

THE FUTURE OF THE REFORM RABBI

I. Preface

The function of the Reform rabbi as described here is based upon my general view of the philosophy of Reform Judaism. I am aware that the emphasis of this paper is to be upon the practical aspects of the rabbinate. However, after careful deliberation, I am convinced that a quest, in our time, for what a Reform rabbi shall do practically, independent of theoretical considerations, will prove fruitless. There are no absolute practical functions of the Reform rabbi which exist independent of a philosophy of Reform Judaism. This does not mean that a Reform rabbinical seminary must train a rabbi according to the prescriptions of some one philosophy of Reform Judaism alone. At this stage of history, it cannot and should not. It does mean, however, that no hypothetical statements, even concerning the practical rabbinate, can be coherently made on the basis of more than one philosophy of Reform. The Reform seminary should be sufficiently broad to allow "space" for the individual seminarian to elect or create from its offerings the ideological and practical material he requires to fulfill the function of Reform rabbi as he understands its nature. For all practical purposes, in view of the diverse nature of the past he studies and the present he experiences, the individual seminarian will for the foreseeable future have the elective and creative space he requires. The only question, to my mind, is the quality of the diversity that will be made available to him by the seminary. Will there be equal opportunity for all serious philosophies of Reform Judaism, or will the seminary offer a preponderance of courses in some favored, establishment philosophy of Reform? Will the freedom of the seminarians be illusory or real? My views are expressed here in summary form. If necessary or useful, they will be expanded at some future point.

II. The Identity of the Rabbi qua Rabbi

The philosophy of Reform Judaism to which a rabbi subscribes provides him with the ultimate foundation upon which he bases his identity as rabbi, namely, the essential nature of his function as a rabbi, or rabbiness. For a rabbi seeking authenticity and, thereby, genuine commitment and satisfaction, a philosophic (philosophy of Reform) identity is an absolute necessity. Without a self-conscious committed identity, the rabbi cannot escape confusion, doubt, and even anguish in his private existence. There can be no question that achieving an authentic philosophic identity is a practical activity of the rabbi. It is the first and foremost practical activity. Several reasons can be given for this proposition, but one is particularly relevant to the present Reform situation. In stable periods, it is conceivable that a rabbi should be defined for himself by external tasks and roles, without having achieved an authentic conceptualization and internalization of his rabbiness. In the contemporary revolutionary period, when the efficacy and relevance of the existing so-called practical structure of Reform Judaism is being seriously challenged, rabbiness cannot be acquired passively as a gift granted by external role-playing. The rabbi, in his everyday practical doings, must be able to systematize and clarify the world of the Reform Jew from his own internal identity and order, rather than expect the reverse to occur.

- A. The definition of the Reform rabbi may be given as follows: The Reform Jewish rabbi is a person whose essential function is to realize the individual and collective possibilities for salvation of a community of persons; the particular object of his concern is the Reform Jewish community; the general object is the Jewish community at large; and his ultimate concern is the community of mankind.

1. The Reform rabbi's essential function is distinguished from that of the Orthodox rabbi not in its goal of salvation, but in the manner in which that salvation is conceived. For the Orthodox rabbi salvation comes only through obedience to a literally revealed infallible Law, whereas such a Law does not exist for the Reform rabbi. Moreover, for the Orthodox rabbi, both the manner in which salvation comes and the nature of salvation are necessarily supernatural.

This is not the case in Reform.

- B. Salvation is the purpose of religion. Religion is defined as "man's response to finitude"; and salvation is the name given to successful response. There are three primary areas in which the rabbi serves the end of salvation: beliefs; ethics; and symbolism. In each of these areas there is a didactic and transdidactic aspect to the rabbi's activity.

Whereas there are other areas of human activity that contribute to the end of human salvation, it is in the combination of these three above-mentioned areas that the rabbi is historically and by training unique and competent, and they provide the essential if not only justification for his existence.

1. The didactic activity of the Reform rabbi in the area of belief is to teach beliefs that relate to religion and salvation so that the members of the Reform community will be aware of and understand them. The trans-didactic activity of the rabbi is to present his own views true in his opinion, and to exhort other Reform Jews to accept his beliefs. Further trans-didactic activity of the Reform rabbi is to urge the acceptance of some belief as necessary for religious

identity, even though this belief is at variance with the rabbi's own view. Thus the prime purpose of the Reform rabbi in the area of beliefs is to acquaint the Reform Jewish Community with all the relevant beliefs that exist, and to urge the community to internalize the beliefs they think true so that they may achieve an authentic religious identity. It is of incidental value and significance that they adopt the rabbi's particular point of view. Trans-didactic activity, as can be seen from the above example, is structural or ontal, not intellectual. It is through his trans-didactic activity in the area of belief that the rabbi is distinguished from the general educator. The primary aim of general education is to cultivate the intellect whereas the primary aim of the religious institution is to realize the intellectual aspect of finite being relative to his finity.

- a. Major (not exhaustive) categories of beliefs in which the rabbi offers instruction are:
 - i. The philosophy of Reform Judaism.
 - ii. The meanings and/or uses of the term God. The determination of such meanings and uses is ineluctably part of a general investigation of the nature of reality.
 - iii. The standard and perennial concepts or themes of religion: such as prophecy; after-life; Messianism; miracles; and so forth.
 - iv. Varieties of past and present Jewish religious systems.
- b. Major sources employed by the rabbi in instructing his people in beliefs are:

- i. Past and present systems of Jews;
 - ii. Philosophy, science, and psychoanalysis or other clinical phenomenologies of man;
 - iii. Non-Jewish religions, --where relevant.
- c. The primary methods of instruction are:
- i. Religious school;
 - ii. Adult education;
 - iii. Lecture sermons during services.
2. The didactic activity of the Reform rabbi in the area of ethics is twofold:
- 1) teaching all relevant ethical theories; 2) teaching the particular ethical theory to which the rabbi subscribes, the particular ethical decisions the rabbi makes on the basis of his general theory, and the relevant facts and issues related to the rabbi's particular decisions. The trans-didactic activity of the rabbi is also twofold:
- 1) exhorting his people to choose an ethical theory with self-consciousness and deliberation; and 2) exhorting his people to adopt his own general theory and particular decisions.
- a. The primary ethical fact of Reform Judaism, which transcends any particular theoretical ethical system to which a Reform Jew may subscribe, is that it is a polydoxy. The right of every member of the Reform Jewish Community to his religious freedom is affirmed. The corollary of the polydox ethical commitment is that the right to formulate ethical judgments for the community does not belong to the rabbi alone. Hence the pulpit as a source of ethical decisions does not belong

solely to the rabbi. Whenever there is significant disagreement over an ethical issue, therefore, the Reform pulpit should be available to all responsible members of the Community.

- b. As in the area of religious beliefs, there are several sources from which ethical theories and/or particular ethical decisions can be derived:
 - i. Ethical theories and particular judgments from past and present Jewish systems;
 - ii. Philosophy;
 - iii. Non-Jewish religious ethical systems.
3. The didactic activity of the Reform rabbi in the area of symbolism is to teach the nature and meaning of Reform Jewish symbolism. The trans-didactic activity of the rabbi is to impress the Reform symbolism upon the psyches of the members of the Community so that it provides for them potent vehicles of moods, feelings, and significances that realize the positive possibilities of existence and bring them to states of redemption and salvation.
- a. The primary source of Reform symbolism has been the Jewish past. We may concede for sentimental and social reasons that the fact that a symbol has its roots in the past is a positive in its favor. Still, if the symbol inherited from the past is not productive, it must be allowed to die. As a polydoxy, Reform allows the creation and/or use of any symbol. As a living religion, Reform demands the creation of new symbols. Hence, in the didactic activity of the rabbi regarding symbols, the point should be clearly made to the Community that the continuous creation of new symbolism is one of the fundamental characteristics of the nature of Reform Jewish symbolism.

- b. Among the possible contemporary sources for symbols are neutral symbols, such as Thanksgiving Day, which can be productively appropriated from the general culture. Such symbols can serve as transcendent symbols, which reach beyond the limits of any one religious community.

III. The Crisis

Having thus briefly epitomized the essential nature of the Reform rabbinate, we come to the critical questions that have prompted this discussion:

1. Is there a crisis in the rabbinate?
2. What is the nature of this crisis?
3. What are the causes of the crisis?
4. What can be done about this crisis?

In the light of the foregoing discussion, my answers are these.

1. From all the evidence available to me, it appears reasonable to conclude there is a crisis in the rabbinate. This conclusion is tentative, pending the outcome of the inquiry which is to be initiated.
2. The nature of the crisis is that large numbers of Reform Jews do one or all of the following:
 - a. They find the religious doctrines and general theological teachings of their local Reform Jewish establishments false or irrelevant, or both.
 - b. They find the symbolism of their local Reform Jewish establishment archaic, impotent, and irrelevant.
 - c. They find the education of their children by the local Reform Jewish establishment archaic, irrelevant, and often, to consist of false-

hood and/or incredible beliefs. Many Reform Jewish children, when they attain adolescence, discard totally the teaching of their Reform Jewish schools, and feel cheated as well as isolated and disenfranchised from the Community itself.

- d. They refuse to attend weekly services, and an increasing number refuse to attend High Holy Day services.
 - e. They find their children leaving the Reform Jewish Community entirely, and affiliating with other disenfranchised members of traditional religious communities.
 - f. Owing to the above and similar factors, many rabbis find themselves frustrated and defeated. Their egos are under constant massive attack, from the emptiness of unattended services to the grim disapproval of dissatisfied congregants. Too often, their tenure is affected, as despairing congregations blame the failure of their religion to give direction and enrichment to their lives upon the rabbi. As a consequence, the situation of much too large a number of rabbis is precarious and close to intolerable.
3. The causes of this crisis are many and complex. These causes fall into two major categories: general environmental; and Reform Jewish.
- a. The general environmental causes are those that are to be found in the economic and social structure of contemporary society, and in the extraordinary scientific, technological, and medical advances of the twentieth century. It is not possible, of course, to enter into details here. Let me simply conclude that the general environment has produced a new mode of consciousness in many

Reform Jews. This mode of consciousness makes the establishment religion of Reform Judaism, as exemplified by the literal meaning of the Union Prayerbook, utterly meaningless. The beliefs of this establishment religion are taken as naive, incredible, or false. The ethical teachings, coming from a pseudo-Reform-orthodoxy, are taken as mere preaching or hypocritical. The symbolism is felt as impotent or dead. It is not necessary for a Reform Jew to have a professional theologian's awareness of these points, --the pervasive, concrete actions of the Reform Jewish Community make all the above statements in the clearest and most convincing manner possible.

- b. The Reform Jewish causes of the crisis are those produced by the Reform Jewish establishment itself. It is my firm belief that it is not the essential function of the Reform rabbi, as outlined above, that is without purpose in the contemporary world, but the way this function has been pursued. The present inadequate and limited conception of Reform Judaism has compelled the rabbinate to meet its difficulties with a narrow range of beliefs and an obviously dying symbolism. The Reform rabbi simply does not have the necessary tools, ideological and practical, with which to cope with our crisis situation. The very request that this paper be "practical" points to the inadequate conceptualization with which we must contend. There is no way, in my opinion, through the use of the present practical apparatus of Reform, namely, the belief and symbolism structures which are almost exclusively employed in congregational life, to begin to deal adequately with the profound problems of the Reform Jewish Community, which

are, in turn, the direct causes of the anguished problems of the Reform rabbinate. "More of the same," no matter how expertly done, or expertly manipulated, will only give us more of the same crisis, but ever deeper, and ever more critical. What has been called the "practical activity" of the rabbinate is not practical at all. Our religious schools, by and large, are inadequate from their pseudo-orthodox theology and methods to their textbooks; the beliefs we generally present to adults are not adult; and the general symbolism is stale. Given the unknown and new directions of the general environment, the future for any institutional religion is today clouded. Still one thing is clear, Reform Judaism, as a free religion, enjoys a distinct superiority over other religions in that it possesses the potentiality to create, to unlock and fashion novelty, --and without novelty in our symbolism to meet the changes within ourselves and in the general environment, the crisis of the rabbinate will soon extend to the true crisis it is: the survival of a religious system of Judaism in the twenty-first century.