

"A Common Symbolism for Reform Judaism"  
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# Part 3

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RELIGION is concerned with the whole man and involves his entire being, psyche, and body, but it relates essentially and directly to the psyche. Moreover, the entire psyche is integral to religion; it cannot authentically be pursued by one part alone. In the useful classification of traditional philosophic psychology, the psyche is divided generally into three parts: reason (cognition or knowing), will (conation or desire), and feeling (emotion or attitude). Each of these parts is served by one or more aspects of religion. The creed of a religion provides reason with beliefs concerning reality, such as the meaning of the word god. The will is taught its limits and direction by a combination of the beliefs and ethical teachings of the religion. And the feelings a person should have regarding ultimate reality or particular events are also determined by the creedal and

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DIMENSIONS

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ethical commitments of his religion, as well as by the conative decisions he has made. The expression of will and feeling in religion takes two primary forms: one, individual and private; the other, social and public. The former consists of the personal and subjective religious actions that a person engages in, the latter refers to practices shared by an entire religious community. Practices shared by an entire community may be called a *common symbolism*. The common symbolism of Reform Judaism consists of festivals (principally, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukot, Pesach, Shavuot, and Chanukah); life-cycle ceremonies (such as, birth, marriage, death); and whatever other public rituals there may be (confirmation, and so forth). Of late there is evidence of increasing disagreement over the common symbolism currently prevailing in Reform Judaism. It is with this problem, and the subject of the common symbolism of Reform generally, that this discussion deals.

Before proceeding further, let the point be explicitly stated that the importance of a common symbolism to Reform is not in dispute. The issue is not whether Reform Judaism should have a common symbolism, but what that symbolism shall be. To illustrate the vital importance of the common symbolism to a religious community, the following enumeration lists some of the many significant functions it performs. The common symbolism serves:

- to bring a person with full being into relation with the divine aspects of existence;
- to evoke meaningful moods and positive attitudes;
- to enrich our sense of wonder and perception of reality by focusing our attention on cosmic events such as the solstices and equinoxes, or earthly processes such as growth and maturation;
- to quicken our sense of history and a shared past by commemorating significant past events;
- to provide a productive celebration of significant life-cycle events;
- to provide a family, through home ceremonies, with enriched moments of shared experience;
- to enable a community to communicate its joy on happy occasions and its compassion on sad ones;
- to provide, by its distinctive nature, a sense of common identity and shared purpose to those who participate in it;
- to provide children with an elementary knowledge of their religious community, since, at first, the true beliefs of religion are beyond their comprehension.

**D**ESPITE the fundamental importance of these functions, little disciplined attention has been devoted in Reform Judaism to the problem of constructing a common symbolism. Two tasks are involved in the solution of this problem: first, the theoretical task, to set forth the principles of Reform Jewish symbolism; second, the practical task, to create the actual symbolism itself. Before entering upon an examina-

tion of the current symbolism of Reform, it should be stressed that one theoretical principle of Reform symbolism is firmly established, although mainly by implication and usage, rather than by conscious and explicit profession. This is that the same sanction as is applied to the observance of the common symbolism in a religious system such as Orthodox Judaism is unqualifiedly inapplicable in Reform Judaism. In Orthodoxy, the common symbolism is taken to be part of an infallible revelation from God who commands its absolute observance. Failure to observe the common symbolism, consequently, is sin, a violation of God's Law, and subjects the transgressor to excommunication or other punishment. In the Reform community no such infallible revelation exists. The common symbolism cannot and does not have as its authorization that it represents the divine will, and the question of sin is entirely irrelevant to its observance. Moreover, it is clear, as a corollary of the proposition that there is no infallible objective source of the common symbolism, that every determination of the symbolism of Reform is ultimately made subjectively by human resources, and, therefore, no symbolism can be made binding or obligatory upon any member of the community. Every Reform Jew, consequently, possesses the authority to determine for himself the nature of the symbolism in which he will participate. The right of the individual Reform Jew to serve as the final arbiter of his own symbolic practice may be termed the *principle of free symbolism*. Accordingly, the only justification in Reform Judaism for a common symbolism is that it enriches the religious life of the individual and, for this productive purpose, he assents to its use. It is the sacred task of the Reform Jewish leadership not to propose any symbolism other than that which compels assent by its intrinsic value alone.

The common symbolism current in Reform, which will also be referred to as the present symbolism, is represented primarily by the festival and ritual structure that appears in the *Union Prayer Book* and the *Rabbi's Manual*. The method whereby the present symbolism was produced is itself part of the symbolism's basic character. This method will be referred to as *traditional essentialism*. Traditional essentialism takes the common symbolism of Orthodox Judaism as the paradigm for Reform. It is significant to note in this connection that, contrary to widespread belief, the symbolism of Orthodoxy is neither the sole nor original symbolism of the Jews. This point has been fully established by the scientific study of Judaism, to which Reform Judaism is committed. Neither the current "Jewish calendar," nor the Orthodox version of the festivals and life-cycle ceremonials, nor the theological meanings attached by Orthodoxy to these symbols are the same as those of biblical Judaism. In point of fact, neither does one symbolic form obtain throughout the entire biblical period. We find instead a series of different forms which are created to meet changing religious, economic, and social conditions. Thus, in the history of the Jews before the first century, we see a dynamic evolution of symbolism, rather than the static and rigid

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ritualism that comes to dominate Jewish life with the advent of Pharisaism and continues until Reform Judaism emerges to attempt to restore religious dynamism to Jewish life once again. Traditional essentialism does not, of course, begin to realize the creative possibilities inherent in Reform Judaism. The early architects of the present symbolism were certainly aware of the continually evolving biblical period, and there were voices raised against a too narrow application of essentialism. Still, traditional essentialism won out, and the Orthodox common symbolism became the general model for the symbolism of Reform. It was evident, even to the most traditional of the early Reformers, that the Orthodox common symbolism as a totality was incompetent for Reform, or for modern man generally. They proceeded, therefore, to apply the method of traditional essentialism, that is, to abstract from the traditional or Orthodox structure what, to their minds, was its essence. Although this essence was given "modern" dress, the Orthodox "Jewish calendar" and its dates for observing the festivals were retained; the festivals and the theological meanings given them in Orthodoxy were retained; the basic structure and significance of the life-cycle ceremonies in Orthodoxy were retained; and the nature of the congregational service as consisting exclusively of direct address to the deity was kept inviolate. Above all, in fidelity to traditional essentialism, Reform Judaism created no significantly new symbolism.

**T**HE STARTING POINT of the halachist is the inefficacy of the present symbolism. This impotence is evident and now generally acknowledged. Specific instances can readily be cited. The Sabbath, whose nature and observance is viewed in traditional essentialism in basically the same way as in Orthodoxy, has been made into the central symbol of Reform Judaism. Occupying this fundamental position, the success or failure of the present symbolism is frequently measured by the efficacy of the Sabbath. By this standard there can be little question the present symbolism has failed. Only a small percentage of the Reform Jewish community attends services; and in most cities, the Sabbath morning service has been discontinued. There is no reason to believe home observance of the Sabbath is any more successful. It is true that Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, whose importance in the present symbolism rivals that of the Sabbath, are still potent symbols. But in their favor is the fact that they occur only once a year. Moreover, the trend toward decreasing attendance at services can now be discerned even here, particularly in the smaller congregations. If the major symbols, as set forth by traditional essentialism, are in difficulty, the minor ones have all but disappeared. Sukot, Pesach, and Shavuot are moribund. Sukot is recalled mostly by Simchat Torah; Pesach is remembered through the seder; and Shavuot has become the day of confirmation. In each of these cases, the festivals themselves are vestigial remains. The life-cycle ceremonials have fared better, of

course, but their potency derives mainly from natural impulse and real events, rather than from any intrinsic value as symbols.

The halachist finds the reason for the failure of the present symbolism not in the traditional essentialist method employed in constructing it, but in the way the method has been applied. Together with the proponents of the present symbolism, he agrees that the Orthodox ritual structure is the proper model for the Reform common symbolism. When confronted with the evident failure of traditional essentialism in the present symbolism, he responds with arguments similar to the following:

a) The traditional essentialist method, as employed in the construction of the present Reform symbolism, omitted too many details of the traditional ritualism. It was too great an abstraction and did not retain enough of the vigor and flavor of the Orthodox halachah. The term halachah in talmudic usage has several meanings, but the one apparently intended by the Reform halachists is "traditional ritual law," as it appears in the Talmud and in post-talmudic compendia such as the *Shulchan Aruch*. Whereas only a few halachists wish to bring into Reform the entire corpus of Orthodox observance, all wish to introduce much more extensive traditional observance. Thus, the Reform halachist is of the opinion that, although in the present Reform symbolism traditional ritualism has failed, much more of the same ritualism through halachah symbolism will certainly succeed.

b) In addition to Reform symbolism being too abstract, it also offers no detailed instructions regarding observance. Hence, another reason for the inefficacy of the present symbolism is that the Reform Jewish community has not been given adequate directions on its performance. Hence, the halachist proposes to write "guides" which will lay down in detail the way in which a Reform Jew shall celebrate his festivals and ceremonials. One of these, a Sabbath guide, is soon to be distributed.

c) The Central Conference of American Rabbis has never insisted with the full force of its prestige that the Reform Jewish community keep its symbolism. Although the halachist maintains he does not wish to subvert the freedom that is at the heart of Reform, still, his attitude appears to be: if the CCAR were to employ to the fullest the rightful powers of persuasion it does possess, then Reform Jews would follow halachah symbolism as their way of life.

The advocates of an open common symbolism for Reform Judaism agree that the present symbolism is ineffective, but they maintain that the halachists have failed to grasp the real reason why this is so. The present symbolism is important not because it has diluted the traditional ritualism, but because it has slavishly adopted too much of the past, and thereby become incoherent with life as it is really lived, the concrete actual existence of the contemporary Reform Jew.

Thus, the present symbolism, because it is based upon the "Jewish calendar," is incoherent with the true-life rhythms of the Reform Jew. These real rhythms are deter-

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mined by the calendar that represents the economic and social forces that in fact govern his life, namely, the Gregorian or civil calendar. Festivals placed by the Jewish calendar into a routine, working day of the civil calendar cannot long overcome its destructive resistance. This is true of major and minor festivals alike. Hence, the Sabbath of traditional essentialism, a festival of fundamental importance, could not surmount the fact that Saturday, in the civil calendar, is an important commercial day. Not only is this the case in Reform, but in Conservatism and Orthodoxy as well, despite the fact that the latter have detailed "guides" enforced by authoritarian institutions. It should be stressed that more than just physical participation in a symbol is affected when it runs counter to the dominant rhythms of a culture. The "seventh day" can hardly serve as a symbol that evokes a mood of deep spiritual peace when the total environment uses that selfsame day as a symbol that incites to feverish pursuit of mundane goals.

Moreover, the present symbolism is largely incoherent with the economic and social structure in which the modern Reform Jew lives. Certainly, among the primary reasons for the impotence of Sukot, Pesach, and Shavuot is the fact that they are basically pastoral and agricultural holidays, whereas the Reform Jew, whom they must serve, lives in an urban community of an industrial society. Festivals that pertain to farming and shepherding have little relevance to him. There has been no harvest to generate feelings of thanksgiving when Sukot comes so that the latter can serve as a timely means of expressing an authentically generated gratitude. As for the civil festival of Thanksgiving, it succeeds only because it is supported by the massive power of the entire culture, economic, political, and social, including the vast communications media.

**F**INALLY, and most important, the present symbolism is incongruent with the beliefs of many Reform Jews. Religious symbolism relates primarily to will and attitude, the non-rational parts of man, but the whole man, including reason, must participate in them. Language is an intrinsic aspect of most symbols, and the language used in Reform symbolism expresses practically the same beliefs as those of its traditional source. These beliefs represent a theological system in which God is viewed anthropomorphically as a person who speaks to man in ordinary language and who determines the course of history by miraculous intervention. This theology is today considered incredible or irrelevant by many Reform Jews. These Reform Jews, consequently, find they cannot make authentic use of the present symbolism since it expresses beliefs they cannot accept. Yet Reform Judaism, ostensibly a liberal religion, offers its people no other form of symbolic expression. Hence, these sophisticated religionists, whose numbers are on the increase, find themselves disenfranchised by the present symbolism, and have become increasingly alienated from the institution.

That the efficacy of a religious symbol is profoundly affected by the credibility of the beliefs it signifies can be readily verified by the experience in Israel. Despite the congeniality of the general environment to the traditional symbolism, a relatively small percentage of the population finds religious value in its observance.

As is apparent, to the open-symbolist the reason for the impotence of the present symbolism is its reliance upon traditional essentialism. Halachah symbolism, which relies even more heavily upon tradition, will come to no better fate. At the most, it will keep the Reform community from grappling with its true problems a while longer. The open-symbolist does not believe that religious symbolism can be legislated. Symbolism can only flourish when it exists in an organic unity with its environment. When the halachah of Orthodoxy prospered, it did so as part of a total congenial context. This context no longer exists, and it is idle romanticism to attempt to recall the irretrievable past. The potent symbol must be rooted in the authentic ground of man, the economic, social, and ideational matrix from which his existence emerges and in which his life lies embedded.

For the open-symbolist, the new common symbolism of Reform Judaism will come not from the past, but the future. Hence, the open symbolism he advocates is only now beginning to emerge. Still, its broad outlines can already be discerned. Traditional essentialism, as the basic method of arriving at a Reform symbolism, will be discarded. It is not the essence of the Orthodox tradition that is to be taken as a model, but the religious creativity displayed by the entire Jewish continuum throughout its long and changing history. The basic rhythms of the economic and social substratum, as reflected in the civil calendar, will be made an instrument of Jewish religious symbolism rather than its implacable foe. Hence, the Shabbat will be conceived of as a state of being and thus freed of its necessary connection with the "seventh day." The Shabbat will enjoy multiple causation: for some, the "seventh day" will bring about Shabbat; for others, a deeply personal measurement of time. New symbols will be created to realize the spiritual possibilities of an industrial and scientific society. The religious value of such great cosmic events as the solstices and seasons, whose power and significance lie buried in the present symbolism by an overlay of supernaturalism and anthropocentrism, will be uncovered and revealed. Above all, the symbolism will be *open* to all Reform Jews. The language of the symbolism will preclude no Reform Jew from participation, whatever his personal creed. Such language will evoke moods of intrinsic meaningfulness without provoking theological dissent. Thus will the essential spirit of Reform Judaism as freedom be concretized in the symbolism that constitutes its body.

Like most things novel, the concept of an open symbolism may appear strange and to some, even bizarre. But such is the case, perhaps, because this symbolism must live in the age of moon-walking, itself rather strange, and more than a little bizarre.