

WHY ADVOCACY IS CENTRAL TO REFORM JUDAISM

By Rabbi Marla Feldman

“Reform Jews are committed to social justice. Even as Reform Jews embrace ritual, prayer, and ceremony more than ever, we continue to see social justice as the jewel in the Reform Jewish crown. Like the prophets, we never forget that God is concerned about the everyday and that the blights of society take precedence over the mysteries of heaven. A Reform synagogue that does not alleviate the anguish of the suffering is a contradiction in terms.”

--Rabbi Eric Yoffie, speech to the UAHC Executive Committee, February 1998

It has become axiomatic that to be a Jew is to care about the world around us. To be a Reform Jew is to hear the voice of the prophets in our head; to be engaged in the ongoing work of *tikkun olam*; to strive to improve the world in which we live.

The passion for social justice is reflected in the ancient words of our prophets and sages and in the declarations of our Movement’s leaders throughout its history. The ancient command “*Tzedek, Tzedek Tirdof!* Justice, justice shall you seek!” constantly reverberates in our ears. It has become deeply embedded in the Reform Jewish psyche. This charge has led to a long and proud tradition of political activism by the Reform Movement.

The idea that people of faith have a mandate to bring their values into the public arena is not unique to the Reform Movement. There is a long tradition of faith groups “speaking truth to power” and advocating for social change, and every major religious organization in American life participates in this civic exercise. Religious voices have been central in the major social justice movements throughout our nation’s history, from the abolitionist movement to those involved with desegregation and civil rights. In the international arena as well, faith groups have led the way in advocating for nuclear disarmament, international aid and human rights around the world.

This is not an easy time to stand up to be counted. We are challenged by an overwhelming number of issues, each one central to our understanding of the prophetic message of our faith and critical to creating the kind of society we wish to bequeath to those who follow us. And not only are we overwhelmed by the sheer scope of the issues that are before us, but we are confronted by those who claim to speak in the name of faith, but who offer a different version of

what God expects of us; those who proclaim themselves the upholders of family values yet who do not value individual rights or personal autonomy, and who have little respect for the Constitutional principles that have allowed religion to thrive in this country unfettered by government coercion or corruption.

Ours is a different message. We proclaim that maintaining a strong safety net for those who are most vulnerable is the modern manifestation of our obligation to “leave the corners of our fields for the poor and needy.” We believe that supporting public schools so that every child in America has access to a free and appropriate education and that paying workers enough to support themselves without having to choose between shelter and food, medication or heat, are family values. If we don’t bring these progressive religious values into the public arena with us, we will abandon the public square to those offering a different view of religion and values.

HOW DO WE IMPLEMENT THIS MANDATE TO PURSUE JUSTICE WITHIN THE REFORM MOVEMENT?

The [Commission on Social Action \(CSA\) of Reform Judaism](#) provides guidance to the Movement as it wrestles with the challenge of applying our progressive Jewish values to the public affairs agenda. The CSA is a joint commission of the Central Conference of American Rabbis and the Union for Reform Judaism, and is comprised of representatives of all the affiliates of Reform Judaism throughout North America. It oversees the work of Reform Judaism's [Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism \(RAC\)](#) in Washington, D.C. which pursues social justice and religious liberty by mobilizing the American Jewish community and serving as its advocate in the capital of the United States.

Ultimately it is the members of Reform congregations who set the policy for the Movement. During the Union for Reform Judaism’s Biennial General Assembly, delegates from the over 900 member congregations consider and vote on resolutions that reflect the consensus positions of our membership. This democratic process and the commitment of the Reform Movement to speak out on issues of concern is as old as the Movement itself, and is evidenced by the hundreds of resolutions adopted since its inception.

Go to www.urj.org/docs/reso to search the database of resolutions. [Click here to view the social justice statements in the major platforms of the Central Conference of American Rabbis since 1875.](#)

ARE INDIVIDUALS BOUND BY THE POLICY OF THE REFORM MOVEMENT?

The resolutions adopted by the Union for Reform Judaism neither bind the members of individual congregations, nor do they presume to speak for all. Joining a Reform congregation does not mean one subscribes to a particular political perspective. In any group, there will be divergent opinions, and policymakers understand that when religious bodies take positions, there may very well be individuals in the group who disagree with the stated position.

Yet, our diversity need not deter us from fulfilling our prophetic mandate. Reform Judaism stands for certain principles, and those who join our congregations take pride in our long history of “speaking truth to power.” Just as most members know that a hallmark of Reform Judaism is an openness to the “other” – whether lesbian or gay, interfaith families, or those with special needs -- they should also know that there will be a strong social action component – mitzvah days, collection drives, social justice sermons, and education about current issues of concern. And it should be expected that through our congregations we will make a collective effort to bring our progressive, Reform Jewish values to bear in the community at large. We will be engaged on issues of local, national and global concern; we will participate in interfaith coalitions and activities; we will speak out on behalf of the vulnerable; and we will seek justice for all. This is who we are.

From Rabbi Eric Yoffie's speech at the rededication of the Religious Action Center

[Reflecting on the 1961 Biennial debate over need for RAC] In 1959, the Union passed a resolution to establish an advocacy center in Washington, together with the Central Conference of American Rabbis. Its purpose would be to influence Congress on the great moral issues about which our Movement had spoken, and to educate our membership about these issues as well... The opponents of the Center offered a number of arguments. They said that it would be arrogant for any institution to presume to speak for us all – we Reform Jews are famously unable to agree on the time of day. The rabbis don't agree with the laypeople, the Midwesterners don't agree with the Easterners, the traditionalists don't agree with the classical Reformers. But the key argument was this: while both sides acknowledged that ethics are central to Reform Judaism, the opponents insisted that ethics means personal ethics and individual conscience, and not collective political action.

When the debate was over and the smoke had cleared, supporters of the Center had beaten back the opponents by a vote of almost four to one. The Reform Movement by that vote set its course and made a statement about fundamental values from which it has not deviated in 42 years. And our statement was simply this: Yes, personal ethics are important. *G'milut chasadim*-acts of kindness-are important. Setting up soup kitchens, food pantries, and clothing drives is important. It is good and right that we reach into the river of despair and rescue people who are drowning. But, there comes a time when you need to move upstream and see who's throwing them in.

Amos said: "Let justice roll down like the waters." Justice, he said, and not charity, and for good reason. Because, while charity alleviates the effects of poverty, justice seeks to eliminate its cause.



Central Conference of American Rabbis Statements on Social Justice

In full accordance with the spirit of Mosaic legislation which strives to regulate the relation between rich and poor, we deem it our duty to participate in the great task of modern times, to solve on the basis of justice and righteousness the problems presented by the contrasts and evils of the present organization of society.

Pittsburgh Platform, 1875

Judaism seeks the attainment of a just society by the application of its teachings to the economic order, to industry and commerce, and to national and international affairs. It aims at the elimination of man-made misery and suffering, of poverty and degradation, of tyranny and slavery, of social inequality and prejudice, of ill-will and strife. It advocates the promotion of harmonious relations between warring classes on the basis of equity and justice, and the creation of conditions under which human personality may flourish. It pleads for the safe-guarding of childhood against exploitation. It champions the cause of all who work and of their right to an adequate standard of living, as prior to the rights of property. Judaism emphasizes the duty of charity, and strives for a social order which will protect men against the material disabilities of old age, sickness and unemployment.

Columbus Platform, 1937

Until the recent past our obligations to the Jewish people and to all humanity seemed congruent. At times now these two imperatives appear to conflict. We know of no simple way to resolve such tensions. We must, however, confront them without abandoning either of our commitments. A universal concern for humanity unaccompanied by a devotion to our particular people is self-destructive; a passion for our people without involvement in humankind contradicts what the prophets have meant to us. Judaism calls us simultaneously to universal and particular obligations.

A Centenary Perspective, San Francisco, 1976

We bring Torah into the world when we strive to fulfill the highest ethical mandates in our relationships with others and with all of God's creation. Partners with God in *tikkun olam*, repairing the world, we are called to help bring nearer the messianic age. We seek dialogue and

joint action with people of other faiths in the hope that together we can bring peace, freedom and justice to our world. We are obligated to pursue *tzedek*, justice and righteousness, and to narrow the gap between the affluent and the poor, to act against discrimination and oppression, to pursue peace, to welcome the stranger, to protect the earth's biodiversity and natural resources, and to redeem those in physical, economic and spiritual bondage. In so doing, we reaffirm social action and social justice as a central prophetic focus of traditional Reform Jewish belief and practice. We affirm the *mitzvah* of *zedakah*, setting aside portions of our earnings and our time to provide for those in need. These acts bring us closer to fulfilling the prophetic call to translate the words of Torah into the works of our hands.

A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism, Pittsburgh, 1999