



URJ BIENNIAL 2017

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UNION *for* REFORM JUDAISM

Address to URJ Biennial 2017 by URJ President Rabbi Rick Jacobs

This address was presented before the [74th Union for Reform Judaism Biennial convention](#) on Thursday, December 7.

Before we even had the world, we had water.

In just the second sentence of the Torah, we learn that in the earliest hours of time the presence of God hovered over the surface of the water.

It is life itself.

Water gives life to our souls. The sages called Torah “*b’er mayim chayim*,” a well of living water. It gives life to our societies. The wells were the center of ancient communities, the places where our patriarchs met our matriarchs.

It gives life to our very selves. The body, after all, is two-thirds water.

Of all the elements in nature, none is more essential than water. Of the countless symbols in Jewish life, none is more elemental.

But not all water is created equal. Just as God made a distinction between light and dark, between sky and sea, there is a critical difference between “standing water” and “living water.” That with which we wash our hands before eating and wash ourselves in the *mikvah* – it must come from *mayim chayim* – living water. Water that moves and replenishes itself. Why does that matter to us? Because what gives water its power is its vitality. Water is life because it is alive.

It is alive – and, as the president of the URJ, I’m proud to stand with you tonight to say:
So is our movement.

The question before us right now is whether we will keep our movement moving, our Jewish life lively – or risk evaporation.

They say you can never step in the same river twice. I feel that sentiment this week. For many of us, this is not our first Biennial – but thanks to you, your hard work, and the commitment you show in your communities, never have any of us been to a Biennial like this.

Nor have we ever lived in a moment like the one we face today. Some of it is caused by the forces transforming our country and the world: Vitriol in our public discourse. Violence in our public spaces. Violations of personal space and human dignity. We are not spectators. Finding answers to these changes and challenges is our very purpose.

And even as we grapple with the chaos swirling around us, let's remember for a moment why our movement is in such a different and better place today. My friends, it is because of the connections *you* have made. I'm so grateful that this week, we get to celebrate it.

Our movement is stronger because of impactful [Communities of Practice](#) and thriving Active Learning Networks, connecting 300 congregations that work together to make each other better. It's so gratifying to see congregations from coast to coast learning from one another: a temple in New York sharing ideas with one in Kentucky. A temple in Hollywood collaborating with one in the Boston suburbs, not far from here. Leaders of a congregation from Louisiana sharing challenges and experiences with leaders in St. Louis, making our movement better every day.

Our movement is stronger because of the 10,000 active users of [The Tent](#), our online collaboration platform that lets us share ideas, successes, and failures. And because of KN, the [Knowledge Network](#), which expertly and promptly responds to thousands of calls and emails in search of guidance around every aspect of congregational life.

Our movement is stronger because of the presidents and rabbis who have been enriched by the [Scheidt](#) and [Shallat](#) seminars.

Our movement is stronger because of the thousands who have found the Jewish tools for social change at the [RAC](#)'s conferences and seminars.

Our movement is stronger because of the thousands more who have found in [our camps](#) a deeper Jewish identity and commitment.

Our movement is stronger because of the countless people who, through our [audacious hospitality](#), find a home in Judaism for the very first time. Those who need and use our disability resources. And those who visit our website, one of the largest in Jewish communal life, and listen to our podcasts, among the most popular in the Jewish community.

Our movement is stronger because of the congregations that are visionary and courageous enough to reinvent the core functions of synagogue life, from new models of education to new models of membership to new models of spiritual practice, allowing us to share best principles and practices with congregations across North America.

And our movement is stronger because of all of you in this very room – this Biennial. There is simply nothing like it in North American Jewish life.

You have made all of this possible with your creativity, your skill, and your financial support, and with your vision and your participation to make it real. We should all be proud of what we are accomplishing together. I know that I am. And before I go any further, let me say: "Thank you."

Like any established organization in a time of change, ours must be willing to ask ourselves which old habits need to be shaken up. Not because it's nice to get an upgrade once in awhile – but because the forces we face demand our urgent attention and action.

I have spent 25 years of my rabbinate thinking about synagogue transformation. Over the past five years, I have built on my predecessors' work to strengthen congregations and, where necessary, reshape the URJ to meet the adaptive challenges facing our members.

Those of us who lead, love, and live in congregations know how indispensable they are to helping Jewish life flourish. We are making even our best congregations better, and we always will. And when we ask ourselves those ever-present, ever-important questions – How can we ensure that we stay relevant and effective? What new questions do we need to answer and what assumptions do we need to challenge? – we should take a cue from the successes we've seen.

All the points of pride I just mentioned: What do they have in common? The conventions and conferences, the camps and classrooms, the online networks and in-person seminars? Each is about *connection*. None succeeds in isolation. When we ask the participants of our youth programs to tell us what it means to them to be Jewish, what do they say? They want to feel part of a real community.

In fact, over the last year, many previously unconnected people have searched out our communities because they seek a sense of purpose to anchor their lives. Our synagogues and programs have the power to turn that purpose into something real – somewhere to go, someone to talk to, something to do when this moment feels too overwhelming. A community that speaks and listens with respect, that welcomes a diversity of views, and that isn't afraid to take a moral stand.

For the future of our movement to remain strong – to keep its vitality and its liveliness – we must find more ways to make these connections and build these communities. And we must make one more important distinction, like that between light and dark, between sky and sea: we must recognize what congregations do best, and what individual institutions cannot do alone.

This is a moment of tremendous opportunity, one about which I have been thinking a lot this year. And as I have thought about the life of our movement, I have often found my thoughts returning to that one element central to all life: water.

Think of a pond. It's beautiful. It's an entire ecosystem, cultivating life. It offers refuge and reflection. But it is also filled with standing water. Lovely, yes – but independent, disconnected. If one were to dry up, it's hardly anyone else's concern.

These ponds are, at times, like our institutions. Like some of our congregations. What will keep our movement strong are the constant connections from one body to another, like a river or a canal that connects two lakes or a sea that connects two oceans. We have invested and will continue to invest in these institutions, congregations, and programs. But we need more. As we read in the Apocrypha, "observe the waters; when they flow together, they sweep along the stones, earth, and other things; but if they remain divided ... the earth swallows them up and they vanish."

When I look ahead to the next two years of our movement, I see a need for more living water. More dynamic forces that connect and sustain our communities. Not in place of any congregation or any institution or any ritual – but because by strengthening ourselves everywhere we can and will make every community healthier.

This idea is central to everything we do and know and believe as Jews. We do not pray alone – we convene a *minyan*. We are, more than anything else, a people. A one out of many. A community. And that should inform our approach to realizing the full potential of our congregations and institutions.

All of this is especially urgent when we consider our relevance to young adults – and that is what I want to discuss with you tonight: their future, and ours.

I recently visited one of our URJ congregations in the South. As I prepared for my trip, I asked the congregation's president if there was anything I could bring. "Yes," she answered. "Could you bring us some new members?"

We're all aware that there is a gap of two decades when young adults often disconnect from the Jewish community. Some shrug it off. Young people are unsettled in life, some argue, in periods of profound transition – so what can we expect? Let's leave our 20- and 30-somethings alone, they say.

I couldn't disagree more. Times of profound transition are precisely when we need to be there for our young adults.

Let me repeat that: These times are precisely when *we* need to be there for *them*.

No one can magically bring our congregations new members. Here in Boston, let's remember the call of this city's favorite son and ask not when our members will come to us. We must ask what we need to do to be there for *them*. And I am supremely confident that we can meet them where they are while staying true to who we are.

How do we do that? In this challenge, too, the answer lies in what we do and know and believe as Jews.

What is Judaism's holiest day? Our tradition gives us a surefire way to tell. The secret lies in the number of *aliyot* we call up to the Torah.

On days like today – a Thursday – we call up three *aliyot*. [Rosh Chodesh](#) is a little holier, so on those days, we call up four. On *chagim* like [Passover](#), [Rosh HaShanah](#), and [Sukkot](#) – five. On our most solemn day, [Yom Kippur](#), we call six.

And then, there is [Shabbat](#). It is only on Shabbat that we call seven *aliyot* to the bimah. No day sees more *aliyot*. No day is holier. And the beauty of this tradition is that on our calendar, no holiday is more common.

Jewish life is about making the most common events meaningful. About finding purpose *every* day. When we ask how to get more young adults involved, that's where the answer lies. Not in only getting them into the sanctuary for their b'nai mitzvah, or into the sukkah, or underneath the chuppah.

Judaism is about more than milestones. If we're hoping to attract new and active members and participants in Jewish life, we must also make our movement valuable in their everyday lives.

So tonight, I challenge the largest and most diverse North American Jewish movement to think differently about how we make that so for our young students, young professionals, young couples, and young families.

Let's start on campus, where we know young Jewish students identify with the Judaism we live. It is an inclusive, activist, and spiritual expression of our faith.

The problem is, it doesn't always feel that way. I remember, as a student, the first time I led [Birkat HaMazon](#) on my campus. I did it confidently – after all, I'd spent years at URJ camp. But when I finished, a more traditional student sneered, "Is that it?"

Seven out of 10 rabbis on college campuses are Orthodox, and more than half of those are ultra-Orthodox. Those Orthodox outreach programs have every right to make a priority of engaging college students; the problem is that we haven't put forward enough compelling alternatives. On campus, we have to show up.

It's no surprise that campus Jewish activities tilt toward the more traditional, alienating those who express their faith the way we do: not only through ritual and study, but through *tikkun olam* and *tzedakah*, through social justice programs and a Judaism with the courage and backbone to stand up for those who need a voice. For refugees, undocumented immigrants, the LGBTQ community, victims of our criminal justice system, interfaith families, Jews of color – and those of us who reject the false choice between standing against racism and standing beside Israel. This Shabbat, [and especially considering yesterday's announcement on Jerusalem,] I will have more to say on this moment in the Diaspora-Israel relationship.

In the meantime, here are four things we can do for our students on campus:

First, we must let them know that the largest and most diverse network in Jewish life has their backs. We can reach out with support and services that reflect the Judaism we love and lead, and give them the resources to grow Jewishly – not just on holidays, but every day. Whether they're alumni of our camps and [NFTY](#), or grew up in our congregations, our students deserve a sustained connection to our movement.

Second, we can incentivize more Reform Jewish professionals to work on campus and raise our profile among students. That means working closely with the leadership of [Hillel International](#), complementing what they've done and building on it.

Third, we can continue to engage students in Jewish immersive experiences, both on and off campus. On campus, of course, we can offer financial support to Reform programming, leadership development, and connections to our congregations. Off campus, we can support URJ camp staff, [the RAC's Machon Kaplan internship program](#), and [Birthright](#).

And fourth, we can make it clear that social justice activism on campus and Jewish life on campus can be one and the same. They go hand-in-hand. And they will, in the long run, strengthen our congregations and our young people's connections to them.

We have a responsibility to help our young adults stay connected to our community after they graduate, too – when many are starting in new cities and developing new routines.

I'm immensely proud of the young adult communities that have flourished and found followings outside the walls of their congregations. [The Riverway Project at Temple Israel](#) here in Boston, for example, or [2239 at Washington Hebrew Congregation](#). Communities like the [Tribe](#) at New York City's [Rodeph Sholom](#) and New Jersey's [Congregation B'nai Jeshurun](#), and so many more like them in Atlanta, Boise, Charlotte, Dallas, and Detroit.

These programs – dinners, learning sessions, real relationships with clergy, innovative payment models – are answering the call to serve our young people every day of the week. But here's the opportunity: these programs are separate. Our ponds don't yet have streams that connect them.

It's time for URJ to connect, expand, and enhance these separate communities into a North American network. Not only to share best principles and program ideas – but to help a member of this more transient generation feel welcome when she moves from city to city. Meeting them where they are also means meeting them wherever they go. And when some of these young professionals pair-up into young couples, we need to still be there for them.

In an age when more and more young people don't put down deep roots, when more are planning an interfaith or same-sex wedding, but fewer are members of congregations, it's not always so easy to find a rabbi or a cantor to officiate. All the more reason we should never turn our backs on them.

I'm so proud of the amazing clergy in our movement. It's easy to find them here at the Biennial. But for the young people in our communities, it's just too hard to track them down. What if the 10 million people who came to [ReformJudaism.org](#) in the last couple of years could find rabbis and cantors as easily as they find religious history, sacred texts, recipes, congregations, and ritual guidance?

That's the idea behind RJ Connect, a new online officiation referral service. We are excited that, in partnership with the [CCAR](#) and [ACC](#), we will build a prototype and launch a pilot in the coming months, connecting couples with clergy – clergy trained by a real seminary, clergy who are part of a movement that holds professionals accountable to the highest ethical standards, and clergy who are prepared to guide couples through the many relationship hurdles we all face.

We will invite CCAR and ACC clergy to offer their services to couples – but not only to officiate. Our goal is to connect them with our congregations and help young couples take the next steps in their Jewish lives – and to help them find meaning in Judaism every single day.

Let me be clear: Our fidelity to Reform Judaism deeply respects the autonomy of each rabbi and cantor to decide his or her position on officiation. There is a way to do this respectfully and hospitably – and I know it will lead to relationships that last long after the wedding.

Wouldn't it serve us all well, for example, if every couple we help marry – regardless of when the ceremony takes place – knows that whenever they decide it's time to join a synagogue, they will receive a year-long free membership in any one of our almost 900 congregations?

I'm confident that if we get this right, we'll see the fruits in the fourth group: families with young children. What families with young children choose to do as they begin their Jewish journeys will set the direction of our movement for years to come. As we read in *Shir Hashirim Rabba*, "Just as water originates in tiny drops and accumulates into mighty streams and rivers, so the Torah is acquired word by word today, verse by verse tomorrow."

In other words, baby steps. Families with young children need childcare, preschool parenting guidance, practical ways to teach moral and spiritual values, meaningful rituals for bedtime and holidays, all of which bind families together. When a growing number of culturally diverse parents aren't Jewishly literate, we must begin where they are. Not just for the *bris* or the baby naming, and the other major milestones, but every single day.

Families with young children are perhaps the biggest source of new life for our congregations and our movement. In many cases, they are already in our buildings – but in too many cases, we don't engage them in the right ways, and we don't show them the value of joining our congregational communities. Through our partnership with the [Early Childhood Educators of Reform Judaism](#) we are piloting new models of excellence that are resulting in powerful outcomes – and we are disseminating the lessons from this partnership so all can benefit. We should all take time to learn from these models.

As we connect and network organizations of students and young professionals, so too should we connect our pre-K programs and our early childhood centers.

Our job is to connect individual institutions with one another, and in the same way, to connect major life cycle events into a coherent Jewish life. That is how we become greater than the sum of our parts. That is how we have successfully – and with audacious hospitality – introduced more people to the meaning within our movement. Not just by welcoming them into the shallow end, but by leading them toward deeper levels of observance and activity – by showing them what deep study unleashes and how advanced social activism addresses root causes.

Entrances to Jewish life are widest at these special moments. Let's make sure our doors are as open as possible.

And let me add: My door is open, too. I will need your creativity, your experience, your ideas, and your partnership to make this work.

Yes, the way we observe and live Judaism is part of what defines us as a denomination. But as you know, I believe we are so much more than that.

What makes us a movement – what makes us *relevant* – is that Reform Judaism is not just about religious ritual. It is about the *real world*. It is about what happens in our lives *every single day*. It is about our shared values and our shared strength.

A movement comprises not only the card-carrying members of the organizations within it, but all who identify with its core commitments. And our movement, like all great movements, must stand for something. We can learn the lessons of the civil rights and women's movements that changed – and continue to change – our world.

Hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of Reform Jews are not currently members of one of our congregations. But if you stop and ask them about their faith, they'll tell you that the Jewish life we live and lead resonates with them. They are open to what we do and yes, they are thirsty – but they are neither ready nor convinced that they need to be formal members of our ranks. That's not their failing – it's on us.

And we have to remember that if the Judaism we offer our young people doesn't speak to the great moral issues of the day, it won't speak to them.

With backbone and courage, we live out our values. In this moment, that means we must speak out fearlessly against violence, against harassment, and against bigotry.

We've mourned lives ended by bullets in churches and temples, in a dance club and at a concert, in schoolrooms, and throughout the soul of our nation. From Seattle and Los Angeles to Kansas City and Washington, the Jewish community has hardly been spared.

[As my predecessor Rabbi Eric Yoffie asked](#) nearly two decades ago, "Is the need for sensible gun violence prevention a religious issue? You bet it is."

I would add: Is it the responsibility of the Reform Movement to speak out?

You bet it is.

And you bet it is also our responsibility to give voice to the victims of discrimination, harassment, and assault. This isn't a plague limited to the high-powered and high-profile. It threatens our neighbors, our friends, and our loved ones – too often in silence and shame.

Is it the responsibility of the Reform Movement to speak out on behalf of women and all victims of abuse?

You bet it is.

We must approach this issue as religious leaders. As educators. As an employer. And as a movement.

As religious leaders, we must voice our outrage at sexual harassment and assault, which violate our values and our commitment to creating a world of wholeness, justice, and compassion.

As educators, we must teach our young people and our peers – and also listen to our NFTY teens, who are leading the way by taking tangible steps to reject sexual objectification and gender discrimination in their programs. How admirable and visionary they are.

As an employer, we must do all we can to create a workplace that allows all of our staff to work without fear of harassment – and with the knowledge that consequences and accountability exist.

And as a movement, we can be proud that some of our professional organizations, led by the CCAR, have outstanding ethics codes and procedures. But not all do, and there is no Movement-wide code to which our synagogues can ascribe. There should be, and there will be.

I'll have much more to say about this subject in the coming days, some of which is included in online fact sheets that detail the urgent and proactive steps we're taking.

As leaders of this movement – and, simply, as human beings – it is, finally, our responsibility to speak out against all hatred – especially against the brand of bigotry that has found new vigor and voice during the last year.

This challenge strikes at the core of our humanity and our obligations to one another, as North Americans and as Jews. This community has worked hard for generations to develop a voice that matters.

We have that voice today. We have to use it – *today*.

I had the privilege this summer of spending Shabbat at [Congregation Beth Israel](#) in Charlottesville, Virginia – the Reform congregation that found itself at the epicenter of the neo-Nazi rally.

Beth Israel's leaders weren't trained for such a day. But Rabbi Tom Gutherz, Rabbi Rachel Schmelkin, and President Alan Zimmerman [faced it with uncommon strength and courage](#).

Shabbat morning followed an evening of venomous chants and preceded a day that would turn deadly. No one would have blamed them if they canceled services altogether. But that's not who Beth Israel is – it's not who we are.

Beth Israel's congregants prayed earlier than usual – not to sneak out afterward, but to ground themselves with the spiritual armor of Torah and the loving presence of their *kehillah kedosha*. They found strength in their synagogue and in the rituals they practice there. They drew nourishment from the congregational experience. And when their service ended, they went outside to stand their ground against the hate that tried to invade their city.

I am so deeply proud of them. I am so deeply proud of those of you from across our movement who rose in solidarity with Beth Israel and the forces of compassion and good in Charlottesville. You showed what strength looks like – and how we are at our best when we create connections with one another.

And yes, we heard that day that there were good people on both sides, but we know better. Our Reform Movement was on the side of love and justice while the other side spewed out ungodly hate. Moral discernment can be challenging, but not on that day in Charlottesville.

The Babylonian Talmud recounts a time when the Jewish community was in desperate need of water. Nothing the rabbis did would bring the rain.

Then Rav, the great sage, decreed a fast to bring the rain. It, too, didn't work.

He led the community in prayer: "*mashiv haruach umoreed hageshem*." That still didn't open the skies.

Finally, a local citizen stepped up, led the prayers – and the rain fell.

Rav was stunned. He wanted to know: Who was this guy?

“I am a teacher of young children,” the man responded. “I teach the poor just like the children of the rich. And whoever is unable to pay, I don’t take anything from them.”

What’s more, the man said, “I have a fishpond, and whichever students are not yet cooperating, I take them out to the fishpond and engage them until they are ready to learn.”

We are, more than anything else, a people. A community. And we each have a role to play.

Building and growing an interconnected network – that’s what will sustain our movement’s strength. It’s how we will broaden our movement and deepen its meaning in people’s lives. Every single day.

Moments of connection – moments like this one, in this room, right now – are the moments that matter.

These are the connections that will bring our movement closer to more people, more energy, and more life.

The world was created perfectly. The task of our lives is to repair it – to do whatever is in our power to restore it. That has always been humanity’s job.

This movement’s task, in this moment, is to nurture the natural waterways that connect us. To keep our congregations the strong sources of life they have always been and will always be.

Just as important, I challenge this movement today to find those places where there isn’t enough living water – and in those places, let us bring the waters to life.

Where we need better connections, let us build canals with our own hands.

I ask you to join me in building those canals. *Join me* in building those canals.

And where we find a young person like the one in the Talmud, let’s recall his teacher’s patience and compassion. Let us take their hands and work together to build a new connection.

That is how we can ensure that in two years’ time, when we will meet again, we will be ever closer to the goal Amos saw: a world in which justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

Thank you.

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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 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 and connect with URJ on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).