

**Ties That Bind:
Autonomy and Obligation
in Reform Judaism Today
Rosh Hashanah Morning 5763
September 7, 2002**

Do you remember the old story about a Jewish mother who gives her grown son two ties for his birthday? The next time the man comes to visit, he makes sure to wear one of the ties. She sees her son, looks at the tie, and exclaims immediately: "What, you don't like the other one?"

My friends, today I want to speak with you about ties that bind; about constraints and commitments and commandments, about some of the changes you have heard about or noticed in Reform Judaism over the past several years, and about our obligations, to ourselves, to each other, and to our God.

We begin with a story.

Rabbi Richard Israel tells the tale of a pious Jew who is told by his doctor that he has a rare disease, one that could only be cured... by the eating of pork. Now, so far, this is not a problem. For as I am sure you know, Jewish law allows us to do almost anything in order to save a life. So the medical prescription to eat pork is hardly an issue. But this man... this man was determined to triumph not only over his disease, but also over the cure. Yes, of course, he would eat pork, as instructed by the physician. He would not, however, eat an animal that had been killed in an unkosher manner. He wouldn't do it. So he bought a pig. And he took it to the schochet, the kosher butcher.

"Schacht me this chazer," the man pleads. "Please slaughter this pig for me in the proper ritually kosher manner."

The schochet listened sympathetically to the man's story. Yes, yes, he would slaughter this animal in a kosher manner. Of course, he'd have to buy a special knife. He couldn't use his old knives. Or, if he did, he wouldn't be able to reuse them. So, with his new knife, on a new table, away from all the other implements, the butcher went about his business. Only then, when he was done, to his horror, on the lung of said swine he discovered.. a blemish.

Now, such a blemish on a cow would mean that the animal was treif, was unfit for consumption by traditional Jews. But what did it mean on a pig? So patient and butcher, together, went to the rabbi. "Rabbi," they asked, "is this pig kosher?"

Now, this is a man who will do what he needs to do, but is tied to something beyond his own immediate needs as well. Faced with something the Talmud never thought of, he struggles, to figure out what his God wants of him in a weird new world.

What I am about to claim is hard to say. It may be hard to hear. You may not agree with the conclusions I will come to this morning -- in any event, agreement, unless I am giving cause-oriented remarks, is not necessarily my goal. My three goals in a sermon are 1) to touch the heart, 2) to make people think and above all, 3) to keep you awake. So, you may not agree with what I have to say today. But hear me out, I ask you, and we can argue about it amongst friends in the weeks and months and years to come.

I believe that this dynamic, this pull of tradition, this sense of obligation to anything other than ourselves has been too much missing from yesterday's Reform Judaism. I believe that we have worshiped our will and invented an idolatry of the self. I believe that it is the need to restore a balance, to remind ourselves of the transcendent, of the One who speaks to us from beyond -- more than the embrace of any specific ritual or return to tradition -- that is the heart of the new Reform Judaism today. And I believe that we need to ask ourselves what the educated and committed Reform Jew of tomorrow will be like, in a way that will touch our heart not just one day of the year, but every day of our lives.

We live in a world of war and terror; we have witnessed a year of madness and incomprehensible atrocity. We have spoken much in this past year about freedom. But freedom can be misunderstood to mean the opportunity to do whatever we want, whenever we want to do it. I believe that this is *not* the kind of freedom that the founders of this country envisioned, nor even that meant by the first philosophers of Reform Judaism. To know *who* we are, to know *what* we stand for, to know, indeed, what binds our heart and stays our hand, *that* is the deepest freedom of the soul. **W**
have worshiped autonomy, at the expense of obligation.

Change is a part of life. Poignantly, paradoxically, it is the only thing that does not change. An example. We are having services for Rosh Hashanah... tomorrow: a second day of Rosh Hashanah. An old custom. But if you haven't been there before, well. It's new to you.

I once met with a woman in a different congregation upset and angry that the synagogue now had a service for the Second Day of Rosh Hashanah. Where was *her* Reform Judaism? she wanted to know, Reform the way it used to be, with little Hebrew and hidden choirs, with dignified, decorous services and a disdain for ritual of any kind. Second Day Rosh Hashanah? Why, that's *Orthodox!*

So many ways to respond. Never mind the *real* answer: that Reform Judaism has *always* changed, and evolved; that this is why it is called *Reform* Judaism and not *Reformed*, that it is an ongoing process, that, indeed, the *essential* insight of our movement is that the *outer forms* of our spiritual lives can – should – must -- *grow* in response to an interaction with the surrounding culture... and that, therefore, *hello!* The appearance of Reform Judaism is going to *continually* change, with the climate and character of the times. That, in this way, Reform Judaism is absolutely consistent. In allowing for change, it has not changed at all.

I tried to respond rationally, but I missed the deeper meaning, that she was feeling lost and displaced, yearning for yesterday, for the comfort of what was. I answered with my head and not my heart, and with that standard slogan of our movement, personal choice. I tried to be reassuring: “Well, it’s optional.” I said. “It’s for those who want it. You don’t *have* to go.” Her response was more than I bargained for. “Rabbi,” she said, “I don’t *have to* come on the first day, either!”

You know, she’s right. It’s true. You don’t *have to* be here. Thankfully gone are the days of flogging the slackers who don’t show up in shul, shaming families who don’t

keep customs the way communal bosses say they should. Americans and moderns both, we rebel against autocracy and imposition and coercion. The reality of our lives is the opposite. We live in a world of voluntarism and democracy and choice. So what this woman said, of course, it's true.

My question is: *should* it be? Is *this* what Reform Judaism means? Is this *all* it means? Is this what we have become, that we can do *anything we want*, and call it Jewish?

A year ago, in the days after the High Holy Days, in the midst of much weightier matters, a small item in the Style section of the *Washington Post* caught my eye. It was a gossip column report on an African-American politician and a well-known Jewish journalist, seen together in a restaurant. On Yom Kippur. What was the journalist eating? Why, a ham and cheese sandwich. Some *schmendrik* had the *chutzpah* to say something. A ham and cheese sandwich, in public, on Yom Kippur? Look, I would have stared for a second, and left them alone. But the journalist's response really stuck in my craw. His response, offered as explanation, not an excuse: "I am a Reform Jew."

Call it what you will: autonomy, personal preference, freedom. This notion that we can pick and choose what we want to do has become *the* litmus test of Reform Judaism. We've even taken the term we try to use for converts -- Jews-by-choice -- and emphasized that, in the modern world, we are *all* Jews-by-choice. As Rabbi Eric

Yoffie, president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations wrote, a la Kennedy, “in the eyes of too many, Jews do not exist to serve Judaism, Judaism exists to serve the needs of Jews.”

Of course Judaism should serve the needs of Jews. But listen closely. Jews and Judaism. It should be a *two-way street*. Not alone a tyranny of faith, but *neither* the unrestrained whim of the folk. **My friends, we have overdone a good idea.** Freedom exists in the *context of commitment*, as *part of* the whole of who we are, not in a vacuum. Even in our first freedom, our Exodus from Egypt, we ended our servitude to Pharaoh, to *enter into the service of God!* We were *supposed to be* free, we Reform Jews, *within the bounds and ties* of our Jewish identity, not *about* them.

A little background. We based our idea of autonomy on the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Autonomy, to Kant, meant a freedom *from* any external pressures -- institutions, power structures even emotions and passions -- which might influence our thinking, and the freedom *to* follow the unfettered dictates of reason. Through this pure, internal mental process, Kant believed, we would then “discover a moral *law*, applicable everywhere and equally to the behavior of all people. To the authority of that moral law... the individual, in turn becomes... subject.” (Herb Bronstein, 1999 quoting H.J. Paton, 1950) And is bound. In my words now: **The uncovered *ought*... becomes a universal *must*. Autonomy begets obligation.**

And here is the problem. We have seen with our own eyes a century in which one person’s morality is another’s atrocity. We no longer believe that reason is pure,

that our thoughts can ever be untouched by the assumptions of gender and culture and race. What we are left with is a philosophy of “freedom *from*”, absent any companion rationale of “freedom *to*.”

I believe that a blank check, a blanket *heksher* to ‘do whatever you want’ does a disservice to the Jews *and* Judaism of today. And I believe that, more than any other motive, the new Reform Judaism is an ongoing experiment in what we are free *to do*.

Like that woman I spoke about earlier, there are those of you who are worried about what is happening to “*your* Judaism,” to the language and liturgy you loved, to the style of worship and level of observance you were comfortable with. That’s not just happening here; it’s going on in every Reform congregation in the country.

Now, there is a lot to be said here. No one sermon alone can send an adequate message of comfort, or can convey the sense that what seems to be a “new” Reform, greater experimentation with a wider variety of practices, is a *development from*, not a *rejection of* the Reform Judaism of the past. As we heard last night, we will spend much of the next year, as a congregation, in a programmatic and pedagogical exploration on the theme of “Reform Judaism: Celebrating our Past, Creating our Future.”

With all its greatness and glory, and all of what our movement had already

achieved in Jewish life*, I believe that part of what is going on is a reaction to an anarchy of individualism, a “do-whatever-you want” view of Reform Judaism that has developed in popular perception and practice.

To try to be reassuring to some of you, let me tell you, for a moment, what this new Reform Judaism is *not*. It is *not* a credal oath of affirmation. It is not a new and different litmus test of observance. It is not even a return to *specific* expectations about particular commandments. No pork police knock down your doors, or stop you in your car for a *traific* violation. An open tent, a pluralistic movement, an inclusive community, we welcome with warmth Jews and Jewish families in all the varied shapes and sizes they come in today; the woman who *davens* with tallit and kippah, and the man who sits next to her and worships bareheaded; equal partners all in the Reform Judaism of today.

But today, when one wears a *kippah*, and another does not, we not only expect each of them to be comfortable with their own choices. We *also* expect them to be comfortable... *with each other*.

What is new here? The Reform Judaism of today reflects a new openness to tradition, evident in congregations across the continent, a thirst for meaning and hunger for depth in which the ancient customs of our people are no longer off limits in the spiritual journeys of modern Jews. It calls upon all of us to take our tradition more seriously than we have, to study Torah with more discipline and devotion than we have, and, yes, to be open to “the whole array of *mitzvot*” [a word which means not

“good deeds” but “*commandments*”], some long observed by Reform Jews, others, both ancient and modern, demanding renewed attention.”

We are free to choose still, but open to a larger repertoire, perhaps, and aware that if we do feel “addressed” by a particular custom, it is not as an adornment or a dressing or a nicety. Though our choices may differ from those of others, what we embrace we take on with the force of a *commandment*, and the awareness of a compelling power beyond ourselves.

And in the words between the lines we assert with pride: no longer are we a Reform Judaism defined by what we *don't* do. You can't define us the same way anymore: that we *don't* use Hebrew, we *don't* cover our heads, we *don't* keep kosher. No, the *results* may be the same for some, but the *rationale* is different.

Called upon to choose, equally bound in the covenant of Israel as any other Jew, we begin in openness and freedom. But now remember an ancient goal. It is to uncover constraints. And acknowledge their source. Obligation: a yoke upon the soul, yes, but a tie that binds, an arrow as well, pointing to a place beyond the self. Rabbi Yoffie again: “If *mitzvot* are done to please God, we must be prepared, at least some of the time, to please God *before* we please ourselves.”

Or, in more ancient words: “It has been asked you, O Israel, what it is that the Eternal, your God demands of you.”

What *is* it that is demanded of us, as the educated Reform Jews of tomorrow?

To find answers, we need to ask questions. Some of the questions will sound bizarre. They will be “kosher-pig” kinds of questions. For a strange new world. But they need to be faced.

Am I doing enough for my children? Am I doing enough for my parents? Am I doing enough for my people? Is this genetically-altered tomato kosher? Is stem-cell research kosher? How far do we go to have a child? What can we do to *not* have a child? How much do we do to keep a loved one alive? Am I helping or hurting the planet? Can watering my lawn be against Jewish law? Where is the balance between defense and offense? In Afghanistan and Israel, in Iraq and in Chevy Chase, where is the border, between justice and revenge? Is it even possible to remember the past and also not “stop thinking about tomorrow?” Is this what we are supposed to do, in a situation we never knew we’d face?

For a moment, forget denomination. Authentic Jews ask questions. We ask questions about what happens in our lives. What is the Jewish answer? Listen. The answer is rarely: do whatever you want. The answer is rarely “it’s *permitted*.” The answer is either: it’s required. Or: it’s forbidden. Case by case, the answer, if there is a God, is a commandment.

But since we cannot, we will not, we *should* not return to a religion of coercion, we cannot, as Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf writes, reconstitute the obligatory through others. Wolf, who, as we heard last night, will address our congregation in early November, asserts that we can only discover it ourselves. [The source of authority

remains, then, as it has been. It is the intensity, and the discipline, that must reach a new level.] It is not the number of *mitzvot* you perform, but the direction of your life that matters. Are you going in, or coming out? Are you acting out of obligation, or whim? Is God at the center of the universe? Or do you worship yourself?

Let me try to put this in a different way. Have you ever felt the call of compulsion? The pull to do something, not what you wanted to do, but *because it was the right thing to do*? There is a wholeness in that feeling, a holiness. A power beyond words.

We read this morning a story of a rope, and a knife. A story at once both compelling and horrible, like an accident we cannot tear our eyes from, an encounter we are eager to avoid and cannot stop thinking about.

Perhaps... perhaps we have been reading it wrong for centuries. Maybe we've missed the point. Maybe this story is not about a *literal* sacrifice at all. But in a parent teaching a hard lesson to a child. Maybe the point was the rope, and the knife. After all, Isaac was bound. And lived. As Pippin found: "if I'm not tied to anything, I'll never be free." Or, in more familiar words, echoing still for all of us in this year of rediscovered patriotism: "Confirm thy soul in self-control, thy liberty in law."

So, too, are all of us bound. By our heritage. By the echoes of yesterday, and the

call of tomorrow. By the influences around us. By our obligations and commitments. By the things we think constrain us, which are, in the end, half of who we are.

“L’chol eish yeish sheim, shenatnu lo heharim, v’natnu lo k’talov; Each of us has a name, given by the mountains, and given by our walls.”

“Elu d’varim she’ein lahem shi’iur; These are the obligations without measure, that which we take upon ourselves in this world, and whose full fruits we taste, in the world to come...”

L’shanah Tovah.