

Remarks by Dr. Michael Meyer at the Installation of Rabbi Evan Moffic

In the required course on the history of Reform Judaism that I give at Hebrew Union College, which both Rabbi Moffic and soon-to-be Rabbi Ari Poster Moffic have taken with me, I have sometimes related the following incident:

A few years ago, while attending a conference of smaller Reform congregations in Augusta, Georgia, I met a woman who proudly represented a Classical Reform Temple in Houston, Texas. Following the Friday evening service, which had included a lot of Hebrew, I found her walking back and forth agitatedly in the social hall. Clearly, she had not appreciated the rather traditional character of the service with its frequent use of Hebrew, which was very different from what she was used to in Houston. Seeking to calm her, I wished her, in the friendliest way, *Shabbat Shalom*. Taken aback, she hesitated at first and then, with defiance in her voice, responded: "And Sabbath Peace to You."

Returning to Chicago Sinai Congregation this evening after more than thirty years since my last visit in 1973 to speak in honor of my student Rabbi Evan Moffic, I am acutely conscious that my own interpretation of Reform Judaism differs in numerous points from the mission statement that you have carefully and impressively formulated. But at the same time I do not count myself among those Reform Jews who deride Classical Reform Judaism as a grievous aberration, simply a case of--as it is often put--"throwing the baby out with the bathwater." Although I would not call myself a Classical Reform Jew, I have come to have much appreciation for it, not only as an important historical stage in the development of American Reform Judaism, but as a form of Jewish religious understanding that has ongoing importance--and not only for those who identify themselves Classical Reform Jews. Evan Moffic could surely have chosen any one of a number of Reform congregations to be his first pulpit. But he chose Sinai because he found that its philosophy resonated with his own religious convictions. It seems appropriate therefore on this occasion to devote my remarks to what I see as the values of Classical Reform Judaism that I believe are not only not outdated, but, if anything, more needful than ever in the 21st Century.

Most of you have probably heard that the minutes of the Board of Trustees of this congregation for May 7, 1894 record the following resolution: "Whereas the Congregation is the owner of a Sepher Torah, the use of which in the services has been dispensed with; therefore, be it resolved that the Sepher Torah be donated to the University of Chicago as part of the Semitic library." And in fact a contemporary sketch of the High Holyday services of Temple Sinai shows no ark and no Torah scroll. In this regard things have changed even here. Now you have a beautiful ark and lovely Torah scrolls from which to read. Other Reform congregations have gone much further in a process that one can call re-traditionalization. There is an increasing use of symbols: etrog and lulav, shofar, even throwing bread crumbs into the water on Rosh Hashanah to represent the sins one is casting off. Increasingly, men--and also women--worship with a covered head and a talit. A growing minority now keeps some portion of the Jewish

dietary laws. The founders of Classical Reform Judaism toward the end of the nineteenth century--two rabbis of this congregation, Kaufmann Kohler and Emil G. Hirsch, among them--thought that an excessive concentration on ritual observance would get in the way of the higher purposes of religion, namely the elevation of the human soul. Symbolism in their eyes represented primitivism. Using the language of anthropology, they called them fetishes. Were they wrong? I think we have learned that symbols and rituals have their place in Judaism as they do in other Western religions. The spoken word alone is insufficient. We need something more concrete. But fundamentally, I believe they were right in placing faith and morality above ritual, in considering the latter as a means, but never as an end itself. Ritual is intended to dramatize our religiously motivated moral quest, never to replace it. We may justifiably ask: How much of today's Reform ritual and ceremony is genuinely felt? Does a covered head at prayer perhaps cover up an empty soul? Are the rituals Jews perform personally meaningful to them or do they do them only because Conservative Jews do them and they do not want to be different? Classical Reform Judaism makes us ask: Are some of us trying too hard to be "authentic" Jews when what we really need is to be true to ourselves?

The two nineteenth-century rabbis of this congregation whom I just mentioned--Kaufmann Kohler and Emil G. Hirsch--had a lot in common: they were both sons-in-law of Rabbi David Einhorn, the man who brought Classical Reform Judaism to this country from Germany and they were both themselves Classical Reformers. But it was only Hirsch who put social justice at the center of his rabbinate and who implanted it as a lasting value in the philosophy of this congregation. In his day--the age of robber barons and unscrupulous exploitation of labor--it was what he called "the contrasts and evils of the present organization of society" that he condemned. It was he who launched concern for the welfare of the oppressed as a central theme in Reform Judaism down to the present time. Today, to be sure, our concerns are broader. We are troubled by cruelties in distant lands, most recently in Darfur, no less than by injustices that persist in our own society. And, of course, they do persist--one need only mention the unconscionably low minimum wage and the lack of proper health care for the poor. Today the Reform movement prides itself on expressing the message of a Prophetic Judaism through its Religious Action Center in Washington and the social action committees that exist in nearly every Reform congregation. Here there can be no question of the continuing relevance of Classical Reform principles. Indeed, today for all too many Jews Judaism has become overly focused on what my religion can do for me, for my private spiritual life, to the neglect of social obligations. Spirituality surely has its place in Reform Judaism, but, as Rabbi Leo Baeck taught, without concern for the needs of others spirituality becomes a "religious egotism."

I admire Classical Reform, as well, for its dedication to following the dictates of human reason, for refusing to sacrifice the intellect. In the nineteenth century such intellectual integrity meant especially coming to terms with biblical criticism and with Darwinism. Kohler and Hirsch insisted that Judaism could face the challenge of modern thought and come out a more sophisticated and reasonable faith. Yes, the Bible was composed by human hands, but that does not diminish the value of its contents. Yes, human beings are descended from lower forms of life, but that does not constrain their striving toward

higher forms of humanity. Today we have yet to come to terms adequately with such contemporary challenges to conventional religious thought as genetic engineering, as well as new theories about the beginnings of the universe and the basic character of matter. More generally, we need to give more thought to paths of reconciliation between the scientific and religious outlooks on human existence. In Conservative Christian America, even today, Darwinism is demoted to being only "a theory" while among Jews a mindless mysticism has gained new--and sometimes surprising--adherents. Like the medieval Jewish philosophers, Classical Reform Judaism has always resolutely relied upon human reason as the link between the human and the divine. It is, I believe, a message that has not lost its value.

Finally, Classical Reform Judaism during its early years turned against particularism. It stood opposed to the Zionist movement as representing a retreat from what it called the "mission of Israel" to spread ethical monotheism to the nations of the world, to be a "light unto the nations." But interestingly enough, it was the founding rabbi of this congregation, Bernhard Felsenthal, who was the very first Reform rabbi to espouse Zionism. And certainly, the Holocaust taught us that we must be concerned with our own Jewish welfare and not only with that of others. Today we recognize the importance of the state of Israel not only as a refuge for persecuted Jews but as a spiritual center for Jews everywhere. We are committed to its survival and to the success of a flourishing Hebraic culture there. We recognize ourselves as members of a historic people and not of a religious denomination alone. Personally, I am proud to call myself a Zionist. But at the same time I believe we recognize that nationalism, whether American or Israeli, is not an ultimate value, that the highest value of religion, as it is embodied in Judaism, is represented by the simple phrase, so much emphasized within Classical Reform: One God and One Humanity. That, in fact, is the deepest lesson that I learn from Classical Reform Judaism: that beyond Jewish peoplehood and beyond ritual--however important these are--lies the fundamental religious reason for being Jewish: to propagate the notion that the idea of one humanity flows inexorably from the idea of one God.

This evening, Evan, you become--officially--one of the rabbis of this historic congregation, whose principles have influenced Reform Judaism and influence it still. At the end of my report on your rabbinical thesis I wrote: "I expect Evan Moffic to be among the intellectual leaders of the Reform movement in the coming years." I really do have that expectation. Here at Chicago Sinai Congregation you will learn a great deal about Jewish leadership, you and Ari will make friends among its members, and you will help them to express their ideas and feelings through the rich traditions of Judaism. You will be a teacher of Torah.

This week's reading from the Torah, taken from the Book of Numbers, includes one of its most famous passages: the priestly benediction. We are all familiar with its words; indeed it is used in churches as well as synagogues. But I should like to conclude my remarks this Shabbat evening of your installation not with the usual text, as it is found in the Bible, but with a variant version, one that was found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, those ancient parchment documents, discovered only in our own time, but that date back two millenia. Here is its text:

"May God bless you with all that is good and protect you from all that is evil. May God illumine your heart with life-giving wisdom and grant you knowledge of those things that are eternal. May God's love and kindness extend to you so that you may always have peace." May it be so.