

The Reform Advocate

Volume XIV, Number I: Fall 2022

Jill S. Silverstein, Ed.D., Editor



ROOTS OF REFORM JUDAISM

Inspired by the past, embracing today, shaping tomorrow.

A message from Rabbinic Director Rabbi Ken Kanter



Dear Friends of Roots of Reform Judaism,

One of the most important features of our Roots of Reform Judaism (RRJ) program has been the *Reform Advocate*. During these fourteen years, we have looked back on our history, great Reform books, important rabbis, cantors, and scholars, events, milestones, famous synagogues, and beliefs. This High Holy Day (5783) issue looks in a very different direction. On every *Advocate* you will find the important words, “Inspired by the past, embracing today, shaping tomorrow.” This *Advocate* focuses not on the first two phrases, but the third—shaping tomorrow.

We have reached out to a broad spectrum of scholars, clergy, and leaders asking them to “prophesy”—to help us look to the future of Reform Judaism through the different lenses they provide. We will introduce distinguished academics, historians, rabbis, and cantors at different moments in their careers, from those soon-to-be and very recent ordainees, to those who have enjoyed decades-long, distinguished careers. We are honored to include two internationally recognized faculty members from Hebrew Union College in New York and Cincinnati in the fields of liturgy and education, Drs. Larry Hoffman and Sam Joseph, and of course, an important essay to ground this issue from our RRJ Senior Scholar, Dr. Lance Sussman.

Many times, over the years I have quoted the rabbinic aphorism, *Eyn chadash tachat hashamesh*, “there is nothing new under the sun.” That lesson from the rabbis-of-old has been true in so many ways, but I believe that, in fact, we are at a very new moment. We watch with sadness the changes taking place at HUC in Cincinnati. We have seen the altered directions of historic Reform organizations and leadership. We see growing anti-Semitism in our own country and around the world and witness the challenges facing the State of Israel. All of these have underscored



Barbara Lash, Art Ranger Studio

the increasing importance of the role that Roots of Reform Judaism has to play. From educational materials to worship experiences, from music and liturgical resources to outreach in all corners of our American religious life, RRJ has an increasingly profound mission, purpose, and challenge as we look to the future.

I hope the articles of this *Advocate* will broaden your thinking and inspire your dedication to the beliefs and lessons of Reform Judaism—its yesterdays, today's, and, through you, its tomorrows!

Shaping Tomorrow

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Devotedly,

Rabbi Ken Kanter
Roots of Reform Judaism, Cincinnati



Renew Our Days



Deep Judaism: A Quiet Path Forward

By Rabbi Lance J. Sussman,
Ph.D.

At a crucial moment in the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem in 701 BCE, the prophet Isaiah invoked the symbolism of the “gentle waters of Shiloah” in the Judean capital, in contrast to the impending flood of horrors coming from the land north of the Euphrates River. The prophet urged calm and asked the people of Jerusalem to rely on their faith in the face of overwhelming odds. In my opinion, there is much we can learn from this poignant passage about an existential crisis in Jewish life nearly 28 centuries ago.

In our time, all demographic indications and cultural trends are pointing to a massive if not catastrophic reduction of non-Orthodox Jewish life in the coming decades. The rising generation of American Jews seems to have little attachment to the institutions bequeathed to them. The percentage of Jews affiliating with a modern synagogue is dropping. The length of membership is shortening. The number of young Jews who contend that they have no religion at all is increasing.

Furthermore, the number of consensus issues around which a Jewish future can be built in America is shrinking. Israel and Zionism, which for a century provided an ideological umbrella for American Jews, are now, regrettably, no longer the rallying points for a growing number of young American Jews. Social justice, once the rallying call of American Jewish liberals, is now viewed with suspicion by Jewish political conservatives and others as not only partisan, but an unacceptable alternative to Jewish content. Moreover, fewer and fewer American Jews view Jewish education as a necessity to ensuring the Jewish future, an



Rabbi Lance J. Sussman

issue of little concern to too many American Jews who are content to maintain Jewish identities without Jewish beliefs, practices, or knowledge.

Against this dark background, the organized Reform Movement in American Judaism has broadly gone into institutional decline. Unwilling to provide accurate information about the number of affiliated Reform Jews, the Union for Reform Judaism has become increasingly shrill in boasting about the number of “Reform-identified”

Jews, a meaningless category beyond the PR wars in Jewish life. Reform ideology has melted away in a world of marketing strategies, fads, and gimmicks. The smaller Reform Judaism gets, the louder it becomes in protesting its vitality. These protests are not necessarily the death throes of Reform, but neither are they reassuring about its future viability.

“Going forward, we need a deep, quiet, confident mode of Judaism which embodies dignity, integrity, and spiritual fortitude.”

There are, of course, areas of contemporary Jewish life that remain strong. Jews continue to want Jewish life-cycle events. Jewish food remains popular. Birthright Israel has attracted around 750,000 participants since 1999. Adult Education is thriving in many places. Young Jewish families, however defined, continue to enroll their children in Jewish Preschools. Community charity work, often labeled as “Tikkun Olam,” is attractive. People include places of Jewish interest in their personal travel. Movies

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and TV series with Jewish content remain popular. Thousands are interested in their Jewish ancestry and, of course, Jews continue to rally around efforts to thwart anti-Semitism. For sure, all is not lost.

What then does the future hold for Reform Jews who align themselves with Classical Reform Judaism or, better, Neo-Classical Reform? In contrast to the loudness of rock n'roll, camp-o-centric, adolescent-styled mainstream Reform Judaism, I would suggest that "traditional" Reform listen to the admonitions of the prophet Isaiah. Going forward, we need a deep, quiet, confident mode of Judaism which embodies dignity, integrity, and spiritual fortitude. We need well-crafted, rich literary expressions of our faith in our prayers, and inspiring music to soothe and inspire our souls. I see no formula for mass-market success. Instead, with the prophets, perhaps it is time to think of a "saving remnant" standing by the river of faith with unshakeable commitment to our tradition and its values. The cultural floodwaters are rising but the spiritual waters of Shiloah are always there: strong, steady, and life-giving.

Rabbi Lance J. Sussman, Ph.D. is Rabbi Emeritus at Reform Congregation Keneseth Israel in Elkins Park, PA and Senior Scholar for Roots of Reform Judaism.

A Future of Reform Judaism: The Mission of Israel Today

By Rabbi Andru J. Kahn

Lamentations 5:21

הַשִּׁיבֵנוּ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְנִשְׁוֹבֶה חַדָּשׁ יָמֵינוּ כִּקְדֶּם:

"Return us, Adonai, to You, and let us return;
renew our days as before."



Rabbi Andru J.
Kahn

What is a Reform Jew today? And what is Reform Judaism? The diversity of our congregations, rabbis, congregants, and the beliefs therein, can very well be framed as a strength. In our variety, in our diversity, we are still able to bring ourselves to-

gether as one movement. But it is becoming rather clear that institutional Reform Judaism is struggling to maintain relevance and vitality. With the closing of the rabbinic program in Cincinnati as well as the low numbers of rabbinic students, many synagogues struggling financially and for members, and the ongoing shrinking of the Union for Reform Judaism, we are facing a decisive moment in our movement's history. Perhaps, at a time like this, our diversity ought to be bound up in clarity of shared vision, or in other words, a mission.

"...let us begin again, renewing ourselves as those who came before us did..."

In the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885, a golden thread tied the statements together: "The Mission of Israel". Although ill-defined in the platform itself, two of the major founders of American Reform Judaism, Rabbis Isaac Mayer Wise and Kauffman Kohler, spent a great deal of time developing this concept as integral to the Judaism of the movement, building upon the work of Rabbi Abraham Geiger before them. In essence, Wise declared that the mission of Israel was to "bring about sublime unity...to be the bearers of truth, and to diffuse the bright light of religion among mankind."¹ Kohler, slightly more pointedly, wrote, "the Jewish people began their career conscious of their life purpose and world duty as God's priests, and as the teachers of a universal religious truth,"² going on to more directly develop the mission by writing, "Man (*sic*) needs a higher and deeper ethical motive, and only a religion which makes holiness the aim of the soul instead of salvation; only a system of faith which teaches men (*sic*) to be good because it is good and godly, and to shun evil because it is evil and ungodly; only disinterested service of God and man (*sic*) emanating from the principle of life's holiness will lead mankind (*sic*) back to virtue, righteousness, and peace. This is Judaism's teaching, whose king-

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¹ "First Movement for a Union," in *Selected Writings of Isaac M. Wise: With a Biography*, ed. David Philipson and Louis Grossmann, (Cincinnati: The Robert Clarke Company; The Alumnal Association of the Hebrew Union College), 1900.p. 47.

² Kohler, *The Mission of Israel and its Application to Modern Times*, CCAR, 1919, p. 7



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dom of God is to be built by man (sic) here on earth.”³

A rallying cry for Reform Judaism that is easily explainable and understandable, by Jew and gentile alike, and provides a comprehensive purpose for the institutions, ceremonies, and gatherings of our movement begins here. Although we have an unprecedented rise in Jews of no religion, which, of course, leads to the language of “religion” itself being outmoded in our day and age, the underlying message of this thematic element of Classical Reform is an excellent starting point for reconsidering the ethos of Reform Judaism today. This element of Reform Jewish theology was the foundation upon which our movement was built and allowed for generations of Jews to understand their religion and culture through a lens of universal moral action. For a movement built to incorporate Jews who wished to engage fully in the worlds and lives of their non-Jewish locales, this made perfect sense. It provided a role to play, an explanation that, in the words of Dr. Susannah Heschel, turned the Christian gaze back on itself, as Jews were able to articulate that the mission of Israel presaged Christianity, and was also integral to Christianity itself.⁴

Today, understanding the twin goals of our Classical Reform forebears’ mission of providing a way for acculturated Jews to find meaning and purpose in Jewish practice, while also working to critique and improve the power structures of their time, provides us a fundamental pathway to renewing our movement today based on first principles. As we continue forward into a future that appears to hold much more unknown than known, much more change than continuity, let us begin again, renewing ourselves as those who came before us did, bringing a mission to our people, and in fact, the world.

Rabbi Andru J. Kahn is Associate Rabbi at Temple Emanu-El in New York City.

³ *ibid.*, p. 23

⁴ Heschel, Susannah, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus*, University of Chicago Press, 1998

Reflections of 50 Years of Female Rabbis

By Rabbi Lydia Medwin



Rabbi Lydia Medwin

One female rabbi. That’s how many rabbis I knew who looked anything like me growing up. Raised in Memphis, Tennessee, I remember our first female rabbi. She was larger than life. As a child, it was both the most normal thing to see and, also something of note. My father, at first hesitant, took his first Hebrew classes with her and deeply respected her as a teacher. That’s why I remember her as an incredible scholar. I also remember her kindness and her encouragement of Jewish leadership, even though her tenure only lasted two years, coinciding with my preschool years. We have remained in touch all these years later.

“A multitude of voices makes us a more responsive, sensitive, relevant, and stronger community.”

Our second female rabbi did not arrive until fifteen years later. By this time, I was already in college, but she left an impression on me all the same. Whenever I came home to visit, she took me to coffee, studied Torah with me in Hebrew (which must have been a slow slog for her), and even drove me from Memphis to Cincinnati to visit Hebrew Union College for a weekend dedicated to college students. She later presented me for ordination. We remain close to this day.

Along with the other incredible rabbis and cantors that served my congregations, these two women were formative role models for me when it came to becoming a rabbi myself. The first showed me that it was possible to lead. The second showed me

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the kind of rabbi I could imagine myself becoming. Both developed relationships with me that continue to sustain me. They believed in me even before I believed in myself.

Now, as I enter my twelfth year in the rabbinate, and as we celebrate fifty years of women serving as rabbis in congregations, I look back on my role models and mentors with great fondness. These women sacrificed so much to lead with passion and dedication. They walked into a great unknown, sometimes met with discrimination and hostility, but more often met with a lot of questions. Imagine having to explain your own existence on a weekly basis! Their bravery and commitment continue to strike me today as outstanding and inspiring, as I continue to push on the boundaries of what it means to lead as a female rabbi.

Even now, as female rabbis are equal in number to male rabbis being ordained, there are still challenges that female rabbis face. We are still underrepresented nationally in both senior rabbi positions and other Jewish communal leadership positions. We still receive less pay per dollar than our male counterparts, even for the same role inside the synagogue. We still struggle with the issue of paid parental leave. We still wrestle more than male colleagues in finding the balance between raising a family and shepherding a synagogue, even with the most willing and committed partners at home and within Temple leadership. And yes, we still explain our existence regularly as female clergy, though less often within the Jewish world.

Progress has definitely been made, though, in large part because of both the men and women who stood together in creating a world where female leadership mattered. Female voices paved the way for LGBT voices, which paved the way for voices from the disability community and voices of Jews of color, which paves the way for young voices, and the list goes on and on. A multitude of voices makes us a more responsive, sensitive, relevant, and stronger community.

As we reflect on what it means to celebrate 50 years of women in the rabbinate, I think that one of the most important lessons we can glean goes back to the basics. Relationships matter. Mentoring matters. We might take a lesson from the organizers' playbook that says: If you count yourself as a leader, you should be raising new leaders. This goes for any organization at any level, and all the more so for leaders of Judaism in the 21st century. Only two decades in, and after a devastating pandemic, we are faced with high levels of burnout of clergy on the front lines of all the major crises in the world today: mental health, racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, immigration, disease, political polarization, and the list goes on. It might be enough to scare away the potential rabbis of the future. So, what we need is long-term investment, training for rabbis, perhaps, on how to nurture future rabbis.

Some questions that might guide us are: What does religious education look like, both for synagogue life and out in the community, with mentoring future rabbis as a focus? How do we continue to break down old stereotypes of what makes for "rabbi potential" and continue to broaden our definition of "rabbi?" What does relationship-building with young people look like, especially in a climate of heightened awareness of the power imbalance between student and rabbi, and previous indiscretions by some clergy? What does investment in spiritual resilience look like over time? What does investment in deeper Jewish scholarship look like, so that future rabbis can become even more the "text people" that Rabbi Heschel described a half century ago? How seriously will the Jewish institutions of the future take sabbaticals and ongoing learning opportunities for our clergy? How can we ensure that the next generation of clergy, female or otherwise, feels that Reform Judaism is responsive, sensitive, relevant, and strong? There are many big questions to address such that my sweet introduction to Jewish leadership can be replicated.

We in Jewish leadership today cannot answer these questions alone. They must be answered in conversation and in the context of trusting relationships

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with those who will come after us. Mentorship is a precious relationship, one that our ancestors understood well. A prospective young student would sit at his teacher's feet, and the teacher would take the student under his wing to answer questions and live as an example to the young aspirant. While I'm not advocating for a return to this system, I do believe that when we unabashedly argue for religion, for its potential to be a force for good, and for clergy as a vocation of meaning and purpose. When we

invest in our young people, and tell them through our words and our actions that we need them and believe in them for our people's future, and when we create structures and systems that can anticipate and respond to their needs and their future world, then we will continue to inspire future generations of Jewish leadership, inclusive of all and in service to all.

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Courage of Convictions



Make the World a Better Place

By Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, Ph.D.

I first encountered classical Reform Judaism as a 15-year-old, anxious to become a rabbi. It was the 1950s. My hometown in Canada had a small Jewish community where everyone belonged to a single synagogue which was Orthodox, and as much as I loved that little shul and its rabbi, I was clearly not like him. So, I wondered, "Was there another kind of rabbi I might be?" Well-meaning relatives arranged for me to meet an illustrious Conservative rabbi in relatively nearby Toronto, who grilled me briefly on my Jewish education. But upon learning that I knew no Hebrew and had not even heard of (let alone studied) *Tanakh* or *Talmud*, he dismissed me with the verdict, "It's too late; you'll never know enough; be something else." My good Jewish parents decided to elicit a second opinion.

Reform Judaism, at the time—classical Reform, I learned eventually to call it—was wrongly, albeit widely, discredited in Canada as being "churchy," but my parents (who had never been in a Reform Temple in their lives) drove me one Friday night to meet the nearest Reform rabbi, fifty miles away,



Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman

who smiled encouragingly, and here I am. I have spent a lifetime grateful for that second opinion: grateful also for all that classical Reform gave me.

Let me be clear: the Shabbat service that fateful night put me to sleep. We sat at the back of a long, narrow sanctuary as a soloist sang, an organ played, and the rabbi intoned some prayers from far away. In rabbinic school, I learned how to be that rabbi, but by then, it was the 1960s, the era that brought us hippies, folk music, and power to the people. By the '70s, the Reform movement was responding with liturgical change: a new prayer book, new music, and a participatory service for all those newly-empowered worshipers. I had a major hand in bringing those changes into being, but I continued to respect what we were losing. A cantorial student once visited me in my office to discuss the beauty of classical Reform; upon hearing my very balanced view of things, she remarked, "You're not as bad as people say you are."

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But I knew too, that classical Reform was more than just its worship style of the moment. It was nothing short of a philosophy of Judaism for modernity—the kind of Judaism that faced the world with optimistic honesty and without fear of fossilizing because its universalistic ethic and wisdom about the human condition offered both sustenance and substance. Instead of seeing non-Jews as threats, we were to enlist them as allies, marching hand-in-hand, Jews and non-Jews alike, to attain a better dawn for all humanity. That was “the Mission of Israel.” What a vision that was; and still is!

“Classical Reform had not just courage, but the courage of its convictions, because it actually had convictions.”

That vision was possible because of two other characteristics of classical Reform, both of which, I fear, we largely lack today. The first is the courage to change, not just to tinker at the edges, but to change dramatically. Nineteenth-century Reform created an entirely new kind of worship that delivered the message of an entirely new kind of era: a time of enlightenment, culture, and the certitude that Jews belonged; that they had an ethical mission that mattered; that the world actually needed them. The reason the classical Reform service became outdated in the 1960s is that it had taught its lesson so well; and between 1819 (when the first Reform prayer book was born) and the heady 1960s, so much had changed. We needed another kind of worship for another kind of lesson, this one being the recovery of Jewish joy, Jewish Peoplehood, the State of Israel as our Land of promise, and with that state, Hebrew as our living language.

It is now the 2020s. The young baby-boomers of the 1960s are aging, even dying. We need newfound courage to retool our worship for the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren whose world is not John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon but Barack Obama and Donald Trump, who take for granted computers, social media, and globalism

on one hand but a retreat into national localism on the other. Surveys regularly warn of young people leaving synagogue life, and a decline of liberal religion generally, as opposed to rising fundamentalism. But 19th-century Reformers in Germany faced challenges at least as difficult: young Jews writing off Judaism altogether, and intense opposition from the Orthodox. Yet they had the courage not just to change things here and there, but to reinvent Judaism altogether. We need equal courage and an equal reinvention today.

My second great lesson from classical Reform is what I called above “not just sustenance but substance.” Sustenance is what sustains us, rituals in times of need, what we nowadays call pastoral care, or “healing.” We are very good at that. But we are not strong on substance. Classical Reform had not just courage, but the courage of its convictions, because it actually had convictions. It believed in things, not blindly, but through deep and serious investigation into Jewish tradition on one hand and secular knowledge on the other. Universities today are no longer guaranteed bastions of the secular sort; and as for Jewish tradition, we have made our rabbis into generalists, who are asked to do everything, and have little time for sustained and penetrating learning of their own. We nowadays lack the substance that crystallizes what we can believe, what our core principles are, and why it still matters to be a Reform Jew.

I came to Reform to save my rabbinic aspirations. But I stayed because I admired the Reform vision that I found there. With enough honesty and courage, we will change our worship again, just as we have in the past. The harder task, but a task that is not beyond us, will be creating the necessary substance for our time. That liturgy and that substance will reenforce Reform’s timeless message of optimism; and its universal mission, as members of the Jewish People, to work with others and make the world a better place for those who come after us.

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Our Brightest Days

By Rabbi Aaron Miller



Rabbi Aaron Miller

My office is full of pictures. To my left is a picture of my wife with me at my ordination and another of the *bedeken* from our wedding. Just beyond is a stream of framed photographs of my two daughters taken over the years. I have photo cubes and photo collages, photos between books and photos behind clocks, but right in front of my laptop is a picture of my grandfather, Rabbi Judea Miller z'l, and my father, Rabbi Jonathan Miller. They are standing next to each other, leaning on either side of a podium. My grandfather is clean shaven, wrinkled, and smiling behind glasses that I am sure were at the height of fashion in the early '80s. My father is young, bearded, and looking with intensity into the crowd. Each of them devoted their lives to Reform Judaism and the congregational rabbinate, and each were and are outstanding rabbis of their time.



My grandfather's father Dave grew up in Upole, Poland, spent his childhood in a *yeshiva*, and as a teenager, fled antisemitic oppression for the *goldene medina*, where he met my great grandmother Yetta. They lived in New York City, worked in the garment industry, and raised their children to be model Americans. Upon ordination, my grandfather served as an Army chaplain. It was later, as a congregational rabbi, my grandfather found his prophetic voice that marked the great rabbis of his generation. In the 1950s, Judea was at the

front lines of the racial justice movement and a fierce advocate of fair housing for people of color. In the 1960's, Judea would put his life at risk multiple times, traveling to Mississippi to fight for voting rights. Judea's was a rabbinate defined by the struggles of his day—civil rights, the founding of the State of Israel, workers' rights, the Vietnam War, Soviet Jewry, and immigration. These causes, and many more, captured my grandfather's fighting spirit. As my grandmother Anita used to say, "Judea never met a cause he didn't love."

If my grandfather's rabbinate was about bringing his congregation to the streets, my father's rabbinate focused on bringing them back home. My father spent the first nine years as a young rabbi at a large congregation in California, but spent the rest of his career in Birmingham, Alabama. His was a rabbinate of passing down the lessons of the *Shoah* and miracle of the founding of the State of Israel to a generation who had not experienced these events firsthand. My father led development projects and building campaigns and transitioned his classical congregation out of the High-Church aesthetic that had largely defined Reform Judaism until then. Jonathan was a rabbi in the deep south when the Christian right, and the culture that came with it, was at its peak. Interfaith collaboration was among the most important work of my father's career. In these decades, the early 90s and aughts, chart-topping boy bands wore purity rings and "What Would Jesus Do" bracelets. First Priority, an evangelical youth group, was far and away the most popular student community at my high school. Religion ran deep in Alabama, and Birmingham's Jewish community needed a Judaism that was as resonant and identity-defining as the Christianity of our neighbors.

I am a Millennial rabbi, and every time I look at that picture of my father and grandfather, I am reminded how seismically the Jewish community has changed. Intermarriage is now the norm, anti-Semitism is skyrocketing, and we live in an era

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of atomization, extremism, loneliness, and profound uncertainty. More than any point in Jewish history, my generation is embracing spirituality and religious wisdom from an array of sources. The doom-sayers of Jewish demography are having a field day.

But there is a parallel unfolding that makes me wildly hopeful. The Jewish population is not shrinking—quite the opposite. Since 1990, the Jewish community in the United States has grown by 35%. Surveys show how Jews are the most admired religious body in the country, more people are converting to Judaism than ever before, and a full two-thirds of intermarried couples are now raising their children as Jews. Never in the history of the Jewish people has there been an opportunity like the one before us.

We are at the beginning of another Jewish renaissance. I have seen a deep and unfulfilled hunger for Jewish content among Jews and non-Jews alike. Our success hinges on how we leverage the best digital tools available to communicate the power of our tradition's 3,500 years of wisdom. But digital outreach, while broad, is also shallow. In our age, content is free, but the discovery of community and belonging is precious. It is in our congregations—some of our country's last truly communal spaces—where next-generation institutions hold the power to bring millions of Jews on the periphery and Jew-curious seekers together to lead deep and resonant Jewish lives. If we are going to be successful, we need to teach adults who did not grow up with much or any Yiddishkeit to love Judaism like we

do, and then to give them the language and passion they need to pass it down to the next generation. To fight anti-Semitism and pursue equality for all, Jews will need to reach across our current political chasm and empower allies on both the left and the right. In this next chapter of Jewish life, visionary philanthropy will ensure that congregations do not need to overly rely on dues-revenue to dream and to grow. These trends have defined the past twelve years of my rabbinate, and as I look to the decades ahead, momentum is growing faster than I ever thought possible.

"More than any point in Jewish history, my generation is embracing spirituality and religious wisdom from an array of sources."

We are serving a generation longing to uncover its spiritual wells. While they may not always have the words to say it, most Millennials know that they are missing something essential to living a life with depth and meaning. If we can help bring the largest generation of Jews our country has ever known closer to their spiritual center, if we can light a fire in the Jewish soul, then I know our brightest days are ahead.

Rabbi Aaron Miller is Associate Rabbi at Washington Hebrew Congregation in Washington DC.

I Opened It for You

By Rabbi Eliza McCarroll



Rabbi Eliza McCarroll

On my first day at Holy Blossom, one of the little pre-school boys was waiting with his mother outside in the parking lot, eager to press the electric button that opens the door to the synagogue. Note that I said synagogue, not his preschool—that was another door—but I guess when you are four years old, a big, shiny button is extremely fascinating! His mother relented, and the doors swung open, delighting the

small child. Unexpectedly, he then turns back to look at me and says, “I opened it for you”!

“We are taught in our Torah that ‘it is not good for a person to be alone’...” (Genesis 2:18)

In that moment, my heart totally melted. In the time that has followed, I haven’t stopped thinking about that sweet encounter, and how it encapsulated my hopes for the Reform Jewish future, a mere four months out of rabbinical school.

This is because I see one of the roles of Reform Jewish institutions as centers of **connection**, for all ages. We are taught in our Torah that “it is not good for a person to be alone” (Genesis 2:18), and, following nearly three years of pandemic, our people are craving community and friendship once more. We also live in a world in which we are busier and busier with the commitments of a harried life, and ever-more drawn into the world of screens and the convenience of less human interaction, leading to a shadow epidemic of loneliness. This is particularly evident in the aging population who have been isolated in quarantine, and in the families who have become increasingly mobile, living further apart from each other—far from grandparents, cousins, old friends, and so on. Yet, our future is bright if we can provide a forum for deep, enduring relationships, and to be the village that takes care of one another.

Additionally, the world has become a scary place. We face impending climate catastrophe, enormous economic pressure, dangerous political polarization, rising antisemitism, homophobia, transphobia, homelessness, and the list goes on. It is leading to a stronger desire on behalf of our constituents to pray with their feet and pursue **social justice**. It is my hope that as communities, we can draw on our collective power to fulfill our mission to be a light unto the nations, creating a better world for our children.

When I was applying for my position, a crucial insight from my now-colleagues was that our congregation views its clergy as teachers. This phi-

losophy permeates everything that we say and do, whether it is from the pulpit, with a group of teens on camp, opening a board meeting, or, nowadays, even on Zoom.

What has subsequently become ingrained is the essence of the phrase from *Pirkei Avot* 4:1, “Who is wise, one who learns from every person”. Each of our congregants and guests can be our teachers—from the *B’nei Mitzvah* child on the *bimah* to the archivist hanging up artwork on the walls of our building. It is my hope, therefore, that **education** remains central to our institutions of Reform Judaism, from synagogue to social justice organization.

However, my further hope is that we see learning and teaching as partnership with our communities, and that we see Torah in the broadest sense, from text to practice to relationships.

Thinking back to that boy and to our question of the Reform Jewish future, I would tell him that I don’t have any answers, but I do have many hopes, which can be expressed in this blessing, from *Talmud Brachot* 17a: “May you trust in generations past and yet to be... may you live to see your world fulfilled”.

Rabbi Eliza McCarroll is the Assistant Rabbi of Holy Blossom Temple in Toronto, Canada.



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The Glass Is Half Full



We Do Live in Interesting Times

**By Rabbi Samuel K. Joseph,
Ph.D.**

The saying “We live in interesting times” may be a gigantic understatement. None of us could predict the shutdown of the world beginning in March 2020. The implications of the COVID pandemic will continually echo for generations. What it means particularly for Jewish life and living, the institutions and organizations of the Jewish community, we are only getting but a glimmer. There are and will be tremendous changes.



Rabbi Samuel K. Joseph

In my 40 years of teaching rabbis, Jewish educators, and Jewish leaders, I have been an observer, consultant, and change agent. What interested me most has been what the vision and mission of our institutions and organizations and how have these sites for Jewish life and community attempted to make their ideals a reality. I constantly asked leaders to think about the culture in their communities. “What is it like to be a Jew in this town?” “How is being Jewish here connected with the general culture of your city, state, region, country?” “What does your Jewish institution/organization want to add to one’s life and how does it do so?”

Living in the pre-pandemic world of the synagogue-congregational sphere, we came with expectations. We expected face-to-face worship, with common, well-known prayers, music, rituals, sermons, customs, and food. Variations on this theme were caused only by the liturgical calendar from Shabbat to High Holy Days, to the Pilgrimage Festivals, and so on. We expected the education of children to happen face-to-face, mostly on Sunday morning, about 25 times per year. Hebrew School

generally was midweek, face-to-face. Adult Learning, obviously face-to-face, included Saturday Torah Study and any number of other choices during the year, from Jewish texts to cultural offerings. We expected congregational affinity groups for women, men, teens, families with small children, and on and on.

Every atom of what I described above has changed in one form or another. What does that mean? Let me take one example, Hebrew School. Most students and their

parents very much disliked midweek Hebrew. Grabbing a kid immediately after a day in school, driving to the synagogue, possibly in crazy traffic, and the kid him/herself after a full day in school now trying to pay attention to foreign language training for an hour and a half seems irrational. Add the fact that the pedagogy of language teaching and acquisition is highly technical, and the students require lots of drilling and practice, which is more or less impossible given the timing and setting of Hebrew School.

Naturally, the pandemic required change. Hebrew School went online, both as live sessions (synchronous) and recorded video sessions (asynchronous). It worked. No more rushing to the synagogue immediately after school. Live sessions with the students in their home setting. Practicing and drilling at any hour using pre-recorded materials.¹ I do not think we are going to return to face-to-face Hebrew School week in and week out. There may/should be face-to-face gatherings of the classes occasionally. But midweek Hebrew School will be remote online.

Other synagogue congregational “events” also worked during the pandemic. Shiva included friends and loved ones who, in the past, could not

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

attend. They lived too far away, for example. Online, the personalizing by Shiva attendees as they shared their stories of the deceased, was powerful. Same with *Bar/Bat Mitzvah*, where, in the past, unwell or elderly loved ones were unable to travel, they now attended. I was at a baby-naming yesterday where the godparents of the newborn participated from Greece to Cincinnati, leading a special reading during the ceremony for all of us to hear.

"We have so many possibilities to enhance Jewish life and living for Jewish community members."

Almost three years of pandemic living, and Jews are taking advantage of attending worship services at congregations world-wide. Adult learning opportunities via the Internet are infinite. One can study with some of the finest teachers in the universe.

So, now it is 2032, a decade away. As I look back to 2022, here are a few of my thoughts:

- One cannot look back on the good old days. We are in a post-synagogue culture.
- Synagogue is a digital organization with a physical location. Everything is decentralized.
- On-demand access exceeds events where people attend face-to-face and reaches people where they are.
- We are staffed 100% for digital and 100% for physical.²

I am excited about the future. We have so many possibilities to enhance Jewish life and living for Jewish community members. The pandemic forced all of us to address the incredibly rapid changes in our world. I do not think there are huge risks in these endeavors. We DO live in interesting times.

Rabbi Samuel K. Joseph, Ph.D. is Eleanor Sinsheimer Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus of Jewish Education and Leadership Development at HUC in Cincinnati OH, and RRJ's Senior Consultant for Organizational Learning.

¹ It should be noted that it takes time to train Hebrew School teachers how to teach in an online milieu, to have the best technical equipment to do this teaching, to have top Hebrew language curricula for these online classes and have the digital support the students and teachers require. At the same time, we still struggle with what religious school/Sunday school should look like in the future.

² A huge thank you to Cary Nieuwhof and his Church Disruption Summit, August 22-23, 2022

Teaching the Torah of Music

By Isaac Sonett-Assor



Rabbi Isaac
Sonett-Assor

As I enter my fifth year of study in the Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music at HUC-JIR and approach ordination, I am filled with anticipation—and, of course, quite a few nerves. Over these past four years, I have been privileged to ob-

serve, study with, and work alongside leaders in the cantorate, both in my coursework and in the internship roles that HUC has made possible. I have seen my mentors bring their vision of our changing field to life. And now, as I prepare to join them as a colleague—though always their student—I am eager to become their partner in serving and leading our broader Jewish community.

"A Cantor who faces the holiness in the Ark rather than the curiosity of man will realize that his audience is God...his task is not to entertain but to represent the people of Israel."
(Abraham Joshua Heschel)

In my first year at HUC in Jerusalem, my classmates and I read Abraham Joshua Heschel's famous essay *The Vocation of the Cantor*. "The Cantor who prefers to display his voice rather than to convey the words and to set forth the spirit of the words, will not bring the congregation closer to prayer... A Cantor who faces the holiness in the Ark rather than the curiosity of man will realize that his audience is God. He will learn to realize that his task is not to entertain but to represent the people of Israel."

I continue to return to these words at each stage of my education. Heschel reminds the cantor in every age that musical factors like genre, congregational participation, and the balance of new and familiar

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repertoire are the means of our work, not the ends. Cantors must find the “why” behind each musical decision. Does this new *L’cha Dodi* or *Mi Chamocha* awaken some hidden dimension of the poem, or are we simply bored with the familiar melodies? When we share a complex musical setting, what impact do we hope it will have on the congregation? How can we guide the worshiper’s ear in the way a *darshan* illuminates the deeper meaning of the text?



In my cantorial work so far, I ask myself what unique value a cantor can bring to each setting, whether as a prayer leader, teacher, pastor, or performer. In other words, how does my cantorial training lead me to approach challenges differently than a rabbi, educator, or other Jewish professional? To me, being able to articulate and demonstrate this value is a primary necessity for each cantor. I see the cantor as one who is trained to teach the Torah of music to students of all levels of musical experience. Whether interacting with a lifelong choral singer or an individual completely unfamiliar with Jewish music, cantors have the opportunity to show how music can help us celebrate, mourn, heal, and find meaning.

To do so, we cantors must continue to renew our love of music and all art forms that excite us. Only through this love will we find new ways to connect with and elevate our communities, even as musical tastes inevitably shift. The best way to communi-

cate the power of Jewish music is to show how it has changed and continues to change us.

Isaac Sonett-Assor (he/him) is a fifth-year cantorial student at the Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music in the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in New York City.

Feeling at Home in Jewish Spaces

By Melissa Carp Lefkowitz



Melissa Carp Lefkowitz

My Jewish story began in Newton, Massachusetts where I attended Temple Beth Avodah, a Reform synagogue. My rabbi at Beth Avodah, Rabbi Keith Stern, played a large role in my desire to become a rabbi, and has become a great confidant, mentor, and my very own wedding officiant this past June. He introduced me to Cheryl Ann’s Bakery *challah* at Beth Avodah preschool which, between you and me, kept me coming back. His lessons allowed me to find a deeper appreciation for Shabbat and Jewish community at Bates College Jewish Student’s Union. It was during my time at Bates where my desire to become a rabbi was solidified.

“If we wish for young Jews to engage in Judaism beyond their b’nai mitzvah, we need to engage them as individuals.”

I have spent the past four plus years envisioning my rabbinate, and my desire to build Jewish community has remained at the forefront. If we wish for young Jews to engage in Judaism beyond their *b’nai mitzvah*, we need to engage them as individuals. We need to fully embrace their needs to get them connected, first on the personal level and then the spiritual level. I believe that community and education work in partnership. Upon ordination in May, I hope to find work as a pulpit rabbi, where connecting young families and our youth to Jewish programming will be at the forefront of my mission.

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My parents always stressed the importance of a Jewish education, sending me to religious school from kindergarten through 12th grade. While we covered the holidays and some Hebrew, the most important things I learned there were that I have good friends who, just like myself, love Judaism, and I feel at home in Jewish spaces. Content acquisition came later for me. Studying and picking apart our tradition's most beloved texts were skills that I only acquired during my time in rabbinical school. I believe that in addition to studying Judaism and learning how to interpret Hebrew, text study should be another vital tool to deepen one's relationship with Judaism and Jewish peoplehood. By not encouraging our students to use and grow these different skill sets, we are not letting them reach their full potential as Jewish youth. My hope, by using these different teaching techniques, we will encourage our youth to find Jewish community after leaving their parent's home and well until their own adulthood.

Melissa Carp Lefkowitz is a fifth-year rabbinical student at Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles

The Future Is Open to Us

By Rabbi Kenneth A. Kanter



Rabbi Kenneth A.
Kanter

While I do not usually contribute a topical article in our Roots of Reform Judaism's *Reform Advocate*, this seemed an appropriate edition to change the standard-operating-practice of the last four years. The *Advocate* has always been a home for

scholarly, meaningful, educational and, I hope, edifying articles about our Reform Jewish heritage. In past issues, we focused on historic subject matter. In recent times, we have concentrated on central topics—our liturgy, music, institutions, and inspirational leaders, both past, and of the present.

“...the future is open to us, as we build on the past, and assure the future.”

But as you are seeing as you peruse this issue, we have asked our contributors to share their vision of the future from wherever they are in their Reform Jewish lives. Some of our contributors, with whom you are the most familiar, are in a similar age-group to me—many decades into their professions, some reaching retirement, all with a long view of how Judaism has changed since their/our careers began forty or fifty years ago. And others, at the start of their careers, share the enthusiasm of new beginnings amid Reform Judaism's changes and evolution now underway.

I think few would disagree that the world of Reform Judaism has changed dramatically over these past fifty years; for example, through new prayerbooks as diverse as Union Prayer Book Sinai Edition and Gates of Prayer to Mishkan Tefillah. The great, midcentury music with choir, organ, and soloist has morphed into guitar and drums and klezmer and cantor. Discussion of these changes can be found in the previous issues of the *Advocate*.

Like Reform Judaism itself, Roots of Reform Judaism, too, has evolved significantly, during these past several years—starting years before Covid, and continuing up to this moment, as we look to the future. This organization began as the Society for Classical Reform Judaism, directing its efforts to encourage broader use of the elegant, uplifting liturgy of the classic Reform Union Prayer Book, in more congregations around North America. Through scholarly journal articles, reprinting of classic Reform books, funding scholarships, resources, or academic prizes for the Hebrew Union College, the SCRJ served a curated mission around the great Reform Judaism of the past century.

In recent years, even before the Covid pandemic's profound changes forced in-person synagogue worship, classes, counseling, meetings, and or-

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ganizational life to move online, we had seen great change. One example has been in Reform congregations' use of printed prayerbooks and *siddurim*—moving away from the traditional publications to on-screen or locally produced worship materials. We have also recognized the diminished commitment to synagogue attendance and membership. The increase in intermarriages, as well as the growing diversity of those who do identify with Judaism, have made these institutions less meaningful and welcoming to many of these contemporary congregants.

Why do I include all these issues? Because, as I look to the future of Roots of Reform Judaism, I see a much broader and more diverse program of educational, inspirational, and practical materials, classes, and worship, all inspired by the heritage of our great Reform traditions, but in a format and accessibility (linguistically and stylistically) that speak to our new reality.

In the coming months, we will be adding to our children's "daily spiritual companion," *A Time to Begin*, with the second resource called *A Time to Grow*. With the same marvelous illustrations and moving text, these two fun and colorful booklets teach the values of Reform Judaism to our children, the next generation of Reform Jews, through the eyes, experiences, and emotions of "Ani the Ant."

Following the wide use of our *A Time to Comfort* booklet, containing meditations, poetry, readings,

and prayers written or selected by forty rabbis and cantors for the inspiration of hospital, hospice, or home-bound individuals, we are now in the process of writing *A Time to Serve* to be available next year. This will be a booklet of meditations, prayers, liturgy, and poetry written by Jewish Chaplains from all branches of the military, and those supporting first responders, for Jewish members of our armed forces and service corps—a need identified by several chaplains serving our military.

One reality that Covid brought into focus for RRJ's view of the future is the role of social media and on-line education. We have been very fortunate to work with Jewish scholars from many disciplines to plan the creation of Reform Jewish "TED-talk-style" videos in the areas of Reform Jewish history, Judaica, Art, music, and values to name a few. With your support, there is so much more we can do and so many more we can inspire.

In the Union Prayer Book, there is a beautiful prayer which I alter just a bit! "Help us preserve Israel's heritage from generation to generation, that it may bring joy, peace, and comfort to the homes of our community... that Your name may be hallowed in all the earth."

With your generosity of spirit and resources, the future is open to us, as we build on the past, and assure the future.

Rabbi Kenneth A. Kanter is the Rabbinical Director at Roots of Reform Judaism in Cincinnati OH.



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Inspired by the past, embracing today, shaping tomorrow.

NEW BOARD MEMBERS

Welcoming Roots of Reform Judaism's Newest Board Members

Roots of Reform Judaism is pleased to announce the appointment of four new members to its Board of Directors. They were unanimously voted in at the June Annual Meeting.



Simon Barrad (*I.M. Wise Temple, Cincinnati, OH & San Francisco, CA*) - Simon Barrad is a two-time Grammy-nominated baritone, performing in concerts across the United States and Europe. He is known for unique and innovative

programming and arranging—melding new and old, jazz and drama, classical technique and heartfelt folk idioms. Simon has also served for 9 years as the cantorial soloist for Isaac M. Wise Temple's High Holy Day services at the historic Plum Street Temple and touring in Yiddish and pre-WWII/Holocaust music. He says: "As a professional singer, I often look for clues of where my artistic ideas and inspiration may have come... It's the gift of music that lives in your bones before you can even articulate what music is."



Cantor Yvon Shore (*Cincinnati, OH*) - Cantor Yvon F. Shore is the Director of Liturgical Arts and Music at HUC-JIR in Cincinnati, Ohio. She earned a master's degree in Sacred Music and Ordination through

HUC-JIR, New York. She received a bachelor's degree in Music Education from West Chester University, College of Visual and Performing Arts with a double major in flute and conducting. Cantor Shore took additional studies in ethnomusicology at Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York with Bathja Bayer, Israel Adler, Amnon Shiloah, Edwin Seroussi, and Johoash Hirshberg. She continued graduate studies with an emphasis in musicology at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music.



Eafat Newton (*I.M. Wise Temple, Cincinnati, OH*) - "As an Israeli, a Jew, and a Midwesterner, I can attest that there is no single Jewish experience. My parents brought us here from Israel when I was five

with the intention of staying for only a year. That was over forty years ago! ...I married my 9th-grade biology lab partner (many years after we bonded over our first frog dissection). And after spending a semester together at Hebrew University in college, we realized two things: that we wanted to spend the rest of our lives together and that shared spirituality would anchor our interfaith marriage. As we raise our Jewish kids, I've had to be intentional in my Judaism. I'm grateful to Congregation Micah of Nashville, Temple Beth Avodah of Newton, and Wise Temple for helping us in our journey."



Rabbi Devon Lerner (*Central Reform Temple, Boston, MA*) - Another new board member, our dear colleague and friend Rabbi Devon Lerner, who has moved from the "staff team" to the "Board team". Devon

was one of the first ten women rabbis ordained by Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR) in Cincinnati and earned a Master of Hebrew Letters and a Doctor of Divinity Degree from the same institution. She also received a Master of Social Work from Boston University and has been active in social justice issues and interfaith relations throughout her career.

RRJ Board Member Emeritus Status

At its Annual Meeting, the RRJ Board of Directors resolved to confer emeritus status on four former Board members. Each of the RRJ Emeritus/Emerita Board members were charter (or very early) members of the Board of Directors of the Society for Classical Reform Judaism. They served with deep commitment and distinction before retiring from the Board of RRJ in the last couple of years. By unanimous resolution of the current Board of RRJ, they were made Emeritus/Emerita, honoring their significant service to our organization.



Phil Hoffman
Chicago, IL (*Sinai Congregation*)



Jan E. Stone
Chicago, IL (*Sinai Congregation*)



Les Novitsky
North Point, FL



Max Tonkon
Dallas, TX (*Temple Emanu-El*)

Ed Ackerman ז"ל – Founding Board Member



The Board of Directors of Roots of Reform Judaism voted unanimously to designate Edward M. Ackerman as Founding Member, bestowed upon him posthumously.

Ed Ackerman had a significant impact on our work, as benefactor of our operations and programs, and supporter of many special projects RRJ/SCRJ initiated. He was deeply committed to the Classical Reform tradition, and had long been an advocate at his congregation, Temple Emanu-El of Dallas. He built on this commitment with transformational support of Hebrew Union College in both Cincinnati and Jerusalem. We are grateful for his leadership and vision.

Simchas and Condolences

Mazal Tov to our Board member, Flossie Weill, on the birth of her new granddaughter, Mae.

Mazal Tov to our Rabbinical Director, Rabbi Ken and Dr. Toni Kanter, on the recent birth of their grandson, Cooper, son of Dr. Aaron and Hannah Schklar.

We are happy to share the news of the engagement of Bates O'Neal to Laura Owens. Bates is the Music and Artistic Director of KK Beth Elohim of Charleston, SC, and has been instrumental in singing, helping to record and produce music for our Shabbat and High Holy Day service recordings. Mazal tov!

With sadness we announce the recent passing of Major General Bertram Chalfant, father of Anna-Gene O'Neal, and father-in-law of our board member, Scott O'Neal.

We share a deep sadness at the recent passing of Marilyn Tonkon, wife of Emeritus Board member, Max Tonkon.

On the Road with Rabbi Kanter



Rabbinical director Rabbi Ken Kanter meeting with our Rabbinic intern Melissa Carp-Lefkowitz, a senior at HUC-JIR in Los Angeles, at her classmate, Sammy Kanter's (no relation!) wedding in Cincinnati.

Upcoming Travels

Autumn, 2022	Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, OH
Winter, 2022-2023	Mizpah Congregation, Chattanooga, TN
Winter, 2022	Congregation Mickve Israel, Savannah, GA
Spring, 2023	CCAR Convention and HUC, Jerusalem
Spring, 2023	Temple Oseh Shalom, Bluffton, SC
Spring, 2023	Temple Beth Zion, Buffalo, NY
Spring, 2023	Congregation B'nai Jehudah, Kansas City, MO

Our thanks to artist, Terri Eilermann, of Spring Grove Mosaics, whose commissioned logo appeared on the cover of our Spring 2022 Reform Advocate.



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 Rabbi Sam Joseph, Ph.D. – Senior Consultant-Organizational Learning
 Rabbi Howard Berman – Founding Director

The Reform Advocate

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NOTES TO ROOTS

Hope you had a wonderful Seder. Here is Yaara with her new RRJ booklet for children. (Vicki Woolner-Samuels, Chicago IL)

Our newest reader



Dear Doug and Ken: I just received my gorgeous box set from Roots of Reform! This is a major accomplishment. I have asked all of our clergy to come look at it. When you have a moment, please send me the link or QR code for ordering—this will be a tremendous resource to many. With much gratitude, Peter (Rabbi Peter Berg, The Temple, Atlanta, GA)

Thank you again for the beautiful gift to the CCAR in support of our new publication, *The First Fifty Years: A Jubilee in Prose and Poetry Honoring Women Rabbis*. Your (gift) will appear ... in the front section of the anthology ... we are planning to recognize your gift as follows: Roots of Reform Judaism, in honor of Rabbi Devon Lerner. With gratitude, Pamela Goldstein (Director of Advancement, CCAR)



(RRJ's Rabbi Devon Lerner in blue)

In these challenging and uncertain times, you can still celebrate the Sabbath and festivals at home or virtually through the **Roots of Reform Booklet Project**. In contemporary language, primarily in English, with Hebrew and transliteration for key prayers. These booklets offer a path for many to find a way into the beauty of our heritage.

9 booklets are available now:

A Time to Begin – *A Daily Spiritual Companion for Our Little Ones*

A Time to Comfort – *Prayers and Meditations for Moments of Need*

A Time to Forgive – *an abbreviated Yom Kippur Service*

A Time to Learn – *the Roots of Reform Judaism*

A Time to Mourn – *Prayers and Home Service for Mourners*

A Time to Reflect – *A Shabbat Evening Service for Today*

A Time to Rejoice – *an abbreviated Rosh Hashanah Service*

A Time A Time to Rest – *Sabbath Prayers and Rituals for the Home*

A Time to Share – *Home Observances, Festivals, Blessings, and Readings*

The booklets are being used for individual reflection; lay-led, in-home, and congregational services; congregational member resources; chavurot (self-led communities); hospitals and hospice communities; and senior living communities.

Visit www.rootsofreform.org for more information.



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