is too sophisticated and too complex to make sense to kids. It is a mature pursuit for mature adults. Children can be taught skills, but only adults can be given the intellectual tools that make for convictions.

One reason why we so often express our Judaism defensively is because we are uncertain of our ground, insecure, ignorant. Our Judaism is infantile because we learned it usually before we were 13. That is why our responses in later years remain immature. Imagine if all you and I knew about sex is what we learned before we were 13, or even 16! Judaism is at least as complex. Therefore, without a continuous program of education, assertive Judaism will remain beyond us.

And so will our claim to authenticity. One of the characteristic features of Jewish tradition is its commitment to a lifetime of learning. A Jew who does not study, stunts his or her religious growth. Effort is valued more than achievement in our tradition as Judaism offers no degrees, no qualifications – only encouragement to delve deeper into the sources and thus grow taller as Jews. I have a shrewd suspicion that had we, as a movement, been more committed – not merely on paper but in practice – to continued adult study, we would have curbed some excesses that threaten to drive us into the margin of Jewish life. To the extent that Reform Judaism today is becoming more “traditional,” it is because more Reform Jews take adult study seriously. Jewish minimalism and Jewish ignorance are twins.

The Non-Jewish World

According to Plaut, the second phase of Reform, after tradition, was the preoccupation with being acceptable to the gentile world. Many Reform ideas and practices, which have by now become characteristics of our movement, have their origins in this preoccupation.

At times, it is dangerously defensive. Too often, we are too anxious to make a good impression on our gentile neighbours, believing that their criteria and standards are the correct ones. Defensiveness easily turns us into assimilationists.

The sad thing is that most gentiles despise Jews who want to obliterate their Jewishness or imitate non-Jews. As a result, many Jews who so desperately try to be accepted by non-Jews experience much antisemitism. That confuses them and, at times, they act irrationally. For example, they turn against the ultra-Orthodox who allegedly through their distinctive garb, characteristic language and demonstrative behaviour are giving Jews a bad name. Another manifestation of the confusion is to see antisemitism everywhere and to get indignant in the wrong places and at inappropriate times. Sometimes, even our allegiance to Israel stems from the same neurosis. Some Jews want Israel to be perfect, yet not very Jewish. They secretly want to shape it in an idealized WASP image.

Assertive Judaism is different. It teaches us to have enough self-confidence in what we are, warts and all. Our attitude to Israel is a case in point. Defensiveness makes us support every Israeli government policy, however wrong. It also makes us threaten withdrawal of all support if Israeli policies offend us. We vacillate aimlessly between these extremes. Assertiveness, on the other hand, liberates us to be critical of whatever merits our strictures. It does this without threats to our Israeli brothers and sisters and without apologies to our non-Jewish neighbours.

The existence of Israel is, I believe, the focal point of our existence as Jews: God is the centre of humanity, Torah the centre of Judaism; the State of Israel the centre of the Jewish people. We need not apologize to the opponents of God, Torah or the Jewish state, but we must struggle with each of these givens of Judaism assertively and honestly. We must allow our own criteria to inform our judgement, and not judge Jewish behaviour by standards imposed from the outside.

As assertive Jews, we can take our place as partners in the society in which we live and fight for justice and goodness for all. We can fight not for reasons of public relations so that people in high places should think well of us Jews, but on intrinsic merits no matter whether it gains us popularity. Emancipation does not mean assimilation – aping the values of others – but integration, articulating the values and ideals of our own tradition, and doing so with the passion of the biblical prophets and the consistency of rabbinic sages.

Continuity

This is the outlook I would like us to teach our children. I referred earlier to the futility of infantilising Judaism. Now I wish to speak of the nobility of presenting it to future generations as a way of life for us, the adults, as something that we are not just proud of when antisemites attack us – letting them decide our identity – but something we feel passionately about when times are good and alternatives are freely available. Our aim must be to imbue the young with a commitment to Judaism that is not based on a ghetto-siege mentality, but one that presupposes the free and open society for which we all strive and in which we all thrive.

Such freedom must also mean that we do not necessarily exercise all options available to us. If I am truly free, I must be able to set boundaries for myself. And if the society in which I live is truly tolerant, it must not impose conformity and uniformity on me. The assertive Jew will have subjected himself or herself to a discipline by which the values of our religion can be made manifest and the

sancta of our tradition made visible. If freedom forces people to obliterate their peculiarities in order to be integrated, it soon becomes a new kind of totalitarianism. Therefore, it is only as observant Jews that we can be assertive Jews; observant Reform Jews, of course.

It is in this way, too, that we can act as role models for our children. Only if they see, with their own eyes, that Judaism matters to their parents, will it matter to them. Only if they witness the significance of Jewish values and Jewish practices for their parents, will they recognize the opportunities these values and practices offer their own lives.

If the only Judaism they see is what the teacher teaches in religious school, it will be virtually pointless. Think back on what you actually remember of what you were taught in public school at the age of 10! Had we not used reading and writing since those days, it is unlikely we would be literate today. And had we not seen our parents read and write, it is unlikely we would have wanted to do the same. Our general education is largely bound up with parental behaviour and attitudes. Why should Jewish education be different?

Unless our children are encouraged by example to use the skills acquired in religious school, the entire enterprise will have been futile. No wonder that, according to many surveys, Hebrew school students often know less Hebrew in the higher grades than they knew in the lower ones. A sense of futility is a powerful disincentive. If you only experience a Jewish festival in religious school, and not as a part of the life of your family, you will soon identify it as a boring game and opt out. If Jewish observance is perceived as a kids' game, the aim will be to grow up and be like daddy and mommy as soon as possible, that is, non-observant.

Assertive Judaism is also the opposite of vicarious Judaism: it is my Judaism, not the Judaism of my ancestors, or of my Israeli cousins, or even of my children.

Personal Fulfilment

Addressing the question, "What will tradition say?" I spoke of authenticity. Addressing the question, "What will the gentiles say?" I spoke of dignity. In answer to the third question, "What will the children say?" I spoke of responsibility. Turning to the more personal question, "What will my life say?" let me speak of integrity, to be more precise, the integrity of my Jewish personality.

Teachers as diverse as Abraham Joshua Heschel, the Jewish thinker, and Erich Fromm, the psychotherapist, have written that our modern lives are poor in being and abundant in having.² Ours is a consumer world, and we apply consumerism to religion too. The result has been, according to Canadian sociologist Reginald Bibby, that the western world has developed a system of religion *à la carte*.³ In our context, this means that we do not relate to tradition in search of authenticity, but choose bits and pieces that take our fancy. Current practices among Reform Jews, for example, reveal an unbelievable hodgepodge. Our attitude to the gentile world is equally strange. We imitate when we should desist, and desist when co-operation is called for. When it comes to teaching our children, our idiosyncrasies border on the bizarre. And when it comes to our own lives, the vestiges and fragments of Judaism that are included often lack coherence.

The Hebrew word *kedusha*, translated as 'holiness,' implies separation, having the integrity to stand apart. The English word "holiness" has often been juxtaposed with wholeness, which is yet another word for integrity. Religion in general, and Judaism in particular, will bring us little joy if we approach it in the same way as we tackle the grocery shelf in the supermarket: letting taste and economics decide our faith. If traditional authenticity, dignity in the face of the non-Jewish world and responsibility to the next generation count for little, integrity will be lacking.

That is how we must understand recent efforts to place religious commitment and religious living in

the centre of Reform Judaism. They reflect the determination of our leadership to counteract the tepid civil religion into which many of us have fled. They shy away from reducing us to nameless and faceless donors to Jewish causes, who pay lip service to tradition, to the gentile world and to the children's Jewish commitment as manifestations of civil religion. The leadership of our movement has called us to step forward as individuals and seek to make Judaism relevant to our own lives. We are called upon not only to vote in committees, but to testify at services; not only to choose, but to discipline ourselves, to subject ourselves voluntarily to the obligations that *mitzvot* make on us. Reform Judaism needs no legal code, only responsible adherents who impose duties on themselves.

Spirituality

That is the stuff of which spirituality is made. This fifth rubric is the product of our endeavours as authentic, dignified and responsible Jews who show integrity in our own lives. An assertive Jew stands before God in prayer. The Hebrew *lehitpallel*, 'to pray,' does not have the petitionary connotation of the English, for it means to plead one's case. Assertive Judaism enables us, entitles us, to plead our case to elicit an affirmative answer from on high.

Notes

1. W. Gunther Plaut, "Reform Judaism: Past, Present and Future," *Journal of Reform Judaism*, 28:3 (Summer 1980).
2. Erich Fromm, *To Have Or To Be* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976) and Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1963).
3. Reginald W. Bibby, *Fragmented Gods* (Toronto: Irwin Publishing, 1987), especially chapter 4.

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