



American Reform Judaism: An Introduction

Dana Evan Kaplan

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The only comprehensive and up-to-date look at Reform Judaism, this book analyzes the forces currently challenging the Reform movement, now the largest Jewish denomination in the United States.

To distinguish itself from Orthodox and Conservative Judaism, the Reform movement tries to be an egalitarian, open, and innovative version of the faith true to the spirit of the tradition but nonetheless fully compatible with modern secular life. Promoting itself in this way, Reform Judaism has been tremendously successful in recruiting a variety of people—intermarried families, feminists, gays and lesbians, and interracial families among others—who resist more traditional forms of worship.

As an unintended result of this success, the movement now struggles with an identity crisis brought on by its liberal theology, which teaches that each Jew is free to practice Judaism more or less as he or she pleases. In the absence of the authority that comes from a theology based on a commanding, all-powerful God, can Reform Judaism continue to thrive? Can it be broadly inclusive and still be uniquely and authentically Jewish?

Taking this question as his point of departure, Dana Evan Kaplan provides a broad overview of the American Reform movement and its history, theology, and politics. He then takes a hard look at the challenges the movement faces as it attempts to reinvent itself in the new millennium. In so doing, Kaplan gives the reader a sense of where Reform Judaism has come from, where it stands on the major issues, and where it may be going.

Addressing the issues that have confronted the movement—including the ordination of women, acceptance of homosexuality, the problem of assimilation, the question of rabbinic officiation at intermarriages, the struggle for acceptance in Israel, and Jewish education and others—Kaplan sheds light on the connection between Reform ideology and cultural realities. He unflinchingly, yet optimistically, assesses the movement's future and cautions that stormy weather may be ahead.

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