Choosing Reform Judaism
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It is fitting that this Shabbat is Parashat Vayikra, which means "God called." I feel that God called me to be a rabbi—and that God called me to Temple Beth-El.

Thank you so much for choosing me, once again, to serve as your senior rabbi. Thank you for trusting me to lead our congregation into the future.

I am honored and humbled to carry forward the legacy of Rabbi Jacob Rudin, Rabbi Jerry Davidson, and Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Tara Feldman.

Temple Beth-El's great story bears the mark of generations of leaders and congregants, with each generation stepping up in turn to write the next chapter. It's a delicate task, because each new chapter must move the story forward and be coherent with what came before.

Our predecessors established Temple Beth-El nearly a century ago as a Reform congregation. We have always been committed to Reform Judaism as an authentic expression of our modern values and religious temperament.

I stand here tonight to affirm my commitment to that legacy. Like those who occupied this pulpit before me, I believe Reform Judaism offers me the most meaningful way to live with others, to live in relationship with God, and to be the most authentic version of myself.

My calling is to be your shepherd: to accompany you in your quest to live a life of meaning, purpose, and authenticity, guided by the Jewish tradition.

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Why Reform Judaism?

In the Great Neck of the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, most people around us went to a Reform congregation, so we did, too. We were Reform by default.

But in Great Neck in 2025, Reform Judaism is no longer the default; it's a *choice*—and a countercultural one at that. It's not easy to be a Reform Jew in this community today.

There is no shortage of synagogues in our neighborhood; we're not here because we have no other place to go. We might fit in better religiously and socially if we changed who we are.

But we're not going to do that, because—whether we know how to articulate it or not—we believe that Reform Judaism and Temple Beth-El have something valuable to contribute to the world, something people *need*, something that enhances the tapestry of Jewish life on the North Shore.

Born out of the Enlightenment, Reform Judaism is based on twin principles: one, that we have an everlasting covenant with God; and two, that we have individual autonomy.

The covenant is a two-way relationship: God calls out to us through Torah, and we respond as autonomous beings who have the ultimate right and responsibility to make choices that honor both our commitment to God and our own individuality.

The theologian Rabbi Jakob Petuchowski taught that the Reform Jew's religious obligation is to "listen for the commandment"—to study the tradition with an open heart and a curious mind and listen with your whole being for what God is calling *you* to do.

Once you hear the commandments God is addressing to *you*, as a unique Jewish human being, your responsibility is to answer in a way that resonates with your soul.

Each individual Jew hears God and responds to God differently. Reform Judaism doesn't judge you for the choices you make; it embraces you and celebrates you for living with integrity.

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I'd like to highlight three things that, to my mind, define Reform Judaism.

The first is that our religiosity is rooted in positive action, not in prohibition.

Did you know that the majority of the 613 *mitzvot*—out of 365 of them—are "thou shalt *nots*"? Classical rabbinic Judaism leans heavily into prohibitions.

Take Shabbat, for example. The commandment is to "remember the Sabbath day and make it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of Adonai, your God; you shall not do any work." (*Ex.* 20:8-10)

The sages of the Talmud emphasize the *prohibition* part of the *mitzvah*, meticulously specifying all the kinds of work you're *not* supposed to do on Shabbat. They come up with 39 different categories, and Shabbat observance, as they define it, is primarily about avoiding those activities.

By contrast, Reform Judaism emphasizes the positive, active part of the *mitzvah*. For us, Shabbat observance is primarily about what we *can do* to "make the day holy."

Our lives during the week are so hectic. Shabbat is an opportunity to rest and do things we enjoy. If that's going for a bike ride while you listen to your favorite podcast, that's great! If it means taking your kids out to lunch at their favorite restaurant, or watching the Mets game on TV, do it! If these things bring you peace and joy, they are in the spirit of making your Shabbat holy.

In Reform Judaism, our spiritual currency is not prohibition, but *freedom*—freedom to listen for the commandment, and to respond by choosing practices that sanctify and enrich our lives.

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Second, our orientation to the non-Jewish world is open and pluralistic. We appreciate the many different ways of thinking and being in the world, and we do not claim a monopoly on truth.

We agree with Maimonides and ibn Ezra that, as Jews, we have a duty to study the sciences, the humanities, and the many other sources of human knowledge because they deepen our understanding of Judaism, the world, and other people.

We take seriously the teaching of Ben Zoma: "Who is wise? One who learns from everyone." (Avot 4:1)

That's why we believe in strong public schools where children of all backgrounds can learn together and build friendships across lines of religious and cultural difference.

We believe in civic involvement, and we are concerned for our neighbors' welfare no less than our own.

We are deeply committed to a robust, secular public sphere in which everyone can thrive, and we will work to preserve that here in Great Neck.

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Third, in Reform Judaism, morality is not a closed system, determined exclusively by Jewish texts and rabbinic authorities. Rather, our morality is informed by Judaism in dialogue with modern science, culture, and human experience.

We believe this expansive view of the world makes us more attuned to the will of God, enabling us to perceive moral truths that our wisest sages, bound as they were by their own time and place, could not grasp.

For example, they rejected homosexuality as an "abomination," but we, having learned from science that sexuality is an essential part of one's nature, affirm it as a positive good for those whom God created that way.

Though the centuries-old *halakhic* consensus, which has never incorporated modern science, holds that gay people who act on their innate desires are in moral breach with God, we embrace them and celebrate the sanctity of their marriages.

So, too, with gender.

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, the preeminent 20th-century American Orthodox *halakhic* authority, ruled that traditional gender roles are divinely ordained, and that "even if the social order were to change for all women…the law of the Torah does not change." (*Iggerot Moshe*, OH 4:49)

We see it differently. We believe that Torah is continuously unfolding, and that the interaction of Jewish wisdom with contemporary human knowledge and experience reveals new and higher moral truths.

We regard the breakdown of social structures that marginalized women as a positive development for humanity. We celebrate modern society's embrace of equal rights and roles for men and women alike—and nonbinary people, too—and we do not discriminate between them in any way.

In Reform Judaism, all have full and equal access to Torah.

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Like many people raised in our movement, I have occasionally felt the romantic allure of a more traditionally observant lifestyle. But living in Great Neck has reinforced my pride in being a Reform Jew.

Does choosing Reform Judaism come with a price? Yes.

We might not get to walk home from shul with our children on Saturday afternoons like many of our neighbors do. Our celebrations might not stir up what Durkheim called the "collective effervescence" of fervent religious uniformity. I'll be honest: I envy those things.

But this is a price I, for one, am willing to pay because what my family and I get in return is worth so much more to me:

- A life rooted in freedom of choice, pluralism, curiosity, expansiveness, and openness to the world;
- A life that enables my kids to grow as holistic citizens of their community, experiencing the beauty of Judaism while also making friends and participating in activities with children whose cultures and religious practices are different from their own;
- And a morality that affirms the inherent dignity and equality of every person.

Since the time of Rabbi Rudin, Temple Beth-El has offered a Judaism that embodies all these things.

Our next chapter will advance this congregation's story in new ways, but it will also be coherent with what came before. The world continues to need what we offer, and, together, we will answer that call—resolutely and without fear.