

## Challenges of Reform Judaism

I want to begin by playing a new game – Progressive Judaism Bingo. There are, I'm afraid, no prizes involved! So, I want you all to think about which of the following questions you have been asked as a Reform Jew. And feel free to shout 'bingo' if you answer yes to all of them.

1. Can you drive on Shabbat? 2. Do you keep kosher? 3. Do you really have a female rabbi? 4. Do you allow same sex marriages? 5. Do men and women really sit together? 6. Do women wear kippot and tallit? 7. You're a Reform Jew, so did you *megaya*/convert? Did you marry someone who *megay'ed*/converted?

Maybe also you've had friends and family say, it's easier to be a Reform Jew as you can pick and choose. It's a watered-down form of Judaism. You're not a real Jew. Anyone got bingo? I have - bingo!

These questions demonstrate that lots of people are interested in Reform Judaism and that there is a lot of ignorance out there. It's fair to say that a perception in Manchester is that Reform Judaism is the option for those who want to marry a non-Jew. It offers a home to those who can't find a home in other forms of Judaism. There is a certain truth to that and I've heard a lot of stories over the past few months of people who felt excluded elsewhere and included here. But we know that this statement is not the whole truth. We have families who have been Reform Jews for many generations, people who have converted *lishma* because they felt the pull towards Judaism and Reform Judaism offered a forward thinking, inclusive home and many more.

Actually, these questions show a basic lack of understanding of what Reform Judaism is. How do Reform Jews keep Shabbat? Do they keep kosher? All these questions demand a yes or no answer. But part of being a reform Jew is not having an answer! We do not have a one size fits all policy. We don't dictate what our personal spiritual or religious practices should be. And this lack of uniformity and lack of yes and no answers leads to the myth that Reform Judaism is easy and we pick and choose. It is all about informed decision making.

One of my rabbinic colleagues, Rabbi Miriam Berger, often said that it can be much harder being a Reform Jew than a Jew who lives strictly by *halachah* – Jewish law. That's because we *have* to be informed. We *have* to struggle with each of our own personal practices and make our *own* decisions. Each time we make a decision - be it around kashrut, how many nights of shiva we do, how we personally mark Shabbat -we weigh up many factors in our decision making. An analogy might be when we choose a holiday - we think

about prices, weather, timing, politics. So what is it that we look at as Reform Jews? What guides our decision making? Rabbi Tony Bayfield said that there are three factors we hold. Imagine a triangle with each of us in the middle. The first is **tradition** – what does my Jewish tradition have to say on my family and community – both halachic (legally) and aggadic (through our sacred stories)? Secondly – we look to our **community**. How will my actions affect my Jewish community? We're aware we're part of something larger than ourselves. Thirdly – we consider **God** and struggle with what God means! Perhaps, thinking Jewishly – as opposed to other types of decision making – how our actions bring light, love, and meaning to ourselves and to the world around us.

Yet being a Reform Jew means adding a complexity to this triangle. Rabbi Miriam Berger, Rabbi Bayfield's daughter, has added another triangle to our image of reform Jewish decision making. She teaches, we don't only think about the Jewish tradition but we consider what our tradition of being a 21<sup>st</sup> century citizen. The wisdom and knowledge found in our wider society - from science, art, the gay liberation movement, the civil rights movement. We are aware of our multiples traditions and identities and look to those traditions for guidance. And finally, we don't only think about our God and our relationship to our God but our relationship to *Ein Sof* – a kabbalistic name for God which denotes something higher than ourselves that we can't name. We value others' beliefs and know that our path is no better than that of others but simply a segment of a prism reaching upwards.

So we have two triangles – and if you invert one of them – we make a *Magen David*, a star of David. We have an intricate web with overlapping factors by which we make our decision. And we are in the centre. We bring ourselves to this complex web and infuse Judaism and shape it along the way. There is no one size fits all. We cannot answer with a yes or no but instead must ask what does it mean for us? How does it fit with Jewish tradition and modern wisdom and knowledge? How will it affect my community and humanity?

Being a reform Jew carries with it a huge responsibility and the potential for personal liberation and redemption. I am so proud to be a reform Jew – to champion women's rights, gay and transgender rights, and a way of looking and practising Judaism which offers no answers but demands questions, which doesn't shut down conversations but opens them up.

But we do have a problem – and our problem is labels. Yes we are Reform Jews, Progressive Jews (with our own particular history and heritage to be proud of) but we are also just...Jewish. Reform Judaism has not *reformed* Judaism. Judaism is a religion that expects questions and demands change – it has never been static. And there are many Orthodox Jews who have progressive attitudes. Labels can be unhelpful. Our name Israel, means to struggle with God. Being Jewish is all about being uncomfortable – of having responsibility for our actions and holding ourselves to account.

Judaism is a radical religion which has always moved with the times. From biblical times when we included, at odds to other Near Eastern law books, the stranger to the list of those people we are responsible for. To the rabbis who said you don't need a Temple to pray to God, to us here today saying your gender and sexuality don't determine whether you can or can't participate in our community. We are Reform Jews. We are Jewish. May Jackson's Row continue to shine as a beacon for a community which is proud of its identity and approach to Judaism. Ken Yehi Ratzon – May this be God's Will. Amen.

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