

Rabbi Lewis' Message for May, 2011

I confess – I can't predict the future. Frankly, I hadn't given it much thought to it until I was asked to write an article about the future of the Reform rabbinate. I can write about the past and the present, I said, but find someone younger to write about the future. Find a newly-ordained rabbi who uses a Blackberry, posts on Facebook, tweets on Twitter and creates Power-Point haggadot for Pesach. But don't ask me.

It isn't that I don't care about the future of the Reform rabbinate. I just can't envision how it might look. The future of the Reform rabbinate is interconnected with the future of Reform Judaism; and I can't envision how that might look, either. Fortunately there are some rabbis who have taken on the challenge of thinking about the future. They have broadened the question about the future of the rabbinate into a challenge about how to shape the Jewish future. Their initial venture was a secret one:

*“In the fall of 2009, when it became glaringly apparent that our movement was in disarray, a group of rabbis formed the **Rabbinic Vision Initiative (RVI)**. The HUC-JIR had just gone through a blistering period of turmoil regarding its finances and continued support of three stateside campuses, and the URJ had enacted its restructuring plan.*

While the national arms of our movement were managing their own budgetary and programmatic declines there was no indication that those institutions, independently or together, had crafted a visionary and coordinated plan for the entire movement. We believed that a first step toward change was for a group of the Senior Rabbis of larger congregations reflecting differing generational and geographical experiences to engage in unpublicized and forthright conversations on a way forward to help transform and sustain the future of our movement...”

After beginning their deliberations in private, the initial 17 rabbis have expanded their membership and have gone public with their view of the challenges to our rapidly evolving Jewish community:

1. Jews do not feel an obligation to be Jewish as previous generations once did.
 2. There is no one way to be Jewish today
 3. Denominational differences are blurring.
 4. Intermarriage has dramatically impacted Jewish life.
 5. Our 20 and 30 year olds are changing the rules.
 6. National organizations can no longer depend on communal support for Israel.
- They have developed a plan of action for our movement, including the plan to “*Convene selected change agents and visionaries, without regard to institutional*

involvement, to consider the future of Reform/Liberal Judaism, in order to access the expertise of the “best and the brightest” within our midst.”

Their conclusion includes their wish as well as their concrete promise to make the future of Reform *“the dynamic force that our forebears set into motion so many years ago.”*

“We imagine a movement that will deepen commitment to study, prayer, tikkun olam, medinat yisrael and am yisrael; provide basic services to congregations which require them; provide services that individual congregations may not be able to independently support (camps, Israel trips, RAC); anticipate future trends and challenges; serve as an incubator and help attract funding for transformative congregational programming; engage Reform Jewish youth; establish excellence as the single standard and goal for our national organizations and all programs of our movement, including the caliber and preparation of our professionals; and create a culture of creativity within our congregations, among our congregations, and beyond them.

We reaffirm our claim on the robust and progressive Reform Judaism that nourished us with vision and purpose. We passionately embrace this profound responsibility: to shape a Jewish future in the 21st century, to decisively meet the challenges of societal transformation, and to commit ourselves to the sacred mission of Reform Judaism, the dynamic, ever-changing, constantly-evolving, living tradition of Jewish life”.

As the Rabbinic Visioning Initiative produces more information, I will share it with you here and from the pulpit. Not knowing what the future will be is no excuse for not planning. The children we educate today will be the leaders of that Jewish community of the future. Our job is to equip them with the tools they need. Our people haven't survived all these centuries by accident. We have always had a plan for living our vision of God, Torah and Israel. May the seeds we plant today grow into the flourishing Jewish communities of the future.

Rabbi Lewis