

## *Does Reform Judaism Still Matter?*

BY RABBI RICHARD N. LEVY

DIRECTOR, SCHOOL OF RABBINIC STUDIES,  
HEBREW UNION COLLEGE, LOS ANGELES

You have been waiting for this moment a long time. But in a little while we shall ask you to lift yourselves up and ascend this bimah to receive, after all these years, your ordination as a *rav*, a rabbi in Israel.

The Torah portion we began reading yesterday afternoon, Bemidbar, has a lot to say about lifting up. As the Israelites crowd together in the wilderness, the *midbar*, Moses is told to lift up the head of each Israelite as he determines how many of them are ready to join the minions of God in advancing on the unknown world between Egypt and the Promised Land.

This instruction is given *b' midbar Sinai b' ohel mo-ed*, in the *midbar* of Sinai, in the Tent of Meeting. What a tantalizing description! It was not given *b' har Sinai*, at the mountain of Sinai (they were there a year before), but at the *midbar Sinai*, the wilderness that Sinai had created. How could that be? Didn't Sinai bring order, law—Torah—to the Israelites? How could it also have brought a wilderness?

One answer to this question will become clear before this morning ends. The moment of your ordination will be for many of you a Sinai moment, as some of you have written on your Ordination pages. We even had a shofar blast! After Rabbi Ellenson lifts up your head and gives you the ordination kiss, you will most likely feel uplifted, transformed, perhaps—but as you walk out those great wooden doors into the sunlight of Hollywood Boulevard, you will notice that the cars will still be racing by, exhaust fumes will still be sullyng the air. Spending this morning here at Sinai may have turned the world you had come to take for granted into a wilderness.

How will you deal with that wilderness when you advance upon it as a new rabbi? How will you be a rabbi in your day school, your religious school, at the head of a class of buzzing teenagers? How will you be a rabbi when there are others in your synagogue older than you, more seasoned than you—who will claim they have heard suggestions like yours many times before? How will you be a rabbi visiting non-Jewish patients in a hospital room, or hanging out on campus in an open shirt and slacks, trying to bring Torah into a chaotic dorm or fraternity house? How will you live as a full-time, lifetime rabbi who is paid only part-time? How can you be as much a rabbi in the supermarket aisle, or spending the day with your kid, or driving between your part-time positions, as when you stand on the bimah, or teach a Torah class? What does it mean to be an *authentic* rabbi? And trained in America—in Los Angeles, no less—how will you be a rabbi in Melbourne, in London, in Lyon, perhaps, where nobody talks with an accent, but also where nobody knows the kind of Reform Judaism that you have lived here for all these years?

A lot of the answers to those questions will emerge as you engage with another aspect of *b'midbar Sinai*, the wilderness created by Sinai—which is Reform Judaism itself, this remarkable movement that grew up around the Torah we received at Sinai.

But some people ask—does the Reform Judaism that emerged from Sinai still have something to say? With the downsizing of the Union and the College, will we still be a presence on this continent, and around the world? Some Jews argue that with the growing traditionalism of the movement, a growing commitment in other movements to social justice and increased opportunities for women, we may be growing so close to Conservatism and even more moderate forms of Orthodoxy that by insisting on our distinctiveness we are hindering the growth of the Jewish people and our common faith.

Does Reform Judaism still matter? Is there still room for a movement once committed to being a priest people, dedicated to bringing the nations near to God? Is there still room for a prophetic Judaism, committed to the messianic age—the belief that *tikun olam* is not only a slogan for Mitzvah Day, but in the Lurianic spirit a day-in, day-out, lifelong work of bringing light to every crisis, of using the community organizing skills you've learned to scrape away the husks that hide the beauty of people, their ties to other people, so you can start to illumine the stunning revelation of God's creation, the conviction that *af al pi she-yitma-mea*, even though the messianic age may tarry, *im kol zeh*, despite the Taliban and Wall Street and nuclear threats—that age *will* dawn, because from the moment Rabbi Ellenson lifts up your head this morning, you will be committed to helping it dawn?

Does Reform Judaism still matter? Ten years ago this month, the organization of rabbis you are about to join passed a Statement of Principles on the cusp of a new century. Ten years ago some of you were still in college, still in business, perhaps not even aware that you were being called to be a rabbi. But we took the liberty of speaking for you, we made affirmations for you—and you have brought new insight to those affirmations. You have affirmed that Reform Jews need to pray, in uplifting English as well as profound Hebrew, accompanied by guitars and drums and sticks and flutes, by crayons and computers, accompanied by Bernstein and Caro and Kent and Radwine; Silverman and Tadmor; Lewandowski and Friedman and Whinston and Katz. You have affirmed that Reform Jews need to go to the ocean and cry psalm verses out across the waves—because Reform Jews want to encounter God in the stormy battles of the sea and the desert and the mountains as well as amid the pastel walls of a windowless room at HUC, where many of you would sit faithfully, day after day, your backs against this chuppah or scattered around the room, searching for God, singing for God, grinning and frowning and muttering about God—because all that is what prayer is, because we have created a Siddur, *Mishkan T'filah*, to bring forth that kind of prayer, and our people need you and our cantors to bring that prayer forth from them.

Does Reform Judaism still matter? Do Bible and Talmud and Midrash—and Hebrew—matter? Do the superb teaching skills and scholarly insights of your faculty matter? Reform Jews want to carry Torah with them not only at peak Sinai-moments, on Shavuot and Simchat Torah, but every day, holding Torah close as you have this

morning, opening it and asking: what is this text revealing about *my life*? Reform Jews have become adept in opening a book and delving deeply into texts—but they want to do more than that. The Reform commitment to ongoing revelation is not just a theological statement, it is a statement that commits us to see what words are jumping out at us from our study, and where they are leading us. How can this text inform my week, your people will ask you, and you will be able to show them how, you will help them voice the questions that gnaw away at them, questions they want to put to the text—to the God they want to find behind the text—and then you have to help them listen for God’s responses. But you need to keep asking yourselves those questions too—which means you have to keep learning, carving out time even in your busiest weeks to hold Torah close, to build on what you have learned with us, to study and savor and grow.

Does Reform Judaism still matter? Do women rabbis matter—in senior positions, as presidents of rabbinic associations? Do male rabbis holding the hand of their male spouses matter? Do women scholars writing a Torah commentary matter? Do men asking themselves what Torah verses say about men matter? Do rabbis and rabbinic students who have experienced themselves in both genders matter? Do non-Jews raising Jewish children with their Jewish spouses matter?

All this is the stuff of the *midbar Sinai*—the multi-layered, gorgeously diverse, wave-pounding world of Reform Judaism in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is Jewish—but it is *differently* Jewish. It is denominational—but it is hardly hostile to other Jewish denominations. It is committed to Israel’s future—not only to a home for progressive Judaism but also, as several CCAR resolutions have stated, to Israel’s destiny as a just, peace-loving, compassionate state living alongside a peaceful Palestinian state.

This Reform Judaism needs to be nurtured, strengthened, deepened—and celebrated. It needs for us not to say, whenever a Reform Jew decides to keep kosher or put on tefillin that Reform is losing its distinctiveness and melding in with the rest of Jewry. But we also need to refrain from following traditional practice only because it is traditional. *Why* are we putting on tefillin? What are the texts that should reside in our tefillin? Is the Shema enough to bind upon our arm? Is it enough to speak of “informed choice,” or do we need to be called by mitzvah, by *chiyuv*, by an obligation based on our covenant with God? Is kashrut merely a hip take on 21<sup>st</sup> century foodiness—or does this discipline too come from a sense of obligation—to God, to suffering workers and animals, and to a battered earth? As more and more people without jobs, without hope, come knocking on your doors, you need to be able to show them how the God and the Torah you cherish can lift them up from their despair.

*You can do all these things*—but you don’t need to do them alone. You need to knock on the doors of the CCAR, asking how the Principles and Platforms they have passed animate their policies today, asking that the Conference not limit itself to serving rabbis’ personal and professional needs—as essential as those services will be to you—but also to provide a powerful, public, rabbinic voice—that will strengthen your voice—on the crucial issues before this country and the State of Israel. And all three national bodies—the Conference, the College and the Union—need to know that we can count on

you, as your incomes and your influence increase, to help us all keep our doors open. You have learned this spring what it can mean if any of those doors are closed.

Leading a people through a wilderness to the Promised Land is exhausting work. And so, God spoke to Moses in a protected place, in the *ohel moed*, the tent of meeting, the Tent of the Appointed Time, a place like...the sanctuary of Temple Israel in the wilderness of Hollywood. Some of you will be plying your rabbinates in synagogues like this one, protected spaces that will let you confront the crises of the wilderness in manageable terms. But others of you will have to build your own *ohel moed*—a private space in your day school or religious school, a corner at Hillel where you can breathe and be alone, a quiet street on your drive to your part-time appointments where you can daven *Shacharit* all by yourself. Heschel has taught us how important is the palace in time that God built into Shabbat—but this week's parasha reminds us that we need, if not a palace in space, at least a room, a seat, where we can keep our appointments with the Holy One. If you are diligent about finding this protected space, you will gradually discover that something remarkable is happening to you. If you are able to take refuge at appointed times with God in your own private space, you will learn what an *ohel moed* feels like—and you will gradually realize that you are becoming an *ohel moed* for the people who learn Torah from you and who come to you for guidance in the wilderness. If you have found your own *ohel*, you will not be afraid to grow into an *ohel* for others, to take them in for their appointed time with you, and help them find the confidence to grow into an *ohel* for the people who rely on them.

If you grow into an *ohel* for others, opening them to Torah and prayer and the prophetic calling, then wherever you ply your rabbinate, it will become clear that you as a Reform rabbi—an authentic rabbi—matter; and therefore the Reform Judaism you embody matters. Whether Reform Judaism will still matter in 10 years, in 25 years, to a great extent will depend on you.

When the priests climbed the 15 steps to the Temple, which took the place of the *ohel moed*, they would proclaim: *S'u shearim rasheichem*, Lift up your heads, O ye gates, *us'u pitehei olam*, be ye lifted up, O doors to eternity!

In just a few moments, Rabbi Ellenson will ask the 15 of you to lift up your heads, as we call you up to this bimah, that you might lift this people, this faith and this movement one step closer to eternity, closer to the Promised Land, to the messianic age.

Lift up your heads, so that each of you, all 15 of you, may today become doors to eternity.

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