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■ APPENDIX

EXCERPT FROM RABBI ERIC H. YOFFIE'S PRESIDENTIAL SERMON DELIVERED AT THE 65TH BIENNIAL ASSEMBLY

DECEMBER 18, 1999

Once again I am overwhelmed, and in awe. What an extraordinary Shabbat service this has been—our extended family of faith, nearly 5,000 strong, raising its voice in praise and thanksgiving, singing unto God in joy and celebration. Where else are we so enveloped by the spirit of Shabbat, so energized by the holiness of the day? But it is not only the experience of our worship that affects me so deeply; I am also struck by what it suggests about our Movement. Enormous changes are taking place in Reform Judaism, and they are evident here at our Biennial Assembly.

A mere ten years ago, our Biennials were dramatically different. Daily worship was perfunctory and sparsely attended, and Shabbat services were less than inspiring. Our Biennials were wonderfully exciting, but people did not come to pray. Today, however, it is spiritual nourishment that we seek. At our last two conventions we surveyed the departing delegates, and asked them what was the highlight of their Biennial experience; the overwhelming majority responded that it was Shabbat and daily worship that had touched them most.

What has changed? Simply this: Reform Jews are rediscovering the power and the purpose of prayer. We sense that our Judaism has been a bit too cold and domesticated; we yearn to sing to God, to let our souls fly free. And we feel that through prayer we can rediscover our inner selves, and bind ourselves to the collective body of Israel.

There is nothing surprising about this. Prayer is an irrepressible expression of the human spirit, and we Jews appeared on the historical scene as a praying people. Yes, we know how hard prayer is; we do not expect that every Shabbat we will leave the synagogue personally transformed. But we do expect to be gently moved each time we come to temple. And we do expect that our prayers will make us feel closer to God.

Does this mean that Reform Judaism is abandoning the rationalism and intellectual rigor that are the foundation of Jewish belief? Heaven forbid. When Reform Jews enter the synagogue, we refuse to check our brains at the door. Two years ago, this Assembly initiated a program of adult Torah study, and Torah study is a cerebral act, requiring reason, contemplation, and analysis.

But our members are very wise. They believe they can have a Judaism that welcomes exuberance and song as well as ideas; that celebrates the cerebral yet pulsates with emotion. And they are right. Judaism has always prescribed two paths to tradition: the path of the mind and the path of the heart. Torah study is the way of thinking, prayer the way of feeling. And even though these paths are parallel, the Jew has always been required to walk them both. Therefore, the Reform Jew must be both a studying Jew and a praying Jew.

And what is happening in our synagogues? Can the fiery enthusiasm for worship that we experience here be found in our congregations?

In many of our synagogues, the prayers are heartfelt, the music uplifting, and the participation enthusiastic. But that is only a part of the story. All of us—rabbis, cantors, lay leaders—seem ready to admit that far too often, our services are tedious, predictable, and dull. Far too often, our members pray without fervor or concentration. Far too often, our music is dirge-like and our Torah readings lifeless, and we are unable to trigger true emotion and ascent.

Poll after poll tells us that 40 percent of Americans attend congregational worship every week, while for Jews, the figure is under 10 percent. We joke about two-day-a-year Jews, but we know in our hearts that the fault is not entirely theirs. We need to ask ourselves why so many of these Jews feel religiously unsatisfied in our synagogues.

There is a certain irony in these numbers. The Jews authored the Psalms—the most passionate, poetic, and beautiful prayers ever composed. How is it then that we are today the least worshipful of peoples in North America?

It is also ironic that we Reform Jews find ourselves in this situation because our Movement came into being as a liturgical revolution. Reform Judaism did not begin with ethics, social justice, or personal autonomy; it was a reaction to the chaos and mechanical mumbling of the then-dominant forms of Jewish prayer. Worship reform was the very heart of early Reform Judaism; classical Reform Jews, then as now, brought a deep earnestness to issues of prayer.

So what happened? What happened is that the innovations of the early nineteenth century no longer suffice, but we are not certain what should replace them. And Reform Jews turn out to be quite conservative in their worship patterns. We say we want prayer that is authentically Reform, but what that usually means is: “what I remember from my temple when I was growing up.” And no two of us ever seem to remember the same thing. Generational differences are particularly pronounced. Our congregations, therefore, often confront a multiplicity of conflicting worship demands. Older members threaten to vote with their checkbooks if worship is changed, while younger members threaten to vote with their feet if it is not.

And this, too: The pressures of the worship wars have created a turf consciousness unusual for our Movement. Caught in the crossfire, rabbis sometimes insist they alone have authority over worship; cantors sometimes do the same. Lay leaders seem to alternate between indifference and the expectation that their rabbi will be transformed into a guru who will do their worshipping for them. And finger-pointing is all too common. Lay leaders complain to me that their rabbi has introduced too much Hebrew, or too little Hebrew, or too many changes, or too few changes; and that their cantor does not let them sing, or sings music they do not like. Rabbis and cantors tell me how frequently their members greet every new idea with that well-worn refrain: “But we’ve never done it that way before!”

Is it a surprise that even some of our most dynamic congregations have grown fearful of innovation? But there is no reason for despair. I see emerging a collective resolve to overcome this paralyzing fear of change. And I see, too, leaders and congregations whose relentless creativity and commitment to renewal will light our way.

I propose, therefore, that at this Biennial Assembly we proclaim a new Reform revolution. Like the original Reform revolution, it will be rooted in the conviction that Judaism is a tradition of rebellion, revival, and redefinition; and like the original, too, this new initiative will make synagogue worship our Movement's foremost concern.

I further propose that this worship revolution be built upon the premise of partnership: Rabbis will be its architects, cantors its artists, and laypeople its builders. This has always been the way of our Movement. No other religious movement in Jewish life has ever been as democratic, as open, and as rooted in the collective partnership of rabbi, cantor, and layperson. And what is generally true is especially important in this case. Because prayer is not a noun but a verb; it is not something that is done to us or for us, but by us; it is not something that you create and give to the congregation, but something that the congregation creates with you. So it is critical that vested interests be put aside and that the laity be admitted into the dialogue, even as we acknowledge that Jewish wisdom is ultimately the rabbis' expertise.

The revolution that I propose will require an accurate understanding of what we mean by "tradition." The heart of the worship tradition is the order of prayers that has become standardized during the last two millennia. And while Reform Judaism has revised this liturgy to make it fully inclusive, the *Sh'ma*, the *Amidah*, and the Torah service are not very different from what they were in the third century.

Everything else, however—the chanting styles, the music, the aesthetics—has been ever-changing. If we have learned anything at all from Jewish history, it is that there is no one way to worship God. In fact, much of what we now refer to as "tradition" is not tradition at all, but reflects European culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. And we need not be bound by cultural precedents that no longer resonate. Eighteenth-century Minsk is not our worship ideal. Neither is Berlin of the 1850s, nor suburban America of the 1950s.

And just as we reject nostalgia disguised as tradition, so, too, do we reject worship that is purely "contemporary." Communal prayer requires recognizable constants; there is no Jewish worship without age-old prayers and time-honored chants. In short, we need not choose between "traditional" worship and "contemporary" worship. As Reform Jews, we insist on the best of both worlds: continuity with our tradition and constant reformation.

To do this, we need both innovators and conservators: those who push the envelope and those who hold back. But at this moment it is innovators that we need most. We must give our leaders the freedom to experiment, and to develop forms of communal prayer that are both Jewishly authentic and fully indigenous to North America.

And what will be the single most important key to the success or failure of our revolution? Music. Every congregation that has revived its worship has begun with music that is participatory, warm, and accessible. Our wisest synagogues invite their members to sing, because they know that Jews feel welcomed, accepted, and empowered when they sing. Because ritual music is a deeply sensual experience that touches people in a way that words cannot. Music converts the ordinary into the miraculous, and individuals into a community of prayer. And music enables overly intellectual Jews to rest their minds and open their hearts.

There is nothing new in this. At the very moment of Israel's liberation, Miriam led her people in song on the far shore of the Red Sea. But somehow, many of us have lost our voices. The music of prayer has become what it was never meant to be: a spectator sport. That is why our cantors, soloists, and choirs are working so hard to sing with us, and not for us.

In many instances this work is just beginning. It is not easy for a congregation that has never sung to begin to sing. And let's be honest: It's not always easy for cantors and soloists either. Because East European melodies—soaring and rich—are often difficult to sing; a simpler, American *nusach* is only now being developed. And this, too: When the congregation finds its voice and lets go with singing, the prayer leader—whether cantor or soloist, rabbi or layperson—is no longer completely in control.

Still, despite these challenges, I am convinced that music will be the foundation upon which our worship revolution will be built. And this means that Jews will return to our sanctuaries only when we offer them music that is vibrant, spiritual, and community-building; music that speaks directly to their soul.

The other great challenge of our worship revolution is to bring young families and young children back into our sanctuaries. A twenty-seven-year-old rabbi, newly ordained from Hebrew Union College, will often look out at her congregation on Erev Shabbat and realize that she is the youngest person there by several decades. Why has this happened? Some have suggested that we may have unwittingly driven young people away. Convinced that exuberant children could not be accommodated at regular Shabbat worship, and that their baby-boomer parents would not be drawn to the somber melodies of the older generation, we created the monthly Shabbat family service, which is shorter, more energetic, and more spontaneous. And it has succeeded. The average family service is filled with wonder and dissonance and natural enthusiasm, and our sanctuaries are often filled to overflowing. But by creating the family service, we may have signaled that young parents and children are not welcome at other times—that for them, in effect, Shabbat falls but once per month. How do we change this perception and put Shabbat back on their weekly schedule?

Many suggest that Shabbat morning is the best time for family prayer. But this means confronting a myriad of conflicts, including the choice between soccer and synagogue. As Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin has put it: “The God of soccer is a vengeful God.” An even greater obstacle is the Shabbat morning bar or bat mitzvah, which in most cases has alienated the uninvited, young and old, and appropriated the worship service as a private affair of the bar mitzvah family. This is far from a simple matter. For many Reform Jews, the rite of bar mitzvah is the single most significant religious event in their lives, and we should be respectful of its impact. Still, Judaism is a collective enterprise, not a private pursuit, and we must be troubled by the prospect that a family celebration is displacing Shabbat morning communal prayer.

But Reform Judaism is ever-evolving. And so some of our congregations have proclaimed that no longer will there be an Erev Shabbat adult service and a Shabbat morning bar mitzvah service, but that every worship service will be intergenerational, welcoming all. Others have undertaken to provide family-oriented worship, in addition to regular services, not once a month but every week. Whatever the solution, this we know: Young children and young families must be part of our

revolution. The children in turn, through their simple faith and playful eagerness, will help us to breathe new life into our prayer.

That we might realize this revolution, I put the following proposal before this Assembly:

First, I urge each member congregation of our Union to devote a major segment of two upcoming board meetings to defining a worship agenda for the synagogue. This is the starting place for worship reform: forward-looking lay leaders, invested as partners by rabbi and cantor, assuming responsibility for congregational prayer that they see as their own. The UAHC has prepared a suggested agenda for these board deliberations.

Second, I propose that we call upon all our congregations to do what many have already done: reorganize the Ritual Committee, co-opting our best and brightest to work with rabbi and cantor on worship renewal. As many of us know who have done combat duty on the Ritual Committee, it is sometimes the stepchild of the synagogue, focused on ushering and High Holidays tickets. But it must now become the primary venue for rethinking the congregation's worship agenda.

I recommend that our reorganized Ritual Committees begin by studying, with rabbi or cantor, the history and theology of Jewish prayer. Just as one cannot pray without appropriate preparation, one cannot engage in the transformation of worship without preparation and knowledge. The Union has prepared a detailed curriculum [*Iv'du B'simchah: Worship With Joy*] for course leaders.

I also recommend that our Ritual Committees undertake, under the guidance of rabbi and cantor, an in-depth self-evaluation of worship in their congregations. If we aspire to spiritual greatness, we must begin with a fair accounting of what our worship practices really are. Does our Shabbat prayer capture the heart and soul and kishkes of the congregation? Is our music uplifting? Are we creative worshipers or captives to sameness? These are difficult questions, but Reform Jews are never afraid of searching self-study.

I further recommend that each synagogue evaluation team commit itself to visiting at least four other Reform congregations. We are sometimes terribly parochial, unaware of what our sister congregations have done to bring dignity, reverence, and beauty to their worship. It is important that rabbis and cantors be included in these visits; we ask our clergy to be experts in matters of prayer, but it is difficult to lead if one lacks exposure to other models of *tfilah*. Here again, the UAHC has assembled a comprehensive self-study document [Entering the Dialogue: A Procedure for Self-Study of Congregational Worship] that congregations may use both to evaluate their own worship practices and to assess the practices of others.

Third, I propose that we initiate an online, Movement-wide dialogue on prayer, to begin immediately following this Biennial. My hope is that hundreds of temple presidents, ritual chairs, laypersons, rabbis, and cantors will initially join this online discussion, and that the number of participants will eventually reach into the thousands.

Fourth, I propose that the Union, the College–Institute, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, and the American Conference of Cantors cooperate in sponsoring retreats for rabbis and cantors, where our worship leaders can consider and develop the scholarly and professional dimensions of worship reform, and examine successful models from across the country. Such gatherings, I believe, will generate many of the creative ideas that will power our revolution and assure its success.

Fifth, I propose that we enrich our worship by undertaking a program of adult Hebrew literacy. Some view the increased use of Hebrew in prayer as contrary to Reform principles, but I disagree. Every Reform service contains an ample number of English prayers so that all worshipers can pray with comprehension. At the same time, Reform Judaism has appreciated that the Hebrew language is more than just a vehicle of expression; it is, in fact, part of the fabric and texture of Judaism, vibrating with the ideas and values of our people.

The division that exists in our Movement is not between those congregations that use more Hebrew and those that use less; these differences are not that significant. The important division is between those congregations where many worshipers know some Hebrew and those where they do not. Why? Because absence of Hebrew knowledge is an obstacle to heartfelt prayer; because inability to pray with the congregation at peak moments becomes a source of frustration; and because the full participation for which our members yearn is that much more difficult without some access to the sacred language of the Jewish people.

Let me put it plainly: We value Hebrew for many reasons, but it is most of all the great democratic tool of Jewish worship, the vehicle that “opens the gates of prayer” to the average Jew. If we fail to learn at least the basics of Hebrew, then we are forcing our rabbis and cantors to serve as priests—as an ecclesiastical elite that enjoys sole access to the secret code of Jewish worship. But they do not want to be cast in this role, and we should not force it upon them. We want to be empowered to pray on our own, and this is so much easier when we can turn those little black dots and boxes on the page of the siddur into a conversation with God.

The UAHC is developing two Hebrew primers exclusively for adults. They focus not only on phonetic reading but on comprehension of basic prayers and texts. I propose that following the High Holidays, our congregations make use of these texts, offering ten-session adult Hebrew courses in both the fall and the spring.

The course of action that I have put forward is an ambitious one. For those synagogues willing to undertake an even more vigorous effort, the Union has entered into an agreement with *Synagogue 2000*, the synagogue transformation project led by Dr. Ron Wolfson and our own Dr. Lawrence Hoffman. Drs. Hoffman and Wolfson are the pioneers and creative geniuses of the movement for worship renewal. They have agreed to accept fifteen congregations into an intensive program of worship self-study and reform. Congregations prepared for the highest level of commitment to worship revival are encouraged to apply.

I do not wish to mislead you. The revolution that I am calling for is as daunting a challenge as any that this Movement has ever faced. We Jews are never more recalcitrant than when we deal with issues of prayer. But I am convinced that our Movement possesses the spiritual courage for just such a revolution, and indeed that it is already underway. Above all else, our success will depend on creating the partnership that I discussed before.

We do not want to be rabbis who are spiritual imperialists, insisting that worship is ours alone; we do not want to be cantors who are operatic obstructionists, intent on performance at the expense of prayer; and we do not want to be laypeople who are conscientious objectors, objecting to everything that is not as it was. What we do want is for our members to join together with rabbi and

cantor in creating worship that leaves us all uplifted—connected to ancient wisdom and to our deepest selves. And to join together in creating a synagogue that is a center of Jewish life in all its sweep and scope, but that is first and foremost a center of *avodah*—of worship, reverence, and awe.

And we will do this because we are the most creative movement in Jewish life; because, in the absence of prayer, all our crowded congregational calendars are for naught; and because to live without prayer is to live without God. And so, together, we will give Reform Jews the meaningful prayer they demand from us—worship rooted in tradition that manages still to seduce the soul and electrify the heart.

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