

A Vision of Holiness for 5786

Who here remembers *Reform Judaism* magazine? Back in the not-so-long ago era of print media, *Reform Judaism* magazine arrived quarterly in the mailboxes of every household belonging to a Reform synagogue in North America. The Winter 1998 issue was one of the most controversial issues, featuring a cover story on the soon-to-be published Pittsburgh Principles, a document espousing the core values and ideals of Reform Judaism at the close of the last century. The CCAR, the Central Conference of American Rabbis - the Reform rabbinic association to which I belong - has released 5 platforms, from 1885 to the present day, espousing the core values of Reform Judaism in each generation.

If *Reform Judaism* magazine was still in circulation today, we can imagine what a controversial cover story might include - absolutely anything related to Israel, the future of AI and Judaism, how we respond as a community when a teacher, writer, or artist is revealed to be an abuser. So what was so controversial about that 1998 cover story? The front cover depicted a rabbi, Rabbi Richard Levy, “in a reflective pose, with *kippah* and *tallit* (though not, as many people thought, *t’fillin*), touching the *tzitzit* [fringes] to his lips.”¹ This image is not so different from what can be seen here in this room, and in hundreds of other sanctuaries across the Reform movement. But in 1998, this portrayal of a visible, public Judaism, drawing from the deep wells of Jewish ritual, prayer, and tradition felt antiquated to many Reform Jews. “It looked like a picture of a Judaism they or their parents had once rejected, which now seemed to be taking over Reform.”

What was this insidious takeover? The article was actually about the process to develop the 1999 Pittsburgh Principles, still the most recent enumeration of Reform values. Prior platforms were released in 1885, 1937, 1976, and 1997. Six years later, Rabbi Richard Levy, of blessed memory, the platform’s architect and one of my beloved teachers, published a book describing the process of narrowing down these principles and determining what was at the core of being a Reform Jew 25 years ago. This year marks the 20th anniversary of the publication of *A Vision of Holiness: The Future of Reform Judaism*. In the 26 years since the publication of the Pittsburgh Principles, there’s been no subsequent effort within the Reform movement to elucidate a list of our core values, that which defines who we are as Reform Jews and as a collective movement.

Rabbi Levy’s *Vision of Holiness* was a transformative part of my own Jewish journey, even before I began my studies at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, where Rabbi Levy was on faculty. When the book was published, I was in university at Brandeis, a school in Massachusetts which at the time had a nearly 50% Jewish student body. Jewish life at Brandeis was immersive and diverse - on any given Friday night, there were often 4 or 5 different prayer services taking place. Hillel, the Jewish student organization, encompassed dozens of smaller groups including religious life, social action, cultural groups like Israeli dance and Jewish a capella, and Israel activism. In this environment, my social group quickly filled out with friends from all types of Jewish backgrounds, and I began to find meaning in the full 25 hours of Shabbat, set aside from the rest of the week, and in a liturgy with more Hebrew than was

¹ Richard Levy, *A Vision of Holiness: The Future of Reform Judaism*, URJ Press, New York, 2005, p. 7.

Rabbi Miriam Wajnberg

Rosh Hashanah 5786 - September 23, 2025

standard within Reform synagogue, camp, and youth group settings. And yet, something didn't quite feel right. I had the vague sense that I was perceived as "frumming out," slang for becoming *frum*, or Orthodox - even though I wasn't. It seemed that there was something incompatible with Reform Judaism and drawing from the deep well of Jewish observance and practice. I knew I wanted a home in Reform Judaism - its deep commitment to social justice, to egalitarianism and inclusion, to reconciling Jewish text with the needs of modernity, to the aphorism "choice through knowledge" - these all described who I was as a Jew. But was there space for me? This book offered a vision of what it might look like to have a diverse Reform Jewish community with space for a wide variety of ritual practices, deeply grounded in Torah and the effort to make God present in our lives. A dear friend - also now a rabbi, Rabbi Liz Hirsch - and I read *A Vision of Holiness* together 20 years ago, as we were in the process of solidifying our Jewish identities beyond the safe, relatively Jewishly homogenous world of our summer camp and youth groups. We revisited it together this past summer, in honour of the book's 20th anniversary. 20 years later, in what seems like a very different Jewish world than the early 2000s, rife with optimism and the early sparks of seeing the potential of including 2SLGBTQ+ Jews and interfaith families, a time that was still very much the "Golden Age of North American Judaism" - my teacher's words, a call to commit to a rigorous, progressive Judaism, to Jewish lives filled with meaning, integrity, and sacred actions, still ring true.

Rabbi Levy's vision and the 1999 Statement of Principles called for a recommitment to the three central organizing pillars of Jewish life: God, Torah, and Israel, Israel referring expansively to not only the Land and State of Israel, but also *Klal Yisrael*, the entire community of the Jewish people.

The 1999 Pittsburgh Principles began with God, perhaps an unusual decision for a movement that has been grounded in rationalism since its inception in the 19th century. As liberal Jews, we're sometimes ambivalent, or even uncomfortable, with talking about God. Earlier this year, I had the honour of sitting on a *beit din* for conversion with some of my local colleagues. After one of the candidates shared their beautiful and powerful story, reflecting on the presence of God in their life and how God acted in their life to bring them to Judaism, I remarked to my colleague, "The only time that we consistently talk about God in our work is when we sit down as a *beit din* and hear the stories of our conversion candidates." We don't always have any easy time identifying God's presence in our lives, or hearing God's voice - and the notion of a personal God who acts in our lives may clash with our own theologies. But the 1999 Pittsburgh Principles place God first and foremost in Reform Jewish life. "We respond to God daily: through public and private prayer, through study and the performance of other *mitzvot*, sacred obligations." The very act of doing Jewish, whether through prayer, through Torah study, or through any of the *mitzvot* that we do on a daily or seasonal basis, is an act of responding to God. Rabbi Levy offers an understanding of commandedness for Reform Jews who historically rejected the traditional Jewish concept of obligation and commandedness, replacing it with "choice through knowledge," the idea that through study, Reform Jews would elect to perform those *mitzvot*, those commandments, that rationally made sense. But we as humans are not exclusively rational beings. We act with our hearts and our souls, not only our brains. Rabbi Levy introduces the concept that God speaks to us through *mitzvot*, not with the harsh language of "I command

you!” but instead with a call rooted in relationship and covenant, “This is something very important to Me that you do.”² Through this framework, God reenters the conversation with Reform Jews, at the center of Jewish life.

Perhaps the most radical shift that the 1999 Principles made was in the section devoted to Torah. Earlier iterations of Reform thought made a clear distinction between ethical *mitzvot* and ritual *mitzvot*. The 1885 Pittsburgh Platform declared:

Today we accept as binding only the moral laws, and maintain only such ceremonies as elevate and sanctify our lives, but reject all such as are not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization. We hold that all such Mosaic and rabbinical laws as regulate diet, priestly purity and dress originated in ages and under the influence of ideas altogether foreign to our present mental and spiritual state... Their observance in our days is apt rather to obstruct than to further modern spiritual elevation.³

This stark boundary led to a Reform Judaism that maybe you are familiar with, depending on where and when you first encountered Reform Judaism. Wearing *kipot* and *tallitot* was rare - sometimes even prohibited! - in early Reform synagogues. Famously, the first ordination class of Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati in 1883 celebrated their ordination with what became known to history as the *Trefa Banquet*, due to the prevalence of *treyf*, nonkosher foods, on the menu. The clear delineation between ethical and ritual *mitzvot* drawn in 1885 placed some elements of Jewish life “off limits” to Reform Jews. And yet, today, many of us keep kosher in some way, shape, or form, many of us wear *kipot* and/or *tallitot*, and the boundary between ritual and ethical practice is blurry. The 1999 Principles reflect this shift, declaring, “We are committed to the ongoing study of the whole array of *mitzvot*, and to the fulfillment of those that address us as individuals and as a community. Some of these *mitzvot*, sacred obligations, have long been observed by Reform Jews; others, both ancient and modern, demand renewed attention as the result of the unique context of our own times.”⁴ This reframing opened up the entirety of Torah as worthy of attention and study, and shifted the emphasis away from individual autonomy “based on a solely internal process” of reasoning.⁵ Instead, we are in conversation - with each other, with our community, with Torah, with God, with tradition.

The “Israel” section of the 1999 Pittsburgh Principles explored how Reform Jews at the dawn of the 21st century might relate to the State and Land of Israel, and to the entire concept of Jewish peoplehood. Who was included in the Jewish people? The 1999 statement was very much a product of its time, recognizing and lifting up the diversity of the Jewish people, in language that might ring as dated to us today. “We are an inclusive community, opening doors to Jewish life to people of all ages, to varied kinds of families; to all regardless of their sexual orientation; to those who have converted to Judaism; and to all individuals and families, including the

² Rabbi Richard Levy, *Vision of Holiness*, p. 50.

³ [Article Declaration of Principles - Central Conference of American Rabbis](#)

⁴ [Article A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism](#)

⁵ Levy, 123.

Rabbi Miriam Wajnberg
Rosh Hashanah 5786 - September 23, 2025

intermarried, who strive to create a Jewish home.”⁶ Rabbi Levy’s discussion on this part of the statement uncovers a discomfort with interfaith marriage, rooted both in fears for the continuity of the Jewish people, and concerns for the fraying connections between Reform Judaism and the rest of *K’lal Yisrael*, the entirety of the community of Israel. The entire Israel section is rooted in its time - first in the optimism of the 1990s, and then in the cynicism and fear of the Second Intifada. “Though the Pittsburgh Principles was passed in a heady time of hopes for peace, despair that a peace settlement can be achieved is contrary to our vision of a Jewish state ‘that strives for a lasting peace.’ The operative word is ‘strives,’ which means continued work, searching, struggling, strategizing, negotiating, and meeting failure with a determination to begin again.”⁷ Many of us have felt this same sense of despair over the past 717 days - and yet, Reform Judaism and progressive Zionism call us to remain committed to the potential for peace and to a State of Israel that lives up to its ideals.

As we launch into the year 5786, our Jewish world is, in many ways, very different than the context in which Rabbi Levy and his colleagues, the architects of the 1999 Statement of Principles, lived, studied, and taught. And yet, one of the things that surprised me the most in revisiting the 1999 Principles and Rabbi Levy’s Vision of Holiness was how compelling and relevant these documents from another era still are for our time. Just as Rabbi Levy’s words did when I was seeking a spiritual home as a student, they once again grounded me in the core texts and practices of Judaism - Shabbat, prayer, social justice, Torah study.

We face rising antisemitism, here in Canada and around the globe, in ways that were inconceivable 25 years ago. Our relationship with Israel as Diaspora Jews is complex for each of us, and in many ways, the optimism of the 90s about the possibility of peace has evaporated. We have lived through a global pandemic that radically shifted the ways we gather together. We face ever more demands on our time and our attention, as individuals and as families. Affiliation with religious institutions of all faiths is decreasing, and Jews and synagogues are part of that trend.

And yet, in the last two years since October 7, we’ve seen a surge in participation in Jewish life, a documented trend I spoke about last year. 43% of the Jewish community across all levels of previous involvement are looking for more engagement in Jewish life. Jews are looking for learning, connection, community, solidarity, and meaningmaking.⁸ We need a vision of holiness for the next 25 years, one that speaks to the reality of our world today and imagines the pressures and opportunities of the future. What might that vision include? A call to be Jewish for its own sake - not to spite the antisemites, but because Judaism is rich, and full of relevance and opportunities for bringing more holiness into our lives. While many of us may have turned towards Judaism following October 7, what *keeps* us Jewish is what has kept our people Jewish for centuries. A deep commitment to study, to prayer, to *mitzvot*, to community. We are in need of deep spiritual sustenance for our time - and we can find that in the Judaism of our ancestors.

⁶ Levy, 198.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 241.

⁸ [New Federations' study shows American Jews still surging into Jewish life | The Jewish Federations of North America](#)

Rabbi Miriam Wajnberg
Rosh Hashanah 5786 - September 23, 2025

Judaism offers a countercultural response to the prevalence of individualism in our world today. Reform Judaism began to shift away from its historical emphasis on autonomy 25 years ago - and all the more so today, we need to remember that Judaism is lived in community. We are part of a greater whole - that of this community, Temple Shalom, that of the entire KW Jewish community, and all of *klal Yisrael*, around the globe. We do not exist in isolation, but in deep relationship with our people.

In the 1999 Statement of Principles, each section concludes with the same formula:

In all these ways and more, God gives meaning and purpose to our lives.

In all these ways and more, Torah gives meaning and purpose to our lives.

In all these ways and more, Israel gives meaning and purpose to our lives.

In this year 5786, may we live lives of holiness, lives filled with meaning and purpose.

Shanah tovah.