

**Some Respona by Rabbi Mark Wm. Gross**

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# הקדמה

# Introduction

## Picking Up (and Being Picked Up By) The Pieces

When a rabbi entering a restaurant, spotting a synagogue member at another table, goes over to offer greetings, the congregant in question will be self-conscious about the lobster on his plate and offer a hurried assurance along the lines of “This only because I’m ‘out,’ rabbi; at home, everything is kosher.” (The only meaningful rabbinic rejoinder to which comes from CCAR member and stand-up comic Bob Alper: “at least your dishes are going to Heaven”). The other side of that same coin is the congregant who invited us to join them for dinner out, emphasizing that he would be fine with any restaurant that struck our fancy because “I keep strictly kosher at home, but am Reform when out.”

I didn’t bite my tongue quickly enough to refrain from informing my constituent and dinner host “you mean you are not observant; leave Reform Judaism out of it.” Which was poor manners, but a teachable moment nonetheless. And the incident bothers me still, because it points to the persistent perception that Reform Judaism is a religious philosophy of repudiation and negation.

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For too many Jews, being Jewish itself consists of a negation. Dara Horn notes that, for the significant number of our coreligionists lacking an involvement in the ritual and social and intellectual richness of Jewish communal life, their

identity is simply a state of non-being: not being Christian, or Muslim, or whatever else other people apparently were (in Britain, for instance, more people identify as Jedi Knights than as Jews), being alienated, being marginalized (*People Love Dead Jews: Reports from a Haunted Present*, 2021).

But being a Reform Jew takes this alienation and marginalization to another level, because (at least in the popular mind) Reform Judaism involves two scoops of “non-being.” We are Jews, by virtue of our not being Presbyterian *etc.*; we are Reform, by virtue of our not being Orthodox.

The latter rejectionist tone was established in the infancy of American Reform Judaism, in the form of the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885. Under the dynamic (some would say draconian) guidance of Kaufmann Kohler, this watershed document at a stroke dispensed with

all such Mosaic and rabbinical laws as regulate diet, priestly purity, and dress, ritual practices which the framers regarded not just as arcane and alien, but as an impediment to “modern spiritual elevation.” As a consequence, Reform Judaism continued to be a philosophy of repudiation for a long time afterwards.

- In the 1940s and '50s, when synagogues in the newly built suburbs of America brought together a wide array of transplanted city Jews with a correspondingly diverse array of personal ritual practice, Reform temples expected individuals formerly accustomed to wearing head-covering at worship either to remove them or to leave the premises.
- In the 1950s and '60s, when energized youngsters returning from sessions at our aptly named "Union Institutes for Living Judaism" (a wonderful double-entendre) expressed their desire to attend Shabbat services and to make *Havdalah* at home and to *kasher* the family kitchen, their angry parents called the UAHF Regional office to complain: "I thought this was a Reform Summer camp!"
- When the 1970s saw a renewed openness to traditional ritual practices in the Reform Movement, older "classical Reform" rabbis mocked their colleagues wearing *t'fillin* to weekday worship at CCAR conventions by making jokes about "these young guys checking their blood pressure."

In view of such anecdotal realities, it is important to emphasize that after 1885 every subsequent formulation of the underlying Reform philosophy of Judaism pointedly back-pedaled from the necessarily revolutionary tone of the Pittsburgh Platform. In contrast to the broad-strokes repudiation called for in the latter document, The Guiding Principles of 1937 acknowledged the need in Reform Jewish life for

the retention and development of such customs, symbols and ceremonies as possess inspirational value, the cultivation of distinctive forms of religious art and music, and the use of Hebrew.

The Centenary Perspective of 1976 went even farther, rejecting early Reformers' spirit of repudiation by insisting that

Reform Jews are called upon to confront the claims of Jewish tradition, however differently perceived, and to exercise their individual autonomy, choosing and creating on the basis of commitment and knowledge.

The tone of these two statements is compelling, because they both emphasize the validity and significance of Jewish practices and rituals which had been categorically repudiated and rejected in 1885.

At the same time both documents institutionalize as the hallmark of Liberal/Progressive/Reform Judaism some highly subjective considerations: personal preference; diverse perspectives; individual choice. Those fluid considerations are highlighted in the most recent Statement of the Principles of Reform Judaism, "the second Pittsburgh Platform" of 1999, which

affirms the central tenets of Judaism – God, Torah and Israel – even as it acknowledges the diversity of Reform Jewish beliefs and practices.

This 1999 Statement represented an attempt, at the turn of the millennium, to define what precisely it is that defines a Movement that in the course of its constant expansion outward is increasingly characterized more by diversity than by any kind of unity.

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Wherein lies the challenge of creating Reform *halachah*— or, more correctly, a Reform approach to being governed by *halachah*.

Although that term is generally summarized succinctly (and, potentially, dismissively) as "[Orthodox] Jewish law," it involves much more. Based on the Hebrew verb *הלך* "going," the nominal form *הלכה* denotes "the way to follow." More specifically, as used in the Talmud it is a technical legal term signifying "the normative conduct of Jewish life, as determined by achieved

consensus through demonstrable process.” We are dealing here, in other words, with an objective authority... that is, conceptually at least, to some degree at odds with Reform Judaism’s subjective spirit of personal autonomy.

In spite of being framed for the moment in such intentionally diametric terms, *halachah* does not necessarily constitute a clash in ideology for Reform Jews. After all, we light two Shabbat candles on Friday night; hang a *m’zuzah* on the right-hand doorpost; put the candles in the Chanukah *m’norah* from right to left (while lighting them from left to right), increasing the number of lights on each of the eight nights of that holiday; and have three *matzot* at the Passover *seider*, because we are Jews and doing all these things is the “the normative conduct of Jewish life.” What matters is that Reform Judaism, while operating within those norms, constitutes an exercise in expanding them— or, as the 1937 Guiding Principles framed it, developing and cultivating “customs, symbols and ceremonies” and “distinctive forms of religious art and music.”

In doing so, we must remain constantly mindful of the Jewish commitment that is far more than implicit in our self-identification as Liberal, Progressive, or Reform Jews.

- **Liberalism is not nihilism.**

The principle of freedom inherent in liberalism implies that we recognize and value the freedom in question, as something to be exercised productively to some good end.

In the case of committed non-Orthodox Jews working within halachic norms, a Conservative rabbi with whom I used to teach was fond of saying: “our task as rabbis is see how far the rubber band can stretch without breaking.” Or, to follow the literal root meaning of *halachah*, to discern how far to one side or the other we can step without leaving the path.

- **“Progressive” is not pejorative.**

Progressive Judaism recognizes that halachic norms are not a ball-and-chain, weighing us down and holding us back, but more like a sea-anchor: a relatively fixed point that helps a sailboat keep a steady course as it negotiates the constantly changing movement of wind and waves and tide.

Rabbi Milton Steinberg highlighted the reality that Judaism is hard to define, because it is a growing and ever-changing living organism. As couched in those terms, “the normative conduct of Jewish life” has by definition also always been equally vibrant and dynamic: Torah is **עץ חיים** “a Tree of Life,” not a monolith; it is protected by a **גדר** “hedge,” not a brick wall. Such conceptualization in our traditional literature emphasizes that, even before the formal advent of a Progressive Judaism, the entire living system has always been inherently progressive by nature.

- **Reform is not rejection.**

Even more offensive than the fact that some people summarize Reform as “pick-and-choose Judaism” is the fact that those using this cringeworthy turn of phrase have in fact generally “chosen” not to. To assert “I don’t keep kosher, because I am Reform” is at least a conceptually valid statement; to say “I am Reform, because I don’t keep kosher” is not. The latter statement subverts the principle of personal freedom into a pseudo-theology of repudiation... or, worse, inertia.

To regard our religious autonomy as license to do nothing, in this manner, runs counter to the expectation of the 1976 Centenary Perspective that Reform Judaism is fundamentally a dedicated exercise in

choosing and creating on the basis of commitment and knowledge.

That insistence on thoughtful and informed decision-making harks back to the founding principles of early American Reform articulated by Max Lilienthal in 1869:

We are Reformers not from inclination, nor reformers for fashion's sake, but reformers from conviction. We do not belong to that frivolous or arrogant class that do away with and abolish because it suits them just now. What we assert, we intend to prove; and when we move the abolition of any ceremony, we shall not do it without showing that the religious codes themselves entitle us to demand such a change and such a reform.

It does not escape notice that the thoughtful tone of this foundation document from the roots of Reform contrasts sharply with the often-inflammatory rhetoric of repudiation and divestiture in the Pittsburgh Platform. The intimation is that Reform Judaism, as originally conceived in Germany and transplanted to North America, has nothing to do with swinging a sledgehammer at Jewish norms. To the contrary, staying with the vocabulary of HGTV, Reform Judaism is all about the thoughtful and deliberate renovation of a cherished house with good bones.

*Halachah* furnishes the framework and context for that project, as well as the tools for carrying it out. And the progressive philosophy of Reform Judaism furnishes innovative and richly meaningful ways in which those tools can be used.

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In his watershed social study *The Jew Faces a New World* (1941), Robert Gordis remarks upon the penchant of American Jews for retaining orphaned fragments of their heritage. He visualizes the scope and richness of Judaism in figurative terms as a priceless antique vase, long cherished as a family heirloom and passed lovingly from one generation to the next, which was finally smashed to pieces by the immigrant generation who threw their *t'fillin* overboard before disembarking at Ellis Island. Although the numerous fragments of that formerly precious vessel are possessed of neither beauty, utility, nor (perhaps most importantly) context, the subsequent generations of American Jews are reluctant to relinquish these random isolated shards which constitute what Gordis calls "the patent of their nobility."

That metaphor creates an electrifying insight. It suggests that our function as "Reform" Jews is no longer to trim down and reshape European Orthodoxy to meet the aesthetic and social aspirations of a new American society, a battle fought in Pittsburgh in 1885 which is now passé. Instead the dynamic of "re-forming" is the process of *תיקון*, a restorative act of gathering together the broken and scattered fragments of Jewish life, and giving them coherent form to fill our lives with higher meaning.

We know this endeavor will bear fruit, for two reasons.

- 1) As Reformers we have a Progressive philosophy, demanding that we "create on the basis of commitment and knowledge" as fuel to drive the process.
- 2) And as committed Jews we have halachah, which is both the blueprint showing the integrity of the structure we are building and the trail map showing the way, to furnish us with context by which to measure the integrity of the work we are undertaking together.