Foreword

Let me confess at the very outset of this foreword to Dana Evan Kaplan's excellent book that I resisted writing this essay. I was eventually persuaded that I should by my respect for the author's clearheaded understanding of the contemporary situation of Reform Judaism. He knows all the nuances of the problems that liberal Jewish religion must face and he understands the positions of all the major participants in the various debates. Dana Evan Kaplan, the scholar, has done an admirable and even exemplary job of leading the reader through this piece of uncharted territory of contemporary religious history of American Jews.

Thus I had no problem with Kaplan's description of the contemporary religious situation among Reform Jews. My problem began with the question of how the contemporary crisis is to be addressed. Dana Kaplan, the rabbi, is clearly an optimist. It is evident that he is comfortable and even takes pride in the openness and experimentation within the ranks of the Reformed. The good that this affords in freedom of behavior far outweighs, so Kaplan believes, the threats of doubt and evaporation that are unchecked by any religious authority. I am on the other side of this debate. I know that the bulk of American Jews are not waiting for rabbinic permission to do whatever they want, but this contemporary situation saddens me. It is the task and responsibility of rabbis to defend and to fight for restrictions on our individual conduct. I remember having this argument for the first time more than a half century ago when I was a teenager teaching a little Talmud in a summer class under the auspices of the Baltimore Hebrew College. Its redoubtable president then, in the 1930s, Dr. Louis Kaplan, paid an unannounced visit to my class. At the end he called me aside to say that the

future of American Jewish observance would be found in cherishing the positive commandments like the Passover seder or the rituals that surround Hanukkah. American Jews would not retain much attachment to the “Do nots,” such as thou shall not eat shrimp. I could not shut myself up before I said to the much older man, whom I loved and admired for his personal qualities, that I did not agree with him at all: Religion, like marriage or patriotism, is best defined by the actions it forbids. Dr. Kaplan shook his head at me and said that “forbid” was not likely to be at the center of the future lexicon of American Judaism.

Dana Kaplan knows that the one element without which Reform Judaism cannot have a firm future is a unifying religious vision, but he seems to admit that this is unlikely. The most that can be hoped for is that some Reform Jews will continue to add to the number of those who are seriously involved in a Jewish piety. They will include both more ritual observance and a deepened sense of the history to which Jews belong. Put simply and fundamentally, Kaplan knows that no religious movement can exist and continue unless it is led by religious personalities. Jews cannot survive as Jews by merely enlisting in the wars of Jews against their enemies.

Some works of scholarship are instantly important because they are the preamble to a call to repent. Other books are of profound significance because they tell us the truth and force the reader to confront it. Kaplan has performed a major service by producing this honest and nuanced account of American Reform Judaism at the turn of the century. Let the reader study this book—and let each of us ponder what we see in the mirror that Kaplan has held up.

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