

Minneapolis Musings -- Reflections on the Reform Movement's Biennial Conference
By Rabbi Adam Morris
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This past Monday night I sat in a classroom at the Rocky Mountain Hebrew Academy. I was part of a panel speaking to an 8th Grade class about the different movements in the Jewish community. My task was to speak about the history, principles, misconceptions and outlook of the Reform movement. So, I wondered, who are we? What are we about? How different is my response to these questions than another rabbi? How different is my response to these questions than the official party line? As I thought about how I might represent Reform Judaism in my allotted 8 minutes, I could not help but to reflect back upon my attendance at the Reform movement's Biennial in Minneapolis only 10 days earlier.

My attendance at this year's Biennial was my first – my first opportunity to participate with the movement's adult leadership on such a grand level; my first chance to hear our President's biannual keynote in person; my first occasion to get a perspective from a macrocosmic level rather than microcosmic one. My experience and impressions were not earth shattering; rather they were more confirming of how I understand our movement.

The Biennial fell on the Shabbat of Lech L'cha – the Torah portion in which Abraham is commanded by God to leave his home and seek out a new home, new truth and new way of life. The Biennial planners integrated that theme throughout the weekend. This Shabbat as I reflect on my impressions of the Biennial, it is the stories we find in Chaya Sarah that frame my own thoughts.

Abraham sends his servant to find a wife for Isaac. We often refer to this servant as Eliezar. However, that name is only given to the servant by tradition ... in fact the servant has no name in the Torah. For some reason he was anonymous in the Torah, but our tradition felt compelled to name him. In Torah his role and what he stood for was clear, for a later generation a name helped to better define this loyal servant of Abraham's.

Naming and names were a significant part of this Biennial. Throughout our movement's history, its name has been the subject of great debate and attempted modification. The name 'Union of American Hebrew Congregations', many argued (most recently Rabbi Eric Yoffie just a few weeks ago) is an anachronism. Our movement spans beyond the borders of America. The word, 'Hebrew', as a descriptor of a Jewish person was an acceptable moniker a century ago, but it is no longer a part of the lexicon of contemporary Jews. In addition, where is the word that defines the movement ... Reform?

Well this would be the Biennial that those arguments would finally be heard. Rabbi Yoffie brought the suggested name change to the plenary (probably the best attended plenary of the entire weekend). He explained that the new name and subsequent tag line

would incorporate all the important elements of the movement ... Union – maintaining a connection with the movement’s history; Reform – using the descriptive term of who we are; Judaism – hey, above we are Jews, not Hebrews!; North America – reflecting our true demography and geography; Congregations – acknowledging that this is primarily a body serving congregational life.

I must admit, that while I am someone who recognizes the power in a name, I was a bit indifferent about the whole change. I was very curious about the discussion about the change – past discussion proved to be heated. Why? Well, why no one can dispute the logic of the change there are many who either do not want to abandon history or lose the focus on the ‘congregational’ nature of this body.

So, perhaps this process of renaming ourselves, serves the same role as giving Abraham’s nameless servant a name – it allows our movement to refocus and redefine who we are and what we are about. Still, as I listened to some of the cons to the resolution – there was one comment that still resonates with me. Unlike the pros – who were heads of the Hebrew Union College, President of NFTY and Rabbis of very large congregations ... the cons were your more pedestrian Reform Jews. This person explained to the assembly that while he understood the rationale for the change, it struck him as being an anxious response people’s perception of who are and what we are about. For him, as he declared, it did not matter what we called ourselves, for in his mind we are the authentic Jewish response to our world ... and we need no rationalization or reinterpretation.

There was no way that the resolution was not going to pass, that our name would be changed ... but that idea reminded me of the resolve and vision we must maintain, no matter what we call ourselves.

Our resolve and vision is regularly stated by the President of the movement during his Shabbat morning sermon at the Biennial. While, it is inevitably our actions that determine these things – these words play an important role in who we are and what we do. It is funny, because the use of one word in this week’s Torah portion that conveys this truth to me. The portion is called, Chaye Sarah – The Life of Sarah. In truth, the portion speaks nothing of her life, but of her death and her family’s reactions to it. Tradition notes that the use of the word for life, to begin a description of Sarah’s death teaches us that we must never lose sight of cherishing a loved one’s life, even in the face of her or his death. The use of one word suggests a deeper meaning and sets a different tone as we read of Abraham and Isaac’s response to her death.

The President of the (now) Union for Reform Judaism words on Shabbat morning every two years, fill this exact role for the Reform movement. The President should insightfully describe where we are and where we want to go. Rabbi Yoffie’s words on Shabbat Lech L’cha served that purpose well. He spoke of initiatives of growing Reform Judaism in Israel and the former Soviet Union. He launched an opportunity for Reform Jews to continue to learn, creative taking advantage of our technological age. He aptly criticized the currently administration for its immoral drive to afford tax breaks to the wealthy, why ignoring the plight of middle class and lower class Americans who struggle

to pay for the basic needs of rent, food and health insurance. He even, for the first time in his administration, confronted the Israeli government's insistence on continuing to build settlements in the disputed territories. (I was hoping that he might go a little further in his challenge, but he went further than he has gone in the past.)

Rabbi Yoffie's words set the tone for a community, who values deepening our understanding of ourselves, fighting the rigidity and prejudice within the Jewish community and pursuing justice in our world. Most who I spoke to about his words, were affirmed in their understanding of who they are as Reform Jews and even challenged to continue to grow in the best spirit of Reform Judaism.

When Rebecca first met her intended husband, the Torah teaches us that she 'Raised her eyes.' That phrase perhaps can be seen as a simple idiom for looking or seeing. However, to me it implies a conscious act of actively looking to examine, observe or see something in a different manner than how one is used to seeing it. As we Reform Jews we are all about 'raising our eyes' and seeing things differently. The many things I saw, heard or felt in Minneapolis confirmed this certainty for me.

The weekend provided opportunities for me and about 4,500 other Reform Jews to sing together, pray together, reconnect with friend and colleagues, meet new partners in this great endeavor and explore both sides of many issues. It is the nature of a Reform Jew to look at how we pray, what we learn, our relationship to Israel and the nature of our communities and our world in a different way. We are a group whose ancestors had the courage to 'raise their eyes' and envision all aspects of the world as how they may become.

As I sat at the Rocky Mountain Hebrew Academy on this past Monday I tried to raise my eyes and observe ... the representative from the Orthodox community explained that it is ritual that defines an Orthodox Jew ... the spokesperson from the Conservative movement tried to explain its place between the fundamental approach of the Orthodox and the liberal one of the Reform movement ... the speaker from the Reconstructionist movement explained how Mordechai Kaplan's teachings has revolutionized every movement. I saw and took great pride in the diversity of the Jewish family. I also saw and felt deep gratitude for the gifts that our movement, with all of its idiosyncrasies, has brought to Judaism and to the world. My few days in Minneapolis affirmed my understanding ... of who we are and what we are about.