

# A LIFE OF MEANING AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SACRED PATH OF REFORM JUDAISM

## AN ADULT EDUCATION CURRICULUM

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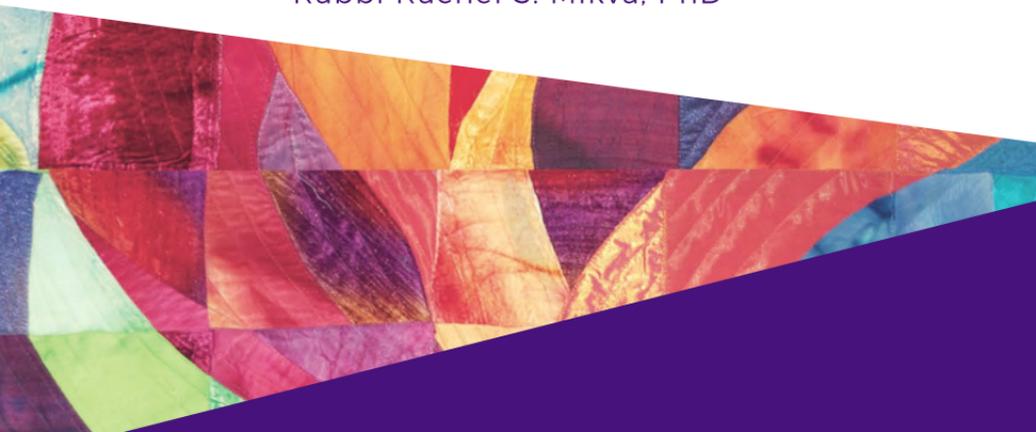
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## Introduction

*A Life of Meaning: Embracing Reform Judaism's Sacred Path*, edited by Rabbi Dana Evan Kaplan, PhD, was published in 2018 by the CCAR Press. The book contains a broad look at Reform Judaism: our history, our theology, the development of our prayer, and our mission in this world. Many of our most important rabbis and thinkers are represented in this book, as authors of its chapters or as writers of the texts cited within its chapters.

This book tells our story.

In April 2019, the CCAR Convention will take place in the city of Cincinnati, celebrating its 130th birthday. This city was the home of Isaac Mayer Wise, the founder of the American Reform Movement, whose 200th birthday we will celebrate this year, on March 29. With abundant energy, passion, and willpower, he created the American Reform Movement. He published our first prayer book, *Minhag America*, and he founded the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (now Union for Reform Judaism) and our rabbinical school, Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, as well as the Central Conference of American Rabbis. His 200th birthday is an apt moment in time to return to our roots, reassess our history, and reconnect to our core values.

This curriculum was developed by the CCAR to give our clergy members and congregants the opportunity to dedicate the years of 2019 and 2020 to the study of our roots. The curriculum comprises five sessions about the history, theology, and core values of Reform Judaism. Each of the sessions stands by itself; they are also in dialogue with each other.

We know, of course, that our theologies and values are shifting. We acknowledge the historic and contemporary differences between the ways Reform Jews experience God and express their identities and beliefs. This curriculum familiarizes students with the core ideas of the Reform Movement, and invites a variety of different texts and voices into the conversation.

### *Session 1: History*

The first session provides an introduction to the history of the Reform Movement in North America. When early Jewish immigrants arrived to North America, they struggled to become American while still maintaining their Jewish identity. We will explore how the European question of whether we were a “nation” or “a religious community” has shaped our self-understanding of Reform Judaism as a religion and the impact of our self-understanding on our national and religious loyalties. (See video 1 with Rabbi Gary Zola, PhD; all videos are listed below.)

### *Session 2: Mitzvot and Ethics*

In the second session, we will study the evolution of mitzvot and of Jewish practice and how this evolution is reflected in the CCAR platforms. We will explore the meaning of mitzvot and ritual practice in Reform Judaism today, the ethics that these mitzvot convey, and the three mitzvot that became central to Reform Jewish American life. (See video 1 and 2 with Rabbi Carole B. Balin, PhD.)

### *Session 3: Justice*

This session is dedicated to the one mitzvah that has shaped the Reform Movement more than any other: the mitzvah to establish justice in our world. The session explores the historical reasons for the centrality of the Reform Movement's ethical calling in this world and examines how Reform Jews who engage in this effort have grown both spiritually and morally during their struggle to live up to the highest moral standards. (See video 2 with Rabbi Gary Zola, PhD.)

### *Session 4: Spirituality*

The fourth session focuses on a map of Reform Jewish spirituality. In what ways do Reform Jews "feel" their religion? This session explores three Jewish ways to grow spiritually as a Reform Jew: text study, sacred relationships, and the words, melodies, and gestures of our prayers. (See video 2 Rabbi Lance J. Sussman, PhD)

### *Session 5: Ongoing Revelation*

As Reform Jews, we know that the messages of the Torah have to be rediscovered in every generation anew and for every person anew. The fifth session, then, is dedicated to the theme of ongoing revelation. Where is the Reform Movement headed? What are today's most important lessons for the future of Reform Judaism and Reform Jews in North America? (See video 1 with Rabbi Lance J. Sussman, PhD.)

Videos available at [vimeo.com/ccar](https://vimeo.com/ccar)

#### **Rabbi Gary Zola, PhD:**

[Video 1: The Americanization of Reform Judaism](#)

[Video 2: The Pillars of Judaism: Prayer, Study, Justice](#)

#### **Rabbi Carole B. Balin, PhD:**

[Video 1: Sacred Commandments](#)

[Video 2: Sacred Commandments, an Example: Meaningful Nutrition](#)

#### **Rabbi Lance J. Sussman, PhD:**

[Video 1: Judaism: A Path for the World](#)

[Video 2: Where Do We Find the Jewish Answer?](#)



## Session One

### History: On Being a Reform Jew in America

This first session provides an introduction to the history of the Reform Movement in North America. When early Jewish immigrants arrived to North America, they struggled to become American while continuing to be Jewish. We will explore how the European question of whether we were a “nation” or “a religious community” has shaped our self-understanding of Reform Judaism as a religion and the impact of our self-understanding on our national and religious loyalties.

#### **Background Materials for the Facilitator**

These readings could also be assigned ahead of time to the class, if realistic. All readings are from Dana Evan Kaplan, ed., *A Life of Meaning* (New York: CCAR Press, 2018).

- Balin, Carole B. “Mitzvah/Mitzvot,” pp. 199–206.
- Hirsch, Ammiel. “Chosen for Torah,” pp. 81–88.
- Holo, Joshua. “Finding Meaning in Our Connectedness across the Generations,” pp. 389–394.
- Katzew, Jan. “Freedom within Limits,” pp. 123–134.
- Kroloff, Charles A. “Community: The Vehicle for Fulfilling the Jewish Dream,” pp. 381–388.
- Marx, Dalia. “Reform Liturgy: Then and Now,” pp. 349–368.
- Sarason, Richard S. “Worship and the Prayer Book,” pp. 335–348.

#### **Session Plan**

##### *Welcome and Personal Introductions (5 minutes)*

#### **For the facilitator:**

- Invite participants to introduce themselves.
- Engage the participants in a scale exercise: on the left, folks who feel there is no conflict between being a Jew and an American, and opposite.

##### *Introduction to the Topic: Who Are We, “the Jewish People”? Who Are We “Reform Jews”? (10 minutes)*

#### **For the facilitator:**

- With the participants, read the following excerpt and discuss, using the guiding questions below.

### **Rabbi Michael Marmor, PhD, “Speaking Truthfully about God”**

*A teaching usually attributed to the founder of the Chasidic movement, the Baal Shem Tov, notes that the Amidah prayer begins in a curious manner: “Our God and God of our ancestors. . . .” Why does it need to mention both ourselves and those who came before us? He concludes that there are two kinds of people in the world. The “God of our fathers” camp concentrates on the concept of God provided by tradition, while the “our God” people are engaged in their own search for a meaningful notion of God. We say both parts of the blessing because one sensibility without the other is weak. If all we have is tradition, we can become parrots repeating sentences we don’t understand or believe in. And if we are constantly searching, we can be blown around by the winds of opinion, believing one thing today and another tomorrow. By combining the two approaches, we can have both firm roots and high aspirations.*

*So far I have described two ways of grappling with the truth of God. One is to delve within traditional discussions, learning from the wisdom of what has come before us. Another is to ask what our best understanding of morality, history, science, and society allows us to believe. The first approach scores high points for grandeur and mystery, and it is rooted in humility and identity. The second approach is all about honesty and integrity. (A Life of Meaning, p. 43)*

#### **Guiding questions:**

- What does Rabbi Marmor mean when he says that the “first approach” (of tradition) is rooted in humility and identity?
- What does Rabbi Marmor mean when he says that the “second approach” is all about honesty and integrity?
- Rabbi Marmor advocates a search for meaning in Jewish life that begins not with “me and my personal experiences,” but with “me as the descendant of my forefathers and mothers; me as a product of history.” From which sources do you draw your sense of self?

#### *Chevruta Study of Torah text (10 minutes)*

##### **For the facilitator:**

- Provide the participants with source sheets with the following excerpt from Exodus 19, along with the guiding questions.
- Explain the context of the text: The Israelites have just crossed the Sea of Reeds and will receive the Ten Commandments in the following chapter.
- Ask the participants to read and discuss the following texts in *chevruta*, using the guiding questions below. (Be sure to explain the process and merits of *chevruta* study in case the participants are unfamiliar with the practice: that it is a very Jewish way of study, that it can get noisy, and that it allows the partners to strengthen their learning together.)

## Exodus 19:3–8

<p>3 <i>And Moses went up to God. יהוה called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and declare to the children of Israel:</i></p>	<p>ומִשָּׁה עָלָה אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו יְהוָה מִן־הַהָר לֵאמֹר כֹּה תֹאמַר לְבֵית יִעֲקֹב וְתִגִּיד לְבָנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:</p>
<p>4 <i>‘You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to Me.</i></p>	<p>אַתֶּם רְאִיתֶם אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי לְמִצְרַיִם וְאֲשָׂא אֶתְכֶם עַל־כַּנְּפֵי נְשָׁרִים וְאָבֵא אֶתְכֶם אֵלָי: וְעַתָּה אִם־שָׁמוּעַ תִּשְׁמָעוּ בְּקוֹלִי וְשָׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת־בְּרִיתִי וְהָיִיתֶם לִי סֻגְלָה מִכָּל־הָעַמִּים כִּי־לִי כָל־הָאָרֶץ:</p>
<p>5 <i>Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine,</i></p>	<p>וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ־לִי מִמְּלֶכֶת כְּהַנִּים וְגוֹי קָדוֹשׁ אֱלֹהֵי הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר תִּדְבַּר אֶל־בָּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:  וַיָּבֵא מִשָּׁה וַיִּקְרָא לְזִקְנֵי הָעָם וַיִּשָּׂם לְפָנֵיהֶם אֵת כָּל־ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר צִוָּהוּ יְהוָה:</p>
<p>6 <i>but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the children of Israel.”</i></p>	<p>וַיַּעֲנוּ כָל־הָעָם יַחְדָּו וַיֹּאמְרוּ כֹּל אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר יְהוָה נַעֲשֶׂה וַיִּשָּׁב מִשָּׁה אֶת־דְּבָרֵי הָעָם אֶל־יְהוָה:</p>
<p>7 <i>Moses came and summoned the elders of the people and put before them all that יהוה had commanded him.</i></p>	
<p>8 <i>All the people answered as one, saying, “All that יהוה has spoken we will do!” And Moses brought back the people’s words to יהוה.</i></p>	

### Guiding questions:

- What will happen if God’s commandments are followed?  
[The people of Israel will become not just any *am* like others, but an *am s’gulah*, a “treasured people.” Define *am* (people, nation) and *s’gulah* (uniqueness, closeness, destined, beloved) for non-Hebrew speakers. Note that God’s promise is repeated in Deuteronomy (7:6, 14:2, 26:18). Point out that it is significant that the word *am* occurs sixteen times in chapter 19 of Exodus—biblically speaking, that’s a lot!]
- Who accepts the commandments?  
[The people of Israel, *am Yisrael*, as a people, not as individuals.]

## **A Chronology of Our Evolving Reform Jewish-American Identity (35--40 minutes)**

### *Jewish Emancipation in Europe (10–15 minutes)*

#### **For the facilitator:**

- With the participants, read the following excerpts and discuss, using the guiding questions below.

#### **Rabbi Carole B. Balin, PhD, “Mitzvah/Mitzvot”**

*Emancipation of Jews in the West led to a new response to identity, including for many a hyphenated existence. So Jewish-Americans or Germans-of-the-Mosaic-faith, to take two examples, along with new citizens of every other emerging, secular nation-state of the modern era, could elect (or not) to be a part of a religious community. At least theoretically, the state would no longer regard the Jews as a corporate body or “nation within a nation” with specific privileges and obligations owing to that status. Rather, each individual Jew could decide for him- or herself whether to affiliate voluntarily with a synagogue or follow the mandates of a particular rabbi. (A Life of Meaning, pp. 204–205)*

#### **Guiding questions:**

- In what ways did emancipation benefit the Jewish people? Share some examples. What price is paid by the Jewish community for their so-called hyphenated identity? Are there benefits?

#### **Rabbi Jan Katzew, PhD, “Freedom within Limits”**

*This concern about Jewish identity and loyalty has proved to be a recurring theme in Jewish life that has transcended time and place. At the turn of the nineteenth century in France, Napoleon convened a Sanhedrin, a Jewish court, asking for clarity on the question of Jewish identity and loyalty. One of the twelve questions put to the Sanhedrin was “Do the Jews born in France, and treated by the law as French citizens, acknowledge France as their country? Are they bound to defend it? Are they bound to obey the laws and follow the directions of the civil code?” The persistence of variations on this question is remarkable, painful, and telling. (A Life of Meaning, p. 128)*

#### **Guiding questions:**

- What are the factors that led Napoleon to convene the Sanhedrin, and how did this affect the Jews’ experience of emancipation? Why is France a particularly good example of the trajectory of emancipation?
- In what ways were the loyalties of the Jews of France questioned? How might the Jewish community have experienced emancipation differently from their neighbors?

**Rabbi Richard S. Sarason, PhD, “Worship and the Prayer Book”**

*The traditional petitions for a return to the Land always bore a political dimension (as was recognized and acknowledged by the modern Zionist movement). This political dimension became highly charged during the era of Jewish emancipation in Europe. Citizenship rights were extended to Jews with the expectation of complete loyalty to the European nation-state; no dual loyalty would be allowed. One French legislator at the time put it this way: “To the Jews as individuals, everything; to the Jews as a people, nothing!” Anxiety about the charge of dual loyalty, warranted or not, became ingrained in Western Jews (it occasionally surfaces even today in some American Jews’ ambivalence about supporting Israel); this is what lies behind the elimination of the prayers for the return to Zion in virtually all Reform prayer books before the rise of Nazi Germany in the 1930s. (A Life of Meaning, p. 341)*

**Guiding questions:**

- How does the statement “To the Jews as individuals, everything; to the Jews as a people, nothing!” converse with the Torah’s statement that we “shall be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation”? Can you think of other times in history when Jews have been charged with dual loyalty? Have you personally ever experienced anxiety about the charge of dual loyalty? How is this different from or similar to the situation in the North America of the 1940s? How is this different from or similar to what we are hearing in America today?

*The Beginning of Reform Judaism in North America (5 minutes)*

**For the facilitator:**

- With the participants, read the following excerpt and discuss, using the guiding questions below.

**The Pittsburgh Platform’—1885: Declaration of Principles**

*We recognize in the Bible the record of the consecration of the Jewish people to its mission as the priest of the one God. . . .*

*We recognize, in the modern era of universal culture of heart and intellect, the approaching of the realization of Israel’s great Messianic hope for the establishment of the kingdom of truth, justice, and peace among all men. We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community, and therefore expect neither a return to Palestine, nor a sacrificial worship under the sons of Aaron, nor the restoration of any of the laws concerning the Jewish state. (CCAR, <https://www.ccarnet.org/rabbinic-voice/platforms/article-declaration-principles/>)*

**Guiding questions:**

- What was the context that inspired the drafters of the platform to change the prevailing understanding of Jews to a religious community and not a nation?
- What are the long-term implications of such a statement?
- How does this statement reflect the fears and concerns brought up by the changes inspired by the emancipation?
- In what ways does our contemporary political context (re-)shape our religious values?

*The Twentieth Century (10 minutes)***For the facilitator:**

- With the participants, read the following excerpts and discuss, using the guiding questions below.

**Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch, “Chosen for Torah”**

*Eventually, even most Reform Jews did not buy the argument that particularism was a less-advanced vestige of our pre-Enlightenment past and that universal brotherhood and bliss were within our grasp. They simply looked at the world and saw the evidence themselves. As the twentieth century advanced, the classical Reformers’ optimism in the coming of a universal era of peace and unity seemed not only unrealistic, but increasingly delusional.*

*By the middle of the twentieth century, the Reform Movement even came to embrace Zionism. The early Reformers had bitterly opposed Zionism because it is premised on the very principle that the Pittsburgh Platform rejected—Jewish nationhood. But by the end of World War II, the restoration of Jewish sovereignty in the Jewish people’s ancient homeland seemed a much more realistic solution to the Jewish problem than the “approach of the . . . kingdom of truth, justice and peace among men” (Pittsburgh Platform).*

*There was always a healthy tension in Jewish thought between the centrality of the Jewish people and Jewish interactions with, and obligations to, the world at large. Judaism was both particular and universal. But by rejecting the Jewish particular, the Reform Movement ripped Judaism’s universal aspirations from their particularistic moorings, and what was left was not Jewish universalism, but simply universalism. (A Life of Meaning, p. 83; emphasis added)*

**A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism’—Adopted in Pittsburgh, 1999**

*We are Israel, a people aspiring to holiness, singled out through our ancient covenant and our unique history among the nations to be witnesses to God’s presence. We are linked by that covenant and that history to all Jews in every age and place. (CCAR, <https://www.ccarnet.org/rabbinic-voice/platforms/article-statement-principles-reform-judaism/>)*

**Guiding questions:**

- What world events and sociological developments caused the optimism of “classical Reformers in the coming of a universal era of peace and unity to seem not only unrealistic, but increasingly delusional”? In which areas do we have to recognize that we are, still, only humbly learning to live up to our visions?
- According to this platform, what are the essential characteristics of the people of Israel?
- Compare and contrast the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform and the Pittsburgh Principles of 1999. How do they differ, and to what events and realities can you tie the differences?
- In what ways does the 1999 Pittsburgh Principles reflect Rabbi Hirsch’s statement?

*Are We Still a “People”? (10 minutes)***For the facilitator:**

- With the participants, read the following excerpt and discuss, using the guiding questions below.

**Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch, “Chosen for Torah”**

*The concept of chosenness—the idea that God can have a special relationship with one people—is both intellectually and morally challenging for contemporary liberal Jews. It is often seen as offensive and exclusionary. As Jewish history unfolds in North America, and as the impact of the Holocaust and the creation of the State of Israel recedes, . . . in practice, if not philosophy, there has developed a movement back to universalism—not as a function of, but at the expense of, Jewish peoplehood. It is consistent with the spirit of the times. Contemporary liberalism has launched a compelling critique against religion in general that undermines our confidence. . . .*

*The growing inclination in the Reform Movement to de-emphasize Jewish particularism is the gravest threat to the future of Reform Judaism in North America. For what are the prospects of the continuity of the people if the people is not committed to its own distinctive continuity and does not even agree philosophically that it is a legitimate objective and a social good? Is it possible to sustain the Jewish people without being committed to the Jewish people? Can Judaism exist without Jews? (A Life of Meaning, pp. 85, 88)*

**Guiding questions:**

- Do you find the concept of chosenness potentially offensive and exclusionary? Why or Why not?
- How does Rabbi Hirsch define Judaism as a religion and Jewish as a people?
- In reflecting on your life experience, have you witnessed the tension between universalism and particularism in Jewish life?

- What opportunities might Reform Judaism have to advocate both for Jewish particularism and Jewish universalism?

### *Closure (5 minutes)*

#### **For the facilitator:**

- Open the floor for final questions and reflections.
- Ask the participants to reflect on their own identities using a Four Corners game approach. Label index cards for participants to choose, as follows: (1) American-Jewish, (2) Jewish-American, (3) American who happens to be Jewish, or (4) Jewish who happens to hold American citizenship.
- Ask the participants how the readings and discussions have affected the way they think about their personal “position.”

### *For Further Reading*

“A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism: Adopted at the 1999 Pittsburgh Convention, Central Conference of American Rabbis, May 1999--Sivan 5759,” CCAR, <http://ccarnet.org/rabbis-speak/platforms/statement-principles-reform-judaism/>

Feldman, Marla J. “The Women Who Set the Stage: Celebrating Over One Hundred Years of Women in Reform Judaism.” In *The Sacred Calling: Four Decades of Women in the Rabbinate*, edited by Rebeca Einstein Schorr and Alysya Mendelson Graf, pp. 51–61. New York: CCAR Press, 2014. pp. 51-61.

Ammiel Hirsch, “Chosen for Torah”, in *A Life of Meaning*, ed. Dana Evan Kaplan (New York: CCAR Press, 2018), pp. 81-88.

Balin, Carole B. “Mitzvah/Mitzvot.” In *A Life of Meaning*, edited by Dana Evan Kaplan, pp. 199–206. New York: CCAR Press, 2018. pp. 199-206.

Hirsch, Ammiel. “Chosen for Torah.” In *A Life of Meaning*, edited by Dana Evan Kaplan, pp. 81–88. New York: CCAR Press, 2018.

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Katzew, Jan. “Freedom within Limits.” In *A Life of Meaning*, edited by Dana Evan Kaplan, pp. 123–134. New York: CCAR Press, 2018. pp. 123-134.

Kroloff, Charles A. “Community: The Vehicle for Fulfilling the Jewish Dream.” In *A Life of Meaning*, edited by Dana Evan Kaplan, pp. 381–388. New York: CCAR Press, 2018. pp. 381-388.

Marx, Dalia. “Reform Liturgy: Then and Now.” In *A Life of Meaning*, edited by Dana Evan Kaplan, pp. 349–368. New York: CCAR Press, 2018. pp. 349-368.

Sarason, Richard S. "Worship and the Prayer Book." In *A Life of Meaning*, edited by Dana Evan Kaplan, pp. 335–348. New York: CCAR Press, 2018. pp. 335-348.

"A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism: Adopted at the 1999 Pittsburgh Convention, Central Conference of American Rabbis, May 1999—Sivan 5759," CCAR, <http://ccarnet.org/rabbis-speak/platforms/statement-principles-reform-judaism/>.

Timoner, Rachel. "On the Jewish People." In *Lights in the Forest: Rabbis Respond to Twelve Essential Jewish Questions*, edited by Paul Citrin, pp. 213–217. New York: CCAR Press, 2014. pp. 213-217.

## Session Two

### Mitzvot and Ethics: The Mitzvot of a Reform Jew

This session will explore different concepts and roles of mitzvot throughout Jewish history, starting from the Rabbis' view of mitzvot in the Talmud to the effect of the Enlightenment and emancipation on the formation Reform Judaism. Participants will have the opportunity to compare and reflect on the various Reform platforms and their stance on the role of mitzvot in modernity. Learners will reflect on the evolving status of religious observance in a Reform Jewish context and be invited to reflect on the role of mitzvot in their own lives.

#### *Background Materials for the Facilitator*

These readings could also be assigned ahead of time to the class, if realistic. All readings are from Dana Evan Kaplan, ed., *A Life of Meaning* (New York: CCAR Press, 2018).

- Balin, Carole. "Mitzvah/Mitzvot," pp. 199–206.
- Dennis, Geoffrey. "Reform Approaches to Our Sacred Texts," pp. 299–310.
- Goldstein, Lisa. "Shabbat as Spiritual Practice," pp. 217–226.
- Knobel, Peter S. "Reflections on Prayer," pp. 329–334.
- Marx, Dalia. "Reform Liturgy: Then and Now," pp. 349–368.
- Sarason, Richard. "Worship and the Prayer Book," pp. 335–348.
- Shapiro, Marc Dov. "Take Back Your Time," pp. 227–236.
- Washofsky, Mark. "The Jewish Path," pp. 191–198.
- Weisberg, Dvora E. "Why Reform Jews Should Study Talmud," pp. 319–328.
- Zamore, Mary. "Eating Our Values," pp. 207–216.

#### Session Plan

##### *Welcome and Personal Introductions (5 minutes)*

###### **For the facilitator:**

- Ask the group to introduce themselves, inviting each participant to speak about a mitzvah they perform in their daily or yearly lives. You may have to suggest some basic mitzvot, like hearing the sound of the shofar, feeding the hungry, not killing, etc.

##### *Introduction: What Is a Mitzvah? (10 minutes)*

###### **For the facilitator:**

- With the participants, read the following excerpt and discuss, using the guiding questions below.

**Rabbi Carole B. Balin, “Mitzvah/Mitzvot”**

*If you were to ask Jews today to define mitzvah, most would respond “good deed”—as in “Go visit your aunt in the hospital; it’s a mitzvah.” While it is true that already in the Talmud the Rabbis provide a secondary definition of mitzvah as “an act worthy of praise” in contrast to “commandment” (Babylonian Talmud, Chulin 106a), few in our day would interpret calling on one’s sick relative as fulfilling the commandment of visiting the sick (bikur cholim), and even fewer would regard such an obligation as divinely ordained. (A Life of Meaning, p. 205)*

**Guiding questions:**

- How do the Talmud and Rabbi Balin differentiate between a mitzvah and a good deed?
- How would you describe the difference between the traditional Rabbinic definition of “mitzvah” and the way we use the term today?
- Do you personally sense a difference between a mitzvah and a good deed? If you do, how do you differentiate between the two?
- How does doing something out of obligation make you feel? How does doing something because you are internally motivated make you feel?

*The Biblical and Rabbinic Answers (15 minutes)*

**For the facilitator:**

- Ask the participants if they know how many mitzvot there are in the Torah and how we arrive at the number. Explain that the number 613 is mentioned not in the Torah, but in the Talmud.
- With the participants, read the following text and discuss, using the guiding questions below. (For background: Rabbi Simlai was active in the Land of Israel at the end of the third and beginning of the fourth century.)

**Babylonian Talmud, Makot 23b**

<i>Rabbi Simlai taught: There were 613 mitzvot stated to Moses in the Torah, consisting of 365 negative corresponding to the number of days in the solar year, and 248 positive mitzvot corresponding to the number of segments in a person’s body.</i>	דרש רבי שמלאי שש מאות ושלוש עשרה מצות נאמרו לו למשה שלש מאות וששים וחמש לאוין כמנין ימות החמה ומאתים וארבעים ושמונה עשה כנגד איבריו של אדם.
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**Guiding questions:**

- What is a negative commandment?
- Why might Rabbi Simlai have equated negative commandments to the number of days in a year?

- What is a positive commandment?
- Do we really have 248 limbs? (We can't know what the Rabbis thought, but we now know that the number of segments changes during one's lifetime; e.g., the bones in the hand fuse over time.) Why might Rabbi Simlai have equated positive commandments with the human body?

**For the facilitator:**

- Explain the transition and difference between the Written Torah and the Oral Torah:
  - It is debatable whether all 613 commandments are explicitly stated in the five books of the Written Torah (Torah Shebichtav).
  - After the historical era described in the Bible came to a close, several sages have compiled lists of the mitzvot, numbered 1 to 613. However, while there is some overlap, the lists differ from each other. Generations of rabbis continued to update, adapt, and generate new commandments—all understood as derived from the original 613 in the Torah.
  - These legal renderings were initially handed down from rabbi to disciple and memorized, and thus became known as the Oral Law (Torah Sheb'al Peh).
  - Some of the new commandments were supposed to create “fences” around the Torah, in order protect the biblical laws from transgression. For example, we are told three times in the Torah not to cook a kid in its mother's milk (Exodus 23:19, 34:26; Deuteronomy 14:21). In order to protect the biblical commandment, the Rabbis created “fences” in space (separating milk and meat by means of separate dishes) and time (waiting between eating meat and milk.)
  - Some of these commandments were crafted in order to create new meaning in a world without a Temple at its center—transition from the Temple cult to Rabbinic Judaism.

*The Modern Answers (20 minutes)*

**For the facilitator:**

- Briefly outline Jewish emancipation in the Age of Enlightenment, using the following points:
  - Jewish law (halachah) held sway over most of the Jewish community. Jews lived in insular communities.
  - This all changed when citizenship rights were extended to Jews; they now had a choice between a life within a tight and separate Jewish community and living as a part of the broader, national, or even global community.
  - Religion came under increasing scrutiny, including its presumption of divine revelation. Reform Jews took on aesthetic sensibilities from their surroundings, adapting their sacred practices to mesh with the local environment and the context of their lives. Particularistic practices (such as the dietary laws of kashrut, and the wearing of tallitot and t'fillin) were discarded.
- With the participants, read the following excerpt and discuss, using the guiding questions below.

**Rabbi Carole B. Balin, “Mitzvah/Mitzvot”**

*No longer could rabbis assume that adherents to Judaism would abide by religious law because “God said so.” Jews instead sought rational and/or provable explanations for practices both inside the synagogue and at home. This new mind-set led to irrevocable changes in the meaning and performance of mitzvot.*

*In 1885, the Reform Movement in America codified its novel interpretation of mitzvot in the document that became known as the Pittsburgh Platform. In a forthright sleight of hand, the authors overturned the classical Jewish understanding of commandedness by obligating Reform Jews only to those mitzvot that either (a) bring about ethical behavior or (b) enhance the spirituality of human existence. In a statement whose reverberations are felt in liberal Jewish circles today, Reform rabbis asserted:*

*We recognize in the Mosaic legislation a system of training the Jewish people for its mission during its national life in Palestine, and today **accept as binding only its moral laws, and maintain only such ceremonies as elevate and sanctify our lives, but reject all such as are not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization.***

*In no uncertain terms, the early Reformers relegated biblical law to a bygone age while elevating moral conduct to the plane of religious duty. This audacious shift from obligatory observance of all mitzvot to a mandate to carry out moral laws represents nothing less than a revolution in Jewish practice and theology. By denying the claim that halachah represents the revealed will of God, Reform Jews were in effect asserting that divine revelation is progressive, akin to inspiration and ultimately concerned with ethics. (A Life of Meaning, pp. 201–202)*

**Guiding questions:**

- What were the early Reformers hoping to accomplish by the statement “We . . . accept as binding only its moral laws, and maintain only such ceremonies as elevate and sanctify our lives”? What does it mean to “elevate and sanctify”? What are some examples of mitzvot you perform that “elevate and sanctify” your life? Would the early Reformers agree?
- What are some examples of mitzvot that early Reformers might have considered “not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization”? Do you agree with this notion?

**For the facilitator:**

- Explain that the participants will have a chance to look at excerpts from the different Reform platforms and will see how attitudes toward mitzvot and Jewish rituals have evolved since the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885. Introduce and read each excerpt, and then discuss, using the guiding questions below.

## **“Reform Judaism: A Centenary Perspective”—Adopted in San Francisco, 1976**

*Our Religious Obligations: Religious Practice—Judaism emphasizes action rather than creed as the primary expression of a religious life, the means by which we strive to achieve universal justice and peace. Reform Judaism shares this emphasis on duty and obligation. Our founders stressed that the Jew’s ethical responsibilities, personal and social, are enjoined by God. The past century has taught us that the claims made upon us may begin with our ethical obligations but they extend to many other aspects of Jewish living, including: creating a Jewish home centered on family devotion: lifelong study; private prayer and public worship; daily religious observance; keeping the Sabbath and the holy days; celebrating the major events of life; involvement with the synagogues and community; and other activities which promote the survival of the Jewish people and enhance its existence. Within each area of Jewish observance Reform Jews are called upon to confront the claims of Jewish tradition, however differently perceived, and to exercise their individual autonomy, choosing and creating on the basis of commitment and knowledge. (CCAR, <https://www.ccar.net.org/rabbinic-voice/platforms/article-reform-judaism-centenary-perspective/>)*

### **Guiding questions:**

- How does this platform frame the relationship between action and creed?
- This platform was published after the Holocaust, the Six-Day War, and the Yom Kippur War. How might these events have influenced the writers?
- The platform states that “Reform Jews are called to confront the claims of Jewish tradition . . . and to exercise their individual autonomy, choosing and creating on the basis of commitment and knowledge.” What does this look like in practice? Is this a feasible expectation of Jews out in the world?

## **A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism”—Adopted in Pittsburgh, 1999**

*We are called by Torah to lifelong study in the home, in the synagogue and in every place where Jews gather to learn and teach. Through Torah study we are called to מצוות (mitzvot), the means by which we make our lives holy.*

*We are committed to the ongoing study of the whole array of מצוות (mitzvot) and to the fulfillment of those that address us as individuals and as a community. Some of these מצוות (mitzvot), sacred obligations, have long been observed by Reform Jews; others, both ancient and modern, demand renewed attention as the result of the unique context of our own times.*

*We bring Torah into the world when we seek to sanctify the times and places of our lives through regular home and congregational observance. Shabbat calls us to bring the*

*highest moral values to our daily labor and to culminate the workweek with קדוּשָׁה (kedushah), holiness, מְנוּחָה (menuchah), rest, and עֵינֵי (oneg), joy. The High Holy Days call us to account for our deeds. The Festivals enable us to celebrate with joy our people's religious journey in the context of the changing seasons. The days of remembrance remind us of the tragedies and the triumphs that have shaped our people's historical experience both in ancient and modern times. And we mark the milestones of our personal journeys with traditional and creative rites that reveal the holiness in each stage of life.*

*We bring Torah into the world when we strive to fulfill the highest ethical mandates in our relationships with others and with all of God's creation. Partners with God in תְּקוּנוֹ עוֹלָם (tikkun olam), repairing the world, we are called to help bring nearer the messianic age. We seek dialogue and joint action with people of other faiths in the hope that together we can bring peace, freedom and justice to our world. We are obligated to pursue צְדָקָה (tzedeq), justice and righteousness, and to narrow the gap between the affluent and the poor, to act against discrimination and oppression, to pursue peace, to welcome the stranger, to protect the earth's biodiversity and natural resources, and to redeem those in physical, economic and spiritual bondage. In so doing, we reaffirm social action and social justice as a central prophetic focus of traditional Reform Jewish belief and practice. We affirm the מצוּוה (mitzvah) of צְדָקָה (zedakah), setting aside portions of our earnings and our time to provide for those in need. These acts bring us closer to fulfilling the prophetic call to translate the words of Torah into the works of our hands.*

***In all these ways and more, Torah gives meaning and purpose to our lives. (CCAR, <https://www.ccarnet.org/rabbinic-voice/platforms/article-statement-principles-reform-judaism/>)***

### **Guiding questions:**

- According to this platform, what is the meaning of mitzvot?
- What does it mean to bring Torah into the world? Describe how you personally could bring Torah into the world.
- What are the ways in which this platform preserves the essence of previous platforms, and in what ways do you see divergence?
- Now that you have read through the excerpts of the various platforms and supporting texts, which of the platforms is most relatable to you, and which feels most unfamiliar or unrelatable?

*Closure (10 minutes)*

**For the facilitator:**

- Ask the participants what insights they have gained about their Jewish practice, the practice of Reform Jews, and the practice of Jews at large?
- Pose the following question: Given your newfound understanding of the concept of mitzvot, how would you now define the term mitzvot?
- The *Life of Meaning* contains a number of essays that speak about specific mitzvot: Rabbi Mary L. Zamore proposes that observing the laws of kashrut (keeping kosher) can have great spiritual meaning in today's world. Rabbi Lisa Goldstein and Rabbi Mark Dov Shapiro invite their readers to get inspired by the seventh day of rest, intention, and community. Rabbi Dvora E. Weisberg, PhD, writes about text study, and Rabbi Dalia Marx, PhD, Rabbi Richard S. Sarason, PhD, and Rabbi Peter S. Knobel, PhD, write about prayer. Ask the participants which might be their personal ways to sanctify their lives as a Reform Jew. Ask the participants which might be their personal ways to sanctify their lives as a Reform Jew?
- Encourage the participants to share a personal story about a mitzvah he or she observes and the impact the observance has on his or her life. Be ready with an example of your own to share.

### *For Further Reading*

- Balin, Carole B. "Making Every Forkful Count: Reform Jews, Kashrut, and Mindful Eating." In *The Sacred Table: Creating Jewish Food Ethic*, edited by Mary L. Zamore, pp. 5–16. New York: CCAR Press, 2011.
- Balin, Carole B. "Mitzvah/Mitzvot." In *A Life of Meaning*, edited by Dana Evan Kaplan, pp. 199–206. New York: CCAR Press, 2018. pp. 199-206.
- Dennis, Geoffrey W. "Reform Approaches to Our Sacred Texts." In *A Life of Meaning*, edited by Dana Evan Kaplan, pp. 299–310. New York: CCAR Press, 2018. pp. 299-310.
- Gold, Neal. "Tzedakah." In *Navigating the Journey: The Essential Guide to the Jewish Life Cycle*, edited by Peter S. Knobel, pp. 149–154. New York: CCAR Press, 2018. pp. 141-154.
- Goldstein, Lisa L. "Shabbat as Spiritual Practice." In *A Life of Meaning*, edited by Dana Evan Kaplan, pp. 217–226. New York: CCAR Press, 2018., pp. 217-226.
- Henkin, Alan. "Kashrut and Autonomy." In *The Sacred Table*, edited by Mary L. Zamore, pp. 97–103. New York: CCAR Press, 2011. pp. 97-103.
- Knobel, Peter S. "*Hidur Mitzvah*: The Aesthetics of Mitzvot." In *Mishkan Moeid: A Guide to Jewish Seasons* ed. Peter S. Knobel, pp. 107–109. New York: CCAR Press, 2014.
- Knobel, Peter S. "Reflections on Prayer." In *A Life of Meaning*, edited by Dana Evan Kaplan, pp. 329–334. New York: CCAR Press, 2018. pp. 329-334.

- Knobel, Peter S. “Tzedakah.” In *Mishkan Moeid: A Guide to Jewish Seasons*, ed. Peter S. Knobel, pp. 162–164. New York: CCAR Press, 2014.
- Knobel, Peter S., ed. “What Is a Mitzvah?” Chapter 5 in *Navigating the Journey: The Essential Guide to the Jewish Life Cycle*, pp. 85–141. New York: CCAR Press, 2018., pp. 85-141.
- Litvak, Richard. “Oshpek: The Meeting Points of Ritual Piety and Moral Purity in a Contemporary Reform Kashrut.” In *The Sacred Table: Creating Jewish Food Ethic*, ed. Mary L. Zamore, pp. 281–286. New York: CCAR Press, 2011.pp. 281-286.
- Marx, Dalia. “Reform Liturgy: Then and Now.” In *A Life of Meaning*, ed. Dana Evan Kaplan, pp. 349–368. New York: CCAR Press, 2018.pp. 349-368.
- Pesner, Jonah Dov. “Holiness, Mitzvot, and Justice in Jewish Time.” In *Mishkan Moeid: A Guide to the Jewish Seasons*, ed. Peter Knobel, pp. 135–140. New York: CCAR Press, 2013. pp. 135-140.
- Sarason, Richard S. “Worship and the Prayer Book.” In *A Life of Meaning*, ed. Dana Evan Kaplan, pp. 335–348. New York: CCAR Press, 2018. pp. 335-348.
- Schindler, Judith. “The Journey to Judaism: Choosing Judaism, Choosing Mitzvot.” In *Mishkan Moeid: A Guide to Jewish Seasons*, ed. Peter S. Knobel, pp. 157–161. New York: CCAR Press, 2014.S pp. 157-161.
- Shapiro, Marc Dov. “Take Back Your Time.” In *A Life of Meaning*, ed. Dana Evan Kaplan, pp. 227–236. New York: CCAR Press, 2018. pp. 227-236.
- Washofsky, Mark. “The Jewish Path.” In *A Life of Meaning*, ed. Dana Evan Kaplan, pp. 191–198. New York: CCAR Press, 2018. pp. 191-198.
- Weisberg, Dvora E. “Why Reform Jews Should Study Talmud.” In *A Life of Meaning*, ed. Dana Evan Kaplan, pp. 319–328. New York: CCAR Press, 2018.
- Wiener, Nancy H. “A Reform Understanding of *To-eivah*.” In *The Sacred Encounter: Jewish Perspectives on Sexuality*, ed. Lisa J. Grushcow, pp. 23–41. New York: CCAR Press, 2016. pp. 23-41.
- Zamore, Mary L. “Eating Our Values.” In *A Life of Meaning*, ed. Dana Evan Kaplan, pp. 207–216. New York: CCAR Press, 2018. pp. 207-216.

## Session Three

### Justice: Reform Judaism and Its Social Justice Mission

This session is dedicated to the one mitzvah that has shaped the Reform Movement more than any other: the mitzvah to establish justice in our world. The session explores the historical reasons for the centrality of the Reform Movement’s ethical calling in this world and examines how Reform Jews who engage in this effort have grown both spiritually and morally during their struggle to live up to the highest moral standards.

For the sake of clarity, the session follows the historical development of the Reform Movement’s engagement against racism in North America. A broader overview over the spectrum of the Reform Movement’s social justice work will be provided in the next session.

#### *Background Materials for the Facilitator*

These readings could also be assigned ahead of time to the class, if realistic. All readings are from Dana Evan Kaplan, ed., *A Life of Meaning* (New York: CCAR Press, 2018).

- Ellenson, David. “A Personal Comment by a Reform Rabbi on Conversion,” pp. 435–438.
- Gurevitz, Rachel. “Interfaith Families,” pp. 439–450.
- Kaplan, Dana Evan. “Converting to Judaism,” pp. 423–433.
- Mikva, Rachel S. “Jews and Race,” pp. 525–540.
- Pesner, Jonah Dov, and David N. Saperstein. “The Centrality of Social Justice in Reform Judaism,” pp. 503–514.

### Session Plan

#### *Welcome and Personal Introductions (5 minutes)*

**For the facilitator:**

- Ask participants to introduce themselves by reading the biblical quote and answering the following question: “Presuming we agree that the pursuit of justice is an important part of being a Jew, what do you mean by justice?”

**Deuteronomy 16:20**

<i>Justice, justice shall you pursue.</i>	צַדִּיק צַדִּיק תִּרְדֶּה
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#### *A Reform History of Social Justice Work (15 minutes)*

**For the facilitator:**

- With the participants, read the following excerpt and discuss, using the guiding questions below.

**Rabbi Jonah Dov Pesner and Rabbi David N. Saperstein, “The Centrality of Social Justice in Reform Judaism”**

*[The] traditional Jewish imperative for social justice was rooted in Judaism’s distinctive concept of “ethical monotheism,” of a God that calls the Jewish people to righteousness, justice, and peace—ideals that infused the prophetic voice of the Bible. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as much of the Western world altered its most foundational axioms from a God-oriented world to a logic-, science-, and rationality-centered one, this social justice emphasis of Judaism and other Western religions became intensified. A number of Age of Reason and Enlightenment era philosophers argued that the part of religion that was most rational and scientific was ethics. The faith traditions that emerged in this context elevated social justice to a centerpiece of religious expression. Out of this intellectual milieu arose the Social Gospel strands of Christianity as well as Reform Judaism’s emphasis on the “prophetic tradition,” expressed in the Reform Movement’s focus on social justice. (A Life of Meaning, p. 507)*

**Guiding questions:**

- How did the historical contexts of early Reform Judaism shape the early Reformers’ pursuit of justice, and how does the current context shape our own?
- Which areas of justice work would the Reform Jew have been engaged in?

**Rabbi Jonah Dov Pesner and Rabbi David N. Saperstein, “The Centrality of Social Justice in Reform Judaism”**

*American Reform Judaism has, from its beginnings, emphasized social justice as a pillar of our expression of Jewish living. The first American statement of our principles, drafted by the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) in Pittsburgh in 1885, references the Torah’s goal of “regulating relations between rich and poor” and concludes, “We deem it our duty to participate in the great task of modern times, to solve, on the basis of justice and righteousness, the problems presented by the contrasts and evils of the present organization of society.”*

*In the second statement of our principles drafted in 1937 in Columbus, our rabbinic leaders expanded the themes of social and economic justice in a series of paragraphs related to ethical obligations, social justice, and the pursuit of peace, linking the latter to the biblical prophets. The rabbis affirmed, “Judaism seeks the attainment of a just society by the application of its teachings to the economic order, to industry and commerce, and to national and international affairs. It aims at the elimination of man-made misery and suffering, of poverty and degradation, of tyranny and slavery, of social inequality and prejudice, of ill-will and strife.” (A Life of Meaning, p. 504)*

**Guiding questions:**

- Historically, why has social justice work been central to our theology?
- Why did the early Reformers feel obliged to dedicate themselves to the mitzvah of pursuing justice?
- Do you know anything about the partners they had in their dedication? How could you find out more about them?

**Rabbi Jonah Dov Pesner and Rabbi David N. Saperstein, “The Centrality of Social Justice in Reform Judaism”**

*A dramatic affirmation of the Reform Jewish commitment to tikkun olam was the founding of the Commission on Social Action and the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism (the RAC). The former, a joint body of the CCAR and URJ, brings together representatives of the major institutions and affiliates of the Reform Movement, professional and voluntary, in establishing movement positions on critical issues of the day. In 1962, the URJ dedicated the RAC building in the heart of Washington, DC, so that the Reform Movement could directly advocate in Congress and the White House for social justice.*

*The RAC became a hub for the civil rights movement, housing for several decades the nation’s largest umbrella civil rights organization, the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights. . . . Parts of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were drafted there, and for thirty years much of the advocacy on behalf of civil rights legislation was shaped in the RAC’s conference room. In those early decades, Eisendrath, Lipman, Vorspan, Hirsch, and Rabbi Balfour Brickner, together with leaders of the CCAR, played key roles in the battles on nuclear disarmament, civil rights, reproductive rights, the Great Society programs, separation of church and state, anti-apartheid efforts, the Soviet Jewry movement, and pro-Israel efforts. Those of us who succeeded that generation . . . have likewise played leadership roles in such coalition work, not only continuing key work on these causes, but adding environmental efforts, LGBTQ rights, international religious freedom—just as local rabbis and lay leaders have done throughout these past eighty years in communities across America. (A Life of Meaning, pp. 508–509)*

**Guiding questions:**

- What were important steps our movement took in order to become an influential advocate for social justice?
- What surprised you about the priorities listed? How might the priority on civil rights have impacted on other issues?

**Rabbi Jonah Dov Pesner and Rabbi David N. Saperstein, “The Centrality of Social Justice in Reform Judaism”**

*In the most recent statement of principles, adopted in 1999, the theme of social justice continued to be emphasized. In this more contemporary iteration, the statement grounds the Reform Movement’s commitment in the notion of tikkun olam (literally “repairing the*

world”), arguing that our actions for justice and righteousness help bring about a better world. The 1999 statement deepens the Reform Jewish connection of social justice to the biblical prophets who demanded that ethical concerns be paramount in service to God. (*A Life of Meaning*, pp. 504–505)

### *Chevruta Study: Us and the Other (30 minutes)*

#### **For the facilitator:**

- Provide the participants with source sheets with the following excerpts from Deuteronomy, Rabbi Mikva’s essay “Jews and Race,” Rabbi Ellenson’s essay “A Personal Comment by a Reform Rabbi on Conversion,” Rabbi Dr. Rachel S. Mikva’s essay “Jews and Race,” and Rabbi Kaplan’s essay “Converting to Judaism,” all from *A Life of Meaning*, along with the guiding questions.
- Ask the participants to read and discuss the following texts in *chevruta*, using the guiding questions below. (Be sure to explain the process and merits of *chevruta* study in case the participants are unfamiliar with the practice: that it is a very Jewish way of study, that it can get noisy, and that it allows the partners to strengthen their learning together.)
- During the *chevruta* learning, walk around the room and help the participants to process and find the right words.
- After the *chevruta* learning, call the participants back into a large-group setting, and ask one member of each *chevruta* to share one or two central elements of their learning. Encourage the group to listen carefully and not to comment.

#### **Rabbi Jonah Dov Pesner and Rabbi David N. Saperstein, “The Centrality of Social Justice in Reform Judaism”**

*Torah repeatedly commands us to love, protect, and treat as ourselves the ger, “the stranger,” because “you were strangers in the land Egypt.” The injunctions to love and protect the ger are repeated in varied forms thirty-six times, more than any other commandment in the Torah, and remind us of our responsibilities to protect the weak and the vulnerable of our communities, even when they are not Jews themselves. (A Life of Meaning, p. 505)*

#### **Deuteronomy 10:19**

<p><i>You are commanded to love the stranger, because you were strangers in the land of Egypt.</i></p>	<p>וְאָהַבְתֶּם אֶת הַגֵּר כִּי גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם</p>
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**Guiding questions:**

- Why is this commandment central in our Torah? What is the role of empathy in social justice work?
- How does this text and the action surrounding it play out in our lives today?

**Rabbi Rachel S. Mikva, PhD, “Jews and Race”**

*Jews were heavily involved in the fight for integration, voting rights, and an end to Jim Crow. They marched and lobbied and organized. Most people know about Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, two white Jewish boys who were murdered alongside James Cheney in Mississippi 1964 as they tried to register African Americans to vote. Fewer people know about the seventeen white Reform Rabbis who were arrested in St. Augustine, Florida, three days earlier, for the crimes of praying and eating with their black brothers and sisters. In jail their first night, they wrote about why they responded to Dr. King’s call:*

*We came because we could not stand silently by our brother’s blood. We had done that too many times before. . . . Silence has become the unpardonable sin of our time. . . . We came as Jews who remember the millions of faceless people who stood quietly, watching the smoke rise from Hitler’s crematoria. We came because we know that, second only to silence, the greatest danger to man is loss of faith in man’s capacity to act.*

*Jewish philanthropists gave heavily to historically black colleges and helped found or fund some of the pivotal organizations in the fight for racial equality: the NAACP, the Urban League, the Congress of Racial Equality. Rabbi Robert Marx, a Reform rabbi in Chicago, publicly called out other Jews who acted as slumlords or inner-city merchants who dealt unfairly with communities of color. He went on to found the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs, which continues to work in vital partnerships with diverse community organizations seeking social and economic equality. (A Life of Meaning, p. 526)*

**Guiding questions:**

- Rabbi Mikva provides an overview of Reform Jewish anti-racism work. What makes racial injustice so important to Jews, and what makes it particularly challenging to address?
- Rabbi David Ellenson, PhD, “A Personal Comment by a Reform Rabbi on Conversion”

*The issue of ongoing discussion and sometimes contention that remains for many Reform Jews centers on questions of inclusion or outreach to persons who are not converted to Judaism but who, along with their children, dwell within the ambit of the Jewish community. After all, there have been significant rates of intermarriage in the American Jewish community since 1970, and the 2012 Pew Research Center’s study of the American Jewish population reported that seven out of ten non-Orthodox Jews who were married between 2001 and 2011 married people who were born non-Jewish. In the*

*large majority of these intermarriages, the non-Jewish partner did not convert to Judaism. This means that the ethnic homogeneity that marked the Jewish community during the mid-twentieth century no longer exists. Simply put, most non-Orthodox Jews in North America born in the last third of the twentieth century and in the twenty-first century have grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, and cousins who are not Jewish. The reality of intermarriage has combined with other factors (e.g., adoption of Asian children, the entrance of Jews of color into the community) to make the Jewish community more ethnically and racially heterogeneous than ever before in American Jewish history. . . .*

*In view of this, I believe that the policy of “audacious hospitality” that Rabbi Richard Jacobs, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, has articulated is the optimal policy option for the contemporary American Jewish community as it strives to retain and attract Jewish members and provide Jewish meaning for those who come within our ambit. . . . This attitude, rooted in Jewish tradition and teaching, will promote our community as our people seek meaning and identity today and in the future. (A Life of Meaning, pp. 437–438)*

### **Guiding questions:**

- Rabbi Ellenson also acknowledges that the Jewish community is increasingly multiethnic and multinational, and he points out that our circles of friends, partners, children, and members of synagogue communities are made up of non-Jews. Which challenges and blessings has this provided to the Jewish community? To your family and friends?

### **Rabbi Rachel S. Mikva, PhD, “Jews and Race”**

*Most books present Jewish diversity today by describing distinct religious movements; a few identify differences between Ashkenazic and Sephardic praxis. It is not surprising, then, that the majority of American Jews do not know that half of the Jews in Israel are not white, mostly from North Africa and Arabic-speaking countries (known as Mizrahi Jews). They may be vaguely aware of Latinx Jews who live or have roots in Central and South America, and they have heard of the Beta Yisrael from Ethiopia—but probably not the Lemba of southern Africa, the Abayudaya in Uganda, the Ibo in Nigeria, the B’nei Yisrael from India, or the Kaifeng Jews of China. They may not even know much about Black Hebrew and Israelite communities established in the United States or about the many Jews of color who have been part of majority-white congregations for generations.*

*Part of this erasure has to do with the unique history of Jews in the United States. Although the first Jews who came to these shores were Sephardic, arriving in the seventeenth century, the massive European immigration between 1880 and 1920 included over two million Ashkenazic Jews, overwhelming the existing communities and*

*changing the racial balance. Like many ethnic (and non-Protestant) immigrant populations, these Jews were not considered white until after World War II, but now a significant majority of Jews in the United States identify as white and it has become the “norm.” . . .*

*White normativity prompts repeated marginalization for Jews of color. It can be as simple as walking into a synagogue where people presume you are not Jewish, or you must have converted, or you are adopted, or (if you are black) you must be from Ethiopia. If you are none of those things, you may become a creature of exotic fascination, which can be just as oppressive. White experience is centered in conversations about Jewish foods, names, hair, humor, neighborhoods, history and culture. . . .*

*Ironically, erasure happens even in the way many white Jewish activists talk about fighting systemic racism, when they speak about how “we” need to reach out to the African American community—forgetting that they are also us. (A Life of Meaning, pp. 527–529)*

**Guiding questions:**

- Rabbi Mikva speaks about the existence of Jews who are not white. What is the racial makeup of your congregation? Have you experienced moments in which you realized that you thought, spoke, or acted based on assumptions that “othered” a part of your community?
- How does systemic racism in the United States impact our communities?
- In “African American Jewish Women—Life Beyond the Hyphen,” Yavilah McCoy comments, “I find Grace when I can enjoy being ‘other’ than the normative experience because I am valued as a contribution to the betterment of a whole.” How does racial diversity contribute to the life of the Jewish people?

**Rabbi Dana Evan Kaplan, PhD, “Converting to Judaism” Rabbi Rachel S. Mikva, PhD, “Jews and Race”**

*As a reader who has gotten this far in this book, you have noticed by now that Judaism is not just a religion. What it is exactly is a bit of a mystery. It is certainly safe to say that it involves an element of what has been variously termed ethnicity, peoplehood, or even that much-maligned term race. The person becoming Jewish has to understand that he or she is not just converting into a religion but entering into a very large family. Jews feel that they are part of a people that has undergone a unique set of experiences covering many thousands of years. The concept of a distinctive entity called the Jewish people is already apparent in the Hebrew Bible. It uses several terms to refer to this people, including “congregation,” “nation,” and “kingdom.” The words imply a spiritual and also a communal, family-like connection linking all these individuals one to another. (A Life of Meaning, pp. 423–424)*

### **Rabbi Rachel S. Mikva, PhD, “Jews and Race”**

*Although some critics have identified Jewish chosenness with racism because chosenness is tied to a people rather than a faith, the argument does not fit the vast majority of biblical evidence. Jon Levenson asserts, “One of the hardest points of biblical thought to understand is the concept of peoplehood, which is familial and natural without being racial and biologicistic.” Chosenness is not due to any innate superiority, racial or other. The biblical portrait of the people Israel includes not only descendants of Abraham and Sarah, but also a “mixed multitude” that emerges together out of Egypt (Exodus 12:38) and others who became part of the assembly (Deuteronomy 23:8–9). Rabbinic literature imagines that Abraham and Sarah gathered followers from among the surrounding populations at the very beginning (B’reishit Rabbah 39:14), and the Sages established a formal path for individuals not born to the community to join it. Over time, it grew even more multiethnic and multinational. (A Life of Meaning, p. 533)*

#### **Guiding questions:**

- Rabbi Kaplan states that Judaism is a family-like structure. What are the positives of family-like structures, and when can they be harmful?
- Rabbi Mikva explains that belonging to the “chosen people” does not mean that all of us need to be the same. Which changes of the Jewish community have you witnessed in your lifetime?
- Many of the quotes you just read speak about Jews and race: Jewish anti-racism and social justice work; the Jewish acknowledgment of our family-like structures and their potentials and problems; the multinational and multiethnic nature of our family structure; and the existence and importance of Jews of color. In what ways were your assumptions about the Jewish community challenged in these texts?

#### *Closure (5–10 minutes)*

##### **For the facilitator:**

- Read the following quote aloud:

### **Rabbi Rachel S. Mikva, PhD, “Jews and Race”**

*Rabbi Ellen Lippmann tells the story of her congregation’s journey, as they discerned a “Torah of Race” in their anti-racism efforts. They formed a taskforce, engaged in difficult conversations, undertook specialized training, ensured that people of color were hired as teachers and served as members of the board, and so on—all drawing upon the sacred times and sacred texts of Judaism to inform their efforts. “This is what we have learned: Working to undo racism is what we must do as Jews.” (A Life of Meaning, p. 536)*

- Ask for just a few participants to share a story of either a moment when they personally were a victim of racism/anti-Semitism *or* a moment when they realized that racist

assumptions had shaped their thoughts, words, or action. Which are the two directions Rabbi Lippman might ask us to work “to undo racism”?

### *For Further Reading*

- Eger, Denise. “On Our Humanity.” In *Lights in the Forest: Rabbis Respond to Twelve Essential Jewish Questions*, edited by Paul Citrin, pp. 92–94. New York: CCAR Press, 2014. pp. 92-94.
- Ellenson, David. “A Personal Comment by a Reform Rabbi on Conversion.” In *A Life of Meaning*, edited by Dana Evan Kaplan, pp. 435–438. New York: CCAR Press, 2018. pp. 435-438.
- Fuchs, Stephen Lewis. “On Our Humanity.” In *Lights in the Forest: Rabbis Respond to Twelve Essential Jewish Questions*, edited by Paul Citrin, pp. 98–99. New York: CCAR Press, 2014. pp. 98-99.
- Gurevitz, Rachel. “Interfaith Families.” In *A Life of Meaning*, edited by Dana Evan Kaplan, pp. 439–450. New York: CCAR Press, 2018. pp. 439-450.
- Jacobs, Jill. “Created in God’s Image: Protecting Even the Least Deserving of Protection.” In *Seven Days, Many Voices: Insights into the Biblical Story of Creation*, edited by Benjamin David, pp. 253–256. New York: CCAR Press, 2017. pp. 253-256.
- Kaplan, Dana Evan. “Converting to Judaism.” In *A Life of Meaning*, edited by Dana Evan Kaplan, pp. 423–433. New York: CCAR Press, 2018. pp. 423-433.
- Karlin-Neumann, Patricia. “Kindling Change: Women Rabbis and Social Action.” In *The Sacred Calling: Four Decades of Women in the Rabbinate*, edited by Rebecca Einstein Schorr and Alys Mendelson Graf, pp. 501–513. New York: CCAR Press, 2016. pp. 501-513.
- Limmer, Seth, and Jonah Dov Pesner, eds. *Moral Resistance and Spiritual Authority: Our Jewish Obligation to Social Justice*. New York: CCAR Press, 2019.
- Lippman, Ellen. “Shabbat and Workers’ Rights.” In *Seven Days, Many Voices*, edited by Benjamin David, pp. 307–314. New York: CCAR Press, 2017. pp. 307-314.
- Mikva, Rachel S. “Jews and Race.” In *A Life of Meaning*, edited by Dana Evan Kaplan, pp. 525–540. New York: CCAR Press, 2018. pp. 525-540.
- Pesner, Jonah Dov, and David Saperstein, “The Centrality of Social Justice in Reform Judaism,” in *A Life of Meaning*, ed. Dana Evan Kaplan (New York: CCAR Press, 2018), pp. 503-514.
- Pesner, Jonah Dov. “Holiness, Mitzvot, and Justice in Jewish Time.” In *Mishkan Moeid: A Guide to the Jewish Seasons*, edited by Peter Knobel, pp. 135–140. New York: CCAR Press, 2013. pp. 135-140.
- Pesner, Jonah Dov. “Shabbat and Social Justice.” In *Seven Days, Many Voices*, edited by Benjamin David, pp. 301–306. New York: CCAR Press, 2017. pp. 301-306.

- Pesner, Jonah Dov, and David N. Saperstein. "The Centrality of Social Justice in Reform Judaism." In *A Life of Meaning*, edited by Dana Evan Kaplan, pp. 503–514. New York: CCAR Press, 2018.
- Schindler, Judith, and Judy Seldin-Cohen, *Recharging Judaism: How Civic Engagement is Good for Synagogues, Jews, and America* (New York: CCAR Press, 2018).
- Schindler, Judith. "On Our Humanity." In *Lights in the Forest: Rabbis Respond to Twelve Essential Jewish Questions*, edited by Paul Citrin, pp. 132–137. New York: CCAR Press, 2014. pp. 132-137.
- Schindler, Judith, and Judy Seldin-Cohen. *Recharging Judaism: How Civic Engagement Is Good for Synagogues, Jews, and America*. New York: CCAR Press, 2018.
- Yanklowitz, Shmuly, *Pirkei Avot: A Social Justice Commentary* (New York: CCAR Press, 2018).
- Yanklowitz, Shmuly. "The Animal Kingdom." In *Seven Days, Many Voices: Insights into the Biblical Story of Creation*, edited by Benjamin David, pp. 202–207. New York: CCAR Press, 2017. pp. 202-207.
- Yanklowitz, Shmuly. *Pirkei Avot: A Social Justice Commentary*. New York: CCAR Press, 2018.

## Session Four

### Spirituality: The Spirituality of Reform Judaism

The fourth session focuses on a map of Reform Jewish spirituality. In what ways do Reform Jews “feel” their religion? This session explores three Jewish ways to grow spiritually as a Reform Jew: through engaging in text study, through establishing sacred relationships, and by internalizing the words, melodies, and gestures of our prayers.

#### *Background Materials for the Facilitator*

These readings could also be assigned ahead of time to the class, if realistic. All readings are from Dana Evan Kaplan, ed., *A Life of Meaning* (New York: CCAR Press, 2018).

- Alexander, Stephanie M. “Ceremony versus Ritual,” pp. 237–240.
- Barlev, Pearl. “Reform Judaism’s Healing Tent,” pp. 557–568.
- Berkson, William. “Sacred Relationships,” pp. 481–492.
- Gold, Neal. “Creating a Life of Meaning by Caring for Others,” pp. 463–470.
- Knobel, Peter S. “Reflections on Prayer,” pp. 329–334.
- Sussman, Lance J. “The Mission of Israel among Humanity,” pp. 569–578.
- Teutsch, David A. “Contemporary Jewish Sex Ethics,” pp. 413–421.
- Timoner, Rachel. “An Experiential Approach to God,” pp. 13–20.

#### Session Plan

##### *Welcome and Personal Introductions (5–10 minutes)*

###### **For the facilitator:**

- Invite participants to introduce themselves.
- Ask the participants whether they would describe Judaism as a spiritual resource in their lives. If not, what is missing? If yes, in what ways?
- Ask the participants to share with their neighbors a spiritual experience and to reflect on the following: Were these experiences solitary or communal? In nature or in a human-built space? Explicitly religious? Explicitly Jewish?

##### *Introduction: Rachel Timoner, “An Experiential Approach to God” (3 minutes)*

###### **For the facilitator:**

- Tell the participants about Rabbi Timoner’s essay “An Experiential Approach to God” from *A Life of Meaning*:
  - She often feels like she has to defend God and to prove that God is there and that God is an important part of Judaism.

- She uses “the word ‘God’ as the label for the Ineffable that [she knows] is there” (p. 14).
- She “would like to make the case that it is time for us to move beyond prescribed *ideas about God* toward real, lived *experiences of God*” (p. 14).
- Introduce the central questions of this session: What is Reform Jewish spirituality, and how can Reform Jews experience this spirituality?

## **Theme: Three Paths of Reform Jewish Spirituality**

### *The First Path: Chevruta Study (20 minutes)*

#### *Chevrutah study of Torah text*

##### **For the facilitator:**

- Provide the participants with source sheets with the following excerpts from Exodus 15, Exodus 24, and *P’sikta D’Rav Kahana* 21, along with the guiding questions.
  - Explain the context of each text selection:
  - Exodus 15: The recently freed Israelite slaves have just crossed the Sea of Reeds safely and dry-shod, while the pursuing Egyptian army drowned when God caused the waters to return.
  - Exodus 24: The Israelites have been camped around Mount Sinai for days, preparing to receive God’s Torah. They have been warned that climbing the mountain can be deadly.
  - *P’sikta D’Rav Kahana* 21: Exodus 20:2, the Torah verse on which the midrash is written, is the first of the Ten Commandments. That verse takes place right in between the two earlier texts (Exodus 15 and 24). Whereas before the Israelites had encountered God as a warrior, now they are encountering God in a new, foreign way. The midrash expounds that God at the moment of giving of the Torah looks different to the Israelites than God did at the splitting of the Sea of Reeds. In order that they not think that there are two deities, God reminds them here that the two images are one and the same.
- Ask the participants to read and discuss the following texts in *chevruta*, using the guiding questions below. (Be sure to explain the process and merits of *chevruta* study in case the participants are unfamiliar with the practice: that it is a very Jewish way of study, that it can get noisy, and that it allows the partners to strengthen their learning together.)
- After the *chevruta* learning, ask the participants to share from their *chevruta* discussion. The following are answers to which the facilitator might want to guide the participants:
  - In the Torah, God acts in the world in ways we can see. God is anthropomorphized (as a warrior or sitting on a throne). This God can be dangerous, but also merciful. The God of our earliest stories is . . . to us. Encountering this image of God feels . . .

- There are moments in our lives, when this image of God can speak to us in powerful ways. Such moments might be . . .

**Exodus 15:1–6**

<p><i>Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to יהוה. They said: I will sing to יהוה, for He has triumphed gloriously; horse and driver He has hurled into the sea.</i></p> <p><i>יהוה is my strength and might; He is become my deliverance. This is my God and I will enshrine Him; The God of my ancestors, and I will exalt Him.</i></p> <p><i>יהוה, the Warrior—יהוה is His name!</i></p> <p><i>Pharaoh's chariots and his army He has cast into the sea; and the pick of his officers are drowned in the Sea of Reeds.</i></p> <p><i>The deeps covered them; they went down into the depths like a stone.</i></p> <p><i>Your right hand, יהוה, glorious in power, Your right hand, יהוה, shatters the foe!</i></p>	<p>אז לשיר־מִשֶׁה וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת לַיהוָה וַיֹּאמְרוּ לֵאמֹר אֲשִׁירָה לַיהוָה כִּי־גָאֵה גָאָה סוּס וָרֹכֵב רָמָה בָּיָם:</p> <p>עָזִי וְזַמְרַת יְהוָה וַיְהִי־לִי לִישׁוּעָה זֶה אֱלֹהֵי וְאֲנֹהוּ אֱלֹהֵי אָבִי וְאֶרְמָמְנָהוּ:</p> <p>יְהוָה אִישׁ מִלְחָמָה יְהוָה שְׁמוֹ:</p> <p>מִרְכַּבַּת פְּרָעֹה וְחִילוֹ יָרָה בָיָם וּמִבְחָר שְׁלֹשׁוֹ טָבְעוּ בָיָם־סוּף:</p> <p>תְּהַמֵּת יִכְסִּימוּ יָרְדוּ בַמַּצּוֹלֹת כְּמוֹ־אָבֹן:</p> <p>יְמִינָהּ יְהוָה נֶאֱדָרִי בַפֶּסַח יְמִינָהּ יְהוָה תִּרְעֵץ אוֹיְבֵי:</p>
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**Exodus 24:9–12**

<p><i>Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy elders of Israel ascended; and they saw the God of Israel—under whose feet was the likeness of a pavement of sapphire, like the very sky for purity.</i></p> <p><i>Yet [God] did not raise a hand against the leaders of the Israelites; they beheld God, and they ate and drank.</i></p> <p><i>יהוה said to Moses, “Come up to Me on the mountain and wait there, and I will give you the stone tablets with the teachings and commandments which I have inscribed to instruct them.”</i></p>	<p>וַיַּעַל מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא וְשִׁבְעִים מִזִּקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:</p> <p>וַיִּרְאוּ אֶת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַתַּסַּח רַגְלָיו כְּמַעֲשֵׂה לַבְּנַת הַסַּפִּיר וַיִּכְעָצְעוּ הַשָּׁמַיִם לְטָהָר:</p> <p>וְאֶל־אַצְיָלֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא שָׁלַח יָדוֹ וַיַּחֲזוּ אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים וַיֵּאָכְלוּ וַיִּשְׁתּוּ:</p> <p>וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה עֲלֵה אֵלַי הִקְרָה נְהַיֵּה־שָׁמַיִם וְאֶתְנָה לָּךְ אֶת־לַחֹת הָאָבֹן וְהַתּוֹרָה וְהַמִּצְוֹת אֲשֶׁר כָּתַבְתִּי לְהוֹרָתָם:</p>
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**P'sikta D'Rav Kahana 12**

**Exodus 20:2**

<i>I יהוה am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage (Exodus 20:2):</i>	אֲנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עֲבָדִים:
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*Because the Holy One appeared to Israel at the Red Sea as a mighty man waging war, and appeared to them at Sinai as a teacher who teaches the day's lesson and then again and again goes over with his pupils what they have been taught, and appeared to them in the days of Daniel as an elder teaching Torah, and in the days of Solomon appeared to them as a young man, the Holy One said to Israel: Come to no false conclusions because you see Me in many guises, for I am God who was with you at the Red Sea and I am God who is with you at Sinai: I am Adonai your God.*

*The fact is, Rabbi Chiyya bar Abba said, that God appeared to them in a guise appropriate to each and every place and time. At the Red Sea, God appeared to them as a mighty man waging their wars; at Sinai, God appeared to them as a teacher, as one who stands upright in awe when teaching Torah; in the days of Daniel, God appeared to them as an elder teaching Torah, for the Torah is at its best when it comes from the mouths of old men; in the days of Solomon God appeared to them as a young man in keeping with the youthful spirit of Solomon's generation. At Sinai, then, when God said, I am Adonai your God, appropriately God appeared to them as a teacher teaching Torah.*

**Guiding questions:**

- What images of God do these texts describe? How do they differ? In what ways are they similar?
- Which part of you responds to these images? When do you feel comforted and inspired to hear about these?
- Is there a part of you that feels skeptical about the God described in the texts of our Torah and our rabbis? Would there be moments in your life when these images would not be comforting or helpful?
- In which moments in your life would you not want to hear these stories?

*The Second Path: Our Sacred Relationships (20 minutes)*

**For the facilitator:**

- **Introduce the next session as follows:**

*In the previous session, we explored the centrality of social justice work within the Reform Jewish community. When we imagine our community in the context of a global community,*

*we begin to see that our social justice work is a Jewish way to make sure that our global community is healthy. Reform Jewish ethics and identity help us to establish healthy relationships not only within our global community, but also in the country we live in, within our Jewish community, our family, and our circle of friends.*

- With the participants, read the following excerpts and discuss, using the guiding questions below.

### *Our Family and Friends*

#### **William Berkson, PhD, “Sacred Relationships”**

*We human beings live not simply in response to what we are experiencing in the moment, but in a world of meaning, and this meaning is defined by our memories of the past and our imagination of what might yet come to pass. . . .*

*The most important source of religious feelings today is loving relationships. . . . In loving relationships, we sense that we are part of something larger than ourselves and to which something larger in the universe is giving a profound “yes.” This is what Martin Buber recognized in identifying the intimacy of “I-Thou” relationships as our portal to experiencing the eternal Thou, God. . . .*

*The link between spirituality and moral conduct is a sense of the oneness of God and of our connectedness to the One. Our feeling that we are part of something greater, transcending my own life, and owe something to it is the key issue. Whether we believe that God is immanent or transcendent, or both, is not of the essence. What is critical is that we feel a sense of obligation beyond our own lives, which transcends “me, now,” and that we set priorities for action accordingly. Thus, ethical conduct and religious feelings support one another. (A Life of Meaning, pp. 482–485)*

#### **Guiding questions:**

- How does Dr. Berkson describe the idea we commonly refer to as b’tzelem Elohim (that we are all created in God’s image)? Which relationships in your life bring this sense most immediately to your heart?
- What is your response to Dr. Berkson’s assertion that “the most important source of religious feeling today is in our loving relationships”?

### *Our Communities*

#### **Rabbi Neal Gold, “Creating a Life of Meaning by Caring for Others”**

*Jewish tradition prescribes two distinct but related categories of mitzvot for doing the work of justice and kindness. Tzedakah refers to giving money away for the purpose of world repair. G’milut chasadim is an umbrella of mitzvot that involve giving time and energy—acts of thoughtful presence—in order to improve the world and care for others. Examples*

*of g'milut chasadim include honoring parents, visiting sick people, caring for a dead body with dignity and honor, comforting mourners, raising orphans, dignifying elders, providing decent clothes for people without any, feeding hungry people, and many similar deeds. . . .*

*Our Rabbis taught:*

*In three ways g'milut chasadim is superior to tzedakah:*

*Tzedakah can only be done with one's money, but g'milut chasadim can be done with one's person and with one's money;*

*Tzedakah can only be given to poor people, but g'milut chasadim can be done for both rich and poor people;*

*Tzedakah can only be given to the living, but g'milut chasadim can be done for both the living and the dead. (Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 49b)*

*The Sages recognized that money is a powerful tool for improving the world in ways that boundless good intentions cannot. On the other hand, certain acts of chesed can impact the lives of others in ways that money never will. Therefore, both tzedakah and g'milut chasadim are parts of a spiritual regimen that puts our highest values into action. (A Life of Meaning, pp. 464–467)*

**Guiding questions:**

- Rabbi Gold describes two ethical ways to live a spiritual life: To give money (*tzedakah*), and to give kindness, or by being a thoughtful presence (*g'milut chasadim* / acts of loving-kindness). Both ways are positive mitzvot; neither can replace the other. Which one comes more naturally to you?
- Would you have recognized yourself as being “kind” for doing what you do?

*Our Global Community*

**Rabbi Lance J. Sussman, PhD, “The Mission of Israel among Humanity”**

*A Judaism that is primarily made of ritual, as beautiful and lyrical as many ritual practices can be, is incomplete. It addresses the need for community and spirituality. But it is not yet a Judaism with a transcendent purpose, a redemptive goal. The transcendent purpose of Judaism is to teach the Jewish people, and then share with all humanity, the Jewish way of love and kindness, the redemptive path of chesed, transcendent loving-kindness.*

*Chesed is Judaism's foremost value. When we practice it, we are at our most godlike. When we teach it, we make it our ethic. When we pursue it, we help establish justice as the standard for society. Chesed is the path to redemption, and redemption is why we exist as a people. Our mission as Reform Jews, our mission of Israel, is to raise the banner of*

*chesed for all; only when we have raised it can we sing with fullness of heart that “all the world” will come to serve the God whose name will finally “become One.” (A Life of Meaning, p. 577)*

**Guiding questions:**

- Rabbi Dr. Sussman believes that acts of kindness, *chesed*, will bring redemption to the world. Research (e.g., [https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/the\\_poor\\_give\\_more](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/the_poor_give_more)) shows that poorer people are actually kinder than richer people. Where on the spectrum do you see yourself? Where would you like to be?

*The Third Path: Our Prayer (20 minutes)*

**For the facilitator:**

- With the participants, read the following excerpts and discuss, using the guiding questions below.

*Liturgy, Worship, and Prayer*

**Rabbi Peter S. Knobel, PhD, “Reflections on Prayer”**

*I want to distinguish among three terms: liturgy, worship, and prayer. Liturgy refers to the texts that we find in our prayer books. These texts have a prescribed structure, are hallowed by tradition, and are often enhanced with additional material. The texts at the core of the Reform prayer books connect us to the whole of Jewish history and the whole of the Jewish people. They are the most important statement of our values and our obligations. We use them whenever we gather together for communal worship.*

*Liturgy becomes worship when performed in a communal setting accompanied by song and chant. At its heart, worship is a communal experience. The presence of others can enhance the ways we are supported in difficult moments, the ways we celebrate joyous moments, and inspire us to translate the words of the prayer books and Torah into action.*

*Prayer is an experience of profound connection to something beyond ourselves. During the worship service, there are often moments when I feel deeply connected to an entity greater than myself. God? The Source of Being? The Shechinah? The Soul of the universe? The Rock of Israel? Divine Friend? Sacred Partner? I cannot really name what I mean, but I feel connected. At these moments I am not rationally examining my theology, but experiencing something important and meaningful that speaks to the deepest aspects of my being. . . .*

*Liturgy, worship, and prayer enable me to regard myself as part of a great tradition. They set forth my responsibilities to myself, to the Jewish people, and to the whole of humanity. Taken together, they create an opening for me to express my greatest concerns. (A Life of Meaning, pp. 329–330)*

**Guiding questions:**

- Rabbi Knobel distinguishes between liturgy, worship, and prayer. Do you agree with the distinctions? Have you experienced all three? Is it mandatory to experience all three?
- What would you need to do in order to have the differentiated understanding of liturgy, worship, and prayer?

*What Prayer Can Do***Rabbi Pearl Barlev, MAHL, BCC, “Reform Judaism’s Healing Tent”**

*Let’s start with the personal. It is natural to desire or pray to pass through life unscathed and to banish bad things. We are reminded of the Torah story in which Moses “cried out” his soulful and singular plea for his sister, Miriam: “God please! Heal her! Please!” (Numbers 12:13). Like Moses’s prayer, our prayer can be a call for help. We may come to learn that sometimes we get the answers we want, sometimes we do not. . . . However, ancient and conventional wisdoms guide us to involve ourselves with spiritual practice and teach that prayer from the heart can bring its own comfort to soothe pain. An example of this is in these poignant words I heard from a patient as she sat with eyes closed, on the edge of her hospital bed crying softly: “God, I am just a person in a hospital. Please help me.” Then after a while in silence she whispered, “Thank you. Amen.” After the prayer she appeared more peaceful. It seemed to have given her respite in her storm. (A Life of Meaning, p. 563)*

**Guiding questions:**

- How would you describe the effect of prayer Rabbi Barlev describes in her essay? Have you experienced the effect Rabbi Barlev observed?
- Can you think of other effects that prayer may have?

*Ceremony versus Ritual***Rabbi Stephanie M. Alexander**

*A Chasidic tale is told of two sages, Rabbi Elimelech and Rabbi Zusya, who wondered as to what the holiness one feels on Shabbat should be attributed. Is it a function of the day itself—are the twenty-five hours of Shabbat intrinsically holy? Or is it a function of what one does on Shabbat—the rituals and intentionality with which one observes the day? So they derived an experiment: They would “make Shabbat” on a weeknight, a regular old Wednesday for instance, and see what happened. All day Wednesday they went about their preparations. They set the table with a beautiful white cloth and all of their finest silver. They cooked an elaborate feast of their favorite Shabbat foods. They put on their Shabbat*

*clothes and shtreimels (fur hats). And when the sun set that Wednesday evening, they lit the Shabbat candles, blessed the Shabbat wine, sang Shabbat songs.*

*So what happened? Well, there are two different endings. According to one account, after they concluded their “Shabbat,” Elimelech and Zusiya looked at each other with trepidation—for they had indeed experienced holiness on this weekday, and they were frightened. It appeared that it was not the Sabbath day that held the secret to holiness at all. Anxious about their findings, they immediately set off to consult with a wise teacher and told him of their experiment. “Do not fear,” he said. “The preparation of the heart has the true power to draw the light of Sabbath holiness down to earth.” Shabbat is more than chronology; it’s a matter of intentionality.*

*Yet, a second account of the same story tells that Elimelech and Zusiya were unsuccessful in their bid to bring the holiness of Shabbat to a weekday. In this version, they recognize that Shabbat—and all of the holidays—are not merely the sum total of the rituals that we perform and the prayers we recite. Only when combined with the auspicious nature of the set days themselves do rituals give Jewish observances their true beauty and power—only then do they bring holiness. (A Life of Meaning, pp. 237–238)*

Guiding questions:

- Rabbi Alexander writes about the difference between soulful ritual and soulless ceremony. It is hard, she says, to determine why exactly some rituals feel soulful and others feel soulless.
- Which rituals (Jewish or not) feel soulful in your life? What do they have in common?

*Closure (5–10 minutes)*

**For the facilitator:**

- With the participants, read the following excerpt, and end with a minute of silence.

**Rabbi Rachel Timoner, “An Experiential Approach to God”**

*The problem is not with the imagery in the mind’s eye. Our minds will make images forever; and the shifting, changing imagery of our vibrant imaginations helps us to relate to the Ineffable. The problem is when we fix an image. When we shape God in stone or wood or paint, we exercise control over God’s image and features, we tame God into something finite, as if the Infinite One were within our control. We reduce God in our imagination to a thing, which impoverishes our perception of who and what God is. It is the externalized, shared, fixed image that is dangerous because it falsely limits what is infinite. . . .*

*If we were to shift our image-making minds from tangible to intangible metaphors for God, that might be progress. Ideas of God as spirit are one way. The Hebrew word most often translated as “spirit,” ruach, appears 378 times throughout Tanach. Onomatopoeic (rhhuuahhh), ruach is life-giving breath, the wind, and the spirit that animates Creation.*

*Each time our lungs fill and empty, it is ruach that enters and escapes. As we watch our sleeping children, it is ruach that lifts and lowers their resting bodies. It is ruach that rushes past us on a mountain crest, gently flutters the leaves of an aspen tree, and stings our faces on a blustery winter day. According to Torah, it is ruach that prompts ecstatic prophecy, endows us with understanding and skill, and girds us with courage and the strength to lead. Ruach is beyond us, around us, and within us. Ruach, the creative force present at the first moment of the formation of the world, is associated with God, with nature, and with humanity.*

*Unlike ruach, which is an impersonal, creative force, n'shamah belongs to the essence of God and the essence of humanity. N'shimah means "breath"; n'shamah means "soul." Our tradition teaches that our souls and our breaths are intertwined and interdependent, coming from God, dwelling in us for a short time, and returning to God each night and upon our death.*

*Given the Jewish evolution beyond God as body, it is easy to see why ruach—spirit, breath, wind—and n'shamah—breath, soul—are such immediate concepts in relation to God in Torah. Spirit is ungraspable, invisible, without shape or form. Wind is one of the few forces that we all feel, experience, and relate to even though we cannot see it and it has no shape. We feel breath every moment of every day; we live by it, but it has no image. For a religion bound by lack of imagery in description of God, these concepts are intuitive and fundamental. (A Life of Meaning, pp. 16–17)*

### *For Further Reading*

- Alexander, Stephanie M. "Ceremony versus Ritual." In *A Life of Meaning*, edited by Dana Evan Kaplan, pp. 237–240. New York: CCAR Press, 2018. pp. 237-240.
- Barlev, Pearl. "Reform Judaism's Healing Tent." In *A Life of Meaning*, edited by Dana Evan Kaplan, pp. 557–568. New York: CCAR Press, 2018. pp. 557-568.
- Berkson, William. "Sacred Relationships." In *A Life of Meaning*, edited by Dana Evan Kaplan, pp. 481–492. New York: CCAR Press, 2018. pp. 481-492.
- Citrin, Paul. Preface to *Lights in the Forest*, ed. Paul Citrin, p. ix. New York: CCAR Press, 2014. p. ix.
- Comins, Mike. "On God." In *Lights in the Forest*, edited by Paul Citrin, pp. 8–12. New York: CCAR Press, 2014. pp. 8-12.
- Gold, Neal. "Creating a Life of Meaning by Caring for Others." In *A Life of Meaning*, edited by Dana Evan Kaplan, pp. 463–470. New York: CCAR Press, 2018. pp. 463-470.
- Hessel, Joui M. "The Jewish Home: From the Physical to the Spiritual." In *Navigating the Journey*, edited by Peter S. Knobel, pp. 145–148. New York: CCAR Press, 2018. pp. 145-148.

- Kedar, Karyn D. "Before We Begin." In *Omer: A Counting*, pp. 1–8. New York: CCAR Press, 2014. pp. 1-8.
- Knobel, Peter S. "Reflections on Prayer." In *A Life of Meaning*, edited by Dana Evan Kaplan, pp. 329–334. New York: CCAR Press, 2018. pp. 329-334.
- Lenke, Michele. "Offering a New Look: Women Rabbis and Jewish Spirituality." In *The Sacred Calling: Four Decades of Women in the Rabbinate*, edited by Rebecca Einstein Schorr and Alys Mendelson Graf, pp. 483–491. New York: CCAR Press, 2016. pp. 483-491.
- Stoller, A. Brian. Introduction to *Omer: A Counting*, by Karyn Kedar, pp. xii–xx. New York: CCAR Press, 2014. pp. xii-xx.
- Sussman, Lance J. "The Mission of Israel among Humanity." In *A Life of Meaning*, edited by Dana Evan Kaplan, pp. 569–578. New York: CCAR Press, 2018., pp. 569-578.
- Teutsch, David A. "Contemporary Jewish Sex Ethics." In *A Life of Meaning*, edited by Dana Evan Kaplan, pp. 413–421. New York: CCAR Press, 2018. pp. 413-421.
- Timoner, Rachel. "An Experiential Approach to God." In *A Life of Meaning*, edited by Dana Evan Kaplan, pp. 13–20. New York: CCAR Press, 2018. pp. 13-20.

## Session Five

### Ongoing Revelation: The Revelation(s) of Our Time

As Reform Jews, we know that the messages of the Torah have to be rediscovered in every generation anew and for every person anew. The fifth session, then, is dedicated to the theme of ongoing revelation. Where is the Reform Movement headed? What are today's most important lessons for the future of Reform Judaism and Reform Jews in North America?

#### *Background Materials for the Facilitator*

These readings could also be assigned ahead of time to the class, if realistic. All readings are from Dana Evan Kaplan, ed., *A Life of Meaning* (New York: CCAR Press, 2018).

- DeBlosi, Nikki Lyn. "Integrating Our Stories: LGBTQ Folks in the Jewish Community," pp. 515–524.
- Mikva, Rachel S. "Jews and Race," pp. 525–540.
- Pesner, Jonah Dov, and David N. Saperstein. "The Centrality of Social Justice in Reform Judaism," pp. 503–514.
- Schwartzman, Amy. "A Reform Jewish Response to Poverty," pp. 541–549.
- Sussman, Lance J. "The Mission of Israel Among Humanity," pp. 569–578.

#### Session Plan

##### *Welcome and Personal Introductions (5 minutes)*

###### **For the facilitator:**

- Invite participants to introduce themselves.
- Explain the content and aim of this session (see above).

##### *Chevruta Study: The Mission of Reform Judaism (15 minutes)*

###### **For the facilitator:**

- Provide the participants with source sheets with the following excerpts from Rabbi Sussman's essay "The Mission of Israel among Humanity" from *A Life of Meaning*.
- Provide the following background to the excerpts on the source sheet:
  - Rabbi Sussman provides an outline of our spiritual paths in the past: from "being a moral light among the nations" and the concept of chosenness, to growing doubts in the superiority of Judaism's superior wisdom and ethics, to the concern of Jewish survival, and, finally, to a renewed covenant with God, with our global community, and with our tradition.

- Ask the participants to read and discuss the following excerpts in *chevruta*, using the guiding questions below. (Be sure to explain the process and merits of *chevruta* study in case the participants are unfamiliar with the practice: that it is a very Jewish way of study, that it can get noisy, and that it allows the partners to strengthen their learning together.)
- During the *chevruta* learning, walk around the room and help the participants to process and find the right words.
- Call the group back into a large-group setting, and ask one member of each *chevruta* to share one or two central elements of their learning. Encourage the group to listen carefully and not to comment.

**Rabbi Lance J. Sussman, PhD, “The Mission of Israel among Humanity”**

*Redemption implies an ultimately irresistible transformative force in the universe. God, as my teacher Alvin J. Reines explained to me, is the ontological precondition of existence but not the ultimate source for salvation. A living God, I learned from years of work as a pulpit rabbi, must be more than a theological proposition. A living God has to have a presence and message for humanity. Long before Mordecai Kaplan wrote of God as “the power that makes for salvation,” God—the God of the prophets—was the God of moral urgency, who demanded we work for redemption through justice, not merely sacrifice on the altar of ritual to the sounds of psalms and other liturgical recitations. (A Life of Meaning, p. 575)*

**Guiding questions:**

- Rabbi Sussman describes our path to redemption. In the center of this path, he puts our social justice work, which he considers to be more important than ritual and liturgy. Do you agree with him?
- What other paths to redemption can you think of?

**Rabbi Lance J. Sussman, PhD, “The Mission of Israel among Humanity”**

*Defining today’s morality is not easy, but Reform Judaism still claims that task . . . and continues to tie redemptive justice to its fundamental mission. Fair labor practices, civil rights, feminism, LGBTQ rights, and more are causes Reform has collectively understood to be part of its sacred task. From early in its history, Reform has claimed it follows the path of revelation that is progressive in the sense of historical evolution, liberal values, and the redemption of humanity.*

*A Reform Judaism reconceptualized in the context of the mission of Israel as its redemptive goal would find in ritual not just individual spiritual endeavor, but a tool to inspire and transform. The end of the prayer service would not be a veritable fourth-period clock in a blowout game, ticking perfunctorily; it would be a crescendo of purpose and proclamation of intent. Memory and tradition would be harnessed to inspiration and hope; social justice*

would be not just policy debate but sacred cause, for the good of all. (*A Life of Meaning*, pp. 575–576)

**Guiding questions:**

- In this excerpt, Rabbi Sussman lists a number of areas in which Reform Jews have truly contributed to the transformation of our world. What are these?
- Also in this excerpt, Rabbi Sussman describes how ritual and prayer can function as tools “to inspire and transform”? How can ritual and prayer do that?

**Rabbi Lance J. Sussman, PhD, “The Mission of Israel among Humanity”**

*If Reform Judaism were to redefine and embrace anew the mission of Israel—the purpose of being Jewish—perhaps it could also rethink its now atrophied Outreach program. Is Jewish survival the main reason we accept non-Jews in our midst as equal partners, or are we seeking partners in the sacred work of redemption? Do converts need to undergo sixteen weeks of Judaization and Jewish socialization, or do they need to embrace a basic commitment to help make the world a better place through Judaism? (*A Life of Meaning*, p. 576)*

**Guiding questions:**

- Rabbi Sussman asks a very important question here: Who are our partners while we walk our path if redemption is our goal?

*Mapping Out the Mission: What’s on Our Menu Today? (30 minutes)*

**For the facilitator:**

- Introduce the participants to the next part of the session by giving a short introduction, as follows:

*Reform Judaism today is specific to our time. Many Reform Jews today are very interested in Jewish traditions. Jewish food, Jewish music, Jewish ritual, Torah study, Jewish meditation, Jewish ethics, and Jewish storytelling are just a few of the topics for the wave of Jewish learning, creativity, and pride that we can witness today.*

*At the same time, age-old concerns have not lost their urgency. Already in biblical texts we are commanded to care for the poor and vulnerable—orphans, widows, and strangers—and little has changed since then. To our call to work against poverty and racism have been added the calls to fight against misogyny and restrictive identity policies and for the protection of the natural world we live in.*

*Our history has shown us that most of our immediate concern have not been created or raised by us. Instead, the Reform Movement has been most reactive to and wisest in sensing the urgency of the hour: Which issues do we have on our menu today? These immediate concern never override older ones, but they require us to carefully measure our*

*resources when deciding into which cases we want to invest the power and spirituality of the Reform Movement today.*

- Choose three of the six sources provided below based on your knowledge of the community in which you are teaching.
- With the participants, read the following excerpts and discuss, using the guiding questions below.
- Ask the participants to address the ways the specific issues talk to them personally and to the entire community.

### **Environmentalism**

**Alex Cicelsky, “The Jewish Imperative of Healing the Land” *Seven Days, Many Voices*, Benjamin Davod (ed.) (New York: CCAR Press, 2017).**

*All four of the elements of life on earth come together for the first time on day three of Creation: water, air, earth, and sun. The plants trap the sun’s energy that will power the explosion of simple and complex creatures. Today we can explain the relationship, the process and evolution of photosynthetic plants, whose waste product (from sequestering carbon from the primordial atmosphere) is the oxygen we breathe today. . . .*

*This is a physical description of the paradigm shift in our appreciation of our environment that Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel called “radical amazement”:*

*Wonder or radical amazement is the chief characteristic of the religious man’s attitude toward history and nature. One attitude is alien to his spirit: taking things for granted, regarding events as a natural course of things. To find an approximate cause of a phenomenon is no answer to his ultimate wonder. He knows that there are laws that regulate the course of natural processes; he is aware of the regularity and pattern of things. However, such knowledge fails to mitigate his sense of perpetual surprise at the fact that there are facts at all. Looking at the world he would say, “This is the Lord’s doing, it is marvelous in our eyes” (Psalm 118:23). .*

*. .*

*Heschel’s thoughts preceded the coining of the term “ecopsychology,” the study of the impact of “nature deficit” on human behavior. Heschel warned of the effects disconnecting from nature might have on the soul:*

*As civilization advances, the sense of wonder declines. Such decline is an alarming symptom of our state of mind. Mankind will not perish for want of information; but only for want of appreciation. The beginning of our happiness lies in the*

*understanding that life without wonder is not worth living. What we lack is not a will to believe but a will to wonder.*

*That disconnection grows when people spend all their day in classrooms and offices and all night in houses. The disconnection is manifested in our insatiable extraction of resources, resulting in the ravages of air and water pollution and the wanton disposal of waste. . . . What is missing? Heschel thinks that the task of religion is to create in us an intelligence to sense, beyond merely following prescriptive practices:*

*Awareness of the divine begins with wonder. It is the result of what man does with his higher incomprehension. The greatest hindrance to such awareness is our adjustment to conventional notions, to mental clichés. Wonder or radical amazement, the state of maladjustment to words and notions, is therefore a prerequisite for an authentic awareness of that which is. . . .*

*On the sixth day, the day when humans and animals were created together, the text of the third day of Creation is implanted, and God informs us of the purpose of the third day of Creation's world encompassing greenery. Simply, to eat. To survive:*

*And God said, "Look, I have given you all the seed-bearing plants on the face of the earth, and every tree that has in it seed-bearing fruit—these are yours to eat. And to every land animal, and to every bird of the sky, and to all that creeps on the earth in which is the breath of life, I [give] all green vegetation for food."—And so it was. [Genesis 1:29–30]*

*Through objective appreciation, radical amazement, and collective intelligence, we will learn to protect and sustain the entirety of this food-bearing, species-filled planet as if it is (and it is) our only resource. A shared resource for all of earth's citizens. A world-encompassing shared garden we call earth, haaretz. (Seven Days, Many Voices, edited by Benjamin David [New York: CCAR Press, 2017], pp. 99–103)*

**Guiding questions:**

- Alex Cicelsky describes the processes and sights of our world in the words of Jewish philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel. Can you understand why? Have you experienced similar moments of awe and wonder experiencing the natural world in which we live?
- Envision a perfect world. What does nature in your vision look like? What could we as Reform Jews, as North Americans, and as humans do to make your vision reality?

*LGTBQ Inclusion*

**Rabbi Nikki Lyn DeBlosi, PhD, "Integrating Our Stories: LGTBQ Folks in the Jewish Community"**

*When queer folks seek, invent, and claim terms to describe our identities, genders, relationships, and families, we are engaging in a similar project: we are attempting to acknowledge what is distinct about us and, at the same time, establish a sense of connection, continuity, and belonging. We are seeking to know ourselves and to be known. Words help: naming is how God created the world, speaking each element and creature into existence. . . .*

*The relationship between Reform Judaism and LGBTQ inclusion has been more complex. At the heart of our challenge remains the mandate for storytelling. We can read about the long process of officially supporting anti-discrimination measures, civil rights, marriage equality, and inclusion for LGBTQ folks by the institutions of the Reform Movement. We can read the words “inclusive” and “welcoming” on URJ congregations’ websites, not knowing for sure who is being addressed (Gays and lesbians? Interfaith families? Trans folks? Jews of color?). . . . But we must ask ourselves whether we are committed to ensuring the visibility not only of folks who are brave enough to name their narrative and claim the words “lesbian,” “gay,” “bisexual,” “transgender,” or “queer”—but committed also to the visibility of variety in sexual orientation and gender identity as a positive value. Are we committed to telling more than one story about what constitutes a valuable and authentically Jewish life? . . .*

*How crucial is this project? Literally, it is a matter of life and death: I recall sitting across from one young person who struggled with the self-knowledge of the same-sex desire they could not deny. At the beginning of their life, this young person declared desperately that they could see only two options for how their life would proceed: deny and ignore any trace of same-sex desire, lie to self and others, and enter a heterosexual marriage—or commit suicide. We cannot allow one more person to live under the illusion that queer Jews have just two choices and that each of them amounts to disappearance. . . .*

*At the heart of every Reform congregation, beneath an eternal light, the Torah waits to be unrolled each and every Shabbat, each and every holiday. A scroll of black fire on white fire, the Torah is called a tree: a living entity that provides shade and fruit and clean air to breathe. The Torah is composed of stories—and its unfolding continues to this very day. When we proclaim the stories of the Jewish people, we as Reform Jews must be expansive and generous in that reading. We must acknowledge the exclusions and violences done to and with Judaism against the queer community. We must present queer lives as equally valuable to straight, cisgender lives. (A Life of Meaning, pp. 517–523)*

**Guiding questions:**

- Rabbi DeBlosi speaks about the importance of storytelling. Do you think we have already arrived at a story of the Jewish people that is truly inclusive?
- Did community have a conversation on how to provide spaces in which LGBTQ Jews can meet and speak safely?

- Did community have a conversation on how to provide spaces in which straight Jews can express possible feelings of confusion, insecurities, and question about LGBTQ Jews and the way in which they reshape our Jewish story and liturgy?

## *Women's Rights*

### **Rabbi Elyse Goldstein, "When God Meets Gender"**

*At its inception, Reform Judaism promised equality for women. Now much later, could Reform have imagined how far the notion of "gender equality" would take us? . . .*

*At first, those discussions focused around binary definitions of male and female, masculine and feminine. This revolution began with what I call "equal access feminism." It was simple: women wanted to have the same opportunities and the same religious responsibilities as men. Women wanted, in short, to be fully Jews out of a sense of being allowed to participate the way men did. We imagined women's religious equality to mean that women could practice those rituals that had been designated as historically men's rituals. In this stage the discussion around gender in Reform settings focused on women doing what men did.*

*Second-stage Jewish feminism went further, developing a thoughtful challenge to our theological language in describing God, and thus a shaking of our foundational assumptions about women, men, and the whole halachic system. We asked if women's spirituality was the same as men's, resting upon distinctions and separation into categories of difference like milk/meat, holy/profane, male/female. We didn't just have women rabbis—those rabbis made us rethink what a rabbi looks like, what a rabbi is, and what a rabbi does. My male colleagues will admit that with the admission of women to the rabbinic discussion, we all started to question work-life balance, parenting time, the hierarchies of synagogue life, the language of the prayer book, and the nature of the synagogue. . . .*

*And now, in third-stage feminism, in the twenty-first century, the binary understanding of "men" and "women" itself has been challenged, and the conversation about male and female differences*

*and similarities also takes into account the full spectrum of gender identification. Today's feminism leads the discussion into the less-clear waters of whether gender at all can, should, or will determine, define, or characterize the way we practice Jewish ritual. . . .*

*The questions Jewish feminism once raised have so clearly entered our conversation that the tone and content of Jewish life have been forever altered. *A Life of Meaning*, pp. 31-36)*

**Guiding questions:**

- Rabbi Goldstein outlines the development of first-stage, second-stage, and third-stage Jewish feminism. What are the main differences between these stages?
- Recent years have taught us that women rabbis are paid less well than male rabbis. How do you explain this fact in the context of our communities?
- Think about a recent wedding, bar or bat mitzvah celebration, or retirement party. Would you agree with Rabbi Goldstein's observation that "today's feminism leads the discussion into the less-clear waters of whether gender at all can, should, or will determine, define, or characterize the way we practice Jewish ritual"?

*Disability Politics*

**W. Gunther Plaut and Mark Washofsky, "Disabled Persons" *Teshuvot for the 1990's* (1997), pp. 297-304.**

*Our she'elah asks whether the community or congregation has an express "obligation" in this respect. The answer is yes with regard to the principle. We deal here with a mitzvah and include it under the obligations we have with regard to our fellow human beings (mitzvot bein adam l'chaveiro), and the important part such mitzvot play in Reform Jewish life and theology. . . .*

*Without stating what is or what is not possible in a particular community, the following opportunities may serve as examples:*

*When we include the disabled in our minyanim, we must attempt to include them fully and facilitate their participation in the spiritual life of the community. For instance, large-print and Braille prayer books and texts, hearing aids, sign-language interpreters, wheelchair access to all parts of the synagogue building and sanctuary, fall under the rubric of mitzvah and present the community with challenges and opportunities. New technologies will facilitate in-home electronic participation in services and classes. Sometimes, aesthetics and mitzvah may seem to clash: a ramp for wheelchair access to the pulpit may present a visual detraction, but it will also be inspiring for the congregation to know that its religious obligations toward the handicapped have been fulfilled. And obviously, where new buildings are constructed the needs of the disabled must be taken into consideration in the planning. As Reform Jews, we should allow for a creative interpretation of the mitzvot that would help to incorporate disabled persons into the congregation in every respect.*

*In addition to providing physical facilities, we must provide the handicapped with the education that they will need to participate fully, or as fully as they can, in the life of the congregation. Where necessary, several congregations in the city should combine their resources to make this possible. The aim of inclusion of the disabled is their complete participation in Jewish life. Therefore, we would, for instance, permit a blind student to*

*read the Torah portion from a Braille Bible, if not from the Torah scroll itself though this would not constitute a halakhically sanctioned reading, since it may not be done from memory. We see the mitzvah of including the deaf as overriding the traditional prohibition. A deaf bar/bat mitzvah student, depending on his/her capacity, could read from the Torah, or write a speech and have someone else deliver it, or deliver it in sign language him/herself and have an interpreter speak it to the congregation. Mentally disabled persons could be encouraged to do as much as possible.*

*Many of these issues are not only similar to, but directly concern, elderly individuals. Indeed, hearing, visual, mental and physical disabilities often come as part of the aging process. Just as the Jewish community has gone out of its way to provide proper facilities for the aged, so should it make adequate resources available for the mentally and physically disabled of all ages. The fate of the tablets of the Decalogue describes our obligation: “The tablets and the broken fragments of the tablets were deposited in the Ark.” There was no separate ark for the broken tablets: they were kept together with the whole ones.*

*In sum, our worth as human beings is based not on what we can do but on the fact that we are created in God’s image. We should aim for the maximum inclusion of the disabled in the life of our communities. (Teshuvot for the Nineties [New York: CCAR Press, 1997], pp. 297–304)*

#### **Guiding questions:**

- Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut, PhD, and Rabbi Mark Washofsky, PhD, provide us with some guidelines to think about our responsibilities toward persons with disabilities in our communities. Do you share their sense of “responsibility”?
- Look at your own sanctuary, the synagogue building, the parking lot (if your community has such places; if not, look at the place you meet to pray, learn, and eat together). Can you imagine what these places look or feel like to someone who is blind, deaf, sitting in a wheelchair, or mentally ill? Is there someone close to you whom you could ask this question?

### *Poverty Reduction and Equal Access*

#### **Rabbi Amy Schwartzman, “A Reform Jewish Response to Poverty”**

*Throughout the spectrum of discussions about poverty—those that are financial and those that go beyond material needs—Jewish texts clearly state that the best thing we can do for our neighbor in need is to help her to become fully self-sufficient once again. Poverty is not seen as a permanent state; it is not held up as an ideal or elevated way to live. Individuals should work to bring themselves out of poverty, and those who are receiving funds from others are even obligated to participate in tzedakah themselves. With this in mind, the biblical commandment to lend money without interest is considered one of the most meritorious forms of dispensing resources to the poor. Perhaps the most well-known*

*text affirming this approach is Maimonides's treatise proposing eight levels of giving. The highest degree "is one who upholds the hand of a Jew reduced to poverty by handing him a gift or a loan, or entering into a partnership with him, or finding work for him, in order to strengthen his hand, so that he will have no need to beg from other people" (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Matanot Aniyim 7:7). In many ways this captures the highest expectations of our engagement with the poor. It preserves dignity, self-respect, and privacy while providing an individual with the means to achieve self-sufficiency, all within an interpersonal relationship.*

*Responding to the needs of others can be a daunting task; thinking about combating poverty in our greater community, country, or world can be overwhelming. All Jews, no matter the movement with which they affiliate, must step up. (A Life of Meaning, pp. 546–547)*

**Guiding questions:**

- Many of our communities support food kitchens, food drives, and homeless shelters. Can you think of projects that will provide an individual with the means to achieve long-term self-sufficiency?
- What could you personally and what could your community do to combat poverty in your family, in your community, in your city, in our country, and in our world?

## *Nationalism, Racism, and Antisemitism*

**Rabbi Rachel S. Mikva, PhD, "Jews and Race"**

*It is worth examining how Torah illuminates the conundrum of race today, even though we recognize that "race" is a modern construct; the idea that skin tone represents substantial social or biological difference was not present in ancient societies. Nonetheless, the Hebrew Bible has quite a lot to say about the good, the bad, and the ugly of how we form groups, establish boundaries, and evaluate difference. Space is too short for a thorough survey, but a few texts stand out. . . .*

*Tanach . . . teaches, for example, how difference is bound up with power. Just after Torah details the naturally increasing diversity of humanity, proliferating with peoples and languages after the Flood, it tells the story of Babel (Genesis 11). A powerful empire arises that imagines all the world the same; with everyone speaking the same language, nothing is beyond their reach, and they determine to build a tower with its top up in the heavens. We know of structures that might have inspired such a tale, ziggurats of the ancient Sumerian and Babylonian Empires.*

*Jewish tradition has discerned all kinds of potential problems with this project, such as trying to usurp the throne of God or caring more about the bricks than about the lives of those who fashion them. Ultimately, however, the story is a critique of empire, of the notion that we maximize human greatness by privileging one language, one culture, one goal, one truth. Babel illuminates the path of tyranny and the legacy of racism. It is a*

*mirror for Western colonialism and white privilege, where power has been confused with normativity, and “norm” has been confused with good.*

*At the end of the Babel story, God reestablishes difference, multiplying the languages and scattering the peoples across the earth. It is not a punishment, but a fulfillment of the divine command after the Flood: “Be fruitful and multiply; populate the earth and increase in it” (Genesis 9:7). Rabbi Jonathan Sacks teaches that Judaism begins with a theology of difference: the radical otherness of God should lead us to respect the radical otherness of diverse languages, nations, cultures, and races. He asserts that Babel is followed by the call to Abraham because*

*God “turns to one people and commands it to be different in order to teach humanity the dignity of difference. (A Life of Meaning, pp. 530–532)*

**Guiding questions:**

- In recent years, we witnessed an increasing numbers of hate crimes against the black community, the immigrant community, the Muslim community—and ourselves. Many of us live, for the first time in our lives, in fear; we are reminded of our personal or our family’s traumas of the Holocaust; we wonder in agony how Jewish Israelis have learned to live with constant terror. How do fear and empathy guide our daily thoughts, words, and actions?
- Which values do we want to uphold in times of fear?

*Finding a Path for Your Community (15 minutes)*

**For the facilitator:**

- Read and explain the following biblical quote. Speak about the way decisions shape our lives and the lives of the people around us.

**Deuteronomy 30:19**

<i>I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life.</i>	הַחַיִּים וְהַמָּוֶת נִתְּנִי לְפָנֶיךָ הַבְּרָכָה וְהַקְּלָלָה וּבְחַרְתָּ בְּחַיִּים
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- With the participants, look at the list of observations and insights the participants gathered during the conversation of the last hour.
- Invite the participants to put a sticker or check mark next to the issue that seems most important to them.
- Ask the participants how they can further pursue their commitment to that issue.

*Closure (5–10 minutes)*

**For the facilitator:**

- Close with a nigun that the participants know.

## *For Further Reading*

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- Mikva, Rachel S. “Jews and Race.” In *A Life of Meaning*, edited by Dana Evan Kaplan, pp. 525–540. New York: CCAR Press, 2018.pp. 525-540.
- Pesner, Jonah Dov, and David N. Saperstein. “The Centrality of Social Justice in Reform Judaism.” In *A Life of Meaning*, edited by Dana Evan Kaplan, pp. 503–514. New York: CCAR Press, 2018.pp. 503-514.
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