

## **A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism**

### **As it Approaches its Third Century<sup>i</sup>**

*Robert M. Seltzer and Lance J. Sussman*

The Reform movement in Judaism emerged two centuries ago in response to a series of unprecedented challenges to traditional Judaism. Its early adherents took the lead with daring measures to make our tradition accessible to modern Jews. They enriched the Jewish tradition through scholarship, theological writings, and innovations in the liturgy and in the synagogue. We believe that the basic tenets of the Reform movement, refined in the crucible of historical experience, are a model for a living authentic Judaism today. In this spirit, we rededicate ourselves to the central principles of Reform Judaism for our time.

1. We hold that Judaism has always been capable of adapting to unforeseeable situations while preserving its core of symbols and ideals. Jewish history is a record of this adaptability and enduring faith. As Reform Jews, we are conservators of what we have inherited and responsible for a Jewish future that maintains its spiritual relevance. We believe that Reform Judaism has offered a satisfying mode of Jewish expression for innumerable Jews around the world. We affirm our fellowship with other expressions of Jewishness, seeking with them to sustain our Jewish heritage. We hold that the Reform movement has contributed to the vitality of Judaism by acting as a vanguard.
2. We affirm that Judaism offers a spiritual grounding in a cosmic order that evokes in us awe and mystery. We insist that morality is central to Judaism and this cosmic order confers ethical responsibilities on us as beings with the capacity to choose between good and evil. We are convinced that modern historical and scientific knowledge has far-reaching implications for our understanding of the universe, the evolution of religion, and the development of Judaism – and that this knowledge calls on us to reexamine our presuppositions in every generation.
3. We find sustenance of soul in Jewish memories, holy days and prayers. They affirm our connection to the Jewish people, deepen our relation to God, and make us better human beings. Reform Jewish ritual and ceremony give our lives order and structure. In the weave of weekday and Shabbat, in the symbolism of the Jewish year, and in the cycle of a Jewish life we find ways to bring the sacred into our lives and to reach out to one another. We undertake to observe those traditional religious practices that enrich our human condition. Education and reflection may lead us to discontinue observances

that run counter to our conscience, however useful these may have been in the past. We introduce new Jewish rituals that strengthen our moral resolve and add spiritual depth to our lives.

4. Even though our personal theologies may differ, we maintain that a meaningful, responsible life imbued with sensitive regard for others is rooted in faith in a transcendent source of being and goodness. Judaism offers hope and succor in the struggle with doubt, suffering and death. Our religion provides ineffable moments of communion with God. It is the ground for affirming the exemplary power of morally courageous deeds, the sanctity of life, and the possibility of personal transcendence through the apprehension of spiritual beauty. In face of the many forms of misery and evil around us, we assert our role as partners of God in repairing the world and furthering the work of redemption.
5. We affirm that the life-long study of Torah is a central Jewish duty and privilege. We recognize in the ongoing interpretation of Torah a developing and unfolding of ethical and spiritual truths by our prophets, sages and our teachers through the ages down to the present. Our broad view of Torah is compatible with reason, historical knowledge, scientific thought, and democratic values. We affirm the beauty and value of the Hebrew language in religious observance and in the learning of Torah.
6. We acknowledge our own heartfelt ties to Jewish life in the Land of Israel where Judaism first arose, the returns to which Jews have long dreamed of and have achieved in our lifetime. We view Zionism and the establishment of a Jewish state as an idealistic and creative expression of Jewish survival and national renaissance in modern times. We encourage the growth of liberal and flexible forms of Judaism in Israel even as we affirm the Diaspora as a permanent feature of Jewish life with its own unique challenges and opportunities.
7. We reject isolating ourselves as individuals or a group from the moral, social, and social concerns of the worlds in which we live. We view the plurality of traditions and people as legitimate expressions of human nature that will endure in the age of global interconnectedness that we have entered. In the spirit of the Jewish teaching that the righteous of all peoples merit salvation, encourage undertakings with other faiths for the betterment of society and mutual appreciation of each tradition's highest values. We reach out in friendship to all those who share Jewish values. We welcome those who wish to become Jews and join our religious quest. Together we will endeavor to

create Jewish homes, support Jewish philanthropic and cultural institutions, and ensure that our synagogues are fitting places of worship, study and moral action.

8. Standing firmly in the modern world, we appreciate deeply the insights embodied in a heritage that has endured for more than 3,000 years. We interpret the traditional view of the uniqueness of the Jewish people as an affirmation of Judaism's central role in the spiritual history of humanity. As enunciated by the Biblical prophets and explained in classical Jewish writings, this aspiration stands for the Jewish mission to represent the highest moral and religious values. We recommit ourselves to the ideals of truthfulness, justice, compassion, and universal peace as envisioned by the prophets -- humanity's best hope in the new age it has entered.

*Robert M. Seltzer was ordained by the Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion in 1961. He is Professor of History and Jewish Studies at Hunter College of the City University of New York.*

*Lance J. Sussman was in the 1980 ordination class of the Hebrew Union College- Jewish Institute of Religion. He has served as Senior Rabbi of Reform Congregation Keneseth Israel in Elkins Park, Pennsylvania since 2001.*

---

<sup>i</sup> "A Statement for Principles for Reform Judaism as it Approached its Third Century" originally appeared in *Thinking Ahead: Toward the Next Generation of Judaism*, Rabbi Judith S. Lewis, Editor, Keshet Press: Binghamton, New York, 2001, pp. 13-16