

Conservative synagogue and then, to help me understand Judaism from multiple perspectives, I went to a Reform synagogue. While I enjoyed both, I found in the Reform congregation a stronger sense of community, group involvement, and acceptance. It was not the “Judaism lite” I had expected, but a dynamic, interactive approach to Judaism which I continue to appreciate today.

Martin Graffman: I joined a temple at age 35 because we needed a religious school for my son. I had no other expectations of membership. Then, in my 50s, I began to take stock of my life and realized that I didn’t really know what being Jewish meant or what Judaism was. Most of my Jewish friends, some affiliated and some not, could not answer my questions, so I embarked on a quest of discovery. It was remarkable, empowering, and at times exhilarating. I have learned to translate many, if not most, of our prayers, so I now have a “feel” as well as an intellectual understanding of our liturgy. I have read, if not studied, many texts that speak to me as a modern, independent Reform Jew—the works of Heschel, Falk, Borowitz, Wolfson, and the new *Torah: A Women’s Commentary* come to mind. Our Torah study group, often lay-led, is inviting and challenging, and this same group has created a Shabbat home service. If I cannot attend the Torah study or the Shabbat home service, something is missing from my life.

Marge Eiseman: My congregation, established in 1956, is only a few months older than I am. My paternal grandparents were among the founding families, and my parents joined immediately upon moving back to Milwaukee shortly before my birth. I joined to raise my children here.

TO LEARN MORE...

about what it means to belong to a synagogue, read Rabbi Jonathan Blake’s *d’var Torah*, “What is the Purpose of the Synagogue?” published in “Reform Voices of Torah” (3/3/08 edition): <http://urj.org/torah/ten/archives/>.

Much has changed since the days of my youth. Gone is the formal Friday evening service led by the black-robed rabbi and hidden quartet. Gone is the original ark, whose fabric curtain was



A Purim shpiel at Baltimore Hebrew Congregation, Baltimore, Maryland featuring Dr. Arlene C. Gerson as “U-Nick,” JoAnne Zarling as Mordechai, and Michael Rowland as King Ahashuerus, March 3, 2007.

donated by my grandparents. Gone, too, are most of the founding generation, but the ongoing sense of decorum and intellectual challenge lingers even now, almost 51 years later.

My favorite room has always been the social hall—a large sort of nondescript room with a wall of windows facing west and, until the recent renovation, a stage covered with a gold velvet curtain. In that room I remember my friends and family gathering for my bat mitzvah. We held each of the *brit milah simchas* for our four boys there, converted it to an indoor “arena” for a 4-year-old’s birthday party, and then filled the room with joy at the b’nai mitzvah party for our twins. The back wall of the sanctuary opened, and hundreds of our friends and community filled every available space for my son Baki’s funeral, just as they had done at my mother’s funeral 13 years before.

My synagogue is my second home.

Judy Fisher: When I was 33 we joined our first Reform synagogue in Cary, North Carolina so my firstborn son could attend kindergarten in its religious school and we could meet other Jewish families. Since then we

have moved on several occasions, each time joining a congregation to keep us Jewishly connected.

Recently I turned 50, and since my birthday coincided with the 37th anniversary of my bat mitzvah portion, I celebrated it by chanting from *Parshat Bo* and giving the *d’var Torah*. I quoted Moses’ response when Pharaoh says, “Go. Serve YHWH, your God. Who are the ones who are going?” Moses replies, “We’ll go with our young and with our old, we’ll go with our sons and with our

daughters, with our sheep and with our oxen, because we have a festival of YHWH” (Exodus 10:8-9). A festival with the whole community of family and friends—that’s the sense of belonging I feel in synagogue.

Dick Israel: Nowadays, as a committed member of two Reform temples, I see myself literally as a “re-formed” Jew.

Growing up in a Conservative congregation, I was put off by its ritual rigidity and ideological fundamentalism. When I became an adult (and a judge in Rhode Island), I rarely set foot in any place of worship, other than for a social, cultural, civic, or political event. In the early 1990s, though, I wanted to “re-form” my otherwise utterly secular Jewishness into something more meaningfully “Jewish.” Reform felt like the only viable choice, so I joined Temple Beth-El in Providence. I soon became an active member and was elected to the Board. I served on a search committee for a full-time cantor, notwithstanding my total tone-deafness. More important, our assistant rabbi recruited me into a *minyan* to engage in Shabbat morning services followed by Torah study. As