

# Men of Reform Judaism: Why It Exists and What It Accomplishes

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The story of Men of Reform Judaism (MRJ) is inextricably tied to the development of the Reform Movement in America.<sup>1</sup> The same impetus that led to the establishment of social groups within Reform congregations stimulated the creation of men's clubs and brotherhoods that continue to thrive and strengthen Reform Jewish life today.

According to a report in the *Jewish Daily Bulletin*, the first Jewish daily newspaper published in the English language devoted exclusively to the dissemination of Jewish news, on January 23, 1923, eighty-nine Reform Jewish brotherhoods and men's clubs from across the United States came together at the Hotel Astor in New York City to form the National Federation of Temple Brotherhoods (NFTB), now called Men of Reform Judaism (MRJ). Their stated mission was "to encourage local Brotherhoods to engage in projects and activities that would provide meaningful services to their congregation, to sponsor and promote vitally important nationwide community-building projects and to give local Brotherhood members the opportunity to explore and celebrate fellowship." Thus was the foundation laid for the organization, which, by 1929, under the leadership of Roger W. Straus as president, would grow to 120 affiliated brotherhoods.

In 1939, the NFTB assumed responsibility for the Jewish Chautauqua Society (JCS) from the UAHC. JCS had been established by Rabbi Henry Berkowitz in 1893 modeled after the Chautauqua Movement, which popularized adult education. Berkowitz

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was ordained in 1883 in the first class at Hebrew Union College, founded by Isaac Mayer Wise just ten years earlier.

The original mission of JCS was to educate Jewish immigrants from lands and countries where the practice of Judaism was denied.—By the 1930s, with the change in patterns of immigration, the mission needed to be modified. A pivot was made, and JCS accepted as its emerging mission the education of non-Jews about Judaism. In 1950, as a result of a friendship between Rabbi Berkowitz and Philander P. Claxton, who would later become President Eisenhower’s Secretary of Education, NFTB began sending speakers out to American universities and colleges as an interfaith educational program. This program ended in 2015, ironically, becoming a victim of its own success. Colleges and universities that had relied on JCS visiting scholars now had their own staff and departments to lecture about Judaism.

There are other examples of MRJ’s major, ongoing accomplishments that might not have happened had the men not organized to make it so. In 1995, growing out of an earlier experimental program, MRJ’s Reform on Campus project (ROC) was created to assist student organizations in developing meaningful Jewish experiences on college and university campuses. The mission of Reform on Campus, “to assist students in creating meaningful Reform Jewish experiences on campus that will lead them to being active and involved Reform Jews for life,” would be fulfilled by granting awards to Reform Jewish student organizations on campuses in order to help nurture, sustain, and grow their Jewish communities and identity.

Over the years, on average, Reform on Campus awards \$25,000 per year to as many as 35 programs. Though some of the events sponsored by Reform on Campus are festivals, the programs are attended by an average of forty students. These statistics reveal the impact of this program to maintain, sustain, and grow our sons’ and daughters’ attachment and commitment to Reform Judaism:

- \$625,000 has been spent in these efforts.
- 875 programs have been funded by Reform on Campus.
- 35,000 students have been to a program sponsored by Reform on Campus.

In addition, for some twenty years, Men of Reform Judaism’s Reform on Campus program has also presented Marcus Jastrow’s

“Talmudic Dictionary” to first-year rabbinical and cantorial students at HUC-JIR in Jerusalem.

Introduced in 2007, and rapidly establishing itself as one of the most popular of all of MRJ’s programs, is the Men’s Seder. As described in the introduction of the Men’s Seder, this new program sought to address important challenges faced by men in today’s society: “Where does a contemporary man go to find male bonding? Where does a man go to find a relationship with other men that is not competitive, that is not comparative, and that is not threatening and dehumanizing?”<sup>2</sup>

We believe that all men can feel safe, accepted, loved, and not judged in a temple participating in a Men’s Seder. There are certain experiences that only men can or will be willing to share. There are specific expectations that only men have. There are certain challenges that only men face, impotence being an extreme example. And there are certain things that can only be understood by men, such as the reluctance to seek medical advice. Men need a place to talk without fear of judgement. Where does a contemporary man go to find male bonding? The Passover seder, directed by the words of the Haggadah, has always been a night of questions and answers, of challenges and struggles, of eating and singing and laughing and bonding. It is the ideal structure for exploring those issues that pertain specifically to men, to be discussed by men, to be wrestled with by men, to be shared by men. Resolution of these issues does not take place in isolation. Like Joseph before us, we need to go out and look for our brothers, brothers who give us the space to express our deepest feelings, brothers who feel free and safe enough to share their feelings with us.

The Men’s Seder has been used and reused, over and over, by men’s clubs and brotherhoods across North America. Tens of thousands of men have found this space safe to talk with other men. MRJ recently commissioned Rabbi Dan Moscovitz, one of the two original authors, to update the Haggadah for contemporary times, with the ability to update it annually as needed.

Other activities of MRJ include the sponsorship of biennial conferences and regional/city conferences in alternating years where we are able to share programming, new trends, and meet with old friends and make new ones. We work closely with the Religious Action Center (RAC) and have delegates on the Commission of Social Action (CSA) of Reform Judaism. MRJ also has a member on

the RAC's Amicus Brief Committee to review and decide whether or not to support various legal briefs we are asked to join, along with other affiliates of the URJ.

In 2005, the National Federation of Temple Brotherhoods became known as the North American Federation of Temple Brotherhoods (NAFTB) to include the Brotherhoods of Reform temples in both the United States and Canada with the following modified mission statement: "To serve Jewish men, Reform Judaism, and its local congregations." Finally, in 2007 our organization became known as Men of Reform Judaism (MRJ). The name change addressed the need to recognize, and welcome, interfaith realities where identifying as Jewish, and male, was not limited to the old definitions of who is Jewish or gender.

In a dramatic shift in policy, on July 21, 2017, MRJ adopted a new constitution and bylaws that eliminated the requirement that member brotherhoods make a specific payment of dues as a requisite for affiliation. This action was taken out of concern that the current financial condition of any temple brotherhood might prevent that group from participating in the MRJ and thus deprive that brotherhood of the benefits of the organization. Accordingly, the executive committee agreed to require only an annual good faith contribution by any member brotherhood to indicate its support of MRJ and for its temple to be a member in good standing of URJ to qualify for affiliation. A provision was also made for individuals, where there is no formal organization, to join and support MRJ.

MRJ encourages the development and expansion of regional groups to connect the local temple Brotherhoods that meet on a regular basis to share information, resolve common problems and concerns, and disseminate ideas to all other chapters. Referred to as "clusters," or "regional councils," there is an ongoing effort to galvanize these member groups as they proceed with their shared vision. Currently, regions have been created in New England, the Long Island (New York) Council, Texas Region, South Florida Cluster, and MRJ West (California, Washington, Oregon).

While adhering to its mission of providing opportunities for men to explore their Jewish identities, to be active in Reform Judaism, and to connect the activities of local chapters to a larger network, the organization has had to evolve and "reinvent" itself on several occasions to respond to the changing social, political, and economic conditions of its operation and the Reform Movement.

MRJ has been fortunate to have leaders with the vision, commitment, and dedication to guide the organization and support the Reform Movement in its changing roles as it adapts to be more inclusive, welcoming Jews of color, binary and nonbinary gender roles, and interfaith couples and families.

Knowing the value and impact that MRJ has had within the Reform Movement, we are now able to reflect upon the changing social dynamics at play in society regarding gender and gender-based programming. This *CCAR Journal* issue seeks to provide an opportunity to consider such questions and explore the continuing relevance and need for single-gender networks and programs, particularly within Reform congregations and organizations.

One finds on the masthead of the Union of Reform Judaism's website the following declaration: "The Union of Reform Judaism strives to create a more whole, just, and compassionate world. We motivate people from diverse backgrounds to participate and deepen their engagement in Jewish life; create a more inclusive Jewish community; help congregations stay adept and agile; develop teen and adult leaders to lead transformation for the future; foster meaningful connection to Israel; and agitate for a more progressive society."

This is a moment for important conversations about the "binary" structure of our congregations to be called upon for inspection and possible overhaul. Will the current structure of our congregations remain so for the foreseeable future? For its part, MRJ has eschewed gender-based exclusion, save for one specific program, the Men's Seder. All other programs, initiatives, meetings, and conventions have been accessible to anyone.

The National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, established as the women's affiliate of the UAHC, was founded in 1913, and its success led to the establishment of the National Federation of Temple Brotherhoods (NFTB). One can only guess at why the National Federation of Temple Brotherhoods was even contemplated in the early years of the twentieth century. Was it because, in 1913, women decided to form an organization that men believed they, too, had to have their own organization? Was it that simple? Or was it because men discerned that sisterhoods stood in stark contrast to men's needs, whatever those may have been at the time? As but one example, men were considered the "bread winners"; women the nurturers and educators of children. There is no

clear-cut answer to the question of why it was that moment in time that NFTB was established. What is clear is that NFTB then, and now MRJ, make it possible for its members to engage in meaningful programming and events that may not be possible otherwise. MRJ functions as a group with values derived from Torah, motivations, and goals, and its affiliated members are free to authentically consider their role in the Temple and community beyond the curb. It is free, in other words, to consider creating all the programs it has initiated and nurtured over the years; it is free to enlist men to engage in these ongoing activities; it validates its relevance each and every day simply by saying “yes” to any request for assistance or “no” to anything it considers anathema to its core values.

Over the course of our history, MRJ has had accomplishments, large and small, incremental and rapid. We continue to provide a safe space for men. Men of Reform Judaism is that place where intellect, vision, matter, and spirit meet. It is this place because our members recognize their obligation to our Jewish heritage and values.

### Notes

1. This article was based on a manuscript by Larry Krasnoff and edited for this *CCAR Journal* issue by Gary Brock and Steven Portnoy. Brock is a member of the MRJ Executive Council and past president of the Brotherhood of Main Line Reform Temple in Wynnewood, Pennsylvania. Portnoy is the president of Men of Reform Judaism.
2. Rabbi Dan Moskovitz and Rabbi Perry Netter, *The Men's Seder* (New York: Men of Reform Judaism, 2007), 2.