

groups to which one belonged—usually country and religion. Today, identity is more fractionalized and complex, determined by such factors as country, language, gender, profession, socioeconomic status—and religion. Each of these components make up our identity like pieces of a pie.

For many, identifying the Jewish piece of that pie or its importance among the other components has become increasingly difficult. What is the binding agent that connects us to the Jewish people? Our personal theological beliefs are far more divergent now than in stage one, and therefore connect us less strongly with Reform (or any branch of) Judaism. Our ethnic ties still draw us together, but nowadays ethnicity lacks the impetus it did in the second stage—perhaps, in part, because today’s synagogues have many more members who were not born into Judaism and cannot share the commonalities of cultural heritage. Loyalty to the Reform Movement may be waning among younger generations of Jews, who tend to dislike labels and prefer more fluid lifestyles. They may seek out the Jewish community to fulfill current needs, such as a lifecycle ceremony or the education of their children, rather than regarding synagogue membership as a lifetime commitment.

Even the State of Israel no longer confers the sense of belonging it once did. We no longer respond instinctively to the “crisis mentality”—that either Israel is in danger and we must save her, or that Diaspora Jewry is vulnerable and only Israel can save us. Instead, our relationship with Israel has become more nuanced, as we have come to understand that the Israeli government—just like our own—sometimes makes unwise decisions, and that we Diaspora Jews, who hold a variety of perspectives about such policies, are free, even duty-bound, to express them.



How Reform Jews confront the paradoxical nature of universalism and particularism will determine the character of the Reform Jewish future.

To infuse Jews with a sense of belonging in this fourth stage, our

Movement will need to develop a more flexible type of community. Even as we draw sustenance from members who make a lifelong commitment, it is incumbent upon us to also provide something of value for those just passing through. Nor can we wait for everyone to come to us; we also have to meet Jews wherever they happen to gather—restaurants, living rooms, internet chat rooms. And we have to make better creative use of electronic media for communication and online study.

At the same time, if Reform Judaism is to survive in this fourth stage, we will have to go somewhat against the stream in a society in which the only constant is change, by creating a community that stands for something timeless. As in the previous stages, our message is two-fold. The universalist Mission of Israel teaches that our lives have meaning beyond the immediate present, beyond the aims and ambitions that we assign to ourselves. It reminds us that we must settle for nothing less than *tikkun olam*—repair of the world—in our continuous quest to bring justice, peace, freedom, and enlightenment to the world. The particularist side of the coin is that the Jewish people has a unique contribution to make in this effort. Our uniqueness derives from a blend of ethical, spiritual, educational, and cultural elements—a blend that is different for each individual, but can be shared with fellow Jews in community.

Adapting to new conditions while maintaining ancient traditions is part and parcel of the Jewish historical experience. In the Mishnah, at the end of Tractate *Berakhot*, the rabbis quote Psalm 119:126: “It is time to act for Adonai; they have nullified Your Torah.” While most of the rabbis interpret this to mean that Jewish tradition must be preserved despite trends toward apostasy or assimilation, Rabbi Natan offers a different interpretation. He reverses the two parts of the verse: “Nullify Your Torah” *because* “it is time to act for Adonai.”

In Rabbi Natan’s view, one way to preserve tradition is to transform it. This is precisely what Reform Judaism, at its best, has been doing at every stage for the past 200 years. □

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