

Reform Judaism Is Being Ruined by Politics

Rabbi Jonah Pesner, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism (RAC), recently wrote a blog post responding to the movement's politically conservative and centrist members, who say their views are unwelcome in the denomination's ranks.

"Reform Judaism would not be the vibrant entity that it is if we all thought the same way, voted the same way, or agreed on the same answers to the challenges facing our world," Pesner wrote. "We cherish the variety of views present in the Reform Jewish community. However, we do not allow disagreement to inhibit our pursuit of justice."

In other words: We value the opinions of everyone in the movement. Even the benighted subhumans among us who hold unacceptable political opinions. See? Vibrant!

The Washington, RAC is the policy arm of the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ). The RAC, the URJ and the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) make up the main organizations of the American Reform movement. These organizations have always been firmly politically leftist—as has the movement itself. But in recent years, the leftward drift has accelerated and the commitment to expressing it in contemporary political terms has deepened.

It is not Reform Judaism itself that deserves criticism for this drift, but rather its current leaders and their hyper-politicization of Judaism. I was raised in and ordained by the Reform movement. I have many wonderful and learned colleagues in the Reform rabbinate, many of whom do heroic work in the trenches of the Jewish community. The movement has a proud history of intellectual, spiritual and moral rigor. But as my Israeli mother-in-law says, the fish rots from the head. And

Reform Judaism is rotting. Those of us committed to the principles of religious (distinct from political) liberalism should be alarmed.

The real conceit of the whole thing is that Reform organizations continually promote readings of sacred text so suffused with political bias that a reasonable observer finds it difficult to distinguish religion from politics. Take the recent example of the CCAR's statement following President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw the U.S. from the Paris Climate Agreement. All three of the Jewish textual citations the CCAR used to justify its position are laughable. Literally. I laughed. When I tweeted about it, I got calls from classmates and colleagues—almost uniformly politically leftist—who agreed. Here's one of the citations:

"Al Tifros (sic) min haTzibbur—We are commanded not to separate ourselves from the community. Until the U.S. withdrawal, the Paris Climate Agreement included every nation on Earth other than Syria and Nicaragua. The United States has now separated itself from the family of nations pledged to seek climate justice together."

The citation for this is Pirkei Avot 2:5. The RAC has used this text to demonstrate that Jewish tradition commands 21st-century American Jews to vote, to support voting rights, to remember our veterans and to support disability rights. It's a versatile citation. The issue in the CCAR statement—aside from the misspelling of the Hebrew word *"tifrosh"*—is the meaning of *"tzibbur."* The author of this statement clearly assumes it means "community" in the broadest possible sense: the assembled nations of the world. Can anyone really believe that's what our sages meant? Jastrow (the primary dictionary of Talmudic and Midrashic literature) defines it as "congregation, community" and proceeds to cite examples that are exclusively reflective of religious community. This passage is an exhortation to keep oneself close to the congregation of Israel. That is both its challenge and its

beauty. How cheap, lazy and empty it is to strip it of that meaning to make an unrelated political point.

At the conclusion of his recent blog post, Pesner wrote, “We will never disregard members of the Reform community who disagree with the direction of our public policy positions. And yet, inspired by our traditions and our text, we hear an unequivocal call to stand with the most vulnerable members of society.”

All one has to do is read what Reform leaders publish, or listen to what they say, to know exactly how those with opposing views are regarding. Pesner deftly accuses those who disagree with him of moral turpitude. He hears an unequivocal call. Those who disagree with him apparently do not. If that’s how he intends to “regard” those who disagree with him, “disregard” is probably preferable.

The Reform movement is confronting real problems: diminution of Jewish identity, catastrophic levels of basic Jewish illiteracy, massive changes in the needs and desires of Jewish families, and too many others to list. It’s a terrible mistake that the movement’s answer to these crises is to wade deeper into politics.

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