

# The Reform Advocate

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Jill S. Silverstein, Ed.D., Editor



ROOTS OF  
REFORM  
JUDAISM

*Inspired by the past, embracing today, shaping tomorrow*

# Reform Judaism in Moments of Crisis

**I**t is no understatement that we live in a very complicated and troubled time. Whether we think of politics and government, world peace, the environment, or personal values and ethics, our world is fraught with challenges. But those concerns are not unique to our 2026 world. As we often quote from the book of *Kohelet* (Ecclesiastes), “*Eyn Chadash tachat hashamesh*” – there is nothing new under the sun. Our newest Roots of Reform Advocate is entitled “Reform Judaism in Moments of Crises,” not the crises of today, because this is not a journal about political or controversial issues, but rather it highlights crises we have faced in the past. The articles in this issue look at critical historical moments facing Reform Judaism, and how our rabbis, lay leaders, teachers, or even young people have responded to them.

As Roots of Reform Senior Scholar Dr. Lance Sussman writes in his introductory essay, in over the more than two hundred years since Reform Judaism developed in Germany, and then in the United States in a period of significant social and political upheaval, the world has experienced unbelievable changes and profound events, both good and bad. This issue of Roots of Reform Judaism’s *Reform Advocate* is focused on some of these very significant moments – pre-World War II through the eyes of a child eighty years ago to opening the eyes of our children today, how Reform Judaism has handled the impact of technological change on synagogue education, and the enormous societal changes regarding gender and self-identity. All of these have profoundly shaped and changed our world in general and our Judaism in particular. We hope it will be a thought-provoking issue for you. We strive to make our Roots of Reform Judaism resources, worship, and social media thought-provoking, as well as inspiring.



Wishing you well for 2026.

Devotedly,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ken".

Ken Kanter

# From the Beginning: Reform Judaism and Crisis

*Rabbi Lance J. Sussman, Ph.D.*

Reform Judaism was born in a moment of unprecedented change in Central Europe. The response of the Reform Movement to this initial set of crises plays a defining role in the subsequent history of Judaism's first modern denomination. The most significant of the early challenges faced by Reform involved political emancipation. For centuries, Jews had lived as a "state within a state" in Europe. With the prospect of political enfranchisement, Jews were compelled to transform their community into a religion. For example, Jews in France would become French Jews of the Jewish faith and Jews in a German state would become German Jews of the Jewish faith. This denationalization and de-ethnization of Jewish identity had profound consequences for Reform and the Jewish people. Second, at the moment of enfranchisement, Jews were also compelled to work with the liberal end of the political spectrum because conservatives in early nineteenth-century Europe largely rejected Jewish emancipation. Reform aligned itself with the liberal camp, often placing it against others in a given society and sometimes within the Movement itself. Finally, Reform had to define itself in response to modern culture, which often created a crisis of tradition within the Movement.

The response to emancipation transformed Jewish identity in much of Central and Western Europe. Jews came to see themselves as a "faith-based" community and not as the descendants of a nation sent into exile by the Romans in the first century who longed to return to their ancestral biblical homeland. As one early American rabbi said, Charleston, South Carolina was now his Jerusalem, and his synagogue was his Temple. Beliefs in a national Messiah and the resurrection of the dead on the Mount of Olives were also abandoned. Viewed historically, it is not surprising that, when the Zionist movement began to form later in the nineteenth century, Reform broadly rejected

the idea that the Jews were a nation who needed to separate themselves from other nations. Jews, they maintained, were now not only a "light to the nations", but members of those adopted national communities. Belief took precedence over ethnicity. The vernacular, not Hebrew, was the language of the Jews, and culturally isolating practices like dietary laws and indoor head covering for men were discarded.

The successes of the Zionist movement and the establishment of the State of Israel resulted in the longest crisis in the history of the Reform movement. No other issue challenged the internal unity and cultural content of Reform Judaism like Zionism did. Ultimately, Reform experienced a dialectal process which produced a synthesis of the older Reform with the new realities of Jewish life. On the other hand, the de-ethnization of Reform Judaism led to a tepid response to the issue of rescue during the Holocaust and a major schism within Reform with the adoption of Statehood as the primary goal of post-World War II Jewish life. The question of the meaning of nationalism versus the embrace of prophetic Judaism has sparked a serious crisis and generational split in contemporary Reform Judaism today. Is Reform primarily an expression of ethical monotheism or part of a realpolitik nationalist defense of the Jewish people?

Reform Judaism's initial embrace of liberalism has largely been sustained within the Movement. One study suggested that Reform rabbis are the most liberal group of clergy in the United States, surpassing even the Unitarians! On the other hand, not all Reform Jews are political liberals. In my childhood, I remember tensions over the Civil Rights movement, supporting voting rights in the South but not residential integration in the North, and then rejecting Black nationalism. At the same time, the war in Vietnam exposed deep splits in the pews of Reform synagogues. By contrast, the

national Movement remained steadfastly committed to supporting liberal views of both conflicts.

The demands of civil enfranchisement and political liberalism have both deepened the challenge of continuity with tradition in Reform Judaism. Reform's fundamental belief in "progressive revelation," to change Judaism in accordance with the demands of the time, has empowered Reform Judaism to deal creatively with the realities of mixed marriage, to a host of gender issues, from the ordination of women as rabbis to the normalization of homosexuality in Reform Jewish life. At the same, traditional practices such as the wearing of *kippot* and *tallitot* have been reintroduced in Reform and both Confirmation and Bar/Bat/Bet Mitzvah can take place under the same roof.

Reform Judaism was born at a moment of crisis in Jewish life and continues to engage in crisis management

on a regular basis. What does tradition ask of us? What does modernity demand of us? What is everlasting in Judaism and what is malleable? These are the questions at the heart of the Reform Movement. How we move forward combining Jewish authenticity, cultural adaptivity, and compassion continues to define who we are and who we want to be!



**Lance J. Sussman, Ph.D.**, is Rabbi Emeritus of Reform Congregation Keneseth Israel (Elkins Park, PA), past Chair of the Board of Gratz College and Senior Scholar of Roots of Reform. He recently published a trilogy of his work, *Portrait of an American Rabbi* (2023), *Portrait of a Reform Rabbi* (2024) and *Portrait of a Rabbi-Historian* (2025) with his writing partner Lynda Barness, and they are now working on a biography of Rabbi Joseph Krauskopf (1858–1923).

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# Learning From Crisis

Rabbi Jan Katzew

Jewish education, like Judaism itself, has had a complicated, ambivalent relationship with crises. The Pesach Haggadah, the quintessential Jewish educational text, emphatically states: **חייב אדם לראות את עצמו כמו שיצא ממצרים – כאילו הוא יצא ממצרים** – A person is obligated to see themselves as though they had come out of Egypt. We remind ourselves of our humble origins as slaves so that we will appreciate our status as free people and accept the responsibility to facilitate the freedom of all humans. A lachrymose perspective on Jewish history teaches about a people that has endured by surviving perpetual crises. Shimon Ravidowicz epitomized this tragic view by describing the Jews as “an ever-dying people”.

The field of Jewish education has internalized and espoused this tragic perspective by composing more Holocaust-oriented curricula than lessons on any other subject in Jewish life and thought. Additionally, the history of the State of Israel is frequently taught from 1948 to 1956 to 1967 to 1973, and now to October 7<sup>th</sup>, i.e., from war to war. Consequently, crisis can become the *leitmotif* of Jewish learning, the (his) story we Jews tell ourselves to ourselves and to our children. However, there are alternative educational options that make the story of Judaism and the Jewish people more complex, more nuanced, more joyful, and arguably above all, more hopeful. The obverse side of the coin that says, “the Jews are an ever-dying people” reads “the Jews are an ever-living people”. This claim of Jewish immortality leads to the question: What is the source, the secret of the Jews’ resilience? Jean Paul Sartre, Karl Marx, and Mark Twain are but three of the many luminaries who have pondered and reflected on the perdurance of the Jewish people. Adaptive leadership and the ability to learn from crisis are two interrelated qualities that have facilitated the life and growth of the Jewish people.

The modern Hebrew word for crisis, **משבר** (*mashber*), had a profoundly different meaning in the Bible, where it signified a birthstool. **וַיֹּאמֶר אֶלְיוֹנָה בְּהָאָמֵר חִזְקִיָּהוּ יוֹם צָרָה – וְתֹכַחַתָּה וְנִגְזַחַתָּה כִּי יוֹם הַזֶּה קַיְבָּא אֶל-בְּנֵי עַד-מִשְׁבָּר וְלֹכֶד אַזְן לְלִבָּה**: They said to him, “Thus said Hezekiah: This day is a day of distress, of chastisement, and of disgrace. The babes have reached the **birthstool**, but the strength to give birth is lacking”. (2 Kings 19:3) Fast forward to 2004 and the Stanford economist Paul Romer who responded to the challenge presented by countries whose level of education exceeded that of the United States by saying, “a crisis is a terrible thing to waste”. A crisis is also always an opportunity. A crisis is a birthstool, a platform to launch ideas, a chance to acknowledge that history need not be destiny. In education, a crisis is a time to give birth and to recalibrate the balance between tradition and innovation.

Any one of the crises that the Jewish people have faced over more than three millennia could have spelled the end of Judaism and the Jewish people, but none of them did. Instead, each crisis led to creative expressions of rebirth. The destruction of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple in Jerusalem led to the efflorescence of Rabbinic Judaism in Yavneh, codified in the form of the *Mishnah* and eventually the Jerusalem and Babylonian *Talmudim*. Responding to the political, social, and scientific challenges of modernity, Reform Judaism was born in a school founded by Israel Jacobson in 1810 in Seesen, Germany.

We recently commemorated the 30<sup>th</sup> yahrzeit of Yitzhak Rabin, who shed light and insight on Jewish responses to crisis.

The joy of the Jewish people is always mixed with sorrow – the *huppah* with the broken glass underneath it [at the end of a wedding]. The dedication of a new house leaves an unfinished piece of plaster as a remembrance of the destruction of the Temples.

The Passover Seder includes both *haroset* and *maror* [the sweet and the bitter]. In Israel, the tears of Yom *HaZikaron* [Memorial Day] touch the circles of dancers on Yom *HaAtzmaut* [Independence Day] (since they come one after the other). The spark in our eyes may have dimmed, but not the spark of our life and faith. And it is precisely this faith that will carry us to the coming days – to days of memory and love, towards days of peace.

Rabin's words were eerily prescient, in anticipation of his own death at the hands of a Jewish extremist assassin, a crisis through which we are living today.

The recent Covid pandemic is a prime example of a how crisis and a birthstool coexist. More than five years after the pandemic began, students, parents, and teachers are still paying a heavy price educationally. Speak to almost any child, any parent, and any teacher and they will attest to some form of arrested development. The effects of Covid on the North American educational system, in general, and on the Jewish educational system, in particular, are profound. Torah teaches that it is not good for a person to be alone. (Genesis 2:18) Covid forced people to be isolated, and isolation resulted in social, emotional, and educational injury. The educational crisis Covid has

caused is real and ongoing. And yet, in the last five years, there have been substantial advancements in educational technology that promote individualized learning, enable teachers to assess student outcomes with greater fidelity and accuracy, provide students with immediate feedback, and give parents the ability to learn with and from their children. We did not choose to endure a pandemic, but once we were faced with a crisis, we did choose to generate new ways of teaching and learning. What began as a crisis has spawned an educational industry. It is practically a given that every generation of the Jewish people will encounter crises. Our individual and collective responsibility is to respond to each crisis, to build on a legacy of creativity, and to give new life a chance to thrive, prepared to surmount the next crisis.



**Rabbi Jan Katzow** is a prominent figure in Jewish education and thought. He has served as a professor at Hebrew Union College and has held significant roles within the Reform Movement. In retirement, he continues to engage with the community through various educational initiatives.



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# Into a New Era: Opportunities for Reform Judaism to Re-Root

*Rabbis Lauren Ben-Shoshan & Evon J. Yakar*

Once upon a time, not so long ago, in a kitchen not so far away, a little boy watched his mother make brisket for their family's holiday dinner. Every important holiday, the boy watched his mother cut the ends off the brisket, season it, and place it carefully into the pan for roasting. When the little boy grew up, he continued to cut the ends off the brisket in preparation for cooking for each holiday. When he became a parent, and it came time for him to show his own little girl how to cook the family's brisket recipe, he showed his daughter how to slice the ends off the brisket. "But why do we do this?" his daughter asked. "It's the way that Bubbe always did it! Let's call Bubbe and ask," replied her father. When they called his mother, she replied simply: "I cut the ends off the brisket because the pan was too small."

In these days of immense technological and societal change, we are no longer worried about the proverbial pan being too small. Not so long ago, the primary work of rabbis was to open congregants' minds and hearts to new-to-them information and insights, and to lift up the wisdom of our ancient tradition, making it relevant and meaningful. There was a time when Reform rabbis may have been the most Jewishly educated in their communities. This is no longer the reality. Today, our access to information, even our access to a set of tools to curate this information, is no longer limited to a few scholars and clergy. Indeed, we are entering a rapidly evolving informational and experiential ecosystem. In response to what is, and feels like, a massive transition, it is our opportunity to re-examine, and perhaps, even re-establish the roots of how we live, that we may uplift, access, and celebrate our rich Jewish tradition, and strengthen the Jewish communal reality. The polycrisis of our moment, the intersection

and amplification of the economic, environmental, social, and technological crises concurrent in our time, demands a Reform Jewish response.

The popularization of Reform Judaism was heavily influenced by the Second Industrial Revolution. The American landscape in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century provided fertile ground for Reform ideals of autonomy and choice to be planted. Rapid building, access to electricity, and newly envisioned and constructed transportation systems were resources that the nascent American Reform Jewish community leveraged to establish roots. Reform Judaism grew significantly as a part of this revolution, maybe even as a result of it, thanks to bold and decisive vision.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise's leadership crafted and cultivated the concept of "Minhag America", the unique expression of North American Judaism at this time. It provided the foundation for the American Jewish practice that is familiar to us today. Rabbi Wise envisioned not just the community that built one of the great cathedral synagogues, Plum Street Temple, but also Hebrew Union College, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (now the Union for Reform Judaism). In his article "A Bold Centrist: Remembering Isaac M. Wise", Rabbi Lance Sussman writes, "He [Wise] invented the late Friday night service to help preserve the historic character of the Jewish Sabbath and opposed the Sunday Sabbath movement late in his career."<sup>\*</sup> With this, Wise held to the historic Jewish identity while embracing the American rhythms and patterns. From technical changes like worship times, to adaptive leadership changes, Wise's efforts

<sup>\*</sup> Rabbi Lance Sussman, March 27, 2019, <https://reformjudaism.org/blog/bold-centrist-remembering-isaac-m-wise-his-200th-birthday>

wove together Jewish life and practice with American behaviors and culture. What was, for many, crises in the Industrial Revolution, became fertile ground for the roots of Reform Judaism.

Today, we face a transition point from this historic past. With artificial intelligence and instantaneous access to information, this technological revolution brings new challenges for our communities and for society, *writ large*. As Rabbi Danny Schiff, DHL., writes in his book *Judaism in a Digital Age: An Ancient Tradition Confronts a Transformative Era*,

The foundational ideas of the Conservative and Reform movements were crafted as cutting-edge concepts for a societal and intellectual milieu that existed when horses were the dominant mode of transportation. It is, however, unrealistic to expect that ideas derived from a nineteenth-century response to modernity will be well-calibrated to a vastly transformed epoch with self-driving cars controlled by artificial intelligence.<sup>†</sup>

Inspired by the visionary revolutionaries who planted the roots of Reform Judaism that we practice today, we too, need to find and adhere to a persuasive vision for the next “Minhag America”. How Reform Judaism, and even Judaism as a whole, responds in this polycrisis moment will write and re-root that *minhag*.

Access to learning and digital life is at our fingertips. Flexibility of thought and strategy in the changing landscape are vital for crafting a vision for the next stage of spiritual life, but also for doing the hard work to create these new realities. Reform Judaism is particularly well-suited to imagine strategies and adapt to this moment. To do so, we lean on our traditions’ guidance to discern what questions we truly face in this moment. Among the key questions is how to strike a balance between communal and traditional obligation with the personal autonomy of choice — cherished Reform values. Eugene Borowitz’s concept of the Autonomous Jewish Self, expresses this delicate balance. It describes a modern, free, adult Jew who stands at the intersection of three fundamental, self-chosen

covenants: with God, with the Jewish people, and with one’s own self. As autonomy and individualism grew in both favor and reality, a sense of covenantal community needed re-grounding, and Borowitz’s concept was and is a response to this crisis.

With a revolution of technology, information, and communication unfolding, the Jewish way of covenant is also evolving. We can find as deep a meaning on Zoom as we find in the sanctuary. We can discover beautiful Torah on social media as we encounter it in the classroom. As we evolve into this re-rooted *minhag*, we want to attend to the same three areas of covenantal living that Borowitz emphasized, namely, human connection (self), social connection (peoplehood), and our connection to the mystery of creation (God).

As co-founders and co-rabbis of the nascent Tahoe Jewish Community (TJC), we strive to be part of this response. The laboratory for these emerging connections can already be seen in the ways new communities — ours among them — are re-imagining what covenant looks like in embodied, digital, and ecological space. Leveraging the tools of technology, we are able to connect with a geographically diverse community. TJC is cultivating a strong sense of place, as we recognize our community members’ commitment to being in the Northern Sierra. This is both a lifestyle choice and a yearning for awe. The work we are honored to engage in taps the fountain of Jewish wisdom as our shared guide through living in the mountains. This is more and different than a virtual presence because the magic of our community is the experience of being together in the same physical space, whether in our sanctuaries, on our trails, or on our local slopes. The human connection is a building block for the social connection, which in turn, lays the foundation for a connection to the Mystery of Creation.

### **Human Connection (Self)**

Martin Buber’s *I and Thou* offers a timeless reminder that genuine relationship is not transactional but transformational. “When two people relate to each other authentically and humanly,” Buber wrote, “God

<sup>†</sup> Schiff, Danny. *Judaism in a Digital Age: An Ancient Tradition Confronts a Transformative Era*. Springfield, NJ: Charles A. Rothschild Publishing, 2021.

is the electricity that surges between them.”<sup>‡</sup> In the age of algorithms and automation, Reform Judaism must reclaim the sacred art of encounter — what Buber calls the *I-Thou* relationship — as an antidote to the *I-It* relationships that dominate much of digital life.

Buber’s theology of dialogue insists that every human being is a potential point of divine encounter, that holiness is not reserved for the synagogue or study hall alone, but can be discovered in the space between souls.<sup>§</sup> With screens mediating so much of human experience, cultivating moments of unmediated presence — prayer in community, compassionate listening, storytelling, touch, shared meals — becomes both spiritual resistance and spiritual renewal. No matter where we are located, our vision for American Judaism must lift up those practices that reawaken the capacity to see and be seen.

### Communal Connection (Peoplehood)

In an era when choice is infinite, but commitment is fragile, community becomes not just a social structure, but a spiritual practice. The next Reform covenant must affirm both the dignity of the individual and the indispensability of belonging. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *z”l*, warned that “a world of self-chosen identities without shared moral bonds risks dissolving into loneliness and fragmentation.”<sup>¶</sup> The Reform Movement’s emphasis on inclusivity, lay leadership, and collaborative co-creation offers fertile ground for a covenantal renewal — one where community is not only inherited, but built, day-by-day, through shared experiences, purpose, and sacred accountability. It is as much about the process as the outcome. It is about people not programs.

Reform Judaism can lead the way by exemplifying what Mordecai Kaplan called “the civilization of the Jewish people,”<sup>\*\*</sup> a collective project that thrives only

when personal meaning and communal responsibility meet in dynamic tension. Our task is to restore *kehillah kedoshah* — holy community — as the vessel through which the Divine is made manifest in human relationship.

### Connection to the Mystery of Creation (God)

The third element of covenantal connection is not just between humans and communities, but between humanity and creation itself. In recent decades, Jewish thinkers have reawakened Jewish eco-theology, recognizing that our covenant extends beyond humanity to the Earth that sustains us. Rabbi Ellen Bernstein, founder of *Shomrei Adamah*, calls for “a Judaism that situates the human story within the larger story of creation.”<sup>††</sup>

To re-root Jewish life is to remember that Torah is also embodied in Creation itself. While we, in Tahoe, are blessed with daily reminders in the trees, the rivers, and the mountains, the Reform Judaism of tomorrow needs to embrace the spiritual requirement of being in a covenant of reciprocity with the living world. As Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin writes, “Tikkun olam begins with *tikkun adamah* — healing the earth is inseparable from healing ourselves.”<sup>‡‡</sup>

While our mountains shape our *minhag*, communities in cities, deserts, and plains each have their own topography of connection — geographic, cultural, and spiritual — from which to grow. This creation connection calls us to design Jewish life that is grounded, literally. We need to have Shabbat dinners that spill outdoors, prayer that listens as much as it speaks, and rituals that honor the cycles of the natural world. In re-establishing our intimacy with creation, we rediscover the humility and wonder that stand at the heart of all authentic spiritual life. Recreation, which is at our literal fingertips here in Tahoe, can be a strenuous

<sup>‡</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970), 89.

<sup>§</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>¶</sup> Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (London: Continuum, 2002), 88.

<sup>\*\*</sup> Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2010), 178.

<sup>††</sup> Ellen Bernstein, *The Splendor of Creation: A Biblical Ecology* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005), 12.

<sup>‡‡</sup> Nina Beth Cardin, “The Ecology of Holiness,” in *Jewish Theology in Our Time: A New Generation Explores the Foundations and Future of Jewish Belief*, ed. Elliot N. Dorff (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2011), 267.

hike to a peak and reading a book on the beach. These are just some ways we continually work towards re-creating our world. It is the community in which we want to live that we co-create with our members every day. When we re-root our *minhag* in human, communal, and creation connection, we will find that the pan was never too small — only waiting for us to imagine a larger table.

Responding to crises as Reform Jews is well within our wheelhouse. It is how our Movement, our collection of cherished values and principles, took hold. This time is different only because we are different from past generations. We will continue to cherish Shabbat and Creation. We will continue to tell our story and wrestle with its commentary. And we will continue to feel a bond of peoplehood. When we do, we not only will have responded to our evolving reality, but more importantly, we will be continuing to write that next *Minhag America*.



*Rabbis Lauren Ben-Shoshan & Evon J. Yakar are co-rabbis for the Tahoe Jewish Community, the collaboration between Temple Bat Yam and Northern Tahoe Hebrew Congregation, creatively serving the Lake Tahoe Basin Jewish Community.*



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# My Story of LGBTQ and Reform Judaism

*Rabbi Allen B. Bennett*

One of the challenging issues the Reform Movement faced in the past had been its position on the acceptance and ordination of LGBTQIA+ candidates into rabbinical school. My experience as a gay man entering Hebrew Union College (HUC) in 1968 was that, if I wanted to be accepted to seminary and ordained, I had to conceal my sexuality. In the Jewish world today, all the non-Orthodox seminaries admit and ordain candidates who identify as LGBTQIA+, and there is movement in that direction even among some mainstream Orthodox circles. The Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) has been clearly on record for at least a couple of decades as welcoming to and supportive of LGBTQIA+ rabbis into its ranks. That welcome is a work in progress, as the CCAR wrestles with its past in terms of placement processes, conflict resolution between rabbis and congregations, and efforts to place the CCAR squarely and clearly in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The contemporary issues that LGBTQIA+ rabbis and cantors face now were nowhere on the radar when I began the process of becoming a rabbi. Between then and now the U.S. Supreme court legalized same sex marriage everywhere in the country. But that hard-won victory is now in jeopardy. HUC has admitted and ordained transgender candidates, and some member congregations of the URJ have welcomed transgender clergy into their ranks. But it has not been easy, and the fight is clearly not over.

The issues that LGBTQIA+ people face are not, and never were, restricted to Jews. We Jews have enjoyed our hard-fought rights, and we have often led the fights for those rights across the country. But it would be naïve to say that we have nothing to fear given the current political climate. So, it is worth looking back from where we have come to get some perspective on where we are at the moment and where we will need to remain vigilant and active.

I was admitted to the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati in 1968. We were the largest class ever admitted to the College-Institute, probably because it was during the Viet Nam War and being a seminary student was one way to avoid being drafted into the American military. Part of the admission process included a psychological screening test intended to weed out homosexual candidates. The way to be admitted if one were gay was to lie on the test, which many gay students did at the time. I had not yet “officially” come out, so I considered my evasion on the test to be a minor inconvenience rather than a life-altering lie.

The subject of homosexuality never came up in those days. The faculty never spoke of it – unless asked directly – and the one time I asked Dr. Petuchowski about his “opinion” of homosexuality, he said that he “took the Biblical view, that is, that homosexuals should be stoned until they are dead.” Some of my classmates and I were aware of each other’s gayness during our student years. Even so, we rarely, if ever, spoke of it with one another. The subject was never raised in any of our “human relations” classes, the only likely place, other than potentially in Talmud classes. I recall an odd exchange with my thesis advisor, Dr. Norman Mirsky, who, during one of our consultation sessions on the thesis casually said to me that he was sorry that I could not write about a subject that he knew was of interest to me and that I had had to settle for writing about something “made up” instead. He never said what that other subject might have been, and I never asked. Such was the atmosphere at the school.

Between my second and third year at HUC, I took a year off “to find myself”. It was during that year that I came out to my parents, even though I had been struggling with my sexual and gender identity since high school. Neither they nor I ever breathed a word about

this once I returned to school after the year abroad. I did enter a course of psychoanalysis when back in Cincinnati, unbeknownst to anyone except my parents. We all knew that even hinting at the possibility of homosexuality would be grounds for dismissal from the school.

I was ordained in 1974, still in the closet. At ordination, a classmate came up to me as we were lining up to go into the ordination service, and he whispered into my ear, “Don’t ever come out. It would kill any chance you’ll ever have of having a successful rabbinical career.” He stayed in the closet for a long time after we were ordained, unable to shake the fear of the negative repercussions that coming out would have.

I finally came out publicly in 1978, the first rabbi ever to do so publicly, at least in the United States. The immediate reaction was silence. Not a peep from classmates, or HUC, or the CCAR (national rabbinical association), or the UAHC (Union of American Hebrew Congregations, now the URJ). Then I started to hear from higher-ups in the Jewish world who loudly – but privately – condemned me for my action for any number of reasons. But much more importantly was the reaction of gay and lesbian rabbinical students across the denominations, as well as from already-ordained rabbis. Many were desperate to talk to another gay rabbi about the trials they continued to face either in school or in their active rabbinates.

It took several more years for the CCAR to reverse its position on whether one could be a rabbi and be openly gay. HUC (the seminary), followed suit relatively shortly thereafter, which meant that one could no longer be denied admission based on one’s gender or sexual identity. But until then, things were still pretty scary for HUC students. The reason became crystal clear in an unexpected way when, at a convention shortly after I came out, I was confronted by HUC President, Alfred Gottschalk, *z”l*. In the presence of one of the other school administrators, he said to me, “If I had known then what I know now, I would never have ordained you.” Obviously, the fear that HUC students had of being expelled if they were discovered continued to be very real.

Likewise with the placement process: I didn’t have placement issues when I was ready to be ordained, as I was the only one in my class who did not want placement in a congregation. I had already been accepted to a Clinical Pastoral Education Residency in Rochester, Minnesota, and so did not have to face questions in an interview that might have disqualified me on the basis of my gayness. Some years later (after I had moved to California and had come out), on the one occasion when I was seeking placement through our system, I met with the then Placement Director. He flat out said to me that he thought my being paired up with a small congregation in the East Bay (near San Francisco) was perfect because “I hate you and I hate them.”

In the intervening years much has changed for the better. HUC admits and ordains openly LGBTQIA+ candidates, the CCAR welcomes us as members, and URJ congregations (among other Jewish institutions and organizations) employ us with far less of a challenge than in the early days. Hebrew Union College (HUC) has also made some strides in welcoming and supporting transgender students, whereas in the past, trans students were even less likely than gay or lesbian candidates to be considered for admission or ordination. Union for Reform Judaism’s (URJ) member congregations officially employ LGBTQIA+ rabbis and cantors, as do (many) congregations and institutions in the Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Renewal Movements. This is much less so among Orthodox synagogues and other institutions, but there is some slight progress even there. While some challenges remain, we have come a very long way.



*Rabbi Allen B. Bennett retired from the active rabbinate in 2012 and has continued his interfaith and other social justice activities since that time.*

# Pre-World War II: A Bar Mitzvah's Perspective

Rabbi Ken Kanter

Sometimes you find something very special and deeply important in the most unusual of places. Sixteen years ago, at Congregation Micah in suburban Nashville, Tennessee where I had the honor of serving as founding rabbi, my father, Julian Kanter, celebrated his second Bar Mitzvah, a tradition in Judaism when a person reaches the age of 83. In Psalm 90, verse 10, it says that a person lives three score years and ten, or given strength, fourscore years. Dad lived to be 85. At his second Bar Mitzvah, he brought with him an old and rather threadbare red velvet bag with gold fringe around it. Inside was his Bar Mitzvah tallit, last used seventy years earlier. That was not surprising, as my father kept lots of historical things important to him. What was unusual, however, was that along with the discolored and frayed tallit, were five faded, yellowed index cards, his "d'var torah" or sermon for the congregation. While the articles in our Roots of Reform Judaism's journal, the *Reform Advocate* are usually not personal or autobiographical, this article is unusual in its personal nature, yet totally appropriate in its theme, "Reform Judaism in Moments of Crisis". I think you will see why.

My father celebrated his Bar Mitzvah in 1938, the two weeks after "Kristallnacht", the "night of broken glass", in Germany, when the Nazi party and Hitler Youth perpetrated one of the worst pogroms against Jewish communities all over Germany, Austria, and the Sudetenland, destroying Jewish-owned homes, more than 7000 businesses, and 1400 synagogues, hospitals, and schools, with more than 30,000 Jewish men arrested and sent to concentration camps. His sermon, the words of a thirteen-year-old in a world about to change in ways no scholar, teacher, or rabbi could have guessed, are amazingly prescient. In this issue about the role of Judaism in general, and Reform in particular, his words seemed very appropriate to share with you.

My grandparents lived on the northside of Chicago. They were members, at the time of Dad's bar mitzvah, of a prominent Conservative synagogue, Anshe Emet, led by the distinguished Rabbi Solomon Goldman. While I cannot share how my father prepared for his bar mitzvah, especially at this fraught time, I can share that he was influenced by the events half-way around the world in Germany and Austria, where my paternal great-grandparents had lived.

In many ways, my father and his friends and family lived in a blessed world. They lived in a lovely neighborhood, went to excellent public or private schools, had parents of means, and lives of comfort. Yet, as you read my father's teenaged words, you will see that even then, before

the war and before most American Jews had any idea about the terrible times for Jews in Europe, he was concerned and wanted his family and friends in his synagogue to be aware and prepared.

In 1938 he wrote:

*Today I am being Bar-Mitzvoh [sic]. Most of you are probably wondering what I think about on this day, many of you may even think that I believe that I have today reached manhood. But you are wrong, for I do not believe that I have reached manhood on this, my Bar-Mitzvoh day. I never did think so, and I do not think so today, because all my friends and cousins who have become Bar-Mitzvoh have told me, that although they were conscious of many new lines of thought, they knew they had not yet*



reached manhood. And I also know that I am not a man today, nor will I be a man, until I take on some responsibility: not just the responsibility for my education and my conduct, but the responsibility of giving to my parents and grandparents some happiness and the obligation of relieving them of a great part of their burden. Then, and then only, will I know that I have become a man.

Perhaps you grown-ups do not give us sufficient credit for serious thought, but in these troubled times all of us, and that means the young people too, are much more conscious of conditions all around us than we ever have been, and we are preparing for the time when we will step into public life and civic relationships. We are preparing for this by going to Hebrew school and Sunday school and familiarizing ourselves with our Jewish history and literature. In this way we are getting ready to face Jewish problems and cope with them in a dignified and intelligent fashion.

If we Jews want to live in peace, free from persecution, we must conduct ourselves and behave in such a fashion as to leave no room for criticism. The finest and simplest way of achieving this behavior is by following the basic principles given to us in the Ten Commandments, transcribed by Moses, for in following these simple rules of conduct we cannot be guilty of breaking moral or ethical laws of mankind. They are the basic rules of conduct for all civilized peoples, these Ten Commandments and the whole Torah which Rabbi Hillel condensed into one principle: "That which is hateful to you, do not do unto others."

For myself, I believe that if we follow these rules conscientiously, no man and no government have the right to ridicule us. In view of present conditions, it may seem Utopian to believe in a time when we Jews will be at peace with ourselves and with the world; a time when we will be permitted to live advantageously among friends and strangers. I believe it will come to pass, and I hope it will come to pass within the lifetime of my parents and grandparents. Even as it is written in my Haftorah [sic]: "Then the whole world and not only the synagogue will be the House of God. So said the Eternal: The Heavens are my throne and the earth my footstool. What manner of house can you build for me and where is the place for my rest?"

For my part, I hope to be able to help in the building of this better house of Judaism . . . I am grateful to you, dear parents and grandparents not only for

showing me how to live my life as a good Jew, but also for showing me how to be a good American. Amen

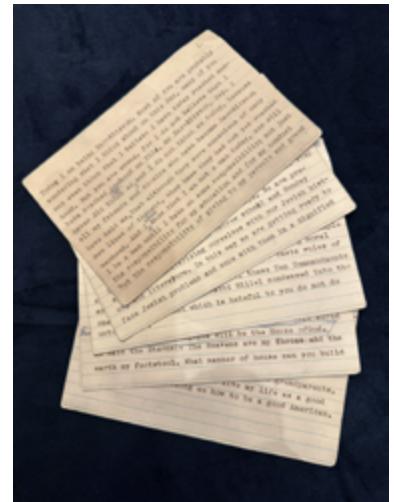
While much of Dad's speech sounds like the "wisdom" of every thirteen year old young man and woman, the insight that they are not really adults, that they will only meet a level of maturity through education and responsibility for their actions, and learning about their faith and its teachings, Dad (with his parents and rabbinical advisors, I would guess!) was clearly very aware of the world in which he and they lived, that they were much more conscious of the "troubled times" and "conditions all around us." He wrote that only through Jewish studies in history and literature would they be ready to "face the Jewish problems and cope with them in a dignified and intelligent fashion."

I think Dad's most profound words were found near the end. *"If we Jews want to live in peace, free from persecution, we must conduct ourselves and behave in such a fashion as to leave no room for criticism . . . If we follow these rules, no man and no government has the right to ridicule us. In view of present conditions, it may seem Utopian to believe in a time when we Jews will be at peace with ourselves and with the world."*

Neither Dad nor his parents or grandparents lived to see such a world. And with the difficult and challenging days in which we live, nor have we. But Dad's lesson still guides us, that we should all strive to help in the building of this better house of Judaism, striving to be good Jews and good Americans.



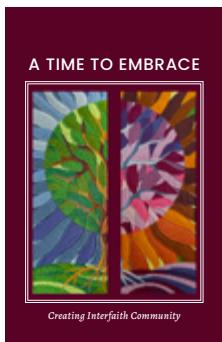
Rabbi Ken Kanter is the Rabbinical Director for Roots of Reform Judaism.



# December 2025

## Rabbi's Board Report

It appears never to be the right time to write my board report. My original plan had been to quote the late Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, Lord Jonathan Sacks, who, several years ago wrote; "Chanukah is about the freedom to be true to what we believe without denying the freedom of those who believe otherwise. It's about lighting our candle, while not being threatened by or threatening anyone else's candles." While I still believe in his words, the tragic events this December in Sydney make that hopeful statement of faith a very difficult one to firmly endorse. What made it even more difficult is that just two weeks before, Toni and I walked near that famous beach, having dinner with two of my former students from HUC, one who is the senior rabbi of the Northshore Congregation of Sydney, and the other from Florida, who was visiting Australia with her family. The tragedy of Sydney is made even more so because unlike the US, Australia has very strict gun legislation. That same weekend, several students were shot at Brown University. Our prayers are with all their families and communities.



These past months, we have been pleased with the response to the publication of our new book, **A Time to Embrace**. It is already being used around the country by schools, clergy associations, and congregations, including my synagogue's (Temple Oseh Shalom SC) Adult Education series this year.

I have heard from other congregations who are also interested in using it for their Adult Education classes. It is important that you share this important book with your congregations and rabbis, as the necessity of understanding different faith communities is even greater in these trying times. I look forward to sharing copies of this important book at the CCAR convention in San Francisco in March. Many thanks for all of those who made this book possible, especially its authors, Rev. Dr. Caleb Gilmore from Knoxville, TN, and our

RRJ Board Member, Rabbi David Bloom, from Louisville, KY. We are especially happy to announce that the first three of our upcoming podcasts supporting this book have been recorded under the direction of our University of Cincinnati media intern, Drew Lambert. Caleb and David came to Cincinnati to take advantage of Drew's expertise in CCM's newly completed ESPN television studio at the University. We envision six or eight podcasts in the next year, some with Caleb and David, and others with guest scholars joining them.

Our next issue of the *Advocate* will be out in late January. It is entitled "Reform Judaism in Moments of Crisis," highlighting both historical challenges and contemporary issues from a variety of perspectives. We are greatly pleased that our authors are experienced rabbis and teachers, as well as young, visionary authors.

**Upcoming projects and accomplishments:** We are moving forward with our new illustrated book of Torah stories for children, authored by Rabbi Craig Lewis of Chattanooga, and illustrated by Rabbi Jean Eglinton of Tampa. This book is a result of a request from RRJ Board Member Rabbi David Bloom, to create a book of short stories for each Torah *parasha* (portion), aimed at family Tot Shabbat services. We are especially thankful that David's family is supporting this new effort and anticipating a summer publication.

A second children's resource nearing completion is a Passover Haggadah for our youngest family members and primary school children. Perhaps you will remember our "Ani the Ant" children's books, written by Rabbi Marshal Klaven and illustrated by Christina Ebert. They are the creators of this Haggadah for these same age groups. What makes this unique is that it will be a two-sided book - when opened from "left to right" it is for the little children, and right to left, for the older children. It will be available for Passover, 5786-2026.

A recent development is the re-creation and revision of our **A Time to Share** book. Thanks to the Rockwern Family Foundation, Rabbi Rachael Miller from Congregation Emanuel in Atlanta will author the updated version of this



booklet. Rabbi Miller's creative efforts will make this book an accessible, family-friendly resource to introduce holidays and home celebrations. This will be the newest book to be added to our Rockwern Family Resource collection.

Upcoming announcements include several new and very generous grants, new programs, and continuing relationship building. Our long-in-process *A Time to*

**Serve** is moving forward, and we are grateful to RRJ board member Chuck Udell for his support, and excellent idea to suggest we publish this book in 2026, the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our country.

All that we accomplish is due to the RRJ team, our Executive Committee, and you, our Board Members. With your gifts of time and generosity, we will build on the root values of Reform for an inspiring future.

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## Welcome to New RRJ Board Members



**Ellen Dietrick** a resident of Massachusetts, is one of our new RRJ Board members. She brings decades of experience in Jewish education and engagement, along with a deep passion for making Jewish life meaningful for families. Ellen's leadership extends nationally, including Advocacy Chair on the board of the Early Childhood Educators of Reform Judaism and the Jim Joseph Leading Educators Online Fellow, building a national online learning community for Jewish early childhood educators. She is a graduate of the Covenant-JECEI Early Childhood Leadership Fellowship and the Covenant Fellowship for Early Childhood Leadership. By day, she is the Senior Director of Learning and Engagement at Temple Beth Shalom in Needham.



A professional photographer and author, **Ashley Merlin Gold** was born and raised in New Orleans and graduated from Lehigh University with a B.A. in Journalism. Her first book, *Statuesque New Orleans*, was published in 2010. Ashley's photography career has spanned from newspaper photojournalism to large-scale installations at hospitals and nursing homes. Ashley currently serves as Board Chair of Jewish Family Service of Greater New Orleans and is a Board member of the Jewish Federation of Greater New Orleans, which honored her with the Herbert and Margot Garon Young Leadership Award in 2017. Ashley and her husband, Scott, live in New Orleans with their son.



**Deborah Haimes** of Chicago, Illinois is a marketing professional currently specializing in pharma marketing for oncology and rare disease to support HCPs and patients. She grew up in Highland Park, IL where she led music in temple services, worked summers at JCC camps, and participated in all things related to the performing arts. After attending Northwestern University, she moved to the city and hasn't looked back! She performed with Kol Zimrah Jewish Community Singers for a time and continues to explore music and theater experiences whenever she can. She lives in the South Loop area with her husband, Jeff. They love exploring the world through travel and food, always seeking their next adventure. She's thrilled to be a part of the RRJ Board and looks forward to learning and contributing to the organization's steadfast goals.

# Notes to Roots

## High Holy Day Online Services

We were excited to share the news that the Roots of Reform Judaism Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services was a featured service on Jewish Life Television (www.jltv.tv). The broadcast network has an audience of 250,000 viewers in 40 major markets, which gave us amazing visibility across the potential of 50 million households via Comcast, DirecTV, and Spectrum.

— **Rabbi Ken Kanter, RRJ, Cincinnati OH**

Such a beautiful, moving service. With gorgeous music. Thank you, thank you. Shanah Tovah.

— **Jan E Stone, Chicago IL**

I watched you in the online service, so nice to hear your voice, the sound of Shofar and service to get started in the new year with lots of strength! Beautiful service, messages and music! Shana Tova Umetuka.

— **Silberberg Family, Sao Paolo Brazil**

## Advocate

Incredible edition of the *Advocate*! It is obvious it was a lot of hard work. The articles were fantastic, and the design lent itself well to the content and its readability. Thank you so much!

— **Rabbi Ben Zeidman, El Paso TX**

I enjoyed reading the articles in this issue.

— **Sally Korkin, Cincinnati OH**

Thank you for sending the Spring 2025 issue of the *Reform Advocate*. My great-grandfather would be very pleased.

— **Bernie Hirsch, Carmel IN**

This is a treasure!

— **Daniel J. Hoffheimer, Cincinnati OH**

I got the *Reform Advocate*, and it was wonderful. Kol haKavod to the entire Roots of Reform Judaism organization!

— **Rabbi Marshal Klaven, York PA**

An excellent — and provocative — issue of the *Advocate*. And a wonderful tribute to Howard. Thanks to all who participated in this issue.

— **Larry Pike, Atlanta GA**

Was just perusing the Roots Spring *Advocate* and was so happy to see the picture of us and the little blurb about our journey! Wish my parents were here to see that — they would be (and I'm sure they are) kvelling and grateful to you for enriching and changing the path of my life in the most meaningful and inspiring of ways.

— **Michael Ochs, Nashville TN**

## Passings

**Rabbi Arnold Mark Belzer**, former rabbi of Congregation Mickve Israel (Savannah), died peacefully on July 9, 2025, at the age of 77. He received his Bachelor of Hebrew Letters (B.H.L.), M.A.H.L., and Honorary Doctor of Divinity (D.D.) from Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, New York, where he was ordained a rabbi in 1972. Along with his many accomplishments and honors, Rabbi Belzer served on the founding board of the Society for Classical Reform Judaism, now Roots of Reform Judaism.

**Rabbi Larry Karol**, 70, of Overland Park, KS, died July 5, 2025. He was ordained as a rabbi at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati, Ohio on June 6, 1981. He received an honorary Doctor of Divinity Degree from HUC-JIR in 2006. He was the beloved father of RRJ friends Adam and Rabbi Juliana Karol.

We are saddened to share the passing of **Suzanne Derzon (née Hirsch)** on June 2, 2025, at the age of 88. Beloved mother to Marci (Howard) Margolis, grandmother to Rachel (Rabbi Evon) Yakar and great-grandmother to Caleb and Jonah Yakar.

## Rabbi Kanter “On the Road”



Rabbi Linda Joseph and Rabbi Ken Kanter in Columbia MD



RRJ Board member Simon Barrad in “Fiddler” as Perchick (the “radical Marxist” from Kiev)



Rabbis Jean Eglinton-Ken Kanter-Nicole Roberts in Sydney, Australia

## Simchas



RRJ Board Member, Rabbi Robert Haas (center), Rabbi at Mikve Israel, Savannah GA was honored as Best Worship Leader by Connect Savannah’s Best of 2025 for his work with Hope Haven, a respite care center for people experiencing cognitive impairments.



Rabbi Ken and Dr. Toni Kanter welcomed their new grandson, Levi Emmett Schklar on June 19, 2025.



RRJ Board Member Simon Barrad and his wife Ksenia welcomed their new baby boy, Leon Lyubomyr Barrad, on Saturday, November 1<sup>st</sup>, weighing in at 8 pounds 4 ounces.

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