

## The Future of Reform Jewry

### *Interview with Rabbi Professor David Ellenson*

- In a general social context marked by intermarriage and cultural homogeneity among Jews, the Reform movement in the United States is growing rapidly, with almost nine hundred congregations having over 1.5 million members. In 2006, about fifty thousand new members joined Reform congregations. When American Jews under the age of forty affiliate, a large plurality join the Reform movement.
- The Reform movement is obliged to address the broad swath of Jews whose life is not halakhic. Its success will be measured by whether it provides a meaningful sense of Jewish roots and thereby imparts a Jewish future to people in this category.
- One major break with Jewish tradition by the Reform movement in recent years was the acceptance of people as Jews who have a Jewish father but not a Jewish mother. This issue is part of the broader one of mixed marriage. The movement's position as articulated by Rabbi Eric Yoffe is that it is desirable for a born Jew to marry another born Jew, or to have the non-Jewish born partner convert to Judaism. The third alternative from Reform's standpoint is for the mixed-married couple to decide to raise the child Jewishly.
- Day schools are crucial to the ongoing life of the Jewish people. The Reform movement has established a program to produce more day school teachers and administrators for the community in general and for Reform day schools in particular. Yet, because the number of children from Reform homes who attend day school remains small, significant supplementary education has to be made available for youngsters who do not go to these schools.

"When considering the overarching situation that confronts American Judaism in general and Reform in particular, the work of the (non-Jewish) sociologist Peter Berger offers an illuminating context. In his book *The Heretical Imperative*, Berger points out that in the modern setting, myriad choices and options are inevitable and increase at a dizzying pace. This manifests itself in many ways and results from multiple factors. Numerous people leave their hometowns. In such a situation, traditional patterns of kinship and associational relationships are radically attenuated. Television, computer, and media images change people's cultural worlds as well. Hence, the traditional Jewish community confronts new challenges in making Jewish life meaningful today."

Rabbi Professor David Ellenson became in 2001 the eighth president of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR), the major institution in the world for ordaining Reform rabbis, cantors, and educators. He was ordained at HUC-JIR's New York School in 1977. He also holds a PhD in the sociology of religion from Columbia University.

Ellenson adds: "Part of what modernity means is that people who were formerly chained to or informed by tradition-and for whom it would be a taken-for-granted part of life-are no longer compelled to observe it at all. My teacher Arthur Hertzberg used to say: modernity is the solvent in which tradition dissolves. Unaffiliated Jews are therefore, to my great regret, the fastest growing segment in the American Jewish community."

### **A Search for Meaning**

"In another book, *The Homeless Mind*, Berger pointed out that in a world marked by a 'homeless mind'-meaning unprecedented demographic mobility and countless cultural options for individuals-people desire to find a 'home,' that is, roots. The spiritual homelessness that characterizes modernity stimulates a search for meaning. So Berger, himself a religious and social conservative, is delighted that the secularization process he formerly saw as all-encompassing has in fact weakened and to some degree

been reversed, resulting in a revival of religion and tradition in many precincts of the modern world. He believes that the cohesion religion provides speaks to people's spiritual needs today just as in past eras, and that religion is necessary to promote collective social and civil life.

"Emile Durkheim, the nineteenth-century Jewish sociologist and the son of an Orthodox rabbi, focused his researches on how societies cohere and achieve stability. He viewed religion as a major source for society to create common values and assumptions. The question is: how are such values and assumptions-so essential for the emergence of a body politic-maintained and formed when one lives in a world where traditional religion is not present? Can this aspect of modernity or post modernity be reversed?

"Rabbi Yitz (Irving) Greenberg, a maverick Orthodox rabbi who is one of the most creative and articulate Jewish thinkers in the modern world, charged that the Holocaust proved that secularism alone-an unbridled faith in secular Enlightenment as a source of meaning-proved an insufficient source of values for society. He also charged that classical Diaspora Judaism made Jews too passive in the face of the Nazi threat and that American Jewish leaders were not sufficiently assertive in demanding that the American government address the plight of the Jews during World War II. Consequently, Rabbi Greenberg regards the state of Israel as a moral necessity, since Jews, as well as others, should never be completely powerless to guide their own destiny and protect their own children."

## Reform Growing Rapidly

Ellenson observes, "In a general American social context marked by intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews and cultural homogeneity among third- and fourth-generation Jews themselves, the Reform movement is growing rapidly, with almost nine hundred congregations having over 1.5 million members. In 2006, about fifty thousand new members joined Reform congregations. When American Jews under the age of forty affiliate, a large plurality join the Reform movement. We can therefore predict with great confidence that over the next twenty years Reform will be very strong in terms of membership.

"During the twentieth century Conservative Judaism was by far the numerically dominant movement of American Judaism. It had its roots in the immigration of East European Jews, whereas Reform addressed mainly German Jews. During 1815-1880, a period that American Jewish historians call the 'era of Germanic domination,' 225,000 German-speaking Jews came to the United States. At the beginning of the Federalist period in 1790, there were approximately three thousand Jews-mostly Sephardic-in the country. Thus, Jews of Germanic origin dominated American Jewish life during most of the 1800s.

"In the twentieth century, over two million East European Jews-including all my grandparents-immigrated to the United States. Like the German Jews before them, they desired acculturation. They found their religious expression in the Conservative movement. Even as late as the 1960s, there were clear differences-attitudes toward Hebrew, Israel, kashrut, and ritual observance-between Reform and Conservative laity. These have diminished greatly in recent years.

"The Reform movement today, given the cultural homogeneity of American Jewish life, is obliged to address the broad swath of Jews whose life is not halakhic. When I analyze what direction Reform is taking today and the population it must address, I am purposely excluding the Orthodox Jewish population.

"The challenge to American Judaism in general forces us to ask what will be the quality of these people's Jewish life. Will Reform succeed in providing a meaningful sense of Jewish roots and thereby impart to them a Jewish future?"

## Educating Rabbis

"Jewish education is the key. The people we intend to serve know much about American culture and have studied at top universities, though they often lack strong Judaic backgrounds. Our task is to make them

Jewishly literate. As president of HUC-JIR, I must address this reality in the students we educate, so that they in turn can cope with the challenges American Jewry faces.

"We must aim for enough common purpose that the central sense of Jewish peoplehood will be imbibed by the great bulk of American Jews. The continuity of large segments of the community depends on the ability of the Reform Movement and its leaders to address and inspire them.

"There are at present 1,500-2,000 ordained Reform rabbis in the United States. There are perhaps 120 every year who want to be Reform rabbis, of which we accept half. We ordain, including in Israel, about sixty rabbis per year. That is close to the numbers we need. About three-quarters become pulpit rabbis in the United States at some time or another. At any one time, perhaps 60 percent of them have pulpits."

## Intermarriage, Few Children

"Many people raised in Conservative congregations join the Reform movement. We now have hundreds of thousands of such members. Membership in Conservative congregations has declined in recent years and the differences between the two movements-on matters such as Israel, Hebrew, egalitarianism, and gay rights and inclusion-have diminished in the past two decades.

"Among the Orthodox, the notion of Judaism as a collective remains strong. In Israel, Jewish identity, as Steven Cohen and the late Charles Liebman have pointed out in their work, is also generally informed by the notion of the collective.

"In the United States, however, Judaism is largely informed by an individualistic sensibility. Arnold Eisen, the new chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), and Steven Cohen, who is now on our HUC faculty in New York, have explained in their book *The Jew Within* that the notion of "the sovereign self" dominates the consciousness of most non-Orthodox Jews. American Jews approach Judaism by asking the very personal question: 'How can Judaism enrich my life?'"<sup>1</sup>

"The research of social scientist Bethamie Horowitz also shows that individuals use Judaism to help construct meaning in their life in highly eclectic nonhalakhic ways. They use their subjective judgment to determine what is authoritative for them. This is contrary to Orthodoxy, where issues of personal meaning are subordinated to the demands of the halakhic system."<sup>2</sup>

"Steven Cohen claims, in light of the overwhelming rate of intermarriage among non-Orthodox Jews in the United States, that most of their children and grandchildren will no longer identify as Jews."<sup>3</sup> Our task is to ensure that these prognostications, based on real evidence, turn out to be false.

"Jack Wertheimer, the provost of the JTS, wrote that in a few decades half of American Jews will be Orthodox because of their higher birthrates. He surely makes a convincing argument based on hard data. At the same time, that prognostication presumes many constants."<sup>4</sup>

Ellenson remarks that he and his wife have five children and adds, "People in the non-Orthodox world usually wait much longer to marry. As a result they have at most two to three children. Most do not have even that. To promote birth in the non-Orthodox community is not something I have focused on in my five years as HUC president, though I am certainly not opposed to it!"

## Patrilineal Descent and Intermarriage

One major break with Jewish tradition that the Reform movement made in recent years was the acceptance of people as Jews who have a Jewish father but not a Jewish mother. Ellenson comments: "I opposed this move initially. Making it an official position represented a very radical departure from the Jewish tradition and its classical concepts of Jewish peoplehood. At the time the decision was made, this disturbed me very much notwithstanding that 'patrilineality' may have, in many places, been in effect de facto for many years.

"Social reality and personal experiences have made me change my mind. There is such a high number of these people, and many participate actively in Jewish life. The classical halakhic definition of Jewish status is simply too narrow for the modern Jewish reality. The essential question before us-in my opinion-is what is the optimal policy our community can adopt to enable bringing children of mixed marriages into the community. Accepting patrilineality is a decision that embraces these people. Another consideration is that those who become more involved and more traditional can convert. It is not a status that has to be permanent and without 'remedy.'

"This issue is part of a broader one confronting Reform-the issue of mixed marriage. The movement's position as articulated by my colleague Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Union for Reform Judaism and leader of our movement, is that it is desirable for a born Jew to marry another born Jew, or to have the non-Jewish born partner convert to Judaism. The third alternative from Reform's standpoint is for the mixed-married couple to decide to raise the child Jewishly.

"Rabbi Yoffie made a speech outlining these points at our last biennial convention in 2005. He said, 'We honor those non-Jews who are part of the Jewish community and have their children raised as Jews.' However, he also added: 'We should seek to convert people to Judaism in cases where intermarriage occurs.'

"This raised much controversy in American Jewry. He could not have constructed his statement more carefully. Yet, even then, many on the Left found it problematic. The New York Times reported on this on its front page. I agree with Yoffie, but have not yet found a way to deliver that message in a way that expresses support for the two preferred options without alienating other people who wish to affiliate with the Jewish people. It may not be possible to do so."

## Picking and Choosing

Ellenson summarizes: "Liberal Jews pick and choose from Judaism in a way that is anathema to Orthodoxy." He mentions some examples stressing that, while not typical, they illustrate his point. "I have friends who wear a kippa all the time and even keep it on when they drive on Shabbat. From a halakhic viewpoint, this is jarring. However, for them, as individuals, this affirms their participation in Jewish tradition and allows them to assert and display a sense of Jewish identity. Yet they do so outside halakhic norms.

"We see similar phenomena among our students. Many come from nontraditional backgrounds and learn at HUC for the first time about Jewish tradition. They can simultaneously wear *tsitsit* (ritual fringes) and smoke a cigarette on Shabbat.

"In another example, a student once heard a lecture in [Jerusalem](#) on how important it was for Jews to feel a sense of pride and connection with Israel. He subsequently went to a tattoo parlor and had a Star of David tattooed all over his arm. This violated all halakhic norms about tattoos. However, it served as a constant reminder to him of his Jewish identity and his connection to Israel, and he proudly showed me this tattoo.

"People like these have returned to tradition outside halakhic categories. They do not ask what is permitted and forbidden, nor think within the framework of an entire system."

Ellenson observes that most examples of this widespread approach are not so extreme. "At all our HUC campuses we have students who engage in premarital sex and even live together. At the same time, they will ask me about issues concerning the *mikveh* (ritual bath) and laws of family purity, as they believe that such practices will enhance their lives. The return of the *mikveh* in the Reform movement is a major step toward tradition. Those students who question me about this-however problematic this might seem from a traditional halakhic point of view-are asking, 'How can I express holiness in my life?'"

## What Can Appeal?

Ellenson returns to the key issue with which he grapples. He states, "I live in a community where I ask myself how I can exercise influential religious authority in a way that moves people. Rabbi Greenberg once said to me that a leader must never be more than 10-15 percent ahead of his people. If you are too far ahead, you are going to leave your people behind.

"In a society marked by individualism, I cannot make the simple statement: you ought to have a sense of collective responsibility for the Jewish people. It is not likely to be persuasive. For the large part of nonidentified Jewry, Jewish tradition is generally perceived as irrelevant to modern life. At the same time the liberal press often portrays Israel negatively, as a victimizer rather than a victim.

"One then wonders what can appeal to such Jews, as the memory of the Holocaust does not inform them nor does this generation of Americans identify with the issue of anti-Semitism. This is despite the attacks and criticisms of Israel by former president Jimmy Carter and others. In this regard there is a great difference between the United States and Europe."

About himself, Ellenson wrote a few years ago,

After completing my M.A. in religious studies at Virginia, I was prepared to leave my native state. I moved to Kibbutz Mishmar Ha-Emek in the Jezreel Valley, where I spent eight wonderful months before entering the Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem for the 1972-73 academic year. The time in Israel was an exceptional one for me. I felt a wholeness and completion I had never felt before or since-and to this day I will confess that I feel myself to be a "failed Zionist." Only in Israel at that time did I ever approach anything resembling the sense of *shlemut*-not so much "wholeness" as "normalization"-that had desperately eluded me during all my years in Virginia. I am still uncertain why I ever left Israel.<sup>5</sup>

Now he says, "Israel remains a major source of potential Jewish renewal. Many more youngsters want to come on birthright Israel programs than there are places. The studies of Leonard Saxe, director of the Cohen Center at Brandeis University, have shown that these trips have an enduring effect. A few years later the attitudinal changes remain. The problem is that because of lack of money and insufficient follow-up planning, we do not yet know how to capitalize fully on this opportunity.

"At HUC-JIR, we address this through a requirement that every future rabbi, cantor, and educator whom we will ordain or graduate must spend a year of study in Israel. We see this as a major way of inculcating within them a sense of Jewish solidarity and peoplehood. The quest for religious leadership is surely more than a personal one and must be connected to peoplehood."

## Are We Strong Enough?

"All these questions lead to the practical question: is Reform Judaism strong enough to promote an ethos that constructs a sense of meaning in today's world? It is not my intention to attack ritual, but in Orthodoxy, it has become so dominant that many there never ask questions about what Judaism can tell me about leading my life meaningfully. That also includes how values can be publicly manifested. Such Judaism has become irrelevant for a great many people.

"Yet there is a resurgence of religious fundamentalism in general. It derives from the fact that people have some need for boundaries and communities. Traditional religions provide this very well. Some of the renewal in non-Orthodox Jewish circles is explained by the same desire.

"I am convinced that the approach of teaching people how to think with a content-less curriculum is doomed to failure. If people do not know anything, they are unable to think. Content is necessary. A Judaism devoid of substance will be unable to transmit itself over the generations. That explains why Reform is becoming more traditional. My message to American Jews is that there has to be some meaningful sense of connection to a tradition.

"I mention to my students that there comes a point for everyone where what one does is not the same as what one is capable of affirming logically. Life is always led according to certain conventions. Many rituals

work for people. But others do not. Hence, creativity is always necessary, as some functional equivalent to the tradition must then be invented for communal life to emerge and personal meaning to be attained.

"I would like to have Judaism taught so that people know what it says in a period of psychological distress—for instance, after a death. The Jewish tradition has significant resources for that. But at the same time we cannot return to the world of the ghetto."

## In Need of a Canon

"How does one create a balance between a tradition and the options individuals have to choose? In Jewish society, particularly its liberal quarters, the debate is only a reflection of what takes place in society in general. Columbia University has always upheld its core curriculum. One has to read the Great Books of the Western tradition. I think one needs a certain canon. People can add to it, but they cannot delete from it."

In an interview four years ago Ellenson said:

It would be a great success if—ten years from now—we have a Jewish community with millions of well-educated, committed Jews. It would still be good even if we have less Jews who are more involved. The day school movement is crucial for this. It represents a radical transformation from the view of a previous generation of Reform Jews, which exclusively embraced public schools. Accepting the new reality of Jewish life was an important but traumatic change for the Reform movement. We now employ a director of day school projects and programs at HUC. I will give this program the strongest support possible.<sup>6</sup>

Ellenson now repeats that he sees the day schools as crucial to the ongoing life of the Jewish people. "With appropriate Jewish education and the socialization of young people into Jewish tradition and values, there is a much greater chance that Judaism will speak to individuals and to society. As president of the HUC I have attempted to promote day schools. We just created a program with the Avi Chai Foundation to produce more day school teachers and administrators for the community in general and for Reform Jewish day schools in particular. Another program called Delet works to further educate teachers in present Jewish day schools.

"I work very diligently on improving the performance of the day schools in the Reform movement. Professor Michael Zeldin, whom we appointed a few years ago as director of our Program for Jewish Day School Education, now heads the entire School of Education in Los Angeles. This represents a further elevation of the day school within the Reform movement.

"My hope is now to persuade more and more parents to take that kind of option for their children. I will not retreat on that position, even if I do not know how effective it is. At the same time, however, we also have to turn to after-school education. We have to provide significant supplementary education for youngsters who do not go to day schools."

Interview by Manfred Gerstenfeld

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*Rabbi David Ellenson was ordained at HUC-JIR's New York School in 1977. He received his PhD in the sociology of religion from Columbia University in 1981. He has published several books including *Between Tradition and Culture: The Dialectics of Jewish Religion and Identity in the Modern World*. His newest book, *After Emancipation: Jewish Religious Responses to Modernity*, published by Hebrew Union College Press, was awarded the Dorot Foundation Award as the most outstanding book in *Modern Jewish Thought and Experience* in 2005. Rabbi Ellenson was named the eighth president of HUC-JIR in 2001.*

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## Notes

1. Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen, *The Jew Within: Self, Family and Community in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).
2. Bethamie Horowitz, "Connections and Journeys: Shifting Identities among American Jews," *Contemporary Jewry* 19 (1998).
3. Steven M. Cohen, *A Tale of Two Jewries: The "Inconvenient Truth" for American Jews* (New York: Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation, 2006).
4. Jack Wertheimer, "Jews and Jewish Birthrate," *Commentary*, October 2005.
5. David Ellenson, *After Emancipation: Jewish Religious Responses to Modernity* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 2004), 16-17.
6. Manfred Gerstenfeld, interview with David Ellenson, "New Concepts for Teaching Reform Rabbis," in *American Jewish Challenge: Conversations Confronting the Twenty-first Century* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 229-30.