



**URJ BIENNIAL 2017**

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UNION *for* REFORM JUDAISM

## Address to URJ Biennial 2017 by URJ Chair Daryl Messinger



The following are remarks as prepared for the **Union for Reform Judaism Biennial 2017** convention, delivered on December 7, 2017.

Late this summer at our Shabbat table, one of my guests said, “Synagogues are going the way of the dodo bird, and denominations are a thing of the past. Why will the Reform Movement matter to our children?”

Yes, folks, this from a good friend.

With a wave of the hand, she dismissed our work.

In my head, I was screaming, “Fake news!” And thinking, “Wow, with friends like her, who needs Bibi Netanyahu?”

But I knew that my friend’s intentions were well-meaning and I understood what she was really asking. And I know that many of you in this room have these questions too.

She wanted me to calm her own fears, to rebut the seemingly constant prognostications that we Jews – particularly Reform Jews – will not survive. She was looking for me to debunk the pundits that proclaim that the “real” Jews are the ultra-Orthodox, that our synagogues are frozen in 1980s tundra, that our adult children don’t care, are unlikely to marry other Jews, join our shuls, or have Jewish homes.

I took a deep breath and began to tell my guests about our work – and that is what I want to do today with all of you. So that you will leave this Biennial filled with purpose, with optimism, and with a greater appreciation of the ways this Movement matters to you, to your family, and to our world.

Over the last two years, I have had the privilege and the responsibility to represent the Reform Jewish Movement in Washington, D.C., and in Jerusalem, at presidential palaces and at congregations both modest and, well, not-so-modest. I have registered voters, marched with other faiths’ leaders, convened and consulted with Reform leaders, young and old, clergy and lay, from around the globe. I have learned from and prayed with Jews of every hue, background, political perspective, and sexual orientation. I have loved it all, because I was clear in our purpose.

Here is what I understand better today than I did two years ago: Reform Judaism matters, our congregations matter. When we act as one Movement, we can create a world that is more compassionate, just, and whole.

Rather than me telling you, let me instead share the perspectives of three individuals.

Let’s start with David.

There are probably a few hundred current or past presidents here today who have had to give the High Holy Day speech. I’m willing to bet that only a very few of you have received a standing ovation after giving it.

After watching David Astrove, president of Washington Hebrew Congregation in Washington, D.C., give his High Holiday appeal speech, I stood up and cheered along with his congregation. [David said, in part:](#)

“This year, I have realized more than in any prior year of my life how important it is, to me, to be a Reform Jew in America today.

“As Reform Jews, we learn that we cannot sit idly by in the face of hatred, suffering and strife. How often we hear that although it is not our responsibility to fix everything, it is absolutely our responsibility to do something.

“As Reform Jews, we learn and we know that we cannot ignore that responsibility. It does not matter if there are laws requiring us to treat our fellow human beings with respect and dignity. We know as Reform Jews, individually and collectively, it is our responsibility to do so. It does not matter if we have laws affording us the right to say anything.

“As Reform Jews, we know that words of hate and incitement cannot be ignored because those words can lead to unspeakable horror. When neo-Nazis marched in Charlottesville chanting anti-

Semitic and racist chants, my inbox was flooded with words of reflection and perspective from many Reform Jewish leaders, including beautiful words from Rabbi Bruce Lustig, Rabbi Rick Jacobs, and Rabbi Jonah Pesner.

“They shared that Reform Judaism teaches us to address hate with love, ignorance with education, embrace the stranger and shout the loudest on behalf of those who have no voice. As an American, these ideals of Reform Judaism provided me with comfort, relief and direction.”

David is right: When we speak truth to power, when we speak out against injustice, when we advocate and fight for those most vulnerable among us, when we partner with God to repair the world, we matter. This is why.

Now, for a second perspective.

Earlier this year, I attended NFTY Convention, where I learned an invaluable lesson from Kathryn Fleischer, then-NFTY president. This remarkable young woman co-taught [a d’var Torah I will never forget](#):

“It breaks my heart to know that within our own Jewish community, some people wouldn't even consider me, some of us, Jewish. And I know that I'm not the only one in the room with this background.

“I know I'm definitely not the only one here who understands the value of finding a home in this community without judgment of the background that we come from. I also know that I'm not the only one here who has doubted their place in this community. That despite the warmest of welcomes, we felt some doubt.

“For instance, when I hear people talk about intermarriage being the death of Judaism, it hurts. It hurts deep down inside. It makes me question my Judaism. It makes me question my leadership. It makes me question my faith. It makes me wonder if all of it isn't as valid as those around me. The most harmful part about questioning someone's place in the community is that it instills a little bit of doubt and that doubt makes them think that maybe, maybe I don't belong...

“...I find myself asking, am I Jewish enough to read Torah. Do I deserve to be standing up here? If I get through this, will that mean I am Jewish enough?...

“...We must continue to open our doors to anyone who wants to find a home in our community.”

There are so many folks, who, like Kathryn, wonder, “Am I Jewish enough?”

My friend Kathryn’s teaching give us two more “whys.”

First, I dare anyone to listen to Kathryn (or to the many Kathryns in their community) and not believe passionately in the work of audacious hospitality. We must continue to work to make sure everyone has a place in our Movement and in our communities, and that their presence makes our congregations stronger. Our Movement and our congregations flourish when we recognize that we are all Jewish enough.

Second, seeing Kathryn teach shows that training new leaders for a new generation is not just a thing we do, it is the essence of what we do. It is at our very core.

And one final perspective.

This fall, our beloved URJ Camp Newman burned to the ground, torched by wildfires. This is where my children went to summer camp, and where my husband and I led a phenomenal group of Jewish leaders in creating the preeminent sacred space for Jewish living and learning in Northern California. After the fires, we saw a terribly personal example of why this Movement matters, and we experienced the love, comfort and enormous support of a holy community that extends beyond buildings and structures.

Sacred space, sacred ritual, and sacred relationships matter today more than ever. No virtual reality could create the caring and connection that our Movement's clergy, professionals, and lay leaders do every day in congregations and communities throughout North America.

Since the fires, I've seen thousands of testimonials that describe the impact camp has on the souls of our children and on our families. One of those was a poem from former Newman camper Dan Kurzrock, who met his bride, Jen, at camp as teenagers and together they celebrated their marriage this summer with an *oof roof* at camp that helped kick off a weekend-long celebration of 70 years of West Coast camping. Dan writes, in part,

Camp is a useful fiction  
And we are the authors  
Our story brings us perspective,  
It shapes us between chapters.  
Community is resiliency.  
We are an evolving ecosystem.  
Community is water, not wood.  
It cannot burn or break.  
We know this--  
Yet, we mourn the loss of our camp because it was ours and we loved it  
We are lucky to have had such a treasure to mourn.  
We are lucky to know that we will still always have each other.  
We create the sense of place.  
We are water, not wood.

Just 23 days after camp was destroyed, we announced the plan for Summer 2018 at California State University Maritime Academy: [Camp Newman by the Bay](#).

There will be 70 plus more years of camp memories.

We are water, not wood.

We create what matters.

We build strong communities, and together, we inspire Jewish life that matters.

Camp Newman has a tradition of asking visitors, campers, and staff to fill in the following statement: “Because of camp...” Today, let’s each of us fill in this statement: “Because of the Reform Movement...”

Here are some I hope we all share:

Because of this Movement, we are all Jewish enough.

Because of this Movement, our voice is heard loudly and powerfully.

Because of this Movement, we have a rich, vibrant future ahead that we, together, will create.

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### **About the Union for Reform Judaism**

*The Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) builds community at every level—from the way we collaborate with congregations, organizations, and individuals to how we make connections across North America to advance contemporary and inclusive Jewish life. Providing vision and voice to transform the way people connect to Judaism, we help congregations stay relevant and innovative, motivate more young Jews to embrace Jewish living, agitate for a more progressive society, and foster meaningful connections to Israel.*

*Founded in 1873, URJ has grown into the largest and most powerful force in North American Jewish life, with nearly 900 member congregations and work that inspires, connects, and educates millions of people. Our legacy, reach, leadership, and vision mean that we can unite thousands of years of tradition with a modern, evolving Judaism to strengthen Jewish communities today and for future generations.*

*Visit us at [www.URJ.org](http://www.URJ.org) to learn about our social justice initiatives, camps and programs for young Jews, services for congregations and communities, and how you can work with us to create a more just, whole, and compassionate world. Enjoy related content at [ReformJudaism.org](http://ReformJudaism.org) and connect with URJ on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).*