

Early Childhood Educators of Reform Judaism Conference
Phoenix, AZ
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Remarks of Peter J. Weidhorn
Chairman, Union for Reform Judaism

Good evening.

I know that some wanted your meeting moved from Arizona because of this state's law on immigration. And so it is particularly meaningful to me that we are here to lend support to the people of this state as they grapple with the tragedy that unfolded in Tucson last weekend.

Rabbi David Saperstein wrote that our Movement has had a close and fruitful relationship with Rep. Giffords, who was a member of a Reform congregation in Tucson. She is a leading advocate for sensible immigration reform and was willing to cast difficult votes on issues she believes in, including health care reform.

I met Representative Giffords in 2006 when I visited her office with Bob Heller and Rabbi Saperstein. It was her very first day in office, and we were her very first visitors. Our hearts and prayers are with her and with the families of all the victims of this senseless shooting. And with all the members of the Tucson and Arizona Community, And especially the reform Jewish community of which Reps. Giffords is a member. Everyone has been touched by this tragedy. I can't help but think that Debbie Friedman is singing a misheberach for them – her voice which was so prematurely silenced this week will be sorely missed. Debbie's music transformed our community, our worship and prayer and has energized our NFTY and Camp communities. She galvanized the reform movement when we were struggling to find our worship identity. Her music will be with us forever, but she will be missed. Please rise and join me for a moment of silence and reflection.

Thank you for giving me this time to share with you news about what has been happening in the Reform Movement with respect to early childhood education. I will try to be brief, and I hope I raise more questions than answers – questions you can raise with me tonight at the bar after dinner or tomorrow morning before I leave to return to New York.

I believe the work you do is the most important work that is to be done if we are to ensure a vibrant Judaism in future generations. I've been preaching the importance of Early Childhood Education whenever and wherever I can for as long as I've been chairman.

My appreciation for all you do and the importance of Jewish preschool education began 30 years ago, when a four year old was asked by her preschool teacher what was special about her weekend.

She said that she went in her father's airplane, no where, and then came home. Obviously a precocious child with a vivid imagination, the teacher immediately called the mother to find out what gives. In her mind she did go "No Where" because she promptly fell asleep as the plane lifted off. The concept of a Jewish dad with an airplane raised an alarm for the teacher. I am pleased to say that my little girl is now one of your colleagues, serving as the assistant director of the pre school at temple Emanuel in Westfield ably lead by Jill Cimafonte . And I'm also delighted to report that each of my daughter's three children, and in fact all five of my grandchildren have flight jackets and model airplanes. Jill, where are you, please stand up so I can acknowledge that you hired my daughter as a teacher before you knew she had an important Dad. And I know you'll confirm that my daughter knows the value of an early Jewish foundation, and that both she and her brother are actively involved in their respective congregations.

Know too, that I have written about the importance of a Jewish preschool education in Reform Judaism magazine and spoken about it as an integral building block in every speech or talk that I

give. I guess you can say that I have opened my mouth one too many times and I am now honored to speak with you tonight.

However, please know my primary reason for traveling to your convention is to learn *from* you. So please, take advantage of my time with you and share with me your thoughts, your concerns and your ideas. The leadership of the Union values the wisdom and contributions of all its affiliates. As the newest affiliate of the Union, the Early Childhood Educators of Reform Judaism is particularly important to us. You've already made important contributions to the committees and task forces that are at work, and I thank you for this and for your continued involvement.

I also want to take a moment to thank Norma Cahan for her leadership of this organization, and to congratulate Tammy Vener on becoming your president. Tammy, I know that we'll be seeing a lot of you in the coming year, and I look forward to working with you.

There are many reasons besides my own children's experiences for me to make Early Childhood Education a top priority, and Cathy Rolland is one of them. The first president of this organization, Cathy is innovative, creative, non stoppable and determined. She is a strong backer of the lay leadership who knows how to work with her colleagues and her lay leaders. She has been extraordinarily successful in getting the Movement's attention focused on early education because she is there all the time and quite candidly is one of the Union's best. Cathy thank you for all you do for your colleagues and for the Reform Movement.

I also want to take a moment to thank Rabbi Jan Katzew. Jan is a brilliant educator, a creative thinker, and one of the people I turn to when I need a fresh perspective and honest appraisal of what is happening in our Movement.

Two of the lay leaders Cathy Rolland works with are here with us at this meeting, and I urge you to get to know them. Marc Newman and Jodi Hessel are the chair and vice chair, respectively, of the Early Childhood Engagement Committee and are actively involved in the work of our Lifelong Jewish Learning group. Both are tireless workers, and both are dedicated to your cause. They are here because of the challenges Rabbi Yoffie and I wrote to you about not long ago, namely, federal funding for preschool education. Marc and Jodi – please stand so everyone will know who you are. I'm sure they'll be anxious to speak with you during this conference.

As we wrote in that memo, the Reform Movement believes universal pre-school is an important start in turning around our nation's decline in education. We must have a better educated society if we are to maintain world leadership -- and that starts with each of you.

That said, federal and state funding for pre-school education presents a direct challenge to us because of another tenant in which the Reform Movement believes, and that is the separation of church and state. If your schools are to accept government funds, your ability to provide a strong Jewish foundation to your pupils is compromised. If you decide not to accept such funds, then you are at a distinct disadvantage with free publicly funded programs.

As you are aware, Cathy has been working with Rabbi David Saperstein of the Religious Action Center on this thorny issue. I thank each of you who have already given them information about how you are responding to this challenge, and I urge you to share your concerns and thoughts during tonight's panel discussion.

I asked Marc, who has devoted his career at the Union to building Jewish identity in the next generation, to take on the difficult assignment of chairing the task force that will try to build consensus on these difficult issues because he understands the unique challenges you face on this issue. Marc will work closely with Jodi, who has been deeply involved in social justice issues during her time on the board. Together they will work with Cathy and Rabbi Saperstein, gathering

information and preparing a proposal for the Union's June Board Meeting and – if required – to be brought to the Biennial in December.

The model which we are using to address this issue is one which I hope you will use in your own communities – namely professionals and lay leaders jointly exploring options and developing a plan of action.

I stress this because at its very heart, this challenge of government-funding will drastically alter the very structure of your programs and their place within your congregational community.

Why do I say this?

Historically, many synagogue preschools have served as “profit centers” for the congregations that house them. As such, congregational budgets were often balanced on the backs of the youngest generation. Our preschools often operated as the congregational step-children, without representation on the congregational board, without a voice in the creation of the congregation's budget, and as the last in line when new funds and resources became available.

This must change, and it must change now. Rather than being evaluated by a financial accounting, your programs need to be appreciated as the foundation for Jewish identity. And so I urge you to work closely with your congregation's professionals and board members to bring about this change.

I know your interactions with the lay leadership of your congregations have not always been sterling and that at times the quality of that leadership can be very frustrating, to say the least. However, without effective lay leadership, and commitment from your Temple professional staff and board the value that you bring to Jewish early learning can not be appreciated. And so the Union is here to help you drive the point home to your leadership.

But, lest we think this is simply a question of putting your preschool on a sound financial footing, let me return to the point I made earlier: the work you are doing is the very foundation for a strong Jewish identity in the next generation.

This year the URJ has embarked in a significant effort to revitalize NFTY and the other ways we have to keep children and their families engaged in the post b'nai mitzvah years. Our efforts are addressing expanding our Jewish summer camp and Israel high school programs, engaging college students and reaching out to the lost 20s and 30s generations.

So what does that have to do with you?

It involves you because your schools are the first building block on a continuum that takes our youth from preschool through college and beyond. And, most importantly, it involves you because YOU have succeeded where our religious and Hebrew schools have failed.

Your curriculum is fluid, changing and forward thinking, you send children home wanting more from their parents, wanting to learn more about holidays and festivals and this thing called Shabbat, which in most cases was foreign to them before entering your classroom.

But then your children, anxious to learn and absorb more, enter our religious schools – and the excitement dwindles. This is another reason for you to become more proactively involved with your lay leadership, for you can help them bridge the gap for your children and their parents between preschool and Hebrew school.

As you are aware, the Movement is holding a series of think tank sessions to explore the major issues facing our Movement – issues including religious participation, intermarriage, assimilation, distancing from Israel and the loss of historical and traditional perspective.

Resolving these issues is not the responsibility of a single part or constituency in our Movement; rather, it is everyone's responsibility – and the solutions begin with you – in the curriculum you offer your children AND your parents.

I say this because I believe the parents of your children, whose lives are lived on the internet and who are too young to remember the Six Day War, don't know how God fits into their world. Perhaps they send their children to your school because they have a kernel of Jewish identification – or maybe it is because you are the best school in town. Whatever brought them to your doors, it is up to you to see that they remain and become engaged. As you build Jewish identity in your children, so too is it your responsibility to build it in their parents. And, I hope, that the meaning and goals of Reform Judaism will infuse all that you communicate and teach.

So what should be the outcome of this convention?

Your schedule is filled with important workshops filled with *tachlis*, and there are sessions for you to grapple with the larger issues facing your schools. This is a full and worthy program, and I hope you will return home excited, intensified and goal driven with the knowledge that both the lay and professional leadership of the Union ARE supportive, understanding of the challenges and engaged in finding solutions.

I also urge you to engage with each other on a regular basis, especially if your preschool program is located nearby another preschool program. Learn to work together, cooperate and not compete. Be dedicated to the achievement of establishing a Jewish identity within each child you touch. And if a nearby temple, of whatever denomination, does not have a preschool program, see how you can work with the leadership of that congregation to develop opportunities to engage their children without the threat of poaching membership.

My friends, I believe these are difficult times, and the survival of Reform Judaism in the 21st century depends on our willingness to think differently, engage our constituencies differently, and restructure what it means to be a congregation. I believe we need to rethink what it means to be a member – and what benefits that membership provides.. These are difficult charges, and I wish I traveled here to bring you just good, glowing news but the reality is that we are challenged and if you don't appreciate those challenges you will shortly receive a big wake up call.

My purpose tonight is not to leave you with a negative taste, but to assure you that the professional and lay leadership of the Union understand the challenges before us. I came to engage you as part of the solution, to make sure that you are heard, that you return home challenged to make a difference and willing to take on the challenges. I know that we can do it, I know the challenges are daunting but achievable and I know that as we have done over thousands of years we will evolve and recognize the value of change and adaptation.

Thank you for all that you do. And remember that just as it was 30 years ago for my daughter, so too today the future of your children and my grandchildren is in each of your hands. Go out there, continue to do your job and watch the future of our movement, just as Debbie Friedman watched happen, blossom under your tutelage.

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