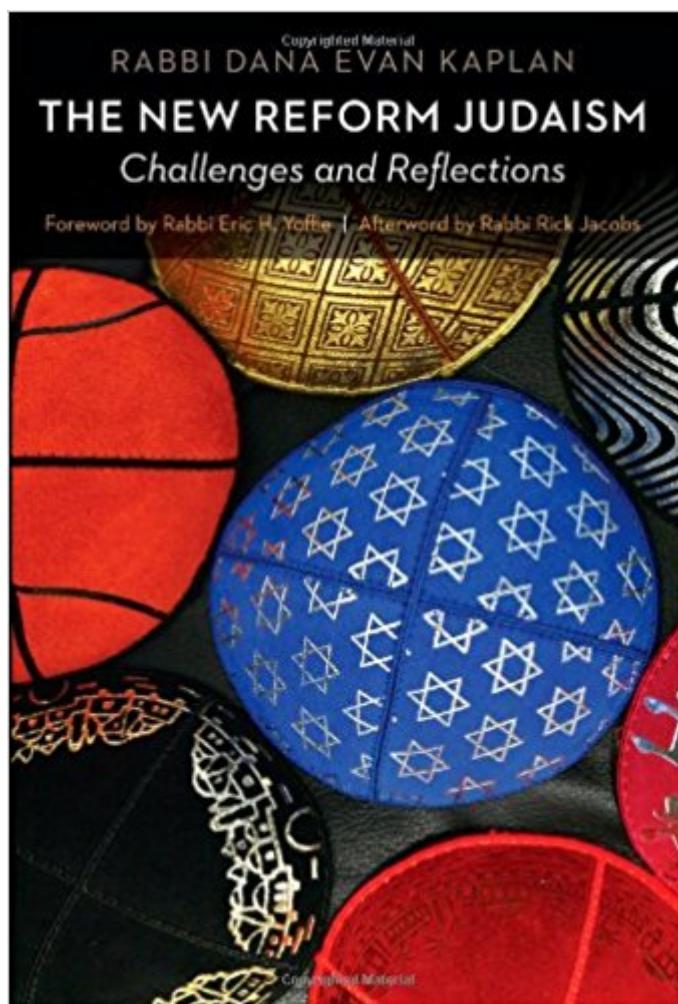


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# The New Reform Judaism: Challenges And Reflections



## Synopsis

This is the book that American Jews and particularly American Reform Jews have been waiting for: a clear and informed call for further reform in the Reform movement. In light of profound demographic, social, and technological developments, it has become increasingly clear that the Reform movement will need to make major changes to meet the needs of a quickly evolving American Jewish population. Younger Americans in particular differ from previous generations in how they relate to organized religion, often preferring to network through virtual groups or gather in informal settings of their own choosing. Dana Evan Kaplan, an American Reform Jew and pulpit rabbi, argues that rather than focusing on the importance of loyalty to community, Reform Judaism must determine how to engage the individual in a search for existential meaning. It should move us toward a critical scholarly understanding of the Hebrew Bible, that we may emerge with the perspectives required by a postmodern world. Such a Reform Judaism can at once help us understand how the ancient world molded our most cherished religious traditions and guide us in addressing the increasingly complex social problems of our day.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Rabbi Kaplan's accessible and compelling exploration of the makings, markings, and current state of Reform Judaism provides an informative, comprehensive tour for both those new to the subject and those familiar with it. Kaplan surveys contemporary scholars, American Reform leaders, and everyday people who have come to Reform Judaism from other traditions or have become more aware of their identities as Reform Jews to personalize his presentation of history, social anthropology, and theology. Kaplan also does a fine job of explaining

facts and discussing experiences. With a focus on individuals who reside elsewhere than the Northeastern U.S. seaboard and his own current association with a synagogue in Jamaica, the often exaggerated points of geographic and cultural connections fall away and give this book a feeling of broadness. An ideal candidate for those who find intellectual nurture in books like Martin Gilbert’s *Jews in the Twentieth Century* (2001) or simply wonder what exactly is this thing called being Jewish means for many in the twenty-first century. --Francisca Goldsmith

Rabbi Dana Kaplan traces the ways in which Reform Judaism has met the challenges of living in a secular society and sets forth his view of what it must do moving forward. He argues that a tent so big it includes every point of view is too vague to win the souls of today’s young people. Kaplan’s book is a warning that, despite its expensive buildings and trained professional staffs, the Reform movement may not be able to sustain itself unless it can articulate a reason for its existence. Rabbi Jack ReimerBest Jewish Books 2013 A J Weekly of Northern California “Judaism is at a crossroads. . . . Those eager to understand and participate in this exciting new chapter in Jewish history will find extensive background and stimulation in *The New Reform Judaism*, a valuable contribution to this evolving discourse.” •Rabbi Rick Jacobs, president, Union for Reform Judaism (Rabbi Rick Jacobs 2013-03-05) “Dana Evan Kaplan has become the chronicler of contemporary Reform Judaism. In this fascinating book, he takes us on a journey through the complexities of a modern liberal faith that is now confronting a period of great upheaval . . . an upheaval that impacts all Jews and all religious Americans.” •Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie, president emeritus, Union for Reform Judaism (Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie 2013-03-05) “[*The New Reform Judaism*] is a useful resource for clergy as well as for synagogue and academic libraries.” •Barbara M. Bibel, Jewish Book Council (Barbara M. Bibel Jewish Book Council) “Rabbi Kaplan’s accessible and compelling exploration of the makings, markings, and current state of Reform Judaism provides an informative, comprehensive tour for both those new to the subject and those familiar with it.” •Francisca Goldsmith, Booklist (Francisca Goldsmith Booklist 2013-11-15)

This is an excellent overview of past and present Reform Judaism from the perspective of the Union for Reform Judaism. Reform Judaism has consciously undertaken to move away from many traditional practices, resulting in many controversies over which new directions to take. The value of the book is greatly enhanced by Kaplan’s candid description of these controversies. Interestingly, Kaplan refers repeatedly to Reform Judaism’s special respect for modern biblical scholarship,

without indicating how that respect manifests itself in the life of contemporary Reform congregations.

It is fully recommended for anyone who wants to learn about Modern Reform Judaism and also study his historical aspects.

Judaism seems to operate in perpetual crisis mode. To understand the crisis and the possible path to something better, I strongly recommend this book by Rabbi Dana Kaplan. Rabbi Kaplan is one of Reform Judaism's most important voices, and certainly one of its leading visionaries. Rabbi Kaplan is troubled by Reform Judaism's evident desire to try to be all things to all Jews. While Rabbi Kaplan embraces the religious pluralism that is arguably Reform Judaism's strongest selling point, he also argues that pluralism is no excuse for avoiding serious scholarly and theological questions, and for clearly stating what it is that we believe in. The Reform Judaism envisioned by Rabbi Kaplan would demand more of Jews like me affiliated with this denomination. Rabbi Kaplan acknowledges that Reform Judaism is based on individual religious autonomy, but argues that this autonomy "only works well if each person takes the time to carefully consider her religious choices." Kaplan's primary argument is that the leadership of Reform Judaism has failed to set forth the kind of theological consistency and denominational self-definition required for individual Jews to make responsible choices. When we are left with instead is "ambiguity, contradiction, and doctrinal confusion." No wonder that modern, liberal Jews like me often appear to be lost, and adrift. Personally, I am not convinced that we can have both a big Jewish tent AND the kind of clarity of purpose that Rabbi Kaplan recommends. His desire to base Reform Judaism on an updated sort of 19th century ethical monotheism strikes me as problematic, requiring a kind of belief in God that doesn't work for many post-moderns, and a move away from the Jewish "spirituality" that is popular in many circles today. Certainly it is possible for Judaism to embrace both the inward and outward directions of Judaism, but it is the desire to include everything within the big tent that is partly why Reform Judaism seems so amorphous to many. But I agree strongly with Rabbi Kaplan that Reform Judaism cannot afford to continue to ask so little of us. And I agree strongly that it cannot be left solely to the individual to decide how to grow to be a wiser, more compassionate and more committed Jew. In short, I think Rabbi Kaplan is on the right track. I recommend his book to anyone interested in the future of American Judaism..

"Whether you call [the Reform movement] salad bar religion or a filling-station synagogue, the imagery is not pleasant. There is a devil's bargain being made between an often self-satisfied leadership and an apathetic laity. Many Reform synagogues have large numbers on the books but few active participants. We are now seeing the consequences of the benign neglect that has been plaguing Reform Judaism for many years." (p. 312) This is Reform Rabbi Kaplan's indictment of current Reform Judaism, which in his view sorely needs a new, coherent theological vision if it is to thrive in the future. Strikingly, the forward to the book by Rabbi Eric Yoffie, outgoing President of the Union for Reform Judaism, and the afterward, by Rabbi Rick Jacobs, the new President of the URJ, both disagree with the thesis of the book. I, as an active Reform Jew, find Rabbi Kaplan's message a very welcome voice, especially coming from clergy, and hope that many others will join him in rejecting the current 'cafeteria' or as he puts it 'salad bar' approach which tries to be all things to all people. The problem with the dominant approach is that it has no power to inspire or lead. Proverbs 29:18 says 'Where there is no vision, the people fall into disorder, but happy are they who keep the Torah.' The current Reform movement lacks vision, and the people have fallen into disorder. Thus to me Rabbi Kaplan's thesis is sound, and Rabbi Yoffie's and Jacobs's rejection of it a very worrisome indicator of continuing problems. The bulk of this book is reportage on the development of the reform movement. He summarizes past Reform Jewish history, and chronicles the recent history of how we came to be in the current situation. You can read only here about recent turmoil in Reform Judaism, which makes the book invaluable to Reform Jews who are not in the know about what has happened in the leadership, and do care about the future of Reform Judaism. I do have some disagreements with Rabbi Kaplan's characterization of Reform history, as I don't think he gives enough weight to conflicting views within the Reform movement. Classical Reform in America, from 1885 to the 1920s, did reject halacha and the Talmud, but some earlier and later leaders acknowledged the importance of the Talmudic heritage, and wanted a kind of Reform halacha. Currently Rabbi Mark Washofsky, author of Jewish Living, represents the 'Reform halacha' view. Rabbi Richard N. Levy's A Vision of Holiness advocated instead the Reform 'salad bar' view that Rabbi Kaplan criticizes in this volume. I will be looking forward to seeing whether other Reform leaders follow Rabbi Kaplan's clear sighted and courageous assessment of the problems of the Reform movement.

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