

Re-CHARGING Reform Judaism Conference Keynote Address

What brings most of us here and now is a sense of urgency that we are at an inflection point in the history of North American Jewry and the Reform movement.

Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch

June 1, 2023



Screenshot from Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch's keynote address

Welcome to the Re-CHARGING Reform Judaism Conference!
Welcome to New York City!

Welcome to the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue! It is our honor to host you.

We are very pleased — amazed really — to see so many friends and supporters. When we first began to brainstorm about a possible conference, we anticipated that perhaps several dozen colleagues might attend. What began as a trickle soon became a torrent of interest from the broad spectrum of Reform leadership, representing much of the glorious diversity of our movement: rabbis, cantors, educators, administrators, and lay leaders of synagogues of all shapes, sizes and geographical locations, as well as other critical organizations such as Hillel, and national and international Reform institutions. The conference planning committee alone soon mushroomed to 90 colleagues.

And it began to dawn on us that we were onto something much bigger than we initially thought: that there is a deep hunger for gathering together in this manner — organic, grass- roots, and informal — to discuss the future of our movement and North American Jewry.

Hinei ma tov u'ma na'im shevet achim gam yachad — how good for brothers and sisters, colleagues and friends, Jewish professionals and volunteers, to gather together after the severe isolation imposed upon us in the past three years. Just to be with so many partners to discuss ideas, values and beliefs is a great joy.

Why are we gathering?

While we may each have a different perch from which to understand the Jewish community, I think that what brings most of us here and now is a sense of urgency that we are at an inflection point in the history of North American Jewry and the Reform movement. That fundamental and rapid changes are unfolding before our eyes that have already and will increasingly challenge our vitality and well-being: a sense that we need each other to identify the key challenges ahead, so that we may craft effective responses that will strengthen the Reform movement we love, and fortify the Jewish community we serve.

When I refer to the Reform movement, I do not mean any one of us separately; I mean all of us together. Outcomes are the product of our collective and cumulative efforts. For example, the numbers of graduates seeking to become Jewish professionals reflect, at least in part, the scope and success of our collective youth engagement years before people contemplate career choices. The uniqueness of this gathering in conception, design and execution, is in our understanding that none of us is bigger— or smaller — than the Reform movement. We are — all of us — entrusted with the precious legacy of ages past, and in our collective hands, lay much of the destiny of the North American Jewish community.

We have identified three central ideological pillars that we think are most relevant for recharging Reform Judaism. There

are more, but these are the ones that the dozens of us on the planning committee eventually settled upon as constituting what we believe are our highest priorities at this moment in time, and we will spend the next two days together discussing them in depth:

First: the fraying commitment to Zionism, and the increasing distancing between North American liberal Jews and Israel.

Second: rediscovering, recharging and restoring the optimal balance between universal values and Jewish peoplehood. How to ensure that *Tikkun Olam* remains rooted in *Klal Yisrael*: that our efforts towards social repair emerge from, and are a reflection of, our deepest commitment to the particularistic covenant of the Jewish people?

Third: refreshing our religious commitments in an increasingly post-religious century. How to develop the ideas, vocabulary and ritual practices that will kindle the innate spiritual yearnings of every human being, and inspire more of our congregants, as well as the many in the Jewish community who are disengaged, unaffiliated or spiritually adrift?

The stakes today are very high. For those of us who believe that of all the many agencies instilling Jewish literacy, cultivating Jewish identity, and advancing Jewish continuity in North America, synagogues are the most important of all, it is

deeply worrying that the dramatic growth of our movement in the 20th century appears to have peaked, and our institutions seem to be contracting, not expanding. While there are some important and notable exceptions, broadly speaking, our numbers, our vigor, and hence, our revenue are in decline. The pandemic accelerated and exacerbated these trends. We are not alone. These developments are unfolding across the spectrum of liberal religious denominations in North America. But the fact that we are not alone, does not diminish the need for us to respond with all the energy and creativity within our powers. Jews have always been good at confronting changing times head-on and devising new ideas and new strategies to reinvigorate Jewish life.

I wish we surveyed our own movement in depth because we would ask different questions than the large agencies that study North American populations, and we would uncover data that would be uniquely important to our specific efforts. We would zero in on motivations and practices that would reveal more about our congregants. What are their values and beliefs? Do we, in fact, reflect their sensibilities and aspirations? What are they looking for, and what would they be willing to fund? We would investigate why enrollment in Reform professional schools is declining. We would learn more about the commitments, motivations and beliefs of our future clergy and educators. Why do they want to be Reform Jewish leaders? What are their views about the great

religious, political and cultural issues of our times? Are they committed to Israel, Zionism, Jewish peoplehood and Jewish particularism, and do these values drive, or at least inform, their decision to apply to our rabbinical, cantorial or educational programs? We would investigate how the year-in-Israel impacts on students during their training and even decades later.

While we have not comprehensively surveyed our own movement for many years, nonetheless, we can gather considerable information from general and Jewish population surveys conducted by others. According to the latest data gleaned from the 2020 Pew survey, when asked, over 2.1 million Jewish adults say they identify with Reform Judaism (Brandeis Demographic Profile of Reform Jewry, 2023).

On its face, this is great news. More American Jews, by far, describe themselves as Reform than any other denomination or movement. More American Jews, by far, embrace our understanding of a liberal Judaism that eagerly welcomes the promise and potential of modernity. Fifty-two percent of currently-enrolled religious school students — more than half — receive supplemental Jewish education in Reform synagogues (Jewish Education Project, 2023). Fewer than 10% of American Jews say they are Orthodox. There are also nearly 2million Jewish adults who describe themselves as either “none” — no particular religious practice or beliefs, or

“secular” — and many of these Jews, too, are not out of our reach.

There is vast potential for a renaissance of Reform Judaism. Most Jewish adults — 65% — want their children to be engaged with Judaism, and 81% feel a sense of Jewish belonging (Keren Keshet). We still have time if we can figure out how to engage the unengaged. The data point to engagement as the key to Jewish continuity, both in the broad community and, certainly, in our own synagogues.

And here, there are worrying signs. While over two million Jewish adults describe themselves as Reform, only around 555,000 of them actually affiliate with a Reform synagogue (Brandeis, 2023). Contrast that with an affiliation rate of 56% for Conservative and 93% for Orthodox Jews. And how to account for the many liberal Jews, including young adults raised in our congregations, who find more interest and meaning in Chabad activities than our own? According to a recent study by the Jewish Educational Project, enrollment in supplemental Jewish education declined by 40% between 2006 and 2019. The only exception was Chabad-run supplementary schools.

Only 34% of American Jews are affiliated today (Keren Keshet). If we can attract more Jews, we will keep many of them. They will return to our congregations as adults and will

add immeasurably to the strength and vitality of the North American Jewish community.

Nearly 90% of adults raised Jewish are still Jewish, according to the 2020 Pew Survey. Two-thirds of adults raised Reform still identify as Reform.

We need to find ways to engage our own congregants more deeply and attract many more North American Jews. We must figure out how to reverse, or at least slow, widespread Jewish illiteracy, disaffiliation and disengagement. We delude ourselves if we think we can overlook pervasive detachment and still sustain Jewish continuity in North America. Sooner or later the protecting walls of Jewish nostalgia and generational loyalty will collapse under the mounting pressures of illiteracy and disinterest.

We are not the only ones to recognize the urgencies of our times. We have many friends and potential benefactors who understand that the Reform movement is too big to fail. All who care about the health and well-being of the Jewish community realize that as goes our movement, so goes much of North American Jewry. It is why there are many individuals, philanthropies and communal agencies that are willing to support us and may not even consider themselves Reform or liberal. They, too, appreciate that what transpires during these

years in our movement will ineluctably shape the future of the Jewish community.

Many of the future leaders of the organized Jewish community will either emerge from our synagogues, or not at all. And therefore, communal agencies recognize that our problems are also their problems, and hence, they are willing, or can be persuaded, to encourage us, help us and fund us.

Our challenges cannot be adequately and comprehensively addressed by technique — by tinkering with, or overhauling, this or that program. It is a question of values. All of life begins with ideas and commitments. Values come first, and then, we create the organizational infrastructure to propagate them. We do not first build a program and then figure out what are our principles. First, we have deep-seated beliefs, and then we build institutions and initiatives to disseminate them.

When it comes to the three central pillars of this conference, we cannot shy away from the intensifying ideological struggle unfolding within the North American liberal Jewish community. To retreat from the competition of values is to leave the field wide open to those who are willing to engage. Mindful of our affection and respect for each other — relationships often built up over many decades — I hope that during these todays, we state our views and critiques with clarity and conviction. Judaism is a tradition of *machloket*— disputation,

disagreement and debate. We do not take offense when we disagree with each other. To the contrary, Jews are offended when we too readily agree! If we feel we have taken a wrong ideological turn we need to say so and lay down counter-claims.

This conference reflects the will of its participants to roll up our sleeves and engage the debate, vigorously, energetically and fully.

I am especially concerned that those of us who are unshakably committed to the central religious value of Jewish peoplehood have not been vocal or effective enough. I am troubled by weakening attachments to Israel, the most eloquent expression of Jewish peoplehood in our times.

I fear that we are losing the soul of the Reform movement.

For the record, like so many of us, I am appalled by elements of the current Israeli government. We will never sanitize ultra-nationalist extremists and religious fundamentalists. They are out of the mainstream, and beyond the pale, of normative Jewish and Zionist values.

But the process of distancing from Israel was gathering strength for many years before this government came into existence. If anything, the crisis imposes upon us a greater

urgency. It is a test of our leadership — a demanding trial in historically momentous times. We must double down and increase our efforts in Israel, supporting the many millions of Israelis, the majority, who share our values. That should be our response to those in our community who seek to walk away. I worry — deeply — that increasing numbers of liberal young adults, including those entering Reform leadership, express indifference to Israel, or worse: opposition not to the policies of Israeli governments, but to the very legitimacy of the Zionist enterprise and the Jewish state.

To critique decision-makers is what Jews do. It is a sign of health, energy and vitality. To turn against Israel; to join our ideological opponents and political enemies in castigating Zionism, is a sign of Jewish illness, an atrophying of our intellectual and emotional commitment to our people. Israel is the Jewish people's supreme creation of our age. When you analyze what it took over nineteen centuries, to create and defend this tiny country, you may point to historical, sociological, political, economic, and a host of other factors that brought the modern Jewish state into being, but at some point you just need to step back and marvel at this inexplicable miracle. According to the laws of history it was impossible.

There shouldn't even be Jews in the world. We should have disappeared long ago, as all the other nations of antiquity that

lived by our side, including the superpowers of the ancient world that were destined to rule forever, and were convinced that they finally destroyed these pesky Jews. The first mention of our people outside the Bible is in the Merpentan Stele from approximately 1200 BCE, wherein the Pharaoh of Egypt proclaims: “Israel is laid waste — its seed is destroyed...” “I destroyed the Jews” — this is history’s first ever mention of our people.

Given the growing hostility to Israel in our circles, liberal and progressive spaces, and mindful of the increasing disdain for Jewish particularism, it is not enough for us to proclaim our Zionist bona fides every now and again, often expressed defensively, and with so many qualifications, stipulations and modifications, that our enthusiasm for Zionism is buried under an avalanche of provisos. It is not enough to issue occasional press releases or tweets that we are a Zionist movement committed to the age-old religious value of the covenant of the Jewish people.

We are the leaders. We must lead. We must be proactive. We must aggressively counter intensifying and expanding anti-Zionist, anti-peoplehood forces in liberal spaces throughout the Western world. We must let people know, with clarity and conviction, what we believe. We must take on forces in American society, whether local or national, grassroots or in the halls of Congress, with whom we may agree on many

other matters, but who disdain Israel, support her enemies, or are connected to elements in American society that hate Jews.

We cannot march arm-in-arm with Israel-haters, lending them our moral authority, and confusing our own followers. We must oppose them. And we must let everyone know why we cannot join them.

And sooner or later we will have to attend to the growing fissures in the Reform movement, itself. We cannot pretend they do not exist for the sake of a false sense of unity. Otherwise, the rifts that emerged between the anti-peoplehood, anti-Zionist Reform Jews of the first half of the 20th century, and the Zionists who were committed to Jewish particularism, will reopen in our movement with devastating consequences for 21st-century Reform synagogues. We must develop curricula from early childhood through advanced Jewish studies that instill a love of our people and a commitment to the Jewish state.

We have already experienced these ruptures in our movement. We thought those days were behind us. We were wrong. There is something innate in the philosophy of Western Jewish liberalism that inclines us to elevate universal aspirations, not as complementary to, or a reflection of, Jewish peoplehood, but as its replacement. As stated with

brehtaking and radical honesty by the founding generation of our movement:

“We recognize in the modern era of universal culture of heart and intellect, the approaching realization of Israel’s great messianic hope for the establishment of the kingdom of truth, justice and peace among all men. We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community, and therefore, [do not] expect...a return to Palestine.” (Pittsburgh Platform, 1885)

It dawned on me only a decade or so ago, that the anti-peoplehood stance of late 19th to mid-20th-century Reform Judaism — the rejection of Jewish particularism in favor of an almost messianic-like embrace of Western universalism — was not a historical aberration. The exception was not the Pittsburgh Platform, as I had assumed for most of my career. The exception was the 20th century that inflicted existential threat after existential threat on our people — Eastern European pogroms, Western European fascism, the Holocaust,

Israel’s War of Independence, the Six Day War, the Yom Kippur War, Communism and the struggle to free Soviet Jews — these compelled even fervent anti-peoplehood Reform Jews to warm towards Jewish particularism for a period of time. But now, in an era of no perceived existential threats

against the Jewish people; when, if anything, Israel is perceived by many liberal Jews as the neighborhood bully — and notwithstanding the distressing rise of Western anti-Semitism — it is natural, and we should have expected, that this strain of Jewish liberalism that denigrates Jewish particularism, would reemerge.

Reform Judaism occupies the seam in Western religious life, bridging both the universal and the particular. It is a good place to be. But, in truth, we have often distorted the balance between *tikkun olam* and *klal Yisrael*, thus disfiguring Judaism's unique approach, and contribution, to the world. We must constantly be on guard against, and effectively oppose, those would take us back to the future, to the bitter disputes that almost ripped our movement apart in the 20th century.

It was only a relative handful of Reform Zionist rabbis and lay supporters who refused to accept the anti-peoplehood, and thus, the anti-Zionism, of the early 20th-century Reform movement. They are the ones who eventually reshaped and recharged our movement, and along with it, much of the North American Jewish community. They are the ones we remember — the few in numbers at first, but the mighty in convictions and influence. They are the ones we study. They are the ones we admire. We name synagogues after them.

They knew that we had taken a wrong turn, and they fought back with every intellectual and institutional capacity they had. The founder of this synagogue, Rabbi Stephen Wise, even created a competing liberal seminary in the building next door – the Jewish Institute of Religion — to counter the then ferocious anti-Zionism of the Hebrew Union College.

The same trends, the same fissures and the same ruptures will reemerge if we are not on our guard and allow Jewish universal aspirations to overwhelm and entomb the theology and reality of the covenant of the Jewish people that lay at the very center of Jewish civilization and religious thought.

At no time in the history of our people, was separation from the Land of Israel considered permanent. At no time did we abandon the dream of return. At no time did we consider dispersion to be a blessing. At no time did the Rabbis sever Torah from Israel, or God from the people. At no time was *tikkun olam* — the universal demand *la'assot tzedeka u'mishpat* – to do what is just and right — ripped from the moorings of *klal Yisrael* — the centrality of Jewish peoplehood. It was never one or the other. One without the other diminished both. It was all part of a unified whole. Loyalty to the Jewish people absent concern for all the families of the earth, is a distortion of Judaism. And *Tikkun Olam* divorced from Jewish peoplehood is not Jewish universalism; it is just universalism. It is more Kant

than *Kedoshim*. It is more Montague, than Micah, more John Locke, than Jeremiah, more Mill than Malachi. To contend that the Hebrew prophets only cared about repairing the world, and not about the well-being of the Jewish people, *qua* people, is to misunderstand and disfigure the entire prophetic tradition.

Judaism absent Jewish peoplehood is not Judaism; it is something else. Whenever Jews abandoned their ideological — or practical — commitment to *Am Yisrael*, they eventually drifted away. This was precisely the accusation leveled by Abba Hillel Silver towards his anti-Zionist colleagues in the pre-War years. By continuing to insist that the Jews are “no longer a nation, but a religious community,” Silver contended that Reform rabbis were reconstituting “Paul’s insistence upon a religious creed entirely divorced from nation and land.” In a scathing critique, he noted that this declaration of Reform rabbis “was the first of its kind ever made by an assembly of Jewish religious leaders,” implying that had the Reform movement continued down this path, we, too, would have eventually drifted away from Jewish civilization. (1935 CCAR Conference)

If the North American Reform movement, in word or in deed, by action or silence, becomes, in fact, or even in perception, an anti-Zionist, anti-particularistic movement that cares only, or mostly, about universal concerns, unanchored in, and

unmoored from, the centrality of Jewish peoplehood – most American Jews will abandon us— as they would have in the 20th century had we not come to our senses.

With your indulgence, I end on a personal note:

One of my favorite biblical verses is in Psalm 118 that constitutes part of the Hallel service we chant on the three festivals and other joyous occasions.

The Psalmist wrote:

“Even maassu habonim hayta le’rosh pina” — the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.

Whenever I hear this verse, I immediately think of my father, of blessed memory. Those of you who worked with him or remember him, might know that the great efforts to build our movement in Israel were highly controversial, especially in those early years from the 1970s through the end of the 20th century. Many senior Reform professionals and lay leaders were convinced that diverting resources to Israel was futile and would harm the North American movement. Some of these controversies are documented in the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati. My father showed me several exchanges before he died. It makes for fascinating historical reading.

Had the sentiments of many in the North American Reform movement prevailed, there would be no Beit Shmuel, no Mercaz Shimshon, no kibbutzim. We would not have joined the World Zionist Organization, and few of the dozens of Reform synagogues, community centers, youth groups, and educational facilities that we are rightly so proud of in Israel today, would have been built.

Is it conceivable to imagine North American Reform Judaism now — half a century later — without what we have built in Israel in the past fifty years? That too, was accomplished by a relatively small group of Reform professionals and their dedicated, doggedly loyal and generous lay supporters — who were right about Israel, right about Reform Judaism, and right about history.

The stone that was widely rejected has become the cornerstone of our world movement.

May it be that our gathering over these two days be looked upon in future years as the cornerstone of a glorious century to come for the Reform movement we love, and for the entire Jewish people.

Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch is the senior rabbi of Stephen Wise Free Synagogue, a Reform congregation on New York's Upper

West Side, where the Re-CHARGING Reform Judaism conference took place May 31—June 1, 2023. He is the author of the newly published book, “The Lilac Tree: A Rabbi’s Reflections on Love, Courage, and History.”

<https://jewishjournal.com/commentary/359355/re-charging-reform-judaism-conference-keynote-address/>