

The Case for Progressive Judaism

by David D Knoll AM

[Video "Start with Why" by Simon Sinek posted on the UPJ website]

Jacob's struggle – 21st century version:

- Reform/Progressive Judaism has a *universalist* tendency.
- Israel Jacobson at the founding of the first Reform temple in 1810: "On all sides enlightenment opens up new areas for religious development. Why should we Jews be left behind?"
- Chosenness seen as a burden
- Reform/Progressive Judaism has a *particularist* tendency.
- It felt good to be Jewish and to share one's Jewish pride with others.
- Post 1967 - a pride in Jewish peoplehood. The light unto the nations.
- Chosenness seen as an opportunity.

The universalist v particularistic dialectic is deficient:

- It addresses how one can be Jewish without addressing why?
- Tikkun Olam is all about the how; without articulating the why?
- To be chosen people we must recognise that in open democracies, we need to attract **choosing** people.
- Acknowledge the challenge; we are the movement which has and which will continue to attract the least committed, the least active, the least identified, and the least knowledgeable Jews, but who still want some spark of connection to being Jewish.
- And there lies the opportunity.

Overcoming the Reform inferiority complex (Authentic Reform Sermon by Rabbi Elyse Goldstein)

- The Reform inferiority complex that many of us carry *inside* feels that really, truly it's better, more "Jewish" to be Orthodox or Conservative.
- It is *not* a compliment to see Reform as a "way-station" to a "better" kind of Judaism.
- It is not *authentic* to abdicate your own authority as the bearers of an *authentic Judaism*, saying "At least *they* are keeping Judaism alive."
- When we say no milk with meat at the shul picnic, or when we require the children of non-Jewish mothers to convert; when we require circumcision for adult males who wish to convert; when we don't do weddings on Saturday nights in January at 6 PM.
- When we ask folks to put on a kipa when they come up to the bima or ask people to stand through a long silent Amidah; when or establish any standards or bottom-lines, we aren't "turning Orthodox." We are being authentically Jewish, and because we exercise choice to do those things, we are being authentic Progressive Jews.
- That you want to belong to a movement that always did, and will always, grant full religious equality to all Jews regardless of sexual orientation or gender identification. Some movements insist "their" women are equal- on the other side of a curtain. Some "allow" women to the Torah for their Bat Mitzvah but not for any Shabbat after it. Some "tolerate" their LGBT members and treat them with "compassion." In this area Reform is unequivocal, unambiguous, and unapologetic.
- Tell them you want to belong to a movement whose teachers and Rabbis are real people, not myths; whose leaders are not symbols, and not messiahs (though it might do my ego some good to be that revered!) but real men and women whom hopefully congregants can trust, relate to, and admire without being afraid of.
- Tell them you want to belong to a movement with real regard for upholding traditional forms but no mandate to hold on to those which oppress, delegitimize, or strangle the human spirit; a movement which welcomes dialogue, debate, and even disbelief while demanding struggle, sincerity, and a search for authentic spirituality.
- Tell them Reform Judaism was never a "justification" to do nothing. Tell them Reform Judaism is freedom *to*, not freedom *from*.
- And then remind them that Judaism has changed and evolved for the past several thousand years, so in this way, Reform may be the only truly "authentic" movement!

“Doing Holy Work” (Rabbi Jacqueline Ninio, 2012)

- We are part of something truly incredible: a Judaism which seeks to bring into the world some of the greatest teachings and values of Judaism.
- And we are doing holy work, drawing together the sparks of divinity to create a light and energy which will shine into the world, through us.
- We are shaping the future of Judaism, each one of us adding our voice, our thread, our story to create the unfolding destiny of our people.
- And we are part of the most dynamic alive and exciting movement in Judaism, responding to the challenges of our world, linking with the prophetic vision, working to heal our broken world and our lives.
- We are doing holy work.
- We hear the call from our tradition to heal the world. In that we are the inheritors of the prophetic tradition, we hear the call of the shofar and are roused from our inertia, we recognise that it is for us to protect the environment, to leave behind a world for the next generation which is better than the one we inherited.
- To stand up and speak out against injustice and hatred wherever it may be found.
- And Progressive Judaism is often in the forefront of movements for change.
- We are doing holy work.

A refrain:

- Many young Jews in the late 1960s and 1970s (and again today) were and are saying:
- "My religion teaches values that are essentially no different from those held by the majority of my fellow citizens; and if the most important of those values is to live an ethical life, then why do I need the rest of the baggage? Why be different? Wouldn't it be easier to assimilate?"
- This would give me a much wider choice for a future marriage partner.
- Besides, now that Judaism can be an individual choice as well as a communal one, I can still express my ethnic Jewish identity without it becoming a barrier in my relationships. By choosing Judaism for myself-and which aspects of it I wish to practice-while at the same time allowing my partner to make his or her own choices, I can have it all!"

Authentic Judaism – a reprise:

- A Judaism that dares, dreams, encourages learning and informed choice, is willing to understand the wisdom of our ancestors and then to shape the kind of Judaism of which we want to be a part and one in which we all have a role to play, is doing holy work.
- Authentic Jews belong to a movement that does not tolerate injustice, that lives in the world, not despite the world.
- Authentic Judaism doesn't approach Torah with a preconceived notion of infallibility but nonetheless treats it as sacred.
- Authentic Judaism “takes great pride in the accomplishments of the Jewish state of Israel but still actively struggles for Israel to live up to [her] prophetic founding ideals”.
- Authentic Judaism is a movement led by real men and women whom congregants, and I interpose, the wider Jewish and non-Jewish community, can trust, relate to and admire, without being afraid of.

Importance of being Jewish:

- What strategies do we have in place so that the willingness of a person to identify that being Jewish is important or very important to them is at least as high if not higher among identifying Progressive and Conservative/Masorti Jews as it is among identifying Orthodox Jews?
- Gen08 found was that it was considerably lower among Jews who identified with our movements.
- What strategies do we have in place to empower families to enjoy and to look forward to enjoying Authentic Judaism in their homes, with their friends and even at our shuls?

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