

Halakhic, Liberal, and Secular?
The Freehof Blog, August 14, 2019

In a recent [interview](#) with the Times of Israel, Dr. Andrew Rehfeld speaks of his vision for HUC-JIR, the Reform movement's seminary and intellectual center, now that he has assumed the presidency of the institution. The discussion is wide-ranging and fascinating. Dr. Rehfeld, an associate professor of political science at Washington University who left academia to head the Jewish Federation of St. Louis from 2012-2019, is the first non-rabbi to serve as president of HUC-JIR. As such, he brings a new perspective to the job, which can be a good thing: "It's very hard for organizations in the middle of dynamic shifts to make them from within, so I think there is a greater opportunity not just for me, but for anyone coming from the outside." We agree. New perspectives carry in their wake new opportunities for learning and growth. And it's in that spirit that we offer the following comments.

Responding to a question about the state of the American Jewish community, Dr. Rehfeld replies:

I really think there are three authentic approaches to Jewish life: *halachic*, liberal, and secular. What I see in America is communities or camps that are increasingly intolerant of one another. For instance, I'm seeing creeping growing extremism among halachic Jews who are becoming less and less tolerant of a communal, broad approach to events and to the community. Pluralism has to be recognizing the authenticity of other forms of Judaism without having to necessarily agree with them.

We're all behind Dr. Rehfeld's call for Jewish pluralism, and there may be something to his tripartite division of the Jewish community. But as the Freehof Institute for Progressive Halakhah, we have a problem with his use of the term "halakhic" to describe (we imagine) the Orthodox camp. He is certainly not the first person to equate "halakhic" with Orthodox Judaism. But in our view it's an inaccurate equation and a confusing one, because it pictures a wall of separation between liberal Judaism and the Jewish legal tradition. As those of you familiar with our work well know, our Institute exists in order to tear down that imaginary wall. And specifically, we exist to teach and promote two fundamental truths:

1. There is no such thing as "non-halakhic" Judaism. As the nature and structure of our own religious practice makes clear, all expressions of Jewish religion are rooted in the tradition of the *halakhah*.
2. *Halakhah* is the language of Jewish religious practice, a discourse with which Jews have for two thousand years shaped their response to the call we identify as the covenant of Sinai. As such, *halakhah* is not under the monopoly control of the Orthodox rabbinate, who enjoy no exclusive right to speak in its name. On the contrary, *halakhah* belongs to all of us, to liberal and progressive Jews no less than to any other, and it is a *mitzvah* for us to study it.

It's obvious that Orthodox Jews relate to the halakhic tradition differently than do we liberals and progressives. For them, *halakhah* is primarily a set of binding rules; for us, it is essentially a collection of resources for thought and argument. But we, no less than they, are entitled to use the texts of our common Jewish legal tradition to help make sense of our world and to construct our Jewish lives in response to it.

So please – don't let the word "halakhic" become a synonym for Orthodoxy. The word is too good, too broad, and – well, too *Jewish* – for that.