Dana Evans Kaplan on Reform Judaism Today

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During a recent dinner party a rabbi of a large conservative congregation and a noted scholar agreed that they were both discouraged by the superficial focus among their respective congregants and colleagues on *tikkun olam*. Both worried about its widespread use as a shorthand for the more substantive if not philosophical text and talk we call Judaic. For them, “*tikkun olam*” reduced to a superficial catch phrase the meaning and measure of what each saw as the more complex theological and communal history of the Jews. It had become a universal message without a distinctly Jewish perspective. The rabbi lamented the loss of focus on the traditional measures of a strong Jewish identity, such as practices, rituals, belief and belonging. The scholar wanted more of a focus on the philosophical and intellectual history that distinguished Judaism from other religious traditions. To repair the world stood as a most worthy idea and practice, they argued, but it should be pursued from a distinctly Jewish orientation. It represented for them a kind of “secularization” of Judaism and a move away from the rich theological and philosophical basis from which Jewish beliefs and practices come.

Dana Kaplan,1 too, worries about the movement away from substantive philosophical tenets, specifically within the Reform movement. He is concerned about maintaining a Jewish set of beliefs in the face of an increasingly secularly oriented U.S. Jewry, particularly among its young.2 While documenting the history and theological pathways that mark Reform Judaism’s journey to its current place as the largest Jewish denomination, Dana Kaplan also chronicles the important dilemmas facing the Reform movement. He argues that Reform Judaism is once again at the crossroads of important decision making if it is

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2 Unless otherwise noted all data will be taken from the Pew Research Center's Religion and Jewish Life October 2013 survey report entitled “Portrait of Jewish Americans”.

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to maintain its place in American Judaism, indeed, if institutional religious Judaism is to survive at all. He looks to a unified theology, Ethical Monotheism (among a common core of committed rabbis), as a way to solidify and grow the Reform movement and as a way of closing the widening gap between an institutional Judaism and its adherents. In the very last pages of his book, Rabbi Kaplan summarizes the central challenges he has posed: Can we simultaneously make our faith both emotionally intense and intellectually honest? That challenge, he argues, is inherent in any theology that stresses individual autonomy and critical thought. In this essay I would like to reflect on Kaplan’s provocative theological thesis from a slightly different angle of vision, that of a sociologist.

Sociology and the Data

Survey data reveal that there has been an overall decline in conventional measures of what we call Jewish religious identity among non-Orthodox Jews; I have termed this in other writings the decline in the traditional three B’s: behavior, belonging, and believing. These trends have been with us for several decades. Some refer to this as the secularization thesis, others as assimilation theory, and still others as the rise of a symbolic religiosity and symbolic ethnicity. In the main, each theory refers to the shifting emphasis among non-Orthodox Jews from religion per se to the cultural/ethnic/secular context for their definition of what it means to be a contemporary Jew. Trends toward

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3 The Pew survey reports that while institutional affiliation among contemporary Jews may be on the decline, the reform movement still remains the denomination of choice. Within all three denominational movements, most of the switching is in the direction of less-traditional Judaism. The Pew survey finds that approximately one-quarter of people who were raised Orthodox have since become Conservative or Reform Jews, while 30% of those raised Conservative have become Reform Jews, and 28% of those raised Reform have left the ranks of Jews by religion entirely. Much less switching is reported in the opposite direction. For example, just 7% of Jews raised in the Reform movement have become Conservative or Orthodox, and just 4% of those raised in Conservative Judaism have become Orthodox. On the other hand, the Reform Movement houses the smallest number of those who say that religion is very important in their lives. About eight-in-ten Orthodox Jews say religion is very important to them. Among Conservative Jews, 43% say religion is very important to them. Fewer than one-in-five Reform Jews (16%) and fewer than one-in-ten Jews with no denominational affiliation (8%) say religion is very important in their lives (Pew report, chapter one, online).