

## Why I am Rooted in Reform Judaism

by Rabbi Dr. Lance Sussman

I grew up in a Reform Jewish family in Baltimore, Maryland in the 1950s and 1960s. In my childhood home, Friday night was Temple night. Long before my Bar Mitzvah, I had unwittingly memorized numerous passages from the Union Prayer Book. I admired my rabbis, listened to their well-constructed and superbly delivered sermons, and was genuinely moved by the majestic music of our cantors, mixed choir, and massive hidden organ. It all combined into a perfect whole and provided me with deep spiritual roots, a religious aesthetic, and an intellectualized moral framework long before the agonizing questions of adolescence began welling up inside of me. Long before I wanted long hair and listened to hard rock, I felt grounded in an ancient tradition with modern sensibilities wrapped in dignity and righteousness.

Like all teenagers, I rebelled but I never rebelled against Reform Judaism. It withstood the intellectual attacks indirectly posed by my college professors, the politics of protests of the Vietnam War, and the unanticipated neo-traditionalism of my early years as a rabbinic student. I loved the new music and creativity of the Reform camps I attended and accepted new prayer books with a mix of resistance and eagerness to move on. I found mysticism to be intriguing and egalitarianism to be unquestionably and morally correct. Repeated trips to Israel connected me with its people, land and language and provided me with a second home deep in the Middle East and in my heart.

However, the more history and theology I studied, the more I realized that despite the complexities of my modern Jewish life, I remained intellectually and spiritually rooted in the Reform Judaism of my youth. It remained my true religion, faith, and iden-



tity. It alone allowed me to think scientifically, study comparatively, and practice Judaism authentically. The older I became, the more I realized that Reform Judaism was the spiritual home in which I lived even as I experienced more and more of the world and other expressions of Judaism.

Beyond my personal, emotional ties to Reform Judaism, I believe it has intellectual integrity, a fundamental honesty central to my experience as a human being. It encourages me to study Judaism critically but lovingly. Modern theories and ancient texts do

not collide in my Reform Judaism but dance together in a natural and complete way. Torah study in a Reform context is grounded in Jewish experience and memory and committed to academic freedom. In Reform Judaism, Torah is neither a fairy tale nor a handcuff of fundamentalism. It is an open path from the deep path to the emerging future.

I am grounded in Reform Judaism because it values the humanity of all people with passion and purpose. In Reform Judaism, righteousness is the path to re-

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demption. In Reform Judaism, God is always bigger than human definition and liberated from religious hucksterism and pious pandering. God is the transcendent source of love, justice, and truth and never a weapon in the religious arsenal of the small minded. In the theological house of Reform Judaism there are many rooms and many conversations, framed by the vertical beams of tradition and the horizontal floors of modern culture, all lit by transparent windows.

I am rooted in the Reform Judaism committed to the Biblical ideal of worship "in the beauty of holiness." Too much of contemporary Reform Judaism relies

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ROOTS OF  
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Inspired by the past, embracing today, shaping tomorrow.

on entertainment gimmicks, short-term marketing, and a theology of customer service. It begins with sales and suffers from a deep lack of self-confidence in its own truths and history. Emotion is valued over intellectualism; trends are valued over Reform traditions and narcissism prevails over humility.

I am rooted in Reform Judaism because Reform Judaism is rooted in me, in prayers expressed with elegance and clarity, in music rooted in tradition and musicianship, and sermons, which appeal equally to the mind and the heart. As the newly selected "Se-

nior Scholar" of Roots of Reform Judaism, it is my mission to share the history, highlights, and hopes of the modern expression of Judaism which seeks to perpetuate Judaism in the minds and souls of modern Jews with authenticity and integrity.

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