

## REFORM JUDAISM AND YOU

A Bohemian rabbi, Isaac Mayer Wise, introduced Reform Judaism to the United States in 1846. He brought with him a new Jewish orientation emerging in Central and Western Europe to reform Judaism—that is, to introduce modifications to make Judaism relevant and meaningful in an emerging modern society. There were many shifts in thought and practice and even changes in the classical prayer book (siddur). The early Reformers were the Jewish theological innovators of their generation.

Today, this proud tradition continues! The Reform movement and its synagogues are the spiritual and communal homes for the largest number of Jews in North America. Some of its guiding principles include:

- immersion in study (Torah), prayer (*avodah*) and the performance of good deeds (*gemilut chasadim*);
- personal responsibility for religious choices based upon knowledge and commitment;
- a commitment to *tikkun olam*—the repair of the world in partnership with God—through acts of social justice;
- full equality of women and men in all aspects of synagogue leadership and religious life (the Reform movement ordained the first woman rabbi in 1972);
- welcoming all who wish to celebrate Jewish life—singles, families, gay/lesbian Jews, interfaith couples, retirees and young adults; and
- developing and maintaining close links with the State of Israel and its citizens.

## MYTHS ABOUT JOINING A SYNAGOGUE

**Myth #1: There's no place for me... I'm not even sure I believe in God.** There have always been differences of opinion regarding belief and practice in our tradition. The meaning of the word Israel is to “struggle with God.” The synagogue provides a safe,

supportive atmosphere in which to engage in that struggle and explore one's spiritual needs. Most of all, synagogue life provides a strong community to help you sustain your connection to Judaism and pass the torch of the Torah to future generations.

**Myth #2: Synagogues are only for families, not for singles like me.** It is true that synagogues have many family oriented programs, but that does not mean that they are only for families. Aside from youth programs and religious schools, many synagogues have women's groups, adult education seminars, leadership opportunities, social justice programs and, of course, worship experiences. The synagogue's task is to enhance your connection with other Jews and your personal search for meaning.

**Myth #3: Why should I join now? My son is not yet ready for religious school.** It is never too soon to be a part of the Jewish community. While we often think that synagogues are around to “teach Judaism” to our children, there is so much more. Synagogues provide ongoing opportunities to study, experience and enjoy being connected to a Jewish community. As for children, most synagogues offer preschool programs as an important component in children's development. The synagogue provides a safe, turing place to help your child develop key skills, as well as to create an enriching Jewish atmosphere for him and for you!

**Myth #4: It costs a fortune to join a synagogue!** Reform synagogues are committed to every Jew who desires to be part of a congregation. A Jewish sage once said that “the gates of prayer are always open.” Reform synagogues have promised to keep their gates open and inclusive to all. Hand in hand with this idea follows another: that “all Jews are responsible for one another.” That is why synagogue leaders set up a fair dues structure—so that the vital ongoing services and programs continue to serve the entire community.

Being part of a synagogue community throughout life is a priority for many; and we hope that it will be one for you, too.

For more information, contact:

# What's Missing from Our Congregation? ...YOU!



Jews have depended on synagogues for centuries as the place for spiritual nourishment and a sense of community. There we not only learn the rich traditions and language of our people, but how to fill our lives with meaning so that each and every one of us can impact our world for good.



SERVING REFORM CONGREGATIONS IN NORTH AMERICA

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Perhaps you've been thinking about joining a synagogue. Maybe you've just been waiting for the right time to actually do it

- when you are ready to find a community...
- when you get married...
- when you have children...
- when you need a rabbi...
- when you can more easily afford it.

As you read on, we hope you'll see that it's always the right time to belong. That's what this is all about: your Jewish connection! The synagogue—one of Judaism's most ancient institutions—continues to provide for the spiritual, communal and educational needs of every generation of Jews.

Each synagogue is unique, with its own distinct character and culture. But all synagogues have one fundamental thing in common: They are the Centers for Jewish Living in your community.

A synagogue is a special place because it nurtures three things that Jews have sought for themselves and their families, three things that infuse life with a sense of meaning and fulfillment: **Community, Learning and Spirituality.**

*I first joined when I was single and in law school I wanted to be connected to a place where I could go to pray, to meet other people and pursue my interest in Jewish education. I wanted a Jewish connection in a spiritually fulfilling, substantial way—that was through a synagogue.*

—Alison Kur, Temple Israel of Boston, MA

## THE VALUE OF COMMUNITY

Do not separate yourself from the community...

—Hillel, Jewish sage, first century B.C.E.

*Beit k'nisset*—בית כנסת—means “house of gathering,” a center where Jews gather to form a community. The *beit keneset* is the place to celebrate life-cycle events with family and friends; to come together to support one another in times of crisis; to rally together to help others in need; or just to bring friends together and meet new ones.

*When I was younger, I lived in an urban center and took knowing other Jews for granted. Now that we are raising a family in a fairly rural area, we joined a synagogue to meet and connect with other people with whom we had 'being Jewish' in common.*

—Karen Horowitz, Temple Har Shalom of Warren, NJ

*My participation in synagogue life is most meaningful when I join the community in the singing of liturgy set to modern music, when I witness a baby naming and when the community witnesses a conversion ceremony. Being part of something much bigger than me, and which cannot succeed unless the entire community is included.*

—Mitch Cohen, Temple Kol Emeth, Marietta, GA

*As a new member of my synagogue, I can vouch for the fact that everyone who arrives at our doors is welcomed and made to feel a needed part of the community. We sing, pray, eat and work together in a pervading sense of warmth and belongingness.*

—Elizabeth Hoover, Temple Sinai, Houston, TX

## THE VALUE OF LEARNING

[The Torah] is a Tree of Life to those who grasp it, and whoever holds onto it is happy. Its ways are pleasant ways and all its paths are peace.

—Liturgy; The Book of Proverbs (3:17, 18)

*Beit midrash*—בית מדרש—means “house of study,” a center where Jews come together to study. At the *beit midrash*, Jews study Torah, prayer, history and Jewish responses to contemporary issues like social justice, parenting, ethics and much more. Most synagogues provide a wide array of opportunities to enhance study experiences for children and adults. Thus we empower ourselves to transmit our precious legacy from one generation to the next.

*My congregation is not only a place to learn Torah, but to extend and deepen its lessons, not only within the Jewish community, but in the human one as well.*

—Andi Rosenthal, Larchmont Temple, Larchmont, NY

*Thirty-five years ago, five of us founded our temple because we wanted our children to grow up with a Jewish education. We started the Hebrew and religious schools... and now, temple is part of the lives of my whole family—my husband and I, our children, and grandchildren.... Our temple is a special place.*

—Bernice Waitzman, B'nai Jehoshua Beth Elohim of Glenview, IL

## THE VALUE OF SPIRITUALITY

My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

—Isaiah 56:7

*Beit t'filah*—בית תפילה—means “house of prayer,” a center to create sacred time and space. Of course, one does not need a *beit t'filah* to experience holy or special moments. But when Jews join together to pray, the individual becomes linked with the Divine and members of a community are linked to one another. There is no better place than the synagogue sanctuary to seek out and engage God in our struggles and challenges, to find solace and peace.

*By emphasizing Jewish identity as a spiritual commitment, Reform Judaism is creating the Jewish future. I want to be part of that creative process!*

—Bea Levy, Central Synagogue of Nassau County, NY

*Reform Judaism has led me to unique worship experiences and study opportunities that have deepened my spiritual life and my identification as a Jew.*

—Matt Cohen, Fairmount Temple, Cleveland, OH

*When I participate in a spiritual experience with learning, sharing and praying, my heart overflows with love and connection.*

—Ellie Jacobs, Temple Beth Shalom, Needham, MA