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WHEN AUTHORITY WAS A FORM OF DISSENT
Postwar Guides to Reform Practice

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This essay analyzes two guides to Reform observance, *A Guide for Reform Jews* (1957) and *Liberal Judaism at Home* (1967), published by individual members of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), the Reform rabbinic organization. While the former attempted to define and mandate norms of observance for Reform Jews, the latter sought to persuade them to become more observant. Despite their differences, however, they constituted an important stage in the evolution of Reform Judaism’s relationship to ritual observance.

A GUIDE FOR REFORM PRACTICE?

That the traditional 613 mitzvot fell into two essential categories—eternal ethical laws revealed or inspired by God and mutable “ceremonies” created by human beings—was a fundamental premise of Reform Judaism in its first century of existence. The perpetual dilemma for Reform rabbis, therefore, was whether to offer any guidance, or set any standards, for ritual observance, and if so how and on what basis. This was particularly true in the United States, a haven for nineteenth century Reformers too radical for the European context. Almost all Reform rabbis agreed with Kaufmann Kohler, the dominant voice of classical Reform, that some ritual was essential to religion because it had an edificatory purpose: “Judaism is a system of religious and moral truths, the ceremonies being only the means to higher ends not ends in themselves. . . . In order to have a positive religious value and significance, ceremonies must either directly or symbolically express thoughts and feelings that appeal to us while elevating, hallowing
and enriching our lives.” But who decided which “ceremonies” were to be retained, which ones eliminated, which innovations encouraged? For this question there was no agreed-upon answer.

Already early in the twentieth century some rabbis and laypeople were calling for guidance in ritual matters and for the reintroduction of discarded ritual observances. This call gathered momentum in the interwar years as the Reform rabbinate and Reform congregations filled up with Jews of East European origin. While the 1937 Statement of Principles (the “Columbus Platform”) affirmed the importance of ritual, it continued to view it from a utilitarian perspective. The innovative element in its attitude toward ritual was that rational “edification” was no longer the sole acceptable criterion for what made a ritual worth observing. After the CCAR adopted the “Columbus Platform,” it joined forces with the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC, the movement’s powerful congregational organization) to establish a Joint Commission on Ceremonies to “revive old rituals, introduce new ones, and experiment with original ceremonial materials.”

Nevertheless, encouraging Jews to light Shabbat candles and hold Passover Seders was a far cry from publishing anything that might appear to tell them that there was a correct way to do so or that they must do so, which was what a vocal minority was demanding. In 1941, therefore, the older and more classically oriented leadership invited the widely respected Solomon B. Freehof to deliver a paper at the rabbinical convention explaining why any code of Reform practice was an impossibility. Arguing that Reform could not legislate matters of praxis without becoming another version of Orthodoxy, Freehof allowed only that one could offer limited, de facto guidance by describing the few areas of Jewish practice where Reform had evolved a more or less standard pattern and explaining the reasoning behind their departures from traditional norms. Several years later he proceeded to do precisely this in Reform Jewish Practice and Its Rabbinic Background.

The book’s purpose, Freehof explained, was “to describe present-day Reform Jewish practices and the traditional rabbinic laws from which they are derived.” It had only four chapters: “Public Worship,” “Marriage and Divorce,” “Naming of Children and Circumcision,” and “Burial and Mourning”—in other words, it “guided” only life cycle rituals and some aspects of public worship. Each chapter was divided encyclopedia-style into a number of entries. Each entry usually addressed one ritual or category of observance where Reform practice differed from the traditional norm. Freehof first briefly stated the Reform practice and then described the traditional practice and explained why Reformers had decided to alter it. In no way could it be construed as a complete guide to Jewish practice.

Freehof went a bit further in recognizing the importance of ritual and his colleagues’ desire for more guidance when he next addressed the subject, in 1946. He acknowledged
the “sense of the increased validity of the ritual practices within Judaism,” though he could not explain this beyond the vague affirmation that “they are not quite law but they do have a certain authority.” Still, he stood utterly opposed to a Reform guide, much less a code. He insisted that it was far too early to begin any process of codification because the laypeople were completely unprepared to hear that Reform expected them to observe anything. The rabbis had to “change the mood of the people. Otherwise our listing of Mitzvot will seem meaningless and even ludicrous to them.”7 Most of the responses to his lecture criticized his temporizing and demanded some sort of guide or code of practice to set standards of observance for Reform Jews.8

The issue of a guide to Reform practice and the nature of its authority continued to roil Reform rabbis and laity for the next decade, as evidenced by a flurry of committees, convention papers, roundtables, and journal articles, but with Frechof’s considerable influence mitigating against it, advocates for a guide still faced an uphill battle. Exacerbating tensions, and adding to the sense of urgency, was the phenomenal growth of the Reform movement in those years, fueled by an influx of second-generation East Europeans, who often expected a more traditional aesthetic in their new congregations.9 In 1952–1953 the National Federation of Temple Brotherhoods (NFTB), in conjunction with the CCAR’s Committee on Reform Jewish Practice, surveyed the religious practices of Reform congregants “to help determine whether there should be a code or a guide of Reform practices to aid UAHC congregations and their memberships.”10

A series of articles in American Judaism, the magazine sent to every household affiliated with a UAHC member congregation, shared highlights of the results in 1953–1954. These articles revealed information such as this:

Bar Mitzvah, the traditional rite of inducting a boy of thirteen into the congregation, is practiced in varying degrees in 92 per cent of the Reform temples, and 77 per cent of the Reform laymen answering the poll endorse this practice. While the survey showed that 45 per cent of the laymen would prefer that their sons wear a talis [sic] at the Bar Mitzvah ceremony, only 21 per cent would want a hat to be worn during the ceremony.11

But they also assured their readers that there was no danger of Reform going “too far” toward observance:

The answers to the questionnaire clearly refute the contentions of those who predicted the survey would indicate that Reform Judaism was going Orthodox.

On the Sabbath, the vast majority of Reform Jews keep their businesses open, 88 per cent; work, 90 per cent; ride, 99 per cent; and smoke, 82 per cent.
Seventy-four per cent have a Seder in their homes on Passover eve; 93 per cent eat matzo [sic] during Passover, but 59 per cent also report that they eat bread.\textsuperscript{13}

Among the critics of Freehof’s resistance were Frederic A. Doppelt\textsuperscript{14} and David Polish.\textsuperscript{15} Both men also disapproved of what they saw as the movement’s superficial approach to ritual. Polish derided the NFTB-CCAR survey as Reform ritual practice by plebiscite and observed acerbically that something was not right when Reform Jews were equally “enthusiastic” about Christmas and bar mitzvah. The growing enthusiasm for performing rituals, he opined, was disconnected from any genuine spiritual content: “Surely custom and ceremony were to be judged by their capacity to elicit deeper religious commitment and conduct. Are we unwittingly saying to our people that the essence of Judaism can be captured by a rite? Do we truly believe that the first stage on the path of Jewish revival is the lighting of Shabbos candles?”\textsuperscript{15} Meanwhile, Doppelt, who was among Freehof’s critics in 1946, was arguing at the 1954 rabbinical convention that neither aesthetic appeal, national survival, nor ethical concerns were appropriate criteria for determining Reform practice; rather, the mitzvot themselves had to be the starting point. (The paper he delivered there would become the basis for the essay “The Authority of the Mitzva” in the \textit{Guide}.\textsuperscript{16})

**COVENANT THEOLOGY AND THE GUIDE FOR REFORM JEWS**

In 1957, Doppelt and Polish privately published a small, slim volume titled \textit{A Guide for Reform Jews}.\textsuperscript{17} Although it was quickly republished the same year by Bloch, and again by Ktav in 1973, it is largely forgotten today. The \textit{Guide} offered its readers three essays where the authors expounded—at length—their reasoning and then seventeen short chapters, each chapter opening with a bolded paragraph beginning, “It is a Mitzva [commandment, sic] to . . .” Each “It is a Mitzva” declaration included a scriptural basis. After each declaration, numbered paragraphs in regular type offered the specific procedures (which the authors labeled \textit{Halachot} [laws]) for fulfilling the defined mitzvah. After the \textit{Halachot}, an italicized list presented what the authors labeled “\textit{Minhagim}” [customs]—generally descriptions of uniquely Reform ways of practicing.

The two authors aimed at nothing less than a complete redefinition of the entire debate about the significance of ritual in a Reform context by completely rejecting the classic Reform distinction between ethics and ritual. This was a direct challenge to the position taken by Freehof, the movement’s dominant voice in the postwar decades on all matters relating to Jewish practice. They mounted their challenge by rooting themselves in the new postwar theology that would become known as covenant theology.
In the postwar years, conversation among American rabbis and Jewish intellectuals took a theological turn, not only in response to the war but also in response to what they perceived as the shallowness and emptiness of most synagogue life. Influenced primarily by Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, they self-consciously attempted to create a new Jewish theology. “The tradition needed to be confronted on its own terms, they declared, rather than surrendered to categories imposed from the outside—as had been the case in the previous generation.” As the Guide explained it: “In the preparation of a Guide for Reform Jewish Practice, it is imperative that one turn to the historic ways in which Judaism has expressed itself whenever it came to the issue of religious observance.” Among the new theologians there was a consensus that one of these external categories, alien to Judaism, was the distinction between binding ethical laws and utilitarian ceremonies that had been central to Reform thought. Thus, from the beginning among Reform rabbis, the new theological discourse centered on what mitzvah meant for Reform Jews.

A small group of Conservative and Reform rabbis, including Emil Fackenheim and Eugene B. Borowitz, began gathering in the early 1950s with the goal of creating a new theology. W. Gunther Plaut, also a participant, later recalled that the group reached a consensus that “the covenant between God and Israel had to be emphasized as the single most important element in our spiritual existence.” Borowitz, who would eventually become its greatest expositor, first used the term “covenant theology” in 1961 to articulate a reaffirmation of the centrality of the covenant relationship between God and Israel established at Sinai, understood in existential terms. Covenant theology, he explained, defines Jewish existence as a way of living one’s life based on a relationship with God . . . in which the whole self is involved. . . . Under the Covenant the Jews . . . have pledged themselves to live by [God’s] law. Here the new theologians emphasize the mitzvah, for it is through this service, individually and communally, that Israel testifies to God’s reality, nature, and existence all through history. . . . The central task of modern Judaism, according to this theology, is to win the conscious, willed loyalty of the modern Jew to the Covenant. . . . Each Commandment becomes a way not only to personal improvement and fulfillment, but also helps to satisfy his responsibility to God and to mankind.

David Polish was a participant in this group and shared its desire to bring a deeper spirituality to synagogue life. In the Guide, he and his collaborator sought to bring this deeper spirituality to Reform Judaism by offering a radically different paradigm for Jewish life.

The Guide opens with the disclaimer that the book is not intended to “legislate conduct and observance, but rather to make available a guide for those who feel the
need for it,” but the authors immediately add that “once a Jew takes the assumptions and the discipline of a guide seriously, and seeks to live by them, he thereby makes them authoritative in his life. Authority in Jewish life can no longer be binding without the consent of those involved; yet this does not absolve us from striving to find that way of religious living to which they may consent.”

Before readers reach page 51 and find actual guidance, however, they must wade through three dense essays. In “Why a Guide?” the authors advance several arguments in support of a guide to Reform practice. First, they argue, somewhat disingenuously, that Reform Judaism was never as opposed to ritual observance as people suppose. In any case, if that was true in the past, it is no longer: “In Jewish theology, it is being emphasized once more that in Judaism . . . the ‘deed’ leads to the ‘creed,’ that the way of ‘doing’ leads to the way of ‘believing.’” Second, thoughtful Reform Jews realize that they cannot just leave this up to everyone’s personal preference because (using an argument that would certainly have resonated with a readership that lived through the Depression) “it has . . . become evident that unbridled individualism in religion can be as destructive to spirituality as laissez-faire individualism has been to democracy.”

Third, this is not being imposed from above. Rather, it will “help bring a greater degree of observance, self-disciplining commitment, and spirituality into our religious life, because it is essentially a response to many who have long been seeking guidance.” Finally, it cannot possibly lead back to Orthodoxy because Reform Jews know that we always have the ability to change our practices as needed.

“Criteria for Reform Jewish Observance” offers a lengthy and florid exposition of covenant theology, with a twist. The authors anticipated the lay reader’s skepticism: for a traditional believer, the covenant is real because God actually revealed Torah at Sinai. For existentialist and covenant theologians it is sufficient to say, as the authors do, that “the historicity of the events . . . is of less moment than Israel’s acknowledgement of their historicity.” But what about the modern Jew who does not believe in divine revelation and does not yet find existentialist arguments compelling because she is not predisposed to have a spiritual turn of mind? The authors needed a way to convince their readers that a spiritual approach to their Jewishness was essential. They did this by offering the best, most compelling, rational, “scientific” proof from an expert.

To bolster their theological argument the authors cite no less a figure than William F. Albright, the (Christian) dean of biblical archaeologists, asserting that nineteenth century Protestant critics were completely wrong when they insisted that the Patriarchal narratives and the Exodus story were fiction. By grouping the biblical narratives of Abraham’s journey and the Exodus from Egypt with later, unquestioned historical events—the Maccabean revolt, the destruction of both Temples, the European genocide, and the rebirth of the State of Israel—Doppelt and Polish create a seamless whole:
all are “salient . . . moments in our history” that are “informed with crucial experiences affecting the people’s dual relationship to its God and to the world.”

Furthermore, they hurriedly continue: “Interwoven with this historical sense are two additional values without which Jewish observance can have no real meaning. They are kedusha [holiness] and mitzva.” In other words, if the best modern scholarship proves that Abraham, Moses, and the Exodus were real, then the average Jew can’t simply dismiss the Torah as a myth and will therefore have to take it seriously. And that means acknowledging and accepting that from its earliest moments, Jewish history has been about the relationship between the Jewish people and God. The implication is clear: a secular or nonobservant lifestyle is not an authentic Jewish lifestyle.

“The Authority of the Mitzva” explains how covenant theology answers all the questions about observance that have long troubled Reform Judaism: Who decides what should be practiced? What is the nature of the observances that we do include, i.e., are all of equal religious significance? And why should these practices be perpetuated? What is their meaning and purpose? Is any particular practice to be determined “by Divine commandment, by ecclesiastical authority, or by popular vote?”

The authors use those three terms to denote what they call the tripartite “river of Jewish observance.” A Mitzva is a “Divine commandment,” deriving from some “spiritual [moment] in Jewish history when the Jewish people came upon God.” A Mitzva is an act that is such an essential element of an authentic Jewish spiritual life that in its absence the covenantal relationship is broken. Therefore, they note pointedly, we “should [never] ask for a popular show of hands” about which Mitzvot should be included in a code of Jewish practice. “Ecclesiastical authority” means the Halachot—“the accepted ways in which one should proceed to do the Mitzvot.” While “Jewish history” is the “basic authority” for Mitzvot, the Halachot derive their authority from the rabbis. They have the right to make them, and to change them as conditions demand. “Popular vote” refers to the Minhaggim [sic], the “customs and folkways” originating in the people’s own creativity, and not in any organized body. Since the people created them, they simply fall away when the people stop doing them.

Doppelt and Polish assert that a Reform Jew must observe certain mitzvot because each is the result of some historical moment of spiritual encounter between God and Israel. Their list of mitzvot bears no relation to the traditional enumeration of 613 commandments. Some are broad categories of observance that include dozens of traditional commandments (e.g., the Mitzva to observe the three festivals); others they defined themselves (e.g., the Mitzva to establish and maintain a synagogue). Still others correspond to a traditional commandment but are not linked to the verse from which the rabbis traditionally derived them. The Mitzva to educate one’s children, for example, is not linked to Deuteronomy 6:7 (ve-shinantam le-vanekha, “teach them
to your sons”) but to a verse in Isaiah that refers to the covenant. In several places the authors felt free to invent new blessings for recitation at moments they apparently regarded as insufficiently spiritualized by existing practices. Thus the bride and groom, standing at the “altar” before the wedding ceremony begins, are to “[clasp] hands and in awareness of the sanctity of the moment” recite the new blessing, “Who has sanctified us by His Mitzvot and commanded us to sanctify life through the marriage covenant.”

The seventeen chapters of the Guide mandate the following Mitzvot:

1. **Birth:** “It is a Mitzva . . . to bring children into the household of Israel, in fulfillment of the promise our fathers received. . . . [It is] doubly incumbent upon us in these times because of the decimation of our people.” [Gen 17:7]
2. **Circumcision (Mila):** “to submit every male child to Circumcision, to bring him into the Covenant” with Abraham [Gen 17:11]
3. **Naming:** “to name our children in the midst of a Congregation, to commit them to God as did our fathers” [Gen 17:19]
4. **Education of children:** “to educate our children in the heritage of Israel [to fulfill] the spiritual destiny of the Jewish people” [Isa 59:21]
5. **Confirmation:** “to be confirmed in the Faith of Israel in order to relive the experience of the Covenant which God made with Israel at Sinai through the giving of the Torah” [Deut 29:13–14]
6. **Adult Jewish learning:** “to engage in the study of Torah throughout life in keeping with the intellectual and spiritual discipline of our people throughout its history” [Josh 1:8]
7. **Marriage:** “to marry in accordance with the traditions of our Torah and to establish a Jewish home” [Gen 2:4:67]
8. **Illness and death:** “to accept every personal life-crisis, even the approach of death, with trust and hope in God’s justice and mercy, as did our fathers in every trial and tribulation” [Ps 130:7]
9. **Burial:** “to bury our dead in accordance with the sancta of our tradition which regards it as a Chesed shel Emet” [Gen 49:29]
10. **Mourning:** “to mourn our beloved deceased and to keep alive their memory out of reverence for their life” [Gen 23:2]
11. **Kaddish:** “to keep alive the memory of our beloved deceased, as did our father Jacob” [Gen 48:7]
12. **The Jewish home:** “to endow our homes with the spirit of our faith, the symbols of our way of life, the spiritual and cultural treasures of our people, and the living practices of our heritage” [Deut 6:9]
13. *The Synagogue:* “to establish and support a Synagogue in every community, so that we might be united in prayer, study, and spiritual fellowship, and that the Divine command may be fulfilled” [Exod 25:8]

14. *Shabbat:* “to observe the Shabbat, as a sign of Israel’s continuous relationship with God, both in our personal lives and in the historical experiences of our people” [Exod 31:16–17]

15. *The High Holy Days:* “to observe the Yamim Noraim [Days of Awe] as a period of intense self-searching, earnest communion with God, and sincere reconciliation with our fellow man” [Lev 23:1, 24, 27, 32]

16. *The Three Festivals:* “to observe the three Festivals (Sukkot, Pesach, Shavuot) as reminders of the spiritual truths proclaimed through our people’s historic experiences, and to relive those experiences as meaningful and recurrent for every generation” [Lev 23:2]

17. Minor holidays and special days:

- **Chanukah:** “to observe Chanukah in order to renew the spiritual experience of our people’s victory over tyranny, and the rededication of the temple, thereby reliving our age-old struggle for religious freedom” [I Macc 4]
- **Purim:** “to celebrate Purim in order to relive Israel’s historic experience of deliverance from enemies bent on our destruction, as our Torah states” [Est 9:20–23]
- **Israel Independence Day:** “to observe the fifth of Iyar, the anniversary of the re-establishment of the State of Israel as a special holiday, commemorating a redemptive moment in the life of the Jewish people.” [Jer 31:10–11]
- **Memorial Day for Martyrs of Nazism:** “to observe the tenth of Tevet as a memorial for the millions of our people who perished at the hands of the tyrant” [Lam 3:19–21]

The most significant aspect of this idiosyncratic mix is that Doppelt and Polish did what Freehof said could not be done: they offer a theological basis for Reform Jews’ obligation to perform actions and behaviors whose meaning—irrespective of any ethical import—is the expression of a unique Jewish religiosity by virtue of their performance. A Jew who lives them is a faithful Jew; a Jew who neglects them is a faithless Jew. Reform Judaism expects its adherents to be faithful Jews; Reform Judaism can say therefore that a Jew must do these things.

The *Guide* received widely differing reviews from Reform rabbis. Before the book appeared, the *CCAR Journal* published the text of the sections on practice; editor Abraham J. Klausner introduced it with an editorial titled “Reform ‘Guide-d’ toward Authoritarianism.”
A code or a guide . . . reflects the growing desire for conformity or authoritarianism in religious living. This desire is reflected in our political and cultural enterprises and is at the core of the present struggle between Conservatism and Liberalism. . . . [The discussion of this guide will] reflect on the one hand, the strength of our true liberal spirit in a refusal to take from man his freedom and with it his responsibility for working out his religious convictions, and on the other hand, our tendency to conservatism or authoritarianism in a readiness to permit the Jew “to lay his freedom humbly at our feet” in exchange for a guide—a way of life the clergy has arbitrarily tailored for him.++

While Klausner objected to the work’s aspiration to be a code, a later reviewer objected to a code that set such a very low bar. He dismissed the Guide as just “a prosaic, down-to-earth outline of standards of Jewish observance that are in effect in many congregations labeled ‘Reform’ or ‘Conservative.’ The religious guidance . . . reads like a manual of instruction of some fraternal organization.” In his view it did no more than reflect the status quo: “We all know that this is the usual range of Jewish observance in the average congregation, but the authors did not have to give it the stamp of ‘scholarly approval.’”++ Both men criticized the Guide for its inconsistencies, its arbitrariness, and its failure to include references to the traditional literature to explain or justify its pronouncements.

Those were valid criticisms. But while Doppelt and Polish were trying to establish a minimum and consistent standard for Reform Jewish practice, in propounding that standard they were also staking their position in the postwar process of creating an American Jewish identity. The Guide also needs to be seen as a template for American Jewish life on the new suburban frontier.

WHY THESE MITZVOT?

Between 1945 and 1965, American Jews moved to the suburbs in droves, where they built and joined Conservative and Reform synagogues in record numbers. But, as we saw earlier, this massive institutionalization of religion appeared hollow to thoughtful observers. Acculturated Jews loved being American and appeared far too willing to bend, redefine, or simply dispense with much of their Judaism in order to be fully American. The Guide’s list of Jewish practices makes perfect sense if one reads it as a protest against the sort of Jewish life so memorably studied by Herbert Gans and Marshall Sklare.++ Its authors were at least as much concerned with resisting acculturation as with launching a Jewish spiritual revival or overcoming Solomon Freehof’s resistance to a guide for Reform practice.
They tried to insist that Jews must live a religiously, culturally, and socially Jewish life, even while making themselves at home in America. Jews must have homes that are identifiable and appropriately Jewish; Jews must be active and involved members of synagogues, attending services as well as cultural and social programs; Jews must observe all Jewish holy days; Jewish children must receive a religiously based Jewish education; Jews must feel and express a connection to their people by commemorating the recent tragic European past and celebrating their newly reestablished sovereign homeland. Wherever they go in America’s increasingly open society, Jews must not neglect to bring their Judaism with them. A Halachah even directed college students, for example, to “identify [themselves] actively with organized Jewish life on the campus and help advance the study of Torah there,” to socialize with Jews, and to take Jewish studies courses if any were offered.  

Consider, for example, chapter 12, “The Home.” The authors write: “It is a Mitzva to endow our homes with the spirit of our faith, the symbols of our way of life, the spiritual and cultural treasures of our people, and the living practices of our heritage, as our Torah states: ‘Write them upon the door-posts of your house.’ (Deut 6:9).”

The individual Halachot in chapter 12, “The Home,” are as follows:  

1. To conduct a “special service of thanksgiving and dedication” upon moving into a home. The reader is referred to the appropriate service in the Union Home Prayer Book.
2. “A mezuzah should be affixed to the doorpost of the entrance of the home.”
3. “Symbols and sancta of the Shabbat and Festivals should be kept as decorations and adornments in plain view.”
4. “Every home should have a collection of books, periodicals, art objects and recordings pertaining to Judaism.”
5. The “blessing for food (Hamotzi)” should be recited before each meal (provided in transliteration in the appendix), and grace after each meal (a single blessing excerpted from the traditional Grace After Meals, also in the appendix).
6. “The family should recite appropriate prayers upon retiring at night and upon awakening.”
7. “Prayers on special occasions in the life of the individual or of the family should be recited at home.”
8. “Time should be set aside for the family reading of Biblical and other Jewish selections, particularly on Shabbat.”
9. “Holidays which are alien to the spirit and practice of Judaism should not be observed in the home, in any manner whatsoever. Holy symbols and images of other faiths should not be displayed in the home.”
10. “Although Reform Judaism does not adhere to the traditional dietary laws, many
Reform Jews still abstain from eating the meat of the pig. This is based on historical associations, since the pig was often used as an instrument of persecution of our people who were tormented by their enemies into eating it.”

In other words, your new, tastefully decorated suburban home must be identifiably Jewish. Don’t store the candlesticks and Chanukah menorah out of sight on the bottom shelf of the new china cabinet; add some Jewish LPs to the collection you play on your new hi-fi; supplement your Book of the Month Club fare with some Jewish books. Pray daily as a family. Don’t put up a Christmas tree or stockings for the kids. Remember how your ancestors suffered and don’t eat pork. And join a synagogue.

Concerning the synagogue, the Guide mandates: “It is a Mitzva to establish and support a Synagogue in every community, so that we might be united in prayer, study, and spiritual fellowship, and that the Divine command may be fulfilled, as the Torah states, ‘They shall make for Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them (Exod 25:8).’” In fact, the chapter on the synagogue was one of the two longest chapters in the Guide—six pages, the same length as the chapter addressing engagement, marriage, and divorce. It began with the statement that the synagogue was a “House of God, and the source from which Torah emanates.” No activity that was not consistent with that purpose could take place there: “Any activity tending to degrade the spiritual character of a Synagogue is sacrilegious and should not be countenanced.” That included gambling, card playing, and performances not in good taste.

Being a synagogue member was more than a matter of paying dues: “Membership involves attendance at services, participation in the adult education program, cooperation with the religious school, generous support of the Synagogue’s financial requirements, and participation in some phase of the Congregation’s organizational life.” This list of expectations mirrors the Statement of Principles that congregants adopted when they formed Beth Emet in 1950, with the conscious intent of creating an ideal synagogue. The Halachot in this chapter dwell in great detail on qualifications for synagogue membership, qualifications for synagogue office, relationships among rabbi, board, and congregants, and other matters that obviously grew out of the distinctive Beth Emet environment.

It is doubtful that many Reform laypeople actually made their way through the turgid prose of the Guide’s three introductory essays and impossible to know how many people actually used it. Two retired rabbis who responded to my inquiries about its use had negative reactions. One “looked at it but decided not to give it to congregants”; the other tried giving it to new converts, but they found it difficult to follow. At the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion it did not figure into the curriculum.

But the demand for guidance continued to grow. In the 1940s Freehof had insisted that a guide to Reform practice was an impossibility: one could only describe what
consensus had been reached and otherwise submit individual questions to the CCAR Responsa Committee. As its chair, he responded to hundreds of inquiries, many of which stated that they were writing after finding no guidance in his Reform Jewish Practice. By the 1960s, however, generational change brought enough voices to positions of influence within the CCAR to change the terms of the debate. In 1968 a special CCAR Committee on the Sabbath, headed by W. Gunther Plaut, reported its plan for a published guide that would include standards for Shabbat observance. In 1966 the rabbis had rejected a committee proposal to include guidance on life cycle rituals in the forthcoming rabbis’ manual; nearly seventy years later they reached a milestone with the publication of A Shabbat Manual.56 As Michael A. Meyer has pointed out, however, acceptance by the rabbinic body required “painful compromise” that resulted in the elimination of language that might hint at any notion of obligation, resulting in only an inoffensive manual for teaching Reform Jews how to make Shabbat at home.57

REFORM JUDAISM AND NOSTALGIA FOR YIDDISHKAYT

In 1958, Leon Uris’s potboiler Exodus hit the best seller list; the 1960 film version was a smash at the box office. In 1964, Broadway’s biggest hits were Funny Girl and Fiddler on the Roof. All of these popular culture offerings reflected the extent to which Jews and Jewishness were visible and acceptable, even cool; but they also pointed to how Jews themselves were being swept away both by nostalgia for the shtetl, the lost locus of “authentic” Jewish existence, and pride in the State of Israel, the new locus of “authentic” Jewish existence.58 Not surprisingly, therefore, in 1967, when another Reform rabbi, Morrison David Bial,59 produced a guide to Jewish practice for his congregation in the comfortable suburb of Summit, New Jersey, it was light on theology but heavy on cloying descriptions of how Jews lived in the shtetl and how you too can create a warm and attractive Jewish home that will ensure that your children grow up to love Judaism.

Bial’s goal was to encourage Reform Jews to lead a life in which Jewish ritual played a more significant role. The book’s first chapter, “The Criteria of Reform Jewish Practice,” informs the reader that while Liberal Jews will never be bound by a code of practice, nevertheless there is a need “to help establish ... correct, thoughtful, efficacious Reform Jewish practice.” Every Reform Jew has to be informed and make their own decisions. But how does one decide, if one does not believe the commandments are divinely revealed? All Bial offers is a vague appeal to a “meaningful” life: “The answer must be a sense of k’dusha, of holiness, of that which will help him sanctify his life, to make it truly meaningful. By this he must live, and it will help give his life that inner meaning by which we seek fulfillment.”60 The language of meaning and holiness may
be reminiscent of covenant theology, but the key element of covenant theology—“You must”—is absent. This is essentially the older Reform theology in which ritual has only utilitarian value, merely expressed in contemporary language: “Do it because it will make you feel good.”

In 1967 most Reform Jews still didn’t want mitzvah, but they did want Yiddishkayt. They wanted the aesthetics and the warmth of “tradition.” Bial gave them what they wanted and tried to push them to go a little deeper into the meaning of what they were doing, drawing his readers in with passages that read like something out of Life Is with People. Consider the following example:

Every people has its lullabies; the Jewish cradle songs were unique in their emphasis on piety and the love of wisdom. Die beste schora ist das Torah. “The best merchandise is the Torah,” sang the mother to her baby. So from his earliest days was the Jewish child bent to know our path of life.

A lovely old custom was to weigh a child on each birthday and donate a sum proportionate to his gain in weight to charity, especially a fund for scholars.

As the child grew he was immersed in a Jewish atmosphere that was more real in determining the direction of his life than even his rigorous schooling. He savored the flavor of Judaism, the peace of Sabbath serenity, the festive spirit of the holidays. Enraptured, he listened to Kiddush and Havdalah, and early learned to respond with hearty amen—and received his own tiny sip of wine. He looked with glistening eyes at the Chanukah candles, fondled his store of nuts, twirled his dreidel, and was happy for eight consecutive nights. Passover with its sedarim was exciting even though he fell asleep over his thimble of wine long before the Haggadah was finished. . . .

An aura of Jewishness is as important today as it ever was for our forebears. The Reform Jewish home should provide the early start that makes our children conscious of the beauties of their religion even before they are ready for school. . . .

The Sabbath and the holidays provide the obvious time to practice Judaism’s customs and ceremonies with our children.61

Very carefully, Bial attempted to steer his readers toward observance through judicious use of language: “No Sabbath is truly observed unless we join in communal Sabbath worship.” “Certainly, Liberal Jews should include many of these [ritual items, books, and pictures of Jewish content] in their homes.” “Liberal Jews differ among themselves on fasting. . . . Therefore, no hard and fast rule can be drawn for Reform Jews. However, fasting should not lightly be dispensed with for it has been an integral, meaningful aspect of Yom Kippur for millennia.”61

Liberal Judaism at Home turned out to be the right book at the right time. While the rabbinical organization dithered, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations,
the powerful congregational arm of North American Reform Judaism, made its own decision to publish Bial’s book. Between 1971 and 1976 it went through five printings.

CONCLUSION

In 1979, the CCAR finally published *Gates of Mitzvah: A Guide to the Jewish Life Cycle*, followed in 1983 by a companion volume dedicated to the holy days. The Reform movement had at last dared to state that there were standards of practice, even if, as Michael A. Meyer observed, “they represented [only] an ideal.” In its explicit use of the word “mitzvah” in the title, in its introduction of observances with the phrase “The mitzvah of . . .,” and in its manual format, it followed the path laid out by Doppelt and Polish, while diverging from their model in two significant ways. First, it abandoned their idiosyncratic and incoherent list of mitzvot, generally limiting the use of the term to biblically or rabbinically sanctioned acts. Second, it redefined the link between theology and deed. In place of Doppelt and Polish’s covenant theology, *Gates of Mitzvah* offered four essays (one by David Polish), each offering a different theology of mitzvah. Thus the dissent of 1957 had become the norm.

NOTES

13. Frederic Doppelt (1906–1973) was born into a Chasidic family that immigrated to the U.S. from Poland in 1920 and settled in Chicago. He studied at the Hebrew Theological College and then at the University of Chicago, where his studies shattered his traditional worldview. He entered the Hebrew Union College in 1928, where he became an advocate for modern Hebrew; he was ordained in 1931 and served a congregation in Ft. Wayne, Indiana, until 1969. (American Jewish Archives, near-print biography.)
14. David Polish (1910–1995) was born in Cleveland to East European immigrants and was ordained at Hebrew Union College in 1934. He was serving a Chicago congregation with an anti-Zionist board and senior rabbi when Stephen Wise died in 1949; Polish eulogized him from the pulpit and was locked out of the building when he tried to enter it the following week. With a loyal following of congregants, he broke away and established Beth Emet—The Free Synagogue in Evanston, Illinois, a few weeks later, where he remained until his retirement in 1980. (American Jewish Archives MS-631 3/1.)
16. William B. Silverman, “Changes in Reform Jewish Practice,” Central Conference of American Rabbis Yearbook 64 (1954): 126. No copy of Doppelt’s paper survives aside from the session report. According to Silverman, Eugene B. Borowitz observed with approval that Reform Judaism had entered a new stage in its development, deeply dissatisfied with formerly agreed upon praxis and desirous of more traditional practices, but noted the need to reconcile the desire for guidance with the commitment to freedom. Alvin Rubin argued that a code would contradict Reform’s basic tenets; Alfred L. Friedman countered that the absence of a code or guide was the reason for the current “ritualistic anarchy.” Doppelt’s paper, positing that a life of mitzvot, including what others called “rituals” or “ceremonies,” was a sine qua non of an authentic Jewish life, “elicited the most controversy.”
17. Doppelt and Polish, Guide.


30. Ibid., 9.
31. Ibid., 12.
32. They cite William F. Albright, The Archaeology of Palestine, originally published in 1949. By the 1950s the Albright school dominated the field of biblical archaeology; its application to biblical criticism meant that Jewish scholars no longer viewed the latter as “the higher anti-Semitism,” as Solomon Schechter had so pithily phrased it. Reform Jews in the 1950s might well have read any of several books by Albright or even more likely a slim volume by one of their own, Rabbi Bernard Bamberger, The Bible: A Modern Jewish Approach (New York: Schocken Books, 1955). See Alan T. Levenson, The Making of the Modern Jewish Bible (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), 155ff.
34. Ibid., 18.
35. Ibid., 30.
36. Ibid., 41.
37. Ibid., 41.
38. Ibid., 43.
39. Ibid., 44.
40. Ibid., passim.
41. “And this shall be My covenant with them, said the LORD: My spirit which is upon you, and the words which I have placed in your mouth, shall not be absent from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your children, nor from the mouth of your children’s children — said the LORD — from now on, for all time (Isa 59:21).”
42. Doppelt and Polish, Guide, 72.
43. Ibid., passim. At the very end of this final section they instruct the reader that “it is not a Mitzva to observe Tu B’Shvat and Lag Ba-Omer, but the Halakha tells us to mark them as special days in our homes” and that we should also refrain from holding weddings on Tisha B’Av “in deference to those who still observe this day of mourning for the destruction of the Temple, even though the State of Israel has been re-established.”
46. See n. 18.
48. Unless otherwise noted, all references here are to Doppelt and Polish, Guide, 89–90.
49. Ibid., 89, 91.
50. Ibid., 91.
51. These Halachot closely resemble several of Freehof’s responsa. Gambling for synagogue fundraising was a sensitive issue in the Reform movement, implicitly touching on issues of class and acculturation. For a thorough discussion of this issue, see Friedman, “Guidance, Not Governance,” 179ff.

52. Doppelt and Polish, Guide, 93.


55. This assertion rests on the author’s personal recollection and anecdotal evidence from colleagues.


59. Morrison David Bial (1917–2004), born in New York City to East European immigrant parents, received a B.A. from Brooklyn College and was ordained at the Jewish Institute of Religion in 1945. As a delegate to the May 1942 Biltmore conference, he introduced the motion that the resolution calling for a Jewish state be published in Hebrew. After serving several congregations in and around New York City, in 1953 he became the first rabbi of Temple Sinai in the upscale suburb of Summit, New Jersey. (American Jewish Archives, nearprint biography.)

60. Bial, Liberal Judaism at Home, 1–2, 6.

61. Ibid., 16.


64. Meyer, Response to Modernity, 377.