

Why So Much Change at a Historic Reform Temple?

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Congregation B'nai Israel may be called a "Historic Reform Congregation." I wonder, though, whether the phrase, "Historic Reform," isn't an oxymoron, like "serious comedy" or "kosher bacon." If a congregation is primarily "historic," it would likely resist true "reform." The word "reform" means "change." Constant change can get in the way of historic preservation. Being historic and Reform at the same time is not easy.

As a Reform congregation, though, our Temple has undergone significant changes over the years. For example, Bar Mitzvah was once very rare here. Now, both Bar and Bat Mitzvah are popular. The attire of the rabbi on the bimah has evolved: robe or no robe, head covering or none. This *tallit* that I wear would once have been unthinkable here. Some have heard me tell about my own Bar Mitzvah luncheon. In the social hall of a similarly historic Reform congregation in Houston, the main dish was Quiche Lorraine. Quite the rage in 1976, a prime ingredient of Quiche Lorraine is bacon. These days, I don't think you can find a Reform Temple that permits pork or shellfish to cross the sacred threshold.

David Bauman tells me that he had never heard of Selichot, until his daughter Katie, now a rabbi, was asked to lead the music for it. As David now knows well, Selichot is held on the Saturday before Rosh Hashanah, a late-night service of penitential preparation for the High Holy Days, when the Torah covers are changed to white. Selichot is now a traditional Congregation B'nai Israel observance, certainly for a generation of LaFTY members and their families. And yet, some might have objected when it was introduced. After all, in the scheme of things, in a congregation that has been around for more nearly 150 years, Selichot is relatively new. It is not at all historic in the minds of many long-time members. It had not previously been part of Reform Judaism at all. And yet, our beautiful Selichot service, along with my prayer shawl and even the prohibition of pork and shellfish, are now woven into the fabric of our Historic Reform Temple.

Over the years, other innovations have been introduced into our Temple's religious observance, and that evolutionary process cannot be expected to stop now. Perhaps, in time, practices we introduce today will no longer feel like changes. They will be part of our congregation's historic willingness to grow and develop, in the finest tradition of Reform Judaism.

On Rosh Hashanah afternoon, this year as for several years before I arrived, a devoted corps of congregants will gather at the home of Terri Moore and Jeffrey Neuhauser for a ritual called Tashlich. Tashlich is a traditional Jewish custom, held on the banks of a river. With special prayers and the sound of the shofar, bread crumbs are tossed into the river. These crumbs represent our sins. Our hope at this season is that our sins will be taken far away from us as we repent, just as the river takes the bread crumbs out to sea.

Some have described this ritual as positively medieval. It was not historically part of Reform observance, though I know of no sizeable congregation without it today. Some object that it seems like magic, not faith, to expect such a physical act to have an effect. And yet, for many of us, perhaps most of all for children, physical rituals help make our spiritual transformation on the High Holy Days so much more real.

This fall, a major change has come to our Religious School. After a diverse Religious School Committee engaged in a deeply deliberative process, and with the approval of our Temple Board, Hebrew is now included in the Jewish education we offer to all of our students.

In the early years of Reform Judaism, Hebrew was regarded much as Latin is in the Catholic Church, a relic of the past, best discarded. Here in America, few Reform Jews speak or understand Hebrew. Decades ago, an equally small number recognized the letters and could make out the sounds. Yes, the sacred tongue was preserved for certain prayers. Reform congregations always recited the *Shema* and *Kaddish* – and, I suspect, a few others, more than some would admit – in the original language. *Ein K’Eiloheinu* is so well known that I’ve heard some request “songs in English, like *Ein K’Eiloheinu*.”

Prayers in Hebrew, though, conflicted with a prized value of Reform Judaism. We strive to be rational. We want our prayers to make sense to us. For most of us, understanding our prayers requires praying in English. Moreover, nobody likes to feel incompetent. Prayers incomprehensibly rendered in a foreign tongue can make even a Ph.D. feel stupid.

The matter of competence goes both ways, though. Congregation B’nai Israel could have stood still, emphasizing comfort and understanding, never introducing much Hebrew into the service. Doing so would have sent our younger generation into synagogues elsewhere, without the basic ability to participate.

Now, therefore, in a process that began long before I came on the scene, we hold some services with more Hebrew; and others, like tonight's, with less. Our goal is for every member of this congregation to feel at home at Congregation B'nai Israel, each Friday night and on every holy day. Our goal is also to build Jewish competence in our kids, so that they may be at home in any synagogue, anywhere.

One of the necessary steps to meet that goal is to assure that all of our young people learn to read Hebrew. Most will choose that peak celebration of young Jewish life, Bar or Bat Mitzvah, celebrating a level of Jewish competence that surpasses their parents and grandparents. That's a feeling that should be familiar to most of us who look at our kids' high school math homework. Just as we want our kids to be ready for college and professional success, so they need to know that math; we also pray that they will possess the tools to be active, participating Jews, wherever they go. Just as my kids' school needs to teach them material that didn't even exist in my day, so is the Temple required to prepare the next generation differently from those of the past. In the 21st Century, the ability to read Hebrew is critical to Jewish competence.

Change comes slowly in a historic congregation, and that is good. When too much change comes too quickly, those with historic ties to the congregation can genuinely feel disconnected from their own personal history. And yet, a failure to change at all would be a violation of the most basic principle of Reform Judaism.

Our brand of historic Judaism is Reform, not "reformed." We have not finished, nor will we ever conclude, the process of growth that makes our Judaism vibrant. We certainly hope that our own congregation's evolution will be positive for our entire Temple family. But whatever the fate of any particular innovation, let us continue to be a congregation that values its members' historic ties to one another and to their Temple. And let us remain also a Reform congregation, with innovative ritual practices, a diverse membership, and new ideas enriching our religious life with each passing season.

In a moment, David and Richard will sing, *L'dor Vador*, from generation to generation. The song is mostly in English, with only that one Hebrew phrase, *L'dor Vador*; and that's translated, "from generation to generation," continuing, "these lips will praise Your name." Let us always praise God's great and holy name here at Congregation B'nai Israel, be the music intoned to sound of the organ behind the wall or sung boisterously, accompanied by guitar. The lyrics

proclaim: “We are carriers of wisdom, not the first and not the last.” One generation learns from another, a process that flows in both directions. Whether in Hebrew or in English, whether in the style of our parents’ youth or our own or our children’s, our mission remains the same: We are charged to create a meaningful Jewish synagogue home in Central Arkansas, true to our history and responsive to each new generation. And let each innovation, like each tradition, be pleasing in the sight of our God.

Amen.