

WE'RE RESPONSIBLE FOR EACH OTHER

Address by Rabbi Dow Marmur at the WUPJ Luncheon at the URJ Biennial

Toronto, November 5, 2009

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I've served large congregations in Britain and in Canada. In both countries, some congregants who studied synagogue budgets carefully would want to know what benefits they derived from paying dues to the national organization - in Britain, the Reform Synagogues of Great Britain (as it was known in my time there), and in Canada to the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (as it was known at the time that I was a congregational rabbi). The implication of each question was invariably that for large Temples such an expense wasn't warranted, since any services it needed it could buy for much less. It's a variant of people all over the world resenting paying taxes, especially if they're able to afford it.

My reaction was always the same. Instead of listing the many services that the national organization does indeed render, I suggested that it would make more sense to assume that the congregations I served derived no benefit from these dues whatsoever – other than (1) the knowledge that their contribution made it possible for Jews in small communities with insufficient resources to practice Judaism and so testify to its truth; (2) that, thanks to the resourceful large congregations, the voice of Reform Judaism would be heard in places where it was needed; and (3) that Jews less fortunate than ourselves would have properly trained teachers and leaders to articulate what we stand for and transmit it to future generations.

In the, of course, very unlikely event that a member of the Union for Reform Judaism should ever doubt the imperative to be affiliated with the World Union for Progressive Judaism and support it, I offer a similar response. It's reasonable to assume that Reform Jews in North America don't need the World Union. Nevertheless their involvement in it, and support for it, are crucial. Thanks to that support, Jews in remote places in the world can identify as Jews. They who not long ago could only testify to devastation they witnessed in Europe and, as a result, could now only share their despair have been imbued with hope and, despite all the suffering and privation, can now confidently and enthusiastically affirm Judaism. The work of the World Union is a vindication of faith and an endorsement of our way of expressing it. To support it should, therefore, be deemed a privilege, not a yoke; a necessity and an imperative.

The late Emil Fackenheim, who played such an important part in this city, urged his contemporaries to survive as Jews and thus deny Hitler a posthumous victory. The World Union for Progressive Judaism is one of the most successful organizations in the world that has heeded Fackenheim's so-called 614th, or 11th, commandment in the wake of the Holocaust. We've made it possible for countless Jews to reconnect with their Judaism and thus carry the torch to the next generation. To be a partner in this sacred endeavour is a blessing and a privilege.

Without the World Union, with the exception of Britain and perhaps France, there would be no Progressive, Liberal, Reform – names vary but the essence is the same – Judaism in Europe today. As a result many more of those who survived the Holocaust and their descendants would also be lost to Judaism. Without the World Union today only enclaves of Orthodoxy would exist in Holland, Germany, Belgium, Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Lithuania, Estonia, Belarus, the Ukraine, Russia and several other countries.

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This brings me, of course, to the former Soviet Union where much of the revival of Jewish life is due to the spectacular achievements of our movement. Nothing of that would have been possible without the World Union. The fact that there are today young rabbis in all the countries I've mentioned, and others that I've not, is due to the stimulus and the resources that the World Union has provided and the framework within which these women and men have been able to work.

I've just come back from a meeting of a fund that supports the revival of Judaism in Eastern Europe. The fact that World Union affiliates receive positive attention isn't due to politicking, but because our colleagues in these countries, lay and rabbinic, carry out work that deserves support. Much of that support, incidentally, is conditioned on matching funds made available by other organizations. Once again, the World Union often steps in. This means that what you and I do here is, at least in this case, matched by contributions from others.

The World Union has brought new hope to a generation of Jews many of whom - if the choice were between Orthodoxy and assimilation – would have chosen assimilation. If anybody asks you why you support the World Union and why the national organization to which you belong should do likewise, please don't hesitate to give them the answer, not in terms of cost benefit but in terms of doing God's work, of fulfilling our highest ideals as Jews.

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By helping our congregations to grow not only in number – for the scope is limited in small communities – but, above all, in passion and self-confidence as witnesses against those who try to annihilate us, they will, in turn, become active partners in helping others. Australia comes to mind. Many, perhaps the majority, of its Jewish population consists of Holocaust survivors and their offspring. Our outstanding leader there, Rabbi John Levi, is also a historian of his country's Jewry. He is about to publish a biography of his predecessor and pioneer of Reform Judaism, the late Rabbi Herman Sanger. Rabbi Sanger, a refugee from Hitler's Germany, was encouraged by Lily Montagu, who carried the torch for Progressive Judaism in the early years of the World Union, to go to Melbourne and bring the heritage of Liberal Judaism in Germany with him.

Lily Montagu knew that it behoves the World Union to reach those parts of the Jewish world others can't or won't. Look what has been achieved thanks to this pioneering effort! Today, Australia contributes more than its fair share – whatever that term may mean – to the promotion of Reform Judaism in other parts of the world.

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And I haven't yet said anything about Israel. Despite Israel's spectacular achievements in the more than six decades of its existence –as, in Fackenheim's own understanding, the supreme manifestation of our survival – its Jewishness is by no means assured. Not only are the threats from without; there're also dangers from within. The prospect of Orthodox domination would turn Israel into a Jewish version of Taliban. The danger of secularization would make the Jewishness of Israel very problematic.

It's the effort of the World Union in creating its own institutions and the encouragement it has given to others to do likewise, that's changing the face of Israel – for the better, much better. The question to be asked isn't how many signed-up members of Reform congregations there are in Israel, or how much money their members raise. I don't have to remind you that the nature and structure of Israeli society is different. Therefore, the question to be asked is what impact Progressive Judaism is having on Israeli society. The answer to that question is bound to overwhelm us all. If Reform Zionism is to have meaning, a crucial way of expressing it is through our commitment to the work of the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism, its Religious Action Centre and many, many other institutions because the very nature of the Jewishness of Israel is at stake.

Though I don't wish to minimize the danger that Israel is facing because of its enemies from without, let me venture to suggest that the physical security of Israel isn't its main problem. The Jewish state is strong and resourceful. The real danger is whether the state will stay Jewish. It seems that many Arab hostile politicians and military leaders have given up the idea of defeating Israel on the battlefield. They may have even reconciled themselves to the fact that they can't defeat it in the so-called court of public opinion, for many important countries in the world are on Israel's side. The real issue is now, I believe, whether Israel will stay Jewish.

That's where Progressive Judaism comes in. In addition to its own institutions it is in growing measure appealing to Jews whom we once may have called secular or indifferent, perhaps even hostile. The way of our Reform Judaism is becoming something of a model of how to be Jewish in the Jewish state, whether or not you're affiliated to a religious organization. We must not let them down and thus let ourselves down by jeopardizing the Jewishness of Israel. The World Union through its affiliate, the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism, is our vehicle. The rabbis and lay leaders involved in this historic challenge today deserve our total support.

Now nothing of what I've said here this afternoon is new or original. And I know that I'm speaking to the converted. Nevertheless, I believe that what I'm saying has to be repeated again and again, because the message is easily lost amidst our own institutional woes, so very much in evidence in the wake of the recent financial meltdown in the world. Not that home should be less important than elsewhere, but we need to remember that what for others may be elsewhere, for us Jews is home, because as Jews we're *arevim zeh bazeh*, responsible for one another. The World Union is our own special vehicle that enables us to discharge that responsibility by challenging and channelling the enthusiasms, initiatives and resources of all its constituents.

One of the many legitimate criticisms of so-called organized religion is that it creates narrow worlds for the converted and closes windows to the outside. The potential insularity masquerading as piety threatens to make even the most ardent adherent irrelevant. The World Union shields us from this charge. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to say so.