

## Being a Jew and Living Jewishly: Rising to Two Challenges

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An Orthodox rabbi once shared with me his limited admiration for Reform Jews. He pronounced us praiseworthy for our adherence to the Covenant of Abraham, even if we are not faithful to the Covenant sealed between God and the Jewish People at Mount Sinai. He meant that actively committed Reform Jews perpetuate Jewish peoplehood, and that we have placed a high priority on transmitting Jewish identity from one generation to the next. His critique was that we do not adhere to the Torah. In other words, we are Jews, but we do not properly practice Judaism.

The rabbi correctly distinguished between two types of Jews, even though his application of that distinction to Reform Judaism is debatable. Dr. Yehuda Kurtzer, an historian who is President of the Shalom Hartman Institute North America, similarly refers to “Genesis Jews” and “Exodus Jews,”<sup>i</sup> referring to the Book of Torah in which each covenant is sealed.

Genesis Jews are deeply concerned about the welfare of our people. The role model is Joseph. Even after his brothers have sold him into slavery, he later saves all the Children of Israel from certain starvation. Genesis Jews are Zionists, because they believe that Jews are only safe in this world so long as a Jewish State exists, and/or because they hold dearly to the God’s Genesis promise to give the land to the descendants of Abraham and Sarah. Genesis Jews value relationships with other Jews. They give to causes that assure the well-being of Jews in their own communities, in Israel, and around the world.

Exodus Jews, by contrast, emphasize that we have been called into Covenant by God, and therefore bear heavy obligations placed on us by our Creator. Exodus Jews may emphasize ritual *mitzvot*, obligations to serve God with religious ceremonies; *mussar*, Jewish ethical discipline requiring moral behavior in our public and private lives; and/or *tikkun olam*, the Jewish responsibility to partner with God to repair our broken world.

Many would argue that we can – indeed, we must – discharge both of our obligations, to our people and to God. At this season, we are all enjoined to ask ourselves, “Have I been a ‘good Jew’ this year?” When we do, we would be wise to examine our faithfulness to both covenants, our Genesis covenant with our people and our Exodus covenant with God.

My Orthodox friend might be surprised that the founders of American Reform Judaism emphasized the Exodus covenant, all but exclusively. The most significant statement of 19<sup>th</sup> Century American Reform, the Pittsburgh Platform, even seems to reject the Genesis covenant: “We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community.”<sup>ii</sup> Instead of peoplehood, our Reform forbears emphasized service to God – performance of those rituals they deemed edifying, ethical living, and the passionate pursuit of social justice, all commanded by God.

But I wonder whether American Reform Jews ever truly left the notion of peoplehood behind. We certainly maintained its negative associations. How many of us grew up being told to keep our voices down in restaurants, lest we reinforce a stereotype that Jews are loud? And those of us old enough to remember 1977 well recall our horror that the “Son of Sam” serial killer turned out to be a Jew, as though we were all implicated.

Even the Pittsburgh Platform does reference “the Jewish people” several times. Nowhere do its authors insist that Jews have a special responsibility to care for one another. However, the existence of a people to pursue “the mission of Israel” was a given for our founders. Then, when a subsequent generation redefined Reform Judaism in 1937’s Columbus Platform, they affirmed peoplehood – that is, the Genesis covenant – while still emphasizing the Exodus emphasis on religious duty: “Though we recognize in the group loyalty of Jews who have become estranged from our religious tradition, a bond which still unites them with us, we maintain that it is by its religion and for its religion that the Jewish people has lived.”<sup>iii</sup>

Traditional Judaism, focused as it is on our obligations to God, the Exodus covenant, nonetheless firmly embraces the interconnectedness of all Jews. The Talmud teaches that, when one Jew commits a transgression, all Jews “cause one another to stumble;” continuing, “This teaches that all Jewish people are responsible for one another.”<sup>iv</sup> Moreover, when 19<sup>th</sup> Century traditionalists responded harshly to the innovations of Reform, they suggested that any change in Jewish religious practice literally cut reformers off from the people of Israel.<sup>v</sup> Early Orthodox rejection of Reform denied even the embrace of Abraham and Sarah’s covenant to those who wouldn’t observe the dictates of Sinai as Orthodox rabbis understand them.

In a sense, those founding Orthodox critics were right, not about Reform Judaism, but about the linkage between our Genesis and Exodus covenants. Only if we are true to our people can we assure the continuation of any covenant. Only

if we follow God's teaching does the Household of Israel have a purpose for self-perpetuation.

With anti-Semitism flaring on the extreme left and the far right, we are obligated to identify strongly with our people, to call out hatred directed at our extended family, particularly when it comes from our own side of the political aisle, whatever that may be. We who have been strangers in Egypt, in Charlottesville, and on too many college campuses, are obligated by Torah to raise our voices in support of all who are persecuted and oppressed.

Living in a state with a tiny Jewish population, we need to be there for one another. The covenant of Abraham and Sarah calls upon each of us to partner with our congregation, the Jewish Federation of Arkansas, Jacobs Camp, Jewish Children's Regional Service, and others to assure that our young people receive an excellent Jewish education and that our elders are embraced in caring community. We sustain this Jewish community when we gather to fulfill the covenant sealed at Sinai, welcoming Shabbat as a congregation, cooking a meal together for the working homeless at Our House, and studying Torah, each of us learning from one another.

Departing from our Reform founders, let us affirm that our Genesis covenant requires Zionist solidarity with the Jewish State. Israel is the fulfillment of a millennial Jewish dream. Israel is the only certain refuge for the oppressed of our people. And Israel needs us; it lives in a very rough neighborhood. And even our Genesis-based Zionism must keep the Exodus covenant, too. We support Israel when we criticize the Jewish State with love, insisting that Israel live up to the ethics and morality of Torah, not to mention its own Declaration of Independence.

On this most sacred of nights every year, each of us contemplates our deeds and misdeeds of the last year, vowing to do better. Repentance, prayer, and righteous giving are fulfillments of the covenant at Sinai, responses to Divine command. Even Yom Kippur, though, is also a fulfillment of the Genesis covenant. We confess, *al chet shechatanu lifanecha*, for the sin **we** have committed. Yom Kippur may seem to address the relationship between each individual and God, but this Holy Day also bespeaks our collective obligations. Remember those words of Talmud? "All Jews are responsible for one another?" We do not sit in our homes and seek forgiveness individually, but come together to offer communal confession, taking responsibility for each other's sins and committing ourselves to everybody's repentance.

If we are heirs to two separate covenants, one with Abraham and Sarah and a second sealed at Sinai, we have received them as conjoined twins. No Torah without the Jewish people. No Jewish people without Torah. And neither without God.<sup>vi</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Dr. Yehuda Kurtzer, “1917: The Idea of Homeland for the Jewish People,” lecture at the Shalom Hartman Institute, Jerusalem, July 4, 2017.

<sup>ii</sup> Pittsburgh Platform, Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1885.

<sup>iii</sup> Columbus Platform, Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1937.

<sup>iv</sup> Shavuot 39a. The internal quotation is from Leviticus 26.

<sup>v</sup> Yehuda Kurtzer’s interpretation of a Responsum of the Chatam Sofer (Rabbi Moshe Sofer), which is found in *Responsa of the Chatam Sofer, Orach Chayim 28*). Kurtzer’s interpretation was offered during the lecture referenced in note 1, above.

<sup>vi</sup> Paraphrasing Genesis Rabbah 22:4, “No man without woman, no woman without man, and neither without God.”