

One of the most powerful moments, I find, in all the Yamim Noraim is when the Torah scrolls are removed from the aron kodesh—the ark—and handed, one by one, to our past presidents. Traditionally, the presidents represent elders of the congregation, who act as witnesses to all the vows we make for the coming year, for Kol Nidre means “all the vows.” By taking hold of Torah and making those vows, we take hold of our past and step forward into the future. At this moment, the presidents and rabbis don’t stand with their backs to the congregation. We don’t stand in a small circle, facing only one another. We face all of you—the Jewish present—and evaluate our collective Jewish future. What a profound moment in the life of the community, each year.

Each year, of course, we face the future with a new understanding of our community. This has always been the Progressive way—our movement in America, for example, searches its soul every few decades and issues a revised statement of principles that reflects what our people has learned about the world around us, how modern Jewish sensibilities may have changed, who the people are who make up the movement, and what they believe and hold dear. Progressive theology has always believed in “ongoing revelation”—that as history unfolds and humanity evolves, new knowledge is revealed, and Judaism must respond accordingly. If we, as a congregation, want to remain relevant, we, too, must turn and face the community, search our souls, and evaluate what we stand for.

This past year, our intrepid Board of Directors did just that, inviting the entire community to engage in a series of workshops and discussions—a sort of communal *cheshbon hanefesh* (“accounting of the soul”)—which they called “Community Conversations.” So what did they learn from those Conversations? One of the most important things they learned is that in keeping with our Constitution, as well as our 2015 congregational survey, you still affirm our shul’s “strong Progressive identity,” and desire weekly services that express that identity. Based on these findings, they reported, “we plan to maintain a Progressive focus in our programs and spiritual leadership.”<sup>1</sup> As the rabbi now charged with bearing out those commitments and carrying our congregation into the future, I feel very grateful for this clarity around our direction and very honoured to walk this journey with you.

But here in Sydney, there’s a responsibility I feel as a Progressive rabbi that goes beyond executing programs and services. If we existed in North America, where our movement is well established, in the majority, and enormous, then services and programs might provide our members all they need to thrive religiously. But here in Australia, I find that there is less self-assuredness to our movement—less a sense of Jewish legitimacy among the individuals who comprise it. There’s less clarity around what it is that Progressive Judaism stands for, and why it’s not only legitimate but worth celebrating. Other than recognising that we are an egalitarian movement where men

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<sup>1</sup> Copies of the *Kol HaKahal* report were presented during a communal meeting at NSTE on 19 March 2017 and are available from the NSTE office.

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and women sit together in the sanctuary and participate equally on the bimah, there’s uncertainty about what *else* we’re really about and how to articulate it. And in the face of that uncertainty, it’s very easy for Orthodox voices, which are in the majority here, to drown us out. We know that there is not only one Jewish opinion on current affairs like the marriage equality debate, for instance. We know that we’re often labelled as “secular” Jews. We know that some claim we are not practicing “real Judaism.”<sup>2</sup> But we don’t often know how to *respond* when we feel these affronts. So beyond just enjoying Progressive services and programs together, here in Australia we have to develop the *language* to speak up and say clearly who we are and why we matter—to express why it is that our movement is so important to the Jewish landscape. What better night than tonight to commit to such a task?

Tonight, as we search our Progressive Jewish souls, let’s turn back for just a moment and recall why our movement started in the first place. The original intent behind reforming Jewish worship, practice, and ideology in earlier centuries was to keep the Jews who were assimilating from abandoning Judaism altogether. Jews were turning away from traditional Judaism because of its strictures and perceived lack of relevance, and the purpose of Reform, as today, was to keep people in the fold. This was an *intentional* endeavour; 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. That is to say, they turned toward the Jews before them in charting a new way forward.

The early Reformers feared that 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 world and uphold two sets of values they believed worthy of their devotion; They worried that there would be no Jewish future if Judaism ignored how much people longed to find fulfilment—religious, intellectual, and social—in the face of this new thing called “modernity.” The Reformers found a way that didn’t require us to abandon either world for the sake of the other. The very goal of their changes was Jewish continuity. This, by the way, was 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 *radically* different system of Jewish life that could survive after the destruction of the Temple and its cultic practices. Or by the authors of the Jewish Legal Codes and Responsa literature, who repeatedly interpreted the tradition and its laws 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

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<sup>2</sup> Eli Knight, “Orthodox Judaism is the only true reflection of Jewish religion,” Letter to the Editor, South African Jewish Report, 2016: <http://www.sajr.co.za/opinion/letters-discussion-forums/2016/02/10/orthodox-judaism-is-the-only-true-reflection-of-jewish-religion>

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those who had been exposed to the sciences reconcile their learning with their faith. Reform—or what we call Progressive—is what Judaism has always been at its finest. That is to say, 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.

Classical Reform Judaism was indeed a radical change from the Judaism that had come before. Having developed in an era that exalted rationalism, it rejected practices for which it saw no moral *reasoning*, like kashrut and the wearing of tallit and kippah.<sup>3</sup> The Classical Reformers rejected the push to return to the ancient homeland, believing that the Jews had found a “new Zion” in America, where they lived relatively safe and comfortable lives. But when the leaders of the movement turned toward the community in *later* decades, post-Holocaust, they realised that some of what their predecessors had rejected were now things that they should *embrace* to promote Jewish survival. That the ritual mitzvot rejected in the 1880s were key to the ethnic distinctiveness our people now celebrated in the 1970s. That the age of reason in which they had put so much faith was not enough to eradicate antisemitism and protect our people against a world gone mad in the 1930s and 40s. That the new world wasn’t the new Zion – we needed the *ancient* homeland too. Classical Reform was what it needed to be for its time, but since then, our movement’s leaders have penned statements of principles in 1937, 1976, and 1999,<sup>4</sup> articulating, at each point in history, our contemporary understanding of our religious commitments. Our most recent Statement of Principles speaks, in contrast to the 1885 Platform, of our commitment to lifelong study of the *whole array of mitzvot*, and the fulfilment 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 dedication to social justice and *tikkun olam*—repairing our world by fighting discrimination, welcoming the stranger, and protecting the environment.<sup>5</sup> Like our presidents who carry the scrolls on Kol Nidre, and our board of directors this past year, the leaders of our movement have repeatedly turned *toward the people* in defining and redefining our Jewish commitments as history unfolds, ethics evolve, and religious sensibilities change.

This approach has led to a number of defining features of our movement in which we should take great pride. Ours was the first to ordain female rabbis in 1972, a full ten years before the Conservative-Masorti movement started admitting women to its rabbinical school and decades before the first Orthodox “Rabba” was ordained. We were among the first include LGBTI Jews in our rabbinate and in communal life. We were the first to see interfaith relationships as an opportunity to bring non-Jews closer

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<sup>3</sup> All Platforms and Statements of Principles are listed on the website of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) at <http://www.ccarnet.org/rabbis-speak/platforms/>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

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to our tradition, instead of a “disaster”<sup>6</sup> that pulls Jews away from it. We remain the *only* movement to recognise that the child of a Jewish father is no less Jewish than the child of a Jewish mother. Like every other stream of Judaism, we wrestle with the question, “What does God want us to do?” but we remain the *only* movement which, in answering that question, upholds personal autonomy—my individual right, *and yours*, to modify or even reject those elements of our tradition which run counter to our moral and ethical commitments. Our rabbinic body aims at persuasion, not coercion,<sup>7</sup> in its vast scholarly Responsa literature,<sup>8</sup> and doesn’t judge *your* choices to be any lesser than *my* choices on how to practice and observe our tradition, so long as we are all making *informed* choices.<sup>9</sup> Our spiritual leaders aspire to be both learned and *approachable*. We share an openness to creativity and innovation that has changed the face not only of worship and ritual, but of congregational life, driving the first formal initiatives to create “caring communities” and “inclusive communities.”<sup>10</sup> We believe in the moral equality of all humankind,<sup>11</sup> and our rabbis in Israel, America, and elsewhere are committed to advocating on behalf of the most oppressed and disadvantaged members of society. As a movement, we have done all of this *in the name of* Judaism, *guided* by Jewish values and teachings—that is, we have done these things *because of* our religious convictions, not in spite of them.

Ours is not, and has never been, a secular movement. Reform and Progressive Jews are hardly the “defectors” from Judaism that some have labelled us. We are a vibrant and joyful, worldwide movement – 1.8 million individuals and 1,200 congregations strong<sup>12</sup> – with a proud history of making a place in Judaism for those who find neither Orthodoxy nor secularism a spiritual fit. One of our own members said it best: “The first time I came to the North Shore Temple Emanuel,” she said, “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 Jewish landscape needs Progressive Judaism. But as a minority within a minority in Australia, Progressive Judaism needs Progressive Jews, who can state

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<sup>6</sup> Knight.

<sup>7</sup> Dr. Mark Washofsky, *Jewish Living: A Guide to Contemporary Reform Practice*, New York: UAHC Press, 2001, and in “Reform Halakhic Texts” at <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/reform-halakhic-texts/>

<sup>8</sup> [http://press.ccar-ebook.com/Reform\\_Responsa\\_Collection/](http://press.ccar-ebook.com/Reform_Responsa_Collection/) and see 76-page Topical Index at [http://press.ccar-ebook.com/Index\\_of\\_Responsa/1](http://press.ccar-ebook.com/Index_of_Responsa/1)

<sup>9</sup> See Eugene Borowitz in *Reform Judaism Today*, Behrman House, 1983, as well as Reform Judaism “A Centenary Perspective” in our platform of 1976 at <http://www.ccar-net.org/rabbis-speak/platforms/>

<sup>10</sup> See <https://urj.org/what-we-believe/resolutions/synagogue-caring-community> and <https://urj.org/audacioushospitality> and <https://urj.org/blog-category/caring-communities>

<sup>11</sup> Dr. Mark Washofsky, *Jewish Living: A Guide to Contemporary Reform Practice*, New York: UAHC Press, 2001.

<sup>12</sup> World Union for Progressive Judaism (WUPJ) website: <http://wupj.org/Congregations/overview.asp>

clearly and proudly what it is we stand for, how we came to be, why we matter, and what has been our impact. It saddens me when other Jews attack our movement, instead of supporting our efforts to keep modern Jews in the fold and strengthen their Jewish identity. 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. It pains me when other Jews suggest that Reform and Progressive rabbis are damaging Jewish continuity,<sup>13</sup> when they don’t recognize that we are working *every waking minute* to ensure it. *Every waking minute*. When they condemn us, they condemn all those values for which we stand, and for which they should too.

That said, it is just as troubling to me when I sense that some *Progressive* Jews aren’t quite comfortable in their own Progressive skin, and combatting that insecurity is one vow we can each make now for the coming year, as we turn and face our future together.

We can begin by building our vocabulary. I’ve shared some terms tonight in articulating what we stand for: “personal autonomy,” “informed choice,” “gender equality,” “moral equality,” “creativity and innovation,” “principled but pliable,” “Jewish continuity,” “keeping people in the fold,” “tikkun olam,” “inclusion,” “Israel,” “lifelong study,” and more. This sermon will appear on our website after the chaggim—so read it over again, once it’s posted. Learn to describe our movement in these positive terms: what it is, not what it isn’t. Read through the historical platforms and statements of our movement on the web<sup>14</sup> or ask me for guidance on books that contain and explain these.<sup>15</sup> Google the terms “ongoing revelation” and “evolving halakhah” to understand the theology of Progressive Judaism and our approach to interpreting Jewish legal texts and codes. Have a look at the vast Reform Responsa literature online to see where the great halakhic scholars of our movement stand on contemporary concerns like GMOs, marriage equality, organ donation, cremation, and so much more.<sup>16</sup> Subscribe to the Israel Religious Action Center’s weekly email<sup>17</sup> to see what worthy causes our movement is championing in the Holy Land, as they stand at the forefront of the struggle for religious pluralism there. Reading is how we become articulate in a language, and so is being around people who speak that language, so come and be part of what we’re doing here at NSTE: learn with us, worship with us, celebrate with us, sing

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<sup>13</sup> Knight.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.ccarnet.org/rabbis-speak/platforms/>

<sup>15</sup> Richard N. Levy, *A Vision of Holiness: The Future of Reform Judaism*, New York: URJ Press, 2005; Michael A. Meyer and W. Gunther Plaut, *The Reform Judaism Reader: North American Documents*, New York: UAHC Press, 2001; and Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988, as well as: <http://www.ccarnet.org/rabbis-speak/platforms/commentary-principles-reform-judaism/>

<sup>16</sup> [http://press.ccar-ebook.com/Reform\\_Responsa\\_Collection/](http://press.ccar-ebook.com/Reform_Responsa_Collection/) and see Topical Index at [http://press.ccar-ebook.com/Index\\_of\\_Responsa/1](http://press.ccar-ebook.com/Index_of_Responsa/1)

<sup>17</sup> Israel Religious Action Center (IRAC) website: <https://www.irac.org/>

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with us, or support us in other ways if you can't be physically present—help our congregation become a beacon for all that shines in our movement and in Judaism.

It's for the sake of building our *own* self-confidence that I encourage this, not for the sake of convincing others. If we stand tall and sure in who we are, and learn to better articulate our principles, our history, and our aspirations, many will come to respect us more, not less. In March, our Board became the first in Australia to appoint a woman to the role of Senior Rabbi. Many, *many* *mazal tovs* about the appointment came in letters, emails, and phone calls from both within *and beyond* our congregation, including Rabbi Paul Lewin of the North Shore Synagogue, Rabbi Mendel Kastel of Jewish House, as well as this letter from The Great Synagogue which, very notably, begins: “Dear Rabbi Roberts...” and, after very kind words of personal congratulations, concludes: “We wish you every success in leading your congregation and look forward to warm relations, on a personal and congregational level, between your synagogue and ours.” It's signed by their Chief Rabbi Benjamin Elton and their president Justice Stephen Rothman. Remarkable and profound. For them to recognise a female in this role—title and all—and applaud a decision so grounded in contemporary, Progressive values, is a tremendous thing.

We heard from others too: presidents and rabbis around the country;<sup>18</sup> our twin congregation in Israel;<sup>19</sup> the World Union for Progressive Judaism (WUPJ); local councilmembers from Chatswood and Willoughby; Jewish organisations around Sydney like the Board of Deputies, the UIA, and JCA. The breadth of response highlights something I want us to take to heart as individuals and as a community: that we can stand tall in our Progressive identity and still be embraced. That we can be fully who we are, and be recognised as a partner in building and serving the Jewish people. With this new insight into the Sydney Jewish community before us, we step forward into a new era, committed to better articulating our movement's merits and contributions. Because the better we do at that, the more Jews will find their place in Judaism. The more people will fall in love with Judaism, instead of falling away from it. This has always been our sacred calling, and tonight we renew our vow to pursue it. May “all our vows” bring blessing.

G'mar tov, and shana tova.

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<sup>18</sup> Temple Beth Israel, Etz Chayim Progressive Synagogue, and Leo Baeck Centre in Melbourne, Emanuel Synagogue in Woollahra, and others.

<sup>19</sup> Through a program called *Domim/Alike*, NSTE is “twinned” with Ohel Avraham Synagogue of the Leo Baeck Education Center in Haifa, Israel: <http://leobaeckhaifa.org/jewish-life/ohel-avraham-synagogue/>