

Rosh Hashanah 2070 or; The New Reformists
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This is an imagined sermon of an American rabbi, delivered on Rosh Hashanah, in the year 2070.

Now listen, I know we are dignified, serious people. But can we play a little and pretend it's fifty years from now? Which, by the way, will be 5831 on the Hebrew calendar, and I guarantee that the joke "I'm still writing 5830 on my checks" would not be understood in this future era.

Now, cue teleporting music, and we're off.

Shanah tovah. So nice to see everyone, in person, on Zoom, in hologram form.

Friends, remarkably, it's been *fifty years* since a microscopic pathogen upended our world. Back in the 20s, my children were young and I wavered between hope and lamenting for the world they'd inherit. Remember in the Covid era and the pervasive uncertainty that hung in our midst like a thick fog that wouldn't lift? Of perhaps more magnitude than the disease were the questions it uncovered. What would become of our institutions, our governmental systems, liberalism, our democracy? In the public realm, honesty was hard to come by, as was basic common decency. A pervasive anxiety and unease made us feel adrift.

Tocqueville (yeah, we still read him!) wrote that "the greatness of America lies not in being more enlightened than any other nation, but rather in her ability to repair her faults." But if our capacity to right our wrongs was the measure of our greatness, we were far from great back then. Instead of making good on America's promises, we argued over our wrongs and couldn't agree on what was right. I say *we*, but our politics and culture were fragmented. Anger and frustration rained down on us and the world flooded. Even as Covid killed millions and evil dictators started wars; as random acts of violence were normalized and despair rose, we couldn't arrive at any common meaning about who we were as American citizens, and who we wanted to be.¹

¹ On the subject of finding common meaning I'm inspired by Terry Eagleton who ends his book *The Meaning of Life* with the following sentence: "No doubt our continuing wrangles over the meaning of life will prove to be fertile and productive. But in a world where we live in overwhelming danger, our failure to find common meanings is as alarming as it is invigorating."

The contested elections of '24 and '28, and the early days of the 2030s, maybe after that's when things began to change. But even then, we couldn't foresee that by century's midpoint, new seedlings would break through hard ground. Today, fifty years after those treacherous decades, we can identify what was happening and the changes that brought about "The Great Transformation." The Great Transformation—those years when our country returned to the principles of the Declaration; human equality, natural rights, and a government responsive to its people. The Great Transformation—the period in which we came to recognize and uphold the dignity of all human beings, of our fellow citizens, our neighbors. I'm particularly interested in how our liberal Jewish communities fared in The Great Transformation.

How did we uphold and then strengthen our chain of tradition, ushering in a new narrative for American Judaism? How did we, as Rabbi Hoffman taught us, learn to "speak in a register that does justice to the human condition."² What changed?

We can begin by remembering that in the 2020s America had all but lost its religious character and was secularizing like Europe. A growing number of people defined themselves as "spiritual but not religious" or as having no religion at all. Church and synagogue attendance was down. Scandals plagued religious institutions and their leaders. A headline actually read: "Religion could disappear by 2041." By all measures, religion was on the defensive, or on the offensive, in the form of extremism.

For Jewish communities in particular, the story was similar. Liberal Judaism was said to be dying a slow death. Our congregations were shrinking, and participating in Jewish rituals was seen as time consuming rather than time-enhancing. Fewer young people wanted to become rabbis³ Jewish knowledge—as it was measured then—was thinning. We focused on survival but not about what it would mean to thrive. We asked how to make Judaism attractive to the next generation but only arrived at new marketing techniques.

But even with flashy new upstarts, our religious vocabulary was stale and rotting. We still used words like "intermarriage" to define an entire category of people instead of seeing the more complex story of an emerging Jewish way of life.

Remember how it was foretold that Orthodox communities would soon represent the greatest share of American Jews?

² Hoffman, "Judaism as a Conversation," 2019. (Unpublished)

³ For the Reform seminary in particular, Hebrew Union College, enrollment has declined 37% over the past two decades.

But the future is never easily predicted. Consider the Merneptah Stele, a stone artifact from 1208 B.C.E. that lists Egypt's military victories. It says: "Israel has been laid waste, her seed is no more." Except—here we are. 2070. Still writing our story, because we know that *what we aspire to, determines our direction forward*. Even if there is no hope, we act as though there is which makes it so.⁴

What else has changed?

We talk about God differently now. We stopped asking "Do you believe in God?" and instead ask questions like, "What narrative tells the story of human flourishing, and how am I a part of that narrative?" We embraced fiction, games of imagination, and came to recognize they aren't just for children but are crucial for grownups, crucial in their ability to shape our worldview. And in embracing a new naivete, we allow ourselves to find transcendence. As a four year old once put it, "For real, God is pretend, and for pretend, God is real."⁵ Those sage words from a child brought us closer to our highest ethical values, and that's what Torah really is, stories that enable us to live in a Divine world.

We have learned that Jewish ideas find their greatest expression when they navigate from the *mind* to the *hand*. The truth about who we are, in turns out, is not contained in some cryptic Talmudic text, but is, rather, about how we live, today, *our* lives... as participants in a community that will outlast us all. In 2070, we know—ask not what Judaism can do for *me*, but what *I* can contribute to the Jewish story.

Perhaps the greatest change over the last several decades has been the influx of non-Jews into our communities. They've joined us because of marriage, but also because we said out loud, publicly, "anyone who's asking life's ultimate question, join our conversation. We have a few things to say about the good life."⁶

Because of our open doors, liberal Jewish communities have nearly doubled in size.⁷

⁴ William James wrote "Beliefs, in short, are really rules for action." This is Pragmatism, a uniquely American philosophy. I learned the most about pragmatism from *The Metaphysical Club* by Louis Menand.

⁵ Hershovitz, Scott. "How to Pray to a God You Don't Believe In." *The New York Times*, 2 May 2022.

⁶ This is part of the thinking behind The Micah Storefront Project.

⁷ Fanciful thinking, maybe, but according to Pew, a rising share of the offspring of intermarriages are choosing to be Jewish in adulthood.

Maybe another reason for this influx is the shift in how we see ourselves— not as a people persecuted, beaten down throughout history, but as a people full of life who stand on the shoulders of giants. After more than 400 years in America, we’ve created something that is uniquely ours. We do not look over our shoulders and say, “they’re more religious,” or hold up the past as a model for an authentic Jewish way of life. We are wholly ourselves.⁸

As I reflect on the past fifty years, what seems to me most crucial is the elevated role of Shabbat in our lives. With practice and dedication, we continue to learn to balance secular living with the holiness of rest. Where we once invited work into our lives at all times, at all hours, in all rooms—during family dinners or nights out with friends, where once rest was only in service of more work, our weekly stroll in the Garden of Eden invites us and entices us as the remedy for a balanced life.⁹

Okay, the pretending part’s over. Thanks for playing.

It’s not 2070. Not yet. The Great Transformation may be no more than something to hope for, both for the country we love and the Jewish tradition that defines us. But the Jewish story is, at its essence, one of perseverance and hope. I’m inspired by Dr. Karl Lippe, who at the First Zionist Congress said, “In spite of the unspeakable and never-ending injustice we have had to suffer, we Jews have not despaired of humanity.”¹⁰ We held seders in DP camps! We found humor and courage in every stage of our existence, be it shining or wretched.

This tradition of hope began with our prophets, and continued with our rabbis, followed by philosophers, Mystics, Hasidism, and then the Zionists—all of whom, *because of their persistent hope*, authored a new Judaism. Now this history must be carried forward by us, *The New Reformists*.

May the Source of Being grant us good health in this new year, and the continued ability to bring meaning to our days, in 5783, in 5831, and beyond.

Shanah tovah.

⁸ I think often about Jacob Neusner and his view on the uniqueness of American Judaism. As summarized by Shaul Magid, Neusner’s central thesis is that “the reception and in some cases mythicization of the Holocaust in American Jewry prevents American Jews from actualizing the distinct potential that exists for them to move beyond an identity founded on oppression and persecution, or ‘negative Judaism,’ and toward a new identity that trusts the world enough to view itself as an integral part of an open society.”

⁹ As we know from Ahad Aham, more than Jews have kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept the Jews. How much more so will it keep us as we go deeper into the age of distraction and hyper consumption?!?

¹⁰ On August 28, 1897, Dr. Karl Lippe gave the opening address at the First Zionist Congress. For a full text see Michael J. Reimer, *The First Zionist Congress An Annotated Translation of the Proceedings*.