

## **Why I am Proud to be a Reform Jew**

My great-great-great grandfather, Max Seeligsohn, was born in a small town in northwest Poland in 1826. He and his wife, Hannah, whom my grandmother, of blessed memory, was named after, left eastern Europe with their 7 children and headed as far west as they could imagine, ending up in San Francisco during the great California Gold Rush.

During the time of their departure, Nicholas I of Russia, was enforcing his edict of forced military conscription which required Jewish boys to serve in the Russian military for 25 years as soon as they turned 18. Even prior to that birthday, many Jewish boys were sent far away from their families with the intent that they would lose their connections to Judaism altogether. Many ended up converting to Christianity.

Max and Hannah wanted none of this for their children so they packed up and didn't look back. After a long journey, they eventually settled in Northern California and ever since then my family has had a presence in San Francisco and it's neighboring cities.

Oftentimes as I'm doing genealogical research I begin to wonder what my ancestors' lives were like. How did they learn about the opportunities out west? Was their travel experience anything like what we see in *The Frisco Kid*? They left Poland because of Jewish discrimination and ended up, not in a town where they could keep kosher with ease, but to a place that lacked so much of the Jewishness from where they came. What kind of impact did this have on them?

The decisions my ancestors made ultimately shaped my life. They and their descendants eventually identified as Reform Jews. I am the individual and rabbi I am today because of their choices.

My friends, last year I delivered a sermon during the High Holy Days on why I was proud to be Jewish. In a time when there is much anti-Semitism

in the world around us and when so many things are competing for our time, it can be a challenge to be a Jew. I discussed many of the reasons why living a Jewish life brings value and meaning to me.

Today, I would like to stick with this theme of pride, but I want to be even more specific. Why am I proud to be a Reform Jew?

I can imagine what some are thinking right now: *I'm not a Reform Jew. I'm Conservative. Or, I'm not any specific kind of Jew, I'm just a Jew. Some might even be thinking, I'm not Jewish at all so what has this got to do with me?*

Our Beth Israel community is unique. As the only synagogue community between Vancouver and Everett, we are the spiritual home to folks from a wide range of backgrounds. I think all of us realize how this is one of our strengths. And I hope everyone is able to find their niche of Jewish connection.

But, for over 30 years, Beth Israel has been a member of the Union for Reform Judaism, paying yearly dues, hiring Reform rabbis, sending children to URJ summer camps and adults to Biennials. At this New Year, it might be worth having a discussion about who we are and why being part of a Reform community can be a blessing.

It is no secret that Reform Judaism during the time Max and Hannah arrived in America is a far cry from Reform Judaism today. During the middle to late 19th century, Reform Jews rejected much of traditional Jewish practices and rituals that they deemed irrelevant to their modern lifestyle. The ethical commandments resonated much stronger with them. Learning science, math, history and philosophy were elevated to be just as important as the study of sacred texts.

These early Reform Jews made drastic changes to traditional practice. In order to be more like their neighbors some Reform communities held Shabbat on Sundays. Many rejected the laws of kashrut altogether since they made no logical sense to modern thinking people. They accepted the

belief that humans wrote our sacred texts, not God. The hope for a return to the Land of Israel was renounced as Germany, and later on, America, were considered the new Zion. Worship services began to include organ music just like it was used in church.

Some of these early practices certainly wouldn't be accepted here in Bellingham or almost anywhere else in America. Yet, since the middle of the 20th century there has been an intentional journey back to more traditional practices. In fact, it's quite hard to figure out who is and who is not a Reform Jew today based on their beliefs and the rituals they follow. Some don't wear *tefillin* daily. Other never set foot in a synagogue. Some support AIPAC. Others support J-Street. Some keep kosher. Others love a bacon cheeseburger. Some believe in God. Others question God's existence. Some support interfaith marriages and others do not. We are a group with a diverse set of opinions.

You can understand why critics might suggest Reform Jews have an identity crisis. What do we even stand for as a movement?

As a product of early Reform Judaism on my father's side and more traditional Judaism on my mother's, I'd like to share my short list of why identifying as Reform is a source of pride for me. No matter where you stand on the Jewish denominational spectrum, whether you are in fact Jewish or not, doesn't matter. You have chosen to spend Rosh Hashanah with a Reform community and my hope is that you too feel grateful for what Reform Judaism has to offer.

*One.* I am proud to be a Reform Jew because the movement advocates for informed choice. We are not a Halachic movement. As much as I respect the rigor of Jewish law, I feel inspired by it more than bound by it. We have the freedom to live—or not live—our lives by the letter of Jewish law and we do not need to apologize or justify our position. We are encouraged to dip our toes as far as we want into the ocean of mitzvot and choose what level of practice feels right for us. The Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism states, "We are committed to the ongoing study of the whole array of mitzvot and to the fulfillment of those that address us as individuals and

as a community. Some of these mitzvot, sacred obligation, have long been observed by Reform Jews; others, both ancient and modern, demand renewed attention as the result of the unique context of our time.”<sup>1</sup>

How liberating it is to be able to explore our roots and not feel obligated to change our lifestyle.

I tell all of my conversion students to slowly incorporate Shabbat rituals into their weekly practice. If they go all-in right away, they’re likely to get burnt out and possibly reject it altogether. But learning about the rituals and experimenting with them over time gives the students the freedom to figure out what enhances their own Shabbat practice.

When it comes to practicing Jewish rituals and customs, Reform Judaism is defined by what we do, not by what we don’t do. If anyone tells you otherwise, run far away from them. I am proud that freedom of choice is a central tenet of our movement.

*Two.* Reform Judaism is rooted in prophetic Judaism; the idea that we must consider our responsibility to the world around us just as much as we should to our own Jewish brothers and sisters. If we don’t look out for the marginalized in our communities and across the world, then our piety means nothing. This is most clearly expressed in Isaiah, a text we’ll be reading during Yom Kippur. The prophet says, “Is this the fast I desire, a day for men to starve their bodies?...Do you call that a fast, a day when the Lord is favorable? No, this is the fast I desire: To unlock fetters of wickedness, and untie the cords of the yoke. To let the oppressed go free; To break off every yoke. It is to share your bread with the hungry, and to take the wretched poor into your home; When you see the naked, to clothe him, And not to ignore your own kin.”<sup>2</sup>

For some, this is at the essence of what it means to be a Reform Jew. We take this seriously. Reform Judaism has been at the forefront in advocating

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<sup>1</sup> A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism was adopted at the 1999 Pittsburgh Convention Central Conference of American Rabbis, May 1999

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 58:5-7

for women's rights and equality among genders. We have fought for LGBTQ+ rights, worker's rights, and religious freedom for all. We have been on the scenes after natural disasters to help communities re-build. We were on the front lines in helping to free Soviet Jewry. Reform leaders also had an integral part in drafting the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. The Reform Movement was the first to ordain a woman rabbi in both America and in Israel and the first to accept a transgender rabbinical student.

One of my colleagues wrote to me recently, "I originally became a Reform Jew because in 1995 it was the only major movement that would accept me as a convert without requiring this lesbian to crawl into a closet."

We don't just accept, we celebrate, people as they are.

Speaking up for those whose voices have been silenced, offering support to people in need, regardless of their background, and being inclusive, despite what halachah might teach regarding some groups of people, are certainly reasons why I'm proud to be a Reform Jew.

*Three.* I am proud to be a Reform Jew because we challenge our traditions and push the limits on issues such as Jewish identity. We accept as Jewish those raised by a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother. While the rest of the Jewish world might not recognize patrilineal descent as authentic, we know it is. In fact, the rabbis debated this very issue nearly 2000 years ago.

The rabbis decided that matrilineal descent solved the problem for offspring from illicit unions which are not recognized under Jewish law, or in which paternity could not be established, or in which the father disappeared due to war or occupation. Today, we don't regard any unions as illicit, we have come a long way in understanding genetics, and mothers are just as likely to go to war or be away from the home for lengths of time. In other words, times have changed and so should our consideration of certain laws. The

Torah is a living document—written on parchment, not stone—and we are tasked with turning it over and over.<sup>3</sup>

Interestingly, prior to the rabbinic period, patrilineal descent determined the status of a child, and even now, patrilineal descent determines one's status of the priesthood. A Jew is a kohen or levite if their father, not their mother, is one.

According to the seminal responsa on this issue back in 1983, “The Reform movement has espoused the equality of men and women, virtually since its inception. As equality has been applied to every facet of Reform Jewish life, it should be applied in this instance.”<sup>4</sup> This is a continuation of Jewish tradition, not a departure from it.

I am proud that Reform Judaism stands by this decision despite this issue causing a schism among the movements. Such a Jew might not be considered a Jew in Mea Shearim, Boro Park or even in parts of Vancouver, but they are considered a Jew here and by nearly 2 million people in over 1,200 congregations.

*Four.* I am proud to be a Reform Jew because we recognize that Judaism is ever-changing. The Babylonian Talmud recounts a fanciful legend in which Moses visits the academy of Rabbi Akiva, although they lived nearly 2000 years apart. Moses's time travel resulted in his bewilderment. He sat in Akiva's classroom and the lesson on Judaism made no sense to him.

Moses is regarded as the greatest teacher of Torah. He's known as Rabbeinu, our teacher. Rabbi Akiva is recognized in rabbinic lore, to be second to Moses, and yet the two of them taught and lived utterly different versions of Judaism. It was not until a student asked Akiva, “How do you know what you are teaching?” that Moses understood. Akiva's response to the student was, *halacha l'Moshe miSinai*, “it is a law of Moses from Sinai.” Even though Moses himself did not understand Akiva's Judaism, he ac-

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<sup>3</sup> Pirke Avot 5:26 “Ben Bag Bag teaches: turn it and turn it again, for all is in it; look deeply in it; grow old and gray over it; and do not depart from it, for there is nothing that surpasses it.”

<sup>4</sup> CCAR Responsa: 38. Patrilineal and Matrilineal

cepted Akiva's word that his Judaism derived from Moses. We are a continuation of the sacred link that connects Moses to Akiva. And like the community in Akiva's time, we also practice a legitimate and authentic expression of Judaism.

I am a proud Reform Jew because I feel that our willingness to innovate and change is a strong tie to the spirit of the early rabbis who reformed Judaism from our biblical roots. What we have been doing for nearly 200 years is certainly not new to Judaism.

*Five.* I am proud to be a Reform Jew because we are intellectually honest. We do not have to pretend to believe what we do not believe. We are free to believe whatever we choose. We teach our students the stories of the Torah and emphasize the lessons they provide us. The Torah is a blueprint for how to live our lives, not a history book. We can accept or reject the historicity of parts of our narrative and still be counted in a minyan.

When my b'nei mitzvah students tell me they don't believe in God, this is my opportunity to have a conversation with them about what definition or concept of God they don't accept and then push them to think about other ways of understanding that which is greater than us. In Reform Judaism there is no litmus test when it comes to Jewish beliefs.

Finally, here are some of your friends' words on why they are proud to be part of a Reform community:

"I am proud to be a Reform Jew because of the freedom to explore traditions without judgement...to be as traditional (or not) as we wish to be. I appreciate that we, as a community, welcome people as and where they are in their spiritual and life journey."

Reform Judaism stresses "openness, acceptance, and open-mindedness."

Reform Judaism is about "love and community; [it is] a constant home to center ourselves and families spiritually, [and it encourages] continuous curiosity and exploration."

When I was living in Israel during my first year of rabbinical school, I got the sense, for the first time in my life, that many see Reform Judaism as watered-down Judaism or a minimalist version of the full tradition.

*You're studying to become a rabbi and you don't wear a kippah?!?*

*You're allowed to change prayers?!?*

*You don't fast on Ta'anit Esther?!?*

It takes courage and commitment to be in a Reform community. It can be intimidating to answer these kinds of questions and to feel that we have to defend our Jewish lifestyle. We might be the fastest growing denomination, but scores of Jews still don't understand who we are.

The current president of the URJ, Rabbi Rick Jacobs, provides a good answer to this in his 2013 Biennial address: "Our Judaism is for everyone. Our Judaism is inclusive, egalitarian, intellectually rigorous, joyful, passionate, spiritual, pluralistic, constantly evolving and relevant. Soul elevating spiritual practice, life-altering Torah study, courageous practice of tikkun olam, loving care for our community, especially the most vulnerable--that's what we are."

Max and Hannah could not possibly have imagined the effect their decisions would make on their descendants. I wonder how they would have responded had someone told them that their great-great-great grandson would one day become a Reform rabbi on the west coast and speak of them on Rosh Hashanah in front of hundreds of people. I am eternally grateful for the sacrifices they made and for their courage in following the early Reform trailblazers.

Each of us has a choice and I am honored that you are throwing in your lot with this very special and unique Reform congregation. I am proud—and I hope you are, too—to be part of a movement that is authentic, engaging, evolving, honest, and moving. It is my hope that in this New Year, each of us will find meaning and fulfillment as we participate in the Jewish life of this thriving Reform community.