

**“Why I Am in Love with Our Movement”
(or “Not a Response to Hate Mail”)**

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A recent letter to the editor¹ of the South African Jewish Report claimed that Reform rabbis will be condemned to “Gehinnom” for leading other Jews down a non-Orthodox path. The leader of the World Union for Progressive Judaism (WUPJ), Rabbi Daniel Frelander, responded, labeling the author’s comments as “hate speech.” To which the author of the letter, Eli Knight, said, “Is it hatred to warn someone that he shouldn’t drive drunk or with a flat tyre? It is love and concern.” I’m afraid this sounds strikingly similar to that unique brand of “love and concern” that Evangelical proselytizers in America profess when they beg us to convert to Christianity because they “love” us and are “concerned” that we will go to Hell for not accepting Jesus as our lord and saviour. Since age 18, when I first encountered this “love and concern” on my university campus in the American south, my response has been consistent: “Thanks, but no thanks.” In my life, I am blessed to enjoy plenty of love and concern that is *not* laced with harsh judgment against something I value profoundly and consider part of my very essence: my Jewish identity. At least the frustrated Evangelical Christian *recognizes* that I am Jewish, even if s/he would prefer I be something else. Knight, on the other hand, contrasts Reform Judaism with what he terms “real Judaism,” my sense of Jewish identity being something of a farce, in his eyes. Something not strong and sure enough to be passed down to future generations.

What Knight and others like him fail to realize is that were it not for Reform or Progressive Judaism, close to 2 million of the world’s Jews today might bear *no* Jewish identity at all. For all the accusations leveled at our movement for being assimilationist, let’s not forget that the original intent behind reforming Jewish worship, practice, and ideology was to keep the Jews who were *already* assimilating right and left from abandoning their Judaism altogether. Jews were turning away from Judaism because of its untenable strictures and perceived lack of relevance, and the purpose of Reform, as today, was to keep people in the fold. This was an *intentional* endeavor; the early Reformers were every bit as knowledgeable in Jewish text and tradition as their Orthodox counterparts – this, after all, was *their* background too. They simply made decisions about worship, practice, and ideology with a bit greater regard for what was going on in the lives and hearts of their people. They feared there would be no Jewish continuity at all if Judaism didn’t make *some* attempt to respond to how torn people felt trying to straddle both the Jewish and the post-Enlightenment worlds and uphold two sets of values they believed worthy of their devotion; if Judaism continued to ignore how much they longed to

¹ <http://www.sajr.co.za/opinion/letters-discussion-forums/2016/02/10/orthodox-judaism-is-the-only-true-reflection-of-jewish-religion>

find fulfillment—religious, intellectual, and social—in the face of this new thing called “modernity.” The Reformers found a way that we wouldn’t have to abandon either world for the sake of the other. The very goal of their changes was Jewish continuity. This, by the way, in keeping with equally radical decisions made by the ancient rabbis of the Mishnah, who decided to write down the “Oral Torah” so it wouldn’t be lost. Or by the sages of the Talmud, who, living in exile, created a system of Jewish life that could survive after the destruction of the Temple and disappearance of its cultic practices. Or by the authors of the Jewish Legal Codes and Responsa literature, who repeatedly interpreted the tradition in ways that were sensitive to the needs of their communities. Or by the great Maimonides, who wrote his *Moreh Nevuchim* – his *Guide for the Perplexed* – to help those who had been exposed to the sciences reconcile their learning with their faith. Reform is what Judaism has always been at its finest and most sustainable: *not* etched in stone. Nothing is more Jewish than a Judaism that, while principled, remains pliable, relevant, and responsive. Reform and Progressive Judaism are as authentic as it comes.

To be fair, early Classical Reform failed to appreciate some of what we’ve learned in more recent times: that once abandoned, some knowledge and skills might be hard to retrieve; that the new world *isn’t* the new Zion – we need the *ancient* homeland too; that the ritual mitzvot we rejected in the 1880s were key to the ethnic distinctiveness we came to value in the 1970s; and that the age of reason in which we put so much faith was not enough to protect us against a world gone mad in the 1930s and 40s and to eradicate the age old plague of racist antisemitism.

Classical Reform was what it needed to be for its time, but modern Reform and Progressive Judaism recognize that times change. That “Reform” is a verb, not an adjective, so it is something our movement does constantly. Unlike Orthodoxy, rather than canonizing one interpretation of Torah or *halakhah* or mode of worship or practice and calling *that* the word of God, we recognize that God’s *world* is ever evolving, and we self-reflect and engage with its new realities. Since the first Reform platform in 1885, the movement’s leaders have penned statements of principles in 1937, 1976, and 1999, articulating, at each point in history, our understanding of the three pillars of our faith: God, Torah, and Israel. The 1999 statement, in contrast to the original 1885 one, speaks of the Reform movement’s commitment to lifelong study of Torah and of the *whole array of mitzvot*, and the fulfillment of those *mitzvot* that address us and bring holiness into our lives. It declares our love for the State of Israel and support for *aliyah*. It expresses our belief in God’s *ongoing* revelation, our embrace of interfaith families striving to create a Jewish home, and our dedication to social justice and *tikkun olam*—repairing our world by narrowing economic disparity, fighting discrimination, welcoming the stranger, protecting the environment, and giving *tzedakah*—affirming all of these as our

obligation to heed the [quote] “*prophetic* call to translate the words of Torah into the works of our hands.”² This is not a secular manifesto! It’s the statement of a people who cherish their Jewish identity and want to live it out in the modern world in ways that have ultimate meaning.

Reform and Progressive Jews are hardly the “defectors” from Judaism that Eli Knight labels us. We are a vibrant and joyful, worldwide movement – 1.8 million individuals and 1,200 congregations strong³ – with a proud history of making a place in Judaism for those who find neither Orthodoxy nor secularism a spiritual fit. One of our very own members says it best, sharing that: “The first time I came to the North Shore Temple Emanuel it was as a woman who had been estranged for more than thirty years from Judaism, the Orthodox Judaism that I was brought up with. When I walked in and saw [a female] Rabbi...on the bima, wearing a tallit and carrying her baby, while *leining* Torah, I burst into tears. I suddenly saw that there was a place for me in Judaism. It felt like a...‘coming home.’ The past twelve years has been a rich unfolding of re-connection, re-membering, and [my Progressive shul] has been very much at the heart of this.”

And what of your rabbi, who comes to Reform or Progressive Judaism not from an Orthodox background but a fairly *secular* Jewish home, in which no one ever talked about God or lit Shabbat candles on a Friday night. Whose parents didn’t send me to Hebrew School or Jewish summer camp. Who attended shul but once a year, and didn’t value my Jewish identity, much less cherish it the way I do now. I could have very easily chosen the secular path in my adult life too, and likely would have if, as Eli Knight claims, Orthodoxy were [quote] “the only true reflection of Jewish religion.” But as it was, I encountered Reform Judaism, and I fell in love. Head over heels *in love* with the movement and *its* truth – its interpretive tradition, its values, its creativity, its rabbis, and its efforts to build the kind of world I *truly* want to live in. Reform Judaism is what kept me in the fold; it helped me see that there was a place for me in Judaism, in this movement which, in the words of the 1999 statement’s Preamble, “has enabled the Jewish people to introduce innovation while preserving tradition, to embrace diversity while asserting commonality, to affirm beliefs without rejecting those who doubt, and to bring faith to sacred texts without sacrificing critical scholarship.” I found my place in Judaism through this movement:

- this movement which made it comfortable for me and my then non-Jewish partner to come and learn about Judaism and participate in Jewish communal life;

- this movement whose leaders were both inspiring and approachable, whose worship experiences were fresh and innovative, deeply moving and engaging;

² <https://ccarnet.org/rabbis-speak/platforms/statement-principles-reform-judaism/>

³ <http://wupj.org/Congregations/overview.asp>

- this movement that had a whole social action branch, whose tireless leader repeatedly brought me to tears with his impassioned advocacy in the name of Judaism on behalf of the most downtrodden, disadvantaged, and oppressed members of society and the world;

- this movement whose Biennial and seminary classes gave me chills because the learning was so relevant and stimulating;

- this movement which, in some parts of the world, sees interfaith relationships as an opportunity to bring non-Jews closer to our tradition, rather than a “disaster” that pulls Jews away from it.

I fell in love, and I am still smitten. Smitten with our movement, which, like every other expression of Judaism, wrestles with the question, “What does God want us to *do*?” but remains the *only* movement which, in answering that question, upholds not *only* the highest standards of Jewish legal scholarship, but also our personal autonomy and our right to modify or reject those elements of our tradition which we find run counter to our moral and ethical commitments.

Smitten with a movement whose rabbinic body aims at persuasion, not coercion, in its vast Responsa literature, and doesn’t judge *your* informed decisions to be any lesser than *my* informed decisions on how to practice and observe our tradition, so long as we are *all* making *educated* decisions.

Smitten with a movement that is the *only* movement to recognize that the child of a Jewish father is no less Jewish than the child of Jewish mother.

Smitten with a movement whose innovations have changed the face of not only worship and ritual, but congregational life, driving the first formal initiatives to create “caring communities” and “inclusive communities.”

Smitten with a movement which espouses a progressive, evolving *halakhah* committed to gender equality and the moral equality of all humankind. Which, from its inception, instituted egalitarian Jewish prayer, inviting men and women to sit together, and with their whole family, in the sanctuary; which ordained its first female rabbi in 1972, before any other movement, and which was also among the first to ordain openly gay and transgender rabbis.

It saddens me when people like Eli Knight choose to express their so-called “love” by attacking our movement, instead of supporting our efforts to keep modern Jews in the fold and strengthen their Jewish identity. It outrages me when they attack our movement’s rabbis – the same rabbis whose brilliant, electrifying teachings and wise, loving mentorship inspired me to turn my life upside down to become a rabbi myself, because I was so enamored with Jewish study and so enchanted with the sacred calling of building Jewish community. It pains me when they suggest that Reform and Progressive rabbis are damaging Jewish continuity, when they don’t recognize that we are working every minute of every day to ensure it. When the Eli

Knights of the world condemn me to Gehinnom, they condemn all these values for which I stand, and for which they should too.

But I've sub-titled this sermon "Not a Response to Hate Mail," because I'm really not so interested in convincing Eli Knight or others like him of the merits of Reform and Progressive Judaism. What I *am* interested in is helping *Reform and Progressive* Jews take pride in and articulate our movement's merits and contributions to the world. Because the better we do at that, the more people will fall in love with Judaism, instead of falling away from it. This is our sacred calling: cultivating love. And I'm proud to be part of a movement that allows me to lead you in its pursuit.

Shabbat shalom.