

Creating Competent Jews

The majority of Reform Jews are seldom seen at Hillel because they fear they will not measure up as Jews. For our own sake, we must make sure they have a better understanding of traditional ritual practices before they go to college.

by Leonard Saxe

My colleagues and I recently completed a study of Jewish life on nearly two dozen American college campuses. Across the country, there is much to celebrate--from newly-built Hillel houses to a burgeoning interest in Jewish studies courses. But one finding was disturbing: Students raised in Reform households participate far less frequently in Jewish campus life than students raised in other denominations. The bottom line: The majority of Reform Jews are seldom seen at Hillel; nor do they become involved in other Jewish activities on campus.

Interviews with dozens of students make clear that all too often they perceive stepping over the threshold of a *Beit Hillel* as an invitation to have their Jewish competence tested, and they fear they will not measure up as Jews. The following anecdote suggests the contours of the problem. According to Sarah (not her real name), the first time she went to a Shabbat dinner at Hillel, she followed the others at her table to the hand-washing station. As she walked to her seat after *netilat yadayim* (the hand-washing ritual) she tried to strike up a conversation with another student. She was met with unpleasant silence. Sarah explained: "I had never done that before, so I didn't know you couldn't talk until after the *motzi*." Embarrassed, she never went to a Hillel dinner again.

Regardless of Reform Judaism's stance towards *halachah*, our youth need to have a better understanding of traditional ritual practices. They need the skills to participate fully, and with confidence, in the life of the community, be it a Shabbat meal, *tefillah* (worship), or a life cycle ceremony. Our traditional brethren have a responsibility to be welcoming, but their response doesn't lessen our burden to prepare our children well.

Home rituals are a natural starting point. Whatever our own practices, we should teach our youth traditional *kiddush* and *motzi* rituals. They need to know when to stand, when to sit, when to remain silent. And whether or not a family observes Jewish dietary laws, young people should be taught about *kashrut*, including allowed and proscribed foods; milk, meat, and *pareve* foods; and appropriate use of dishes and silverware.

We should also make sure that our youth are comfortable engaging in Jewish worship services no matter what the setting. Whether a student's home congregation uses *Gates of Prayer*, relies on the *Union Prayerbook*, or prays from its own *siddur*, he/she should be taught the structure of a traditional service. And while Hebrew fluency may be an unreasonable goal, we need to teach a working knowledge of Hebrew, sufficient so

that a Reform Jew can find his or her way in any service.

Educating our children to be competent Jews would be incomplete without enabling them to be comfortable with traditional ritual practices associated with life-cycle events. Reform Jews need to be able to participate in Jewish rites of passage, from *brit milah* and *b'nai mitzvah* to weddings and funerals, regardless of the setting. As Reform Jews we embrace the idea of *kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh* (all Jews are responsible for one another). What a shame to think that young people might shy away from acknowledging a life transition simply because they do not know what to expect or what to say.

Yes, we Reform Jews, by and large, do not observe many traditional practices regarding Shabbat, *kashrut*, and life cycle events. But for our own sake, as well as for the sake of Jewish solidarity, our young people must be taught other understandings of Jewish tradition. Let us be sufficiently self-confident in the tradition we have adopted to pass on to our children not only our own choices, but the skill to live as part of the Jewish people everywhere.

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