

Jewish spirituality is not only about meditation, prayer, and study. It is also about engaging in social justice, whether that's building affordable housing, cooking in a soup kitchen, or otherwise modeling what it means to be a person of conscience and commitment. Pursuing social justice is a real-world, authentic spiritual practice.

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**What have you learned from your predecessors who have served as president of the Union for Reform Judaism?**

**A**t 6'4" I may be the tallest president in the history of our URJ, but I'm following in the footsteps of giants.

In my mind's eye, I see Rabbi Maurice Eisendrath carrying a Torah scroll alongside Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He knew what too many of us have forgotten—that the Torah should never be sequestered in our synagogues. Rather, we must carry our prophetic mantle beyond the walls of our praying places to shape a more just and compassionate world for all of God's children.

I sense, too, the poetic presence of Rabbi Alexander Schindler, who boldly challenged us to share our Torah with the many interfaith families who felt barred from taking hold of our sacred inheritance, and to embrace our LGBT brothers and sisters. Our congregations are stronger thanks to the many Jews-by-choice, non-Jews, and Jews of all kinds who have joined us.

Rabbi Eric Yoffie's vision of Torah at the center has inspired my rabbinate and our Reform Movement. Eric has taught us to engage deeply with our sacred texts through serious, lifelong study.

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**At the 2011 Biennial outside Washington, DC, you spoke of our Movement's three most pressing tasks. The first is catalyzing congregational change.**

**Y**es, in this new era in which people have multiple Jewish options, synagogues must transform themselves to speak to the human soul. They must also keep up with the best of human thought, by which I mean the expanding frontiers of science and philosophy, which are sources of truth for us. They need to become great congregations, exuding excellence and always searching for new ways to do their holy work better. The URJ must do the same—being a catalyst and convener of best practices, sharing tools, methods, and models—so that all our congregations can flourish by raising themselves up the ladder from ok to good, from good to great, and from great to phenomenal. Only then will our synagogues be the central address for modern Jews who wish to cultivate a deep, nourishing Jewish life.

**At Westchester Reform Temple, you initiated and presided over several transformation processes that encompassed the religious school, youth work, worship, and more. What have you learned from that experience that synagogue leaders can apply in their own communities?**

**F**irst, when embarking on a transformation process, be careful not to make longtime members feel like strangers in their own spiritual home. At WRT each task force and worship group included veteran members who were often skeptical if not resistant to the change process. Second, involve “nay-sayers,” for they are essential to ethical decision-making. Third, make it a priority to develop a dynamic partnership between the professional and lay leadership. Fourth, know that transformation takes time. When someone says, “You can't do it,” my answer is, “Really? Did you try? Did you try hard for 20 years?” If you try for a day, a week, a month, a year—that's not trying. Finally, like lifelong Jewish learning and spiritual growth, transformation is a process that never ends.

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**Your second most pressing task is engaging the next generation. You've warned that if we do not do it right, the rest will not matter.**

**A** staggering 80% of our b'nei mitzvah drop out before confirmation. Stemming this exodus is the impetus for a Movement-wide transformation of how we interact with our youth. That is why Rabbi Yoffie initiated, and I have endorsed as one of my top priorities, the Campaign for Youth Engagement—a long-term effort to transform and strengthen relationships between Jewish teens, their peers, their families, and their congregations. We will fortify NFTY, expand our camps and Israel programs, invest in training adults who connect with youth, and allocate significant funding and programmatic support for innovative initiatives on the local level. Only by creating closer and more enduring relationships with our youth can we hope to reverse this trend.

I saw this happen at Westchester Reform Temple. During my first week as rabbi there, the educator called me aside and said, “A boy in our religious school is a holy terror. He's not just badly behaved; he is literally a threat to this place.” We didn't kick him out of our school; we held him close. I saw him pretty regularly in my office. He kept acting out and we kept taking him back in. It paid off. Eventually he became president of our youth group and president of his college Hillel. Years later I saw him and he said, “You hung in there with me.” Just a few months ago he emailed me from London, where he was transferred by his firm, and asked if I could recommend a synagogue for the High Holy Days. By forging