

A Vision of Holiness

The Future of Reform Judaism

Richard N. Levy, URJ Press, 2005

Where is Reform Judaism in the 21st century? This was the question before the Central Conference of American Rabbis at its historic 1999 convention in Pittsburgh as it voted on a Statement of Principles. *A Vision of Holiness* is an explication of these Pittsburgh Principles, the fourth in a series of comprehensive statements that the Reform rabbinate has adopted throughout its history, as seen through the eyes of the rabbi who guided the process and shaped the document. Rabbi Levy challenges readers to reflect on the nature of their religious lives and deepen their relationship with God, their connection to Torah, and their commitment to the destiny of the Jewish people and the Jewish state. This excerpt illustrates the book's illumination of the manner in which Jews can envision their purpose in the world and the challenges for Reform Judaism's ongoing engagement with the question of being commanded.



From Autonomy to Mitzvah

A command is a call – it involves a voice different from one's own. Autonomy suggests that the individual adopts or rejects a practice or belief based on a solely internal process of ratiocination. *Mitzvah* suggests that the individual is in conversation with another: a text, or the God who issued the *mitzvah* in the first place, or members of the people Israel who have been listening since Sinai. This is why the 1999 Pittsburgh Principles removed the language of autonomy and choice and substituted the idea of dialogue. There is no system, moral or otherwise, that can cause any body of Reform Jews to “reject” a *mitzvah* for another Reform Jew. The Pittsburgh Principles asserts that each Reform Jew has the right, indeed, the obligation, to enter into dialogue with the *mitzvot*, because as Jews we have been involved in that dialogue since

Sinai. It is the right of every Reform Jew to emerge from that dialogue affirming a *mitzvah*, declaring one is not yet ready to accept it, or even rejecting it. But the dialogue must precede the decision, or it is not really a decision.

Dialogue takes place through study. Sometimes study is *lishmah*, “for its own sake,” to understand a text from the inside out, to understand its history, its grammatical formations, its place in the Jewish canon, or to seek the answer to a particular question. Study is a lifelong commitment for Jews. We are enjoined to teach our children, or to provide study opportunities for them (Deuteronomy 6:7). We are obligated to hear the Torah read in public and to study it ourselves, to hear it call to us, and then to read the text of the call, pore over it, involve ourselves in it, and figure out the answer to three questions:

“What did this call mean when it was first uttered?” “What does this call mean to us, in this generation or in this place?” and “What is this call saying to me?”

The traditional understanding of the manner in which the Torah was given to Moses reinforces this dialogic sense of its authorship. Rabbi Akiba and Rabbi Ishmael debated whether God intended every word to be interpreted on its own, including the generally untranslated grammatical particles, or whether God used the human idiom to deliver the Torah so that human beings would see it as a part of their own language. Underlying their two positions was a common agreement: God intended for human beings to find their own meanings within the Torah. As noted earlier, the Torah could not be dictated in forty days and nights unless God gave Moses a summary – the “chapter headings” (*rashei*

p'rakim) – of what God wanted to communicate. What Moses wrote down was the *Torah Shebichtav*, “the Written Torah,” within which God planted the seeds of the *Torah Sheb'al Peh*, “the Oral Torah,” the fulfillment, the completion of the written text. Inherent in the written text we possess is the voice of God calling us to look, to notice the grammatical oddities, the seeming contradictions, the unusual words. God calls us to search for the answers, not only in our lexicons, but in other texts, rabbinic texts, the texts of our own time, and our own experiences. Preceding the Torah *b'rachah* that learning be sweet for us is a blessing praising God for commanding us *laasok b'divrei Torah*, to immerse ourselves – to soak ourselves – in the words of Torah. Torah study is a response to the questions, the demands, and the calls that God has written into the text

and that its human transmitters preserved for us.

Pirkei Avot, “The Ethics of Our Ancestors” (1:6), advises: *Asei l’cha rav uk’nei l’cha chaver*, “Make a teacher for yourself and acquire a study companion for yourself.” The *rav*, the teacher, is the one who helps us discover what Torah meant in its own time and in ours. While the study companion is helpful in those questions too, the *chaver* is essential in the third: “What is the call of this Torah passage saying to me?” For if study is to be a dialogue, it is important that it not be a theoretical dialogue between a book and me, or a dialogue in my head between God and me. The dialogue needs to be personified, by a teacher who inspires us to reach deeply into and beyond the text, or by a *chaver* who helps us let the call of Torah reach deeply inside our-

selves. Torah study calls us to *mitzvot*, the Pittsburgh Principles tells us, which it here describes as “the means by which we make our lives holy.”

The previous section of this book explored *mitzvot* as a way to bring us into the presence of God. In this section, *mitzvot* are the means of bringing Torah into our presence, of infusing our lives with holiness and transforming the ordinary parts of our lives into holiness. We have examined the word “holiness” – *kodesh* and *kdushah* in Hebrew – before. We have seen that like the ground on which Moses encountered the Burning Bush, holiness is an experience of God’s presence. To see Torah study as a dialogue means that we are studying the text God delivered at Sinai not only for its immediate hearers to soak up (“What did this call mean when it was first uttered?”), or only for our people today to soak up (“What does it mean in our generation?”), but also for me to soak up: “What is it saying to

me?” No matter how many *mitzvot* we bring into our lives, no matter how many “traditional” prayers and practices we incorporate, what characterizes a Reform approach to Torah is this insistence that Torah calls to each individual and that the individual responds out of the uniqueness of each one of our lives. It is not an autonomous choice, but a call from outside and a response from inside. Yet it is also a call from inside each of us:

“What should I do in this situation? How can I make *Shabbat* a more profound part of my life? How can this verse of Torah that seems to be calling to me help inform my life this week, today?” The call is not mediated through the Reform Movement, nor from the halachah as interpreted by an authoritative committee, but directly from the Torah itself as we study it alone or, preferably, with a *chaver* or a *Shabbat* morning study group. The published guides of the Reform

Movement certainly rank among our teachers and even our *chaverim*; they are among the sources of the Oral Torah through which we listen to the voice from Sinai, but they are not a “Reform halachah,” a set of rules that all Reform Jews must follow. The call for an individual response is unique to Reform Judaism; it refutes the notion that Reform is “Conservative light” or even heavy, as the Conservative Movement understands its relationship to Torah in a much more authoritarian manner. It has little in common with the language and symbolism of the Reconstructionist Movement, which is opposed to the notion of a God who calls through Torah or any other means. We need not fear, if we feel called to do *mitzvot* similar to those observed by Jews in other movements, that we are betraying Reform. It is the individual nature of the call, not that to which we are called, that marks our response a Reform Jewish one.



Rabbi Richard N. Levy

Rabbi Richard N. Levy is Director of the Rabbinical School and Lecturer in Judaic Studies at HUC-JIR/Los Angeles, and was ordained in 1964 in Cincinnati.

As President of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (1997-99), he was instrumental in shepherding passage of the Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism, the “Pittsburgh Principles,” passed overwhelmingly at the May 1999 CCAR Convention in Pittsburgh, PA. Rabbi Levy served as Executive Director of the Los Angeles Hillel Council, a regional center of Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life (1975-1999), and previously served as Director of Hillel at UCLA (1968-1975). He served as Assistant Rabbi at Leo Baeck Temple in Los Angeles, CA (1966-68) and Rabbi at Temple Beth Am in Yorktown Heights, NY (1965-66). Since 1974 he has been a Lecturer in Judaic Studies at HUC-JIR/Los Angeles, teaching in the fields of liturgy, rabbinic literature, the campus rabbinate, and Jewish sources for communal practice. His publications include *On Wings of Awe*, a High Holy Day prayerbook published by B’nai B’rith Hillel Foundations; *On Wings of Freedom*, a Haggadah (Ktav and B’nai B’rith Hillel Foundations); and *On Wings of Light*, a Shabbat and Festival prayerbook (Hillel). The recipient of the Doctor of Divinity degree from HUC-JIR in 1989, he was awarded the Covenant Award for Distinguished Educators by the Covenant Foundation in 1994. Rabbi Levy graduated Harvard College in 1959, where he was managing editor of the Harvard *Crimson*.