

Biennial 2015
Reflections from Susan Rudolph

TOP OF MIND

- Meeting new people; hugging old friends.
- Electing the first woman as chair of the URJ.
- Reaffirming how fortunate we are to have Rabbi Rick Jacobs as the President of our URJ.
- Being amazed at: how fast the time went by; how much walking can be done in one facility; realizing how well and how much we are doing at CSR after talking with so many other synagogue leaders;
- Being grateful that we have a World Union for Progressive Judaism and how perfect that we honored Rabbi Leonard Thal and Rabbi Danny Friedlander at a Gala dinner on Thursday evening. (Both have been guests and speakers at CSR.)
- Having ARZA to connect Reform Jews with Israel.
- Shabbat dinner with 5000 Jews in one area.
- Watching the expression on the faces of Biennial first-timers
- Music; music and more music.

SOME SPECIFIC HIGHLIGHTS

- A total of four resolutions came out of the Resolutions Committee process. Of those four, there was time to present only the Resolution on the Rights of Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming People. It passed unanimously and to great acclaim.

In addition we amended the URJ's Constitution and Bylaws enabling us to implement a new membership model in our congregations beginning on January 1, 2016. The new model, known as Reform Movement Affiliation Commitment, is a revenue-based system and is designed to be simple, fair, transparent, and responsive.

The Resolutions Committee on which I serve has received a number of inquiries about what is happening with the three remaining resolutions on Paid Family Leave; Mandatory Immunization Laws; and Predatory Lending Practices. Under URJ bylaws, these resolutions now will be presented to the URJ North American Board for consideration and vote.

- The panel that included Stav Shaffir, the youngest (not yet 30) female Knesset member in Israel's history was memorable. She talked about Netanyahu and criticized the government for funding settlements over funding the integration of Arabs into Israel's society.

She was outspoken as she demanded fiscal oversight of settlement funding and supported a wide array of social justice-related issues—from affordable housing for young Israelis to the rights of Women of the Wall.

- **Shabbat Morning Torah Study**

Cantor Richard Cohn
Director, Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music
HUC-JIR

Chayei Sarah: Learned about the *Shashelet* cantillation mark found only 4 times in the entire Torah. It symbolizes that the subject of the story is wrestling with his thoughts and is undergoing some hesitation in his actions. At the same time, the word *chesed* is also found in the 4 verses with the *Shalshelet*. How amazing to have the long, elaborate notes of the cantillation connected to *chesed*, a word that Cantor Cohn described as a free flowing love that knows no bounds. This session confirmed how little I know about Torah and cantillation!

- **Shabbat Lunch Session**

Dr. Lawrence Hoffman:

Rabbi Hoffman said ethnic identity dies within four generations: Bubby and Zaidy are genuinely European and Jewishly ethnic. Embarrassed by ethnic identification, their kids spurn it. The grandchildren cling to the culture of Bubby and Zaidy for nostalgic reasons but have no real connection to the ethnic component. By the fourth generation, nothing's left.

We are the fourth generation: American Jews who are no longer connected with their European identities and are in danger of becoming totally detached from their Jewish heritage. The challenge now is to infuse Judaism with spirituality.

“Ethnicity becomes nostalgia, and as they say, nostalgia ain’t what it used to be. That is why we need to go to spirituality. We need to start talking about God.”

Sunday morning session

Chester Elton

Author, Speaker

Chester Elton is co-author of several successful leadership books. *All In*, *The Carrot Principle* and *What Motivates Me*, all of which have been bestsellers.

The Carrot Principle demonstrates how constructive praise and meaningful rewards powerfully motivate people. He noted that the central characteristic of the most successful managers is they provide their employees with frequent and effective recognition—a practice that unquestionably taps into our own human nature.

I love the Biennial write up by Rabbi Hoffman.

Principles Not Programs: The Resurrection of Denominational Religion
Summary of Biennial 2015 by Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, Ph. D.

Denominational religion is not yet dead, to judge by the biennial of the URJ (the Union for Reform Judaism) that took place last week in Orlando, Florida. It wasn't only that it attracted some 5,000 attendees from all over the world. Nor was it just the superstars it attracted to its

stage: actor Michael Douglas and Vice President Joe Biden, for example. Nor, even, was it the media mastery with which its message was delivered. It was the message itself, a message that demonstrated the transformation of Reform Judaism for the computer era.

Denominationalism's very *raison d'être* was irreversibly altered when computers transferred power from the center to the periphery. In the print era, synagogues (to take the Jewish case) required a denominational center to produce and distribute such necessities as programming guides and religious-school curricula. Computers offer these things on line – cheaper, quicker, and customized to boot. Denominational headquarters thus devolved into inefficient bureaucracies creating materials that could not compete with the internet's ever-expanding and abundantly creative open market.

Had money been no object, the old denominational order — like General Douglas MacArthur's fabled old soldiers — might not have died, but simply faded away. The economic collapse in 2008, however, hastened the near demise. What does a denominational headquarters do when it has spent half a century gearing up to disseminate what member synagogues no longer need?

The answer came clear last week. To begin with, the biennial caught up with the long-term trend from a "service" to an "experience" economy, by becoming a massive and spectacular experience itself; and then highlighting the need to understand how people experience the synagogue, rather than what concrete services they get from it. The call for "audacious hospitality" was everywhere, stretched to make attendees sympathetic to what people actually experience as they walk through the synagogue doors.

But attention to hospitality was just the sidebar story. The headline news was the Reform Movement's decision to offer a message that matters. We live in an era of anxious identity. On the one hand, we must increasingly choose our own identity mix; on the other hand, everything is up for grabs, even motherhood and apple pie, all the more so the inherited Jewish identity of one's youth, not to mention choosing Judaism anew if you find yourself in a Jewish orbit but were not born or raised that way. If Judaism is a choice, it better be worth choosing, and the old ethnic draws (Holocaust memories and Israel loyalties, not to mention Jewish food, jokes and nostalgia) are insufficient nowadays. The biennial broke new ground in its call to embrace Reform Judaism as a proper continuation of an age-old tradition and a profound statement of the human condition.

Over 50 years ago, psychologist Abraham Maslow posited a hierarchy of human needs: food, shelter, and safety; then honor and respect to save our egos. But higher up the ladder – the perch we mostly occupy – we need also to know that we matter. We strive in the end to count for something, not just in the eyes of others, but in those mirror moments when we contemplate who we have become, and who we might yet be. We imagine one more workweek, one more vacation, one more dinner out; and we wonder if that is all there is.

The Reform biennial offered a proud and joyous vision of a mirror image that might matter. It gave a rationale for choosing Judaism in its Reform guise.

In times past attendees left biennials with best practices. This year, they departed with best principles, reasons to believe that the world itself requires the amplified voice of progressive

Judaism. Already the largest Jewish movement in America, and worldwide, Reform Judaism (it was said) can yet double or triple its influence – not by programs but by these principles:

1. Absolute commitment to the State of Israel, but modified by the right — even the obligation — to critique and to oppose any immoral governmental policies;
2. The recovery of the prophetic call for justice, righteousness, and compassion;
3. Eliminating barriers to full participation by all who seek what Reform Judaism is;
4. Serious grappling with the vast library of Jewish classics, to access their wisdom for our time;
5. Responsibility to the Jewish People and its universal mission to add light to the world; and
6. Striving, along the way, to enrich one's own life, personally, through spirituality, community, and commitment to what God asks.

If denominational movements champion messages like these; if they celebrate their promise, in a world where promise is sorely lacking; if they call adherents to become their highest selves, in synagogues that exemplify the principles that will make them so; if they do all this, denominational identity will thrive.