

## *Re-Charging Reform Judaism and the Particularistic Agenda*

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The [Re-Charging Reform Judaism](#) conference, hosted at and sponsored by the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue in New York, is set for May 31-June 1, 2023. It looks like an interesting program, judging from the agenda and the list of speakers. And the Planning Committee includes a lot of good people. There's just one item missing from the program that bothers us. Can you guess what it is? (Hint: it's in our name.)

Okay, we won't keep you in suspense any longer! The missing item is *halakhah*. No, we don't think that the conference should discuss the creation of an official *halakhah* for Reform Judaism, an authoritative code to govern Reform practice. That idea was thoroughly discussed at meetings of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. It was rejected then, and no one seriously imagines it will be revived now. (We at the Freehof Institute certainly don't advocate the creation of such a code.) Rather, we're talking about the absence from the conference agenda of any *mention* of *halakhah*, of the discourse of Jewish law, of the very act of studying its texts. We think that's a missed opportunity.

Why? What does the study of the Talmud, the codes, and the responsa literature have to do with "re-charging" a movement that's all about modernity and change? We detect in the conference program a distinct focus upon what we'll call "the particularistic agenda," a concentration upon those elements of Jewish life and religion that emphasize our distinctiveness as a people. This agenda shows itself in sessions on: Israel (see Plenum #1), [Zionism](#) and [anti-Zionism](#); ["embracing Jewish peoplehood"](#); [1] ["identity formation"](#) among young [Reform Jews](#); and a discussion of ["Universalism v. Particularism"](#) in a workshop devoted to *tikkun olam* and social justice. None of this, of course, means that the "particularistic agenda" is the only topic on the program, that all the participants support that agenda, or that those who do support it agree upon every item. But we get the sense that the organizers of the conference are concerned that, given Reform Judaism's heavy emphasis upon *tikkun olam*, its historic balance between universalism and particularism has tilted too sharply toward the former and requires redressing. [2]

We share their concern. A "re-charged" Reform Judaism is one that offers satisfying answers to the question "why be *Jewish* rather than not?" And that's why we wish that *halakhah* had been included in the conference program. For if the goal is to help Reform Jews (re)discover the distinctiveness of the Jewish religious experience, then *halakhah*, perhaps the most *particularly* Jewish of all Jewish religious discourses or languages, is an essential tool in achieving it. No other religious community (or secular community, for that matter) makes meaning in precisely this way. *Halakhah* is the source of all forms of religious practice – including *Reform* religious practice - that are *particularly* Jewish, that mark us as a distinct religious community. Even those creative ritual practices that the conference calls ["core to Reform Judaism"](#) tend to draw inspiration from the halakhic tradition and to be shaped according to halakhic models. That's not surprising, since those rituals are usually aimed at evoking *particularly* Jewish pathways to religious truth. And speaking of *tikkun olam*: if we wish to identify any *particularly* Jewish approach to questions of ethics (be they social, commercial, political, or medical in nature), we have to draw upon texts from the halakhic tradition, because it is those texts that speak most

directly to *all* questions of Jewish sacred action, ethical as well as ritual. Simply put, there's no Jewish *particularity*, even a "Reform" version of Jewish particularity, in the absence of *halakhah*.

We know that there are lots of things to discuss at a conference like this one, and indeed, the items on its agenda all properly belong there. But we also know that a vibrant, re-charged Reform Judaism that wants to express itself in a particularly Jewish language must include *talmud torah* as a central element on *its* agenda. And when it comes to *talmud torah*, there's no item on the curriculum more *particularly* Jewish than the study of *halakhah*. The task is for the Reform movement to reassert its claim (as legitimate as that of any other stream of Judaism) to this particularly Jewish discourse, to forge its own approaches to the study of the Jewish legal tradition, and to contribute its own ideas and insights to an intellectual activity that Rabbi Solomon B. Freehof once called "the essence and the climax of Jewish culture." [3]

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[1] The organizers [cite](#) the following among "key issues that require urgent attention": "The growing distance between North American Liberal Jews and Israel, and their fraying connection with the concept of Jewish peoplehood."

[2] In this regard we'd refer you to a [podcast interview](#) of Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch, the rabbi of Stephen Wise Free Synagogue and the keynote speaker of the "Re-charging" conference.

[3] Solomon B. Freehof, *Reform Judaism and the Law* (1967: Louis Caplan Lectureship on Jewish Law, HUC-JIR, Cincinnati)