Modern and Postmodern

Reform is a verb. This aphorism served as the title of a prominent 1973 survey of the Reform Movement, a survey that highlighted the ways in which an older—now often called classical—Reform Jewish attitude, grounded in the thinking of the German Enlightenment, had been evolving. The report, reaffirming that Reform reforms, tended however to conceal another reality about late-twentieth-century Reform: that it was not a philosophy, theology, or program, but rather an attitude. Prof. Leora Batnitzky, in her book How Judaism Became a Religion, observed that when Jews were pushed out of their semi-autonomous communities in nineteenth-century Europe, they all had to reform; some more conservatively and some more radically. Clearly, today’s Reform Movement has been on the more radical end. It is nevertheless a spectrum of approaches to God, divine will, Torah, a messianic future, and Jewish peoplehood held together by a tangle of philosophical and political alliances. In Ludwig Wittgenstein’s apt phrase, Reform is a “language game.”

Rabbi Eugene B. Borowitz, the principal author of the elegant 1976 statement of principles, the “Centenary Perspective,” understood this quality of Reform Judaism better than most. One of his last books was called The Talmud’s Theological Language-Game, the culmination of a forty-year personal project of analysis of the interpenetrating uses of halachah and aggadah in Talmudic discourse. Rabbi Borowitz, who passed away in January, devoted an entire intellectual career to Judaism’s—especially self-conscious liberal Judaism’s—language game: how does the modern self in all its autonomy nonetheless feel bound to the historic people Israel and to Israel’s God?

This issue includes Rachel Sabath Beit-Halachmi’s eulogy delivered at Dr. Borowitz’s funeral, a moving interweaving of the personal and professional. Prof. Peter Ochs from the University of Virginia shows how Borowitz defined postmodern Jewish thought in his influential 1992 work, Renewing the Covenant, in his introduction to a set of essays called Reviewing the Covenant. I am grateful to Dr. Ochs and to SUNY Press for their kind permission for a
reprinting of this article. Jill Cozen-Harel draws from Borowitz’s Covenant Theology in order to lay out how Jewish learning in religious schools can also instill Jewish practice. Finally, Phil Cohen reviews a collection of Borowitz’s essays published in the Library of Contemporary Jewish Philosophers.

Although certainly a committed liberal Jew, Dr. Borowitz was devoted to a holistic approach to Jewish thought. Classic and contemporary, Reform and Orthodox, even non-Jewish (both Western and Eastern traditions) informed each other. In Franz Rosenzweig’s apt phrase, “nothing Jewish is alien to me.” This issue of the RJQ provides a number of scholarly offerings that coincidentally—or perhaps, not so coincidentally—touch on Borowitz’s interests.

Stephen Passamankeck explores Talmudic and medieval sources regarding combating destructive fire, and how it differs from a similar concern of repelling marauders. Michael Meyer reflects on the legacy of Rabbi Solomon Schechter upon the one hundredth anniversary of his yahrzeit. Barry Schwartz traces the extraordinary journey taken by Abraham Heschel’s doctoral dissertation, completed in Berlin at the beginning of the Third Reich, to being published thirty years later as The Prophets. Finally, Norman and Naomi Patz translate and comment on a gem of an S. Y. Agnon short story, one that betrays Agnon’s own efforts at blending the traditional and modern.

**Rabbis Inside and Out**

Technically, Jewish congregations in North America are “free churches.” Unlike the judicatory powers of Presbyterian or Episcopal organizations, among others, each synagogue’s leadership is wholly independent. The congregation owns its own property and has final authority in hiring and firing staff. Reform has been the most effective among Jewish movements in forging a federation of congregations (URJ) and collegium of rabbis (CCAR), but these organizations are severely limited in their ability to dictate policy or procedures to individual member congregations. Its greatest success is, perhaps, in determining the assignment of rabbis. Alan Henkin continues his intriguing history of the Placement Commission, from its uncertain formation in 1962 to its confirmation as a permanent entity in 1967. While the office of placement and its director are situated in the CCAR, the system could not possibly
work without both the consent of the rabbis and the congregational lay leadership.

The same can be said regarding the more recent development of the professional interim rabbi. Though conventionally perceived as a placeholder for a synagogue during a period of time—usually a year or two—that a congregation transitions from one full-time rabbi to another, the interim has evolved into a much more active part in preparing a congregation for that change. Darryl Crystal provides insight and instruction of the role and impact of an interim.

From 1950 through 1999, the URJ (then Union of American Hebrew Congregations) had its headquarters in a stand-alone building on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan. Sandford Seltzer discusses the unique significance of the structure—no other American Jewish religious movement has had a similar building—in terms of what its existence says—or said—about Reform Judaism itself.

Les Polonsky proposes a way to respond to the changing attitudes of American Jews with changes to Jewish education. He describes his proposal not as a break from “business as usual,” but rather as a continuation grounded in the very nature of American Reform. Thus, we return to the aphorism, Reform is a verb.

A Personal Note

For graduates of the New York school of HUC-JIR, Rabbi Borowitz is a somewhat disquieting memory as a formidable and exacting teacher of modern Jewish thought. For many other readers of the Journal, he was known for occasional guest lectures and through the large library of books and articles he authored, issues of the journal Sh’ma he founded, or maybe old copies of the Union’s youth magazine, Keeping Posted, he edited. For me, he was a presence in my life for over sixty years, from when I was a five-year-old student in Estelle Borowitz’s kindergarten class at Community Synagogue in Port Washington, New York. Gene (it took me about twenty years following ordination to get comfortable addressing him in the manner he preferred) was a childhood rabbi, rabbinic thesis advisor, and a dear friend. In a classroom discussion about Jewish approaches to afterlife, he commented that the word “believe” might be too strong. He rather trusted in a world-to-come. So do I, Gene. So do I.

Paul Golomb, Editor