

Contemporary Reform Judaism

Reform Judaism in the 21st Century

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The reform movement is considered today the biggest religious Jewish branch in the United States. According to data from the movement, there are 1.5 million affiliated members in over 900 congregations, as well as numerous communities and affiliated members throughout the world.

Taking into account the numbers from the 2000-2001 Survey of the Jewish Population in the USA, the reformists are 49.3% of the members affiliated to a Jewish religious movement, with close to 1.9 million Jews. With regards to the American Jewish population, with 5.5 million, the reformists are 35% of the total.

The movement is known as *Reform or Progressive Judaism* in the USA. In other parts of the world, with some ideological and historical differences, we can find it under the names liberal, reform, or progressive Judaism. In Brazil there are various communities affiliated to the reform movement, concentrated in the southern and southeastern regions of the country.

Classic Reform Movement

The theological basis of the reform movement is that, at the same time in which the moral teachings that Moses received on Mount Sinai are eternal, Judaism is characterized by a set of practices in constant progress and that will be continuously explored and reviewed by each generation. In its origins, during the second half of the 19th century, the movement was guided by religious services conducted in the vernacular language and by the abandonment of practices, that at the time, many considered already irrelevant, such as kashrut and the religious services in Hebrew. The values and practices of this period – which lasted until the 1960s – are part of what today is called the “Classic Reform Movement”.

Contemporary Reform Movement

The movement remains faithful to its original principles of practicing Judaism in constant progress and guided toward social justice. Reform Jews accept the Jewish law, but they emphasize the moral autonomy of individuals to decide which laws have religious meaning for them.

Presently, the study of the Torah, the Talmud and the Halacha is stimulated as the largest source of Jewish tradition, with the largest focus on social and ethical actions. It is in this spirit that throughout the last decades, a set of practices that were considered outdated by classic reform Jews, have been reintroduced, such as, for example, the reevaluation of Hebrew, be it as a language shared by all of the people of Israel, be it in the religious services; respect for the Shabat; the fulfillment, at some level, of the kashrut laws. The return to traditional practices is

being stimulated more and more nowadays by the educational and religious institutions of the reform movement.

The Return to Rituals

The reform movement is many times considered, even by some of its own members, as the most flexible with regards to religious practices. For example, the kosher diet is encouraged, but not mandatory. Currently the majority of the reform Jewish institutions offer kosher food at its main locations, following a general trend in the movement, of returning to traditional practices. In truth, compliance of religious practices in the day to day Jewish family and community life is growing. The demand comes mainly from the younger generation, who feels the need to incorporate Jewish meaning into their lives.

Religious Services

In general reform religious services are not always conducted completely in Hebrew. Many prayers are recited in the native tongue and inspirational texts can be included. The prayers in Hebrew, however, have been taking up more space.

The religious service is egalitarian: men and women sit together during the religious services, compose the *minyan* (minimum quorum of ten adults) and go up to the pulpit to read the Torah.

Training of religious and community leaders

At the same time that the movement grows and changes, a great effort is being made to increase the number of male and female rabbis, chazanim and chazaniot, community leaders and educators. The encouragement provided in the reform seminar for the education of these leaders is a trend that is clear in the United States and is beginning to develop in Europe, in countries such as England and Germany. The same cannot be said about Latin America, where there are no reform seminars. The training of new religious and community leaders is recognized as a key element for the creation, development and livelihood of congregations and teaching institutions.

The Reform Siddur

A new reform siddur was launched in 2007, with a focus on the Hebrew language and on spirituality. In the United States the *Mishkan T'filah* is slowly substituting the previous siddur, *Gates of Prayer*, produced in the 1970s. Among the novelties, there is a text in Hebrew parallel to the translation, the option for issues with or without transliteration, extensive

commentaries, traditional and contemporary texts, trying to respect the different theologies and styles present in different synagogues.

Political Action

Besides the dedication to Jewish life at home and in the synagogue, the public and political arenas are also seen as places for action in the reform movement.

Since 1962, the *Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism* (RAC) acts politically, within and outside the Jewish community, for the defense of the legislative and social values considered essential according to the Jewish sense of social justice and *Tikkun olam*, with the objective of making the world a better place to live in. Among other causes, the Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism is involved in issues regarding the separation between State and religious life within a religiously pluralistic society, be it internally, with regard to the other religious Jewish movements, or externally, with society in general.

Conversions

The number of people that convert to Judaism grows dramatically every year. It is estimated that close to 10,000 people convert every year in the United States through the reform movement. Many rabbis and leaders within the movement consider that opening the doors to the so-called “Jews by option” in these times in which the reform movement has been reincorporating the traditional elements of Judaism, can lead to a positive result, as it encourages families that receive a Jew by choice into their lives to find within Judaism the basis for a Jewish life full of spiritual and communitarian meaning.

The conversions within this movement in general are recognized by the other non-orthodox movements – in the conservative movement as long as the laws of the Halacha with regard to conversion according to their parameters are followed – and by the State of Israel for purposes of *Aliyah*, the Law of Return.

Patrilineality

In 1983 the reform movement began to formally consider that a person born of a Jewish father and non-Jewish mother, as long as he/she is educated within the Jewish values and practices, can be considered Jewish, in a break from the traditional stand of matrilineal descent. The decision is controversial even within the reform movement itself, and throughout time it may create a detachment from the other Jewish movements that only accept Jewish descent through the mother.

Mixed Marriages

With the increase in the number of mixed marriages as of the 1970s, the reform movement instituted a program to attract these families into their congregations. The objective then was to keep the Jews in inter-religious marriages involved, in some way, in Jewish life. This is also a controversial decision, and many reform rabbis do not conduct mixed wedding ceremonies. On the other hand, there was a significant increase, from 3% to 45%, in the registration of children from mixed marriages in Jewish schools during the last decades. The objective now has been to stimulate the non-Jewish members of these families to convert to Judaism.

Homosexuals

The reform movement allows weddings between two people of the same sex, known in some communities as Brit Ahava (covenant of love). The main reform rabbinical seminar in the United States, Hebrew Union College – Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR), ordains male and female rabbis since 1990.

Zionism

In the last few years the support of the reform movement for the State of Israel has increased significantly. Besides the substantial economic support, there are various programs for groups of young people, adults and families to travel to Israel and become more involved with the country's history and culture. The support for Aliyah, immigration to Israel, of reform Jews has also been increasing recently, as well as the creation of various reform synagogues, a center for study and a rabbinical seminar in Israel. From a political point of view, there is clear support for the existence of the State of Israel, defending the position of reaching peace with Palestinians and the two-state solution.