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FROM JACOBS TO JACOBSON – A LIBERAL JEWISH MANIFESTO

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This past December, Rabbi Rick Jacobs, the President of the Union for Reform Judaism, categorized Reform Judaism today as such: “Our Judaism is for everyone... inclusive, egalitarian, intellectually rigorous, joyful, passionate, spiritual, pluralistic, constantly evolving and relevant. Soul elevating spiritual practice, life-altering Torah study, courageous practice of *tikkun olam*, loving care for our community, especially the most vulnerable--that's what we are...”

His rallying cry, given at the Reform Biennial in San Diego, California, resonated deeply with me. For too long, liberal Judaism – that is, Reform, Reconstructionist, Renewal, and even Conservative Judaism – has defined itself by what it is not and not what it is. And, Jacobs, for the first time I can remember, proudly, unabashedly, celebrated what non-Orthodox, Liberal, Progressive Judaism offers the world.

He continued: “We believe that our understanding of Judaism is right: that God did not literally hand down sacred laws in the Bible and the Mishnah at Sinai, but rather that from our encounter with the Divine, Jews have written our sacred texts, striving to understand in their own time what God called them to do. That process has continued through the centuries, and it continues today. We are not the way out, but the way in, the way to being fully Jewish and modern, Jewish and inclusive, Jewish and universal, Jewish and compassionate, Jewish and deeply committed also to science, the arts, and the human community in its constant evolutionary spiral toward sustaining the planet and bettering life for everyone who lives upon it.”

A little over two hundred years ago, another Jacobs, a banker by the name of Israel Jacobson, had the chutzpah to start a Jewish school that was co-ed, a synagogue whose services were short and whose music was beautiful. He wanted a meaningful form of Judaism, a Judaism that resonated with the values of the

modern world, and a Judaism that did not put you to sleep, or confound you with arguments.

The problem for Jacobson and for the millions of Jews who have followed his lead, is that the type of Judaism he was looking for did not fully exist. There were no prayer books, no rabbis, no writings, no clear path forward. And, at the time, Jacobson was living, there were few societies in the world that would accept Jews in that manner. Germany, where Jacobson was living, was one such place, and we all know how that ended up. So, not only did Judaism have to change and adapt, the world had to as well.

Today, as American Jews, we live in as accommodating a society as there ever has been in Jewish history. According to the recent Pew Study, 94% of American Jews like being Jews. We are the cool religion, with the Hollywood stars, political leaders, and even a smattering of elite athletes. More than that, as Liberal Jews, we represent the majority, by a longshot; as almost 2/3rds of the American Jewish community espouse our views, flock to our institutions. And, yet, twenty percent of those who do, will leave Judaism altogether. That number is astounding, adding up to almost two million, so called nones – Jews who were born Jewish, but who no longer consider themselves as such.

To correct this trend, requires us to fully accept who we are, and more than that, to define it in such a way that it resonates with the new generation, a generation that no longer sees synagogue membership as a must, that feels being Jewish requires participation in the larger world and not just in the Jewish world, that loves bagels and lox, but does not have much of a feel for their Jewish heritage beyond Seinfeld and Jewish humor.

Tonight, as we model the new CCAR Machzor, I would like to follow Rabbi Jacobs lead and offer a Liberal Jewish Manifesto.

Welcome to a Judaism that is welcoming, and not just here in shul, but everywhere, with everyone. Jacobs called this “audacious hospitality” alluding to the way Abraham and Sarah welcomed strangers into their tent.

And, the tent he was referring to was a wide tent, open to everyone who wants to come inside. About intermarriage, Jacobs compared it to “gravity” not something to be argued about anymore in the Jewish community, but accepted.

He said, “we have a sacred obligation to open our doors, to add to our ranks, and to make sure that progressive Judaism has a growing, not shrinking, voice in proclaiming what Torah must mean for our time and for our world. It is a veritable gift of God to have the opportunity of a millennium; more non-Jews who want ‘in’ than Jews who want ‘out.’ That has never happened before. We dare not squander this gift out of fear of what new voices may say and where new opinions may lead.”

He also, spoke about paying more than lip service to Jews with disabilities. Here at Congregation Shir Shalom we have a proud history of working with this community. This includes our Harold Burke Braille Room, started fifty years ago at Temple Beth Am, our wonderful audio amplifiers that came from Temple Sinai, and our new streaming video that we have thanks to generous donations from Sisterhood, Dan Kester, and Tobi and Larry Horwitz. Still, we should heed Jacobs cry and continue to make our audio clearer, our print bigger, and our hearts larger to make sure our synagogue door is wide enough for everyone to come inside.

But, I want to take welcoming a step further. We can and should be at the table of every organization, communal infrastructure, gathering or meeting, that we believe in and share values with. We cannot expect Jews to come to us, we must go to them. Our door must be open, but we also must be at the opening of other doors that are not even our own.

More and more, we do not have limitations of who is accepted into a Jewish community. Liberal Judaism has expanded what it means to be Jewish way beyond whether one of your parents is Jewish or not. Judaism is a set of values, and beliefs that teaches us how to be a good person, how to be a good citizen of the world, and how to live a good life, knowledge that has been passed down *l’dor vador*, from generation to generation, from our ancestors to us.

As Deborah Waxman, the new head of the Reconstructionist movement wrote in her response to the Pew Study: “We need to show that Judaism is not a barrier but in fact facilitative, an aid, to being an ethical human being, living in partnership and building with others a just and ethical world.”

To make this a possibility, liberal Jews have taken the language of the rabbis and transformed it into our own. Mitzvah is no longer a commandment but a good deed. Tikkun Olam is no longer a messianic aspiration taken from the end of the Aleinu, but a concept of repairing not just the Jewish world, but the entire world.

Welcome to a Judaism that is honest and authentic. We believe that the Judaism we inherited from our ancestors was not static. We are in, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, Mordecai Kaplan’s words, an ever evolving religious civilization. When he came up with this concept almost a century ago, Jews were new Americans and not only did not feel comfortable in American society, they did not feel comfortable in Jewish society either.

Today, we are fully American and fully Jewish at the same time, and this is not a conflict.

Leonard Fine, the creator of Moment magazine, who died in August, wrote: “the tension between particularism and universalism is hardly unique to the Jews... Traditional societies are characterized by high levels of particularism, while the process of modernizations includes a growing universalism. Which side are you on? Forced to choose, most of us would surely prefer the modern society to the traditional... But the key words in the preceding are, ‘Forced to Choose.’ Who forces?... With respect to the ‘choice’ between particularism and universalism, we must speak, then of a ‘both-and’ understanding... We can be both universalistic and particularistic, both rational and traditional, both sentimental and utilitarian.”

By not putting a line in the sand between what is a Jewish activity and what is not, liberal Jews obliterate this outdated binary altogether. We make the choice about which hat to where at which times, both as individuals and as a community.

The Reform theologian Eugene Borowitz speaks about the individual's commitment to "God-oriented, community-guided personal choice." In other

words, we balance between our Jewish, God-centered values, the needs of our Jewish community, and our needs as well.

It is not inauthentic to make our own decisions about which rituals to follow and which services to attend. Rather, we openly recognize the tension that American society sometimes places us in as a Jewish community. And, we believe there is space within our religious faith to create our own path.

And, lastly, welcome to a Judaism that is loving, humane, compassionate and flexible. We have incredible opportunity to meet people where they are, to preach a form of Judaism that is not legalistic, but humanistic. When someone suffers, we suffer. We openly commit ourselves to remembering that each of our lives has merit, that suffering is not something to be judged, but something that should be alleviated.

As a synagogue community, I pledge that we will be there for you, as best we can, whenever you need. As a rabbi, I will do all I can to remove barriers, to lighten burdens, and to celebrate accomplishment. But, to really do this, it has to be a collective effort, let us be stronger than our individual parts, bravely tackling the difficult challenges that lie ahead.

I close with Rick Jacobs words: “chazak, chazak v’nitchazek. Be strong, be strong, and let us strengthen each other. Look to the future with confidence. For ours is an awesome agenda.”

Shanah Tovah U’Metukah – A Sweet New Year