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'Interim Judaism' And Moral Leadership

[CCAR's Rabbi Peter Knobel calls on his peers to speak out on the issues of the day.](#)



Rabbi Peter Knoebel: War in Iraq "is eating the flesh of this country."

by Debra Nussbaum Cohen
Staff Writer

Rabbi Peter Knobel is on a mission: to propel his colleagues in the Reform rabbinate to exercise moral leadership and speak out with conviction on public issues. According to Rabbi Knobel, president of the 1,800-member Central Conference of American Rabbis, which met for its annual convention this week in Cincinnati, fear of controversy and an over-emphasis on internal spirituality has caused his colleagues to draw back from the prophetic tradition that they once proudly wore as their mantle. There are issues that should be galvanizing us all, he says, like the war in Iraq, which in his presidential address he said "is eating the flesh of this country."

Rabbi Knobel, 65, is a frequent speaker at movement gatherings. In 1995, he encouraged a standing-room-only crowd



[Westchester Jewish Conference](#)
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at a Reform movement biennial to cultivate a Jewish spiritual practice by doing things like writing the Hebrew date at the top of letters, what some thought was a shocking thing to hear at a Reform gathering.

In February, he attended the U.S.-Islamic World Forum, a gathering of 150 government officials and policy makers in Doha, Qatar, where he was the only rabbi present among a small group of religious leaders. Like Rabbi Eric Yoffie of the Union for Reform Judaism, Rabbi Knobel is encouraging dialogue with Muslim leaders.

Currently midway through a two-year term as CCAR president, and in his 28th year as spiritual leader of Beth Emet: The Free Synagogue in Evanston, Ill., Rabbi Knobel took a few minutes away from the conference to speak with The Jewish Week.

Jewish Week: You used to speak about increasing spirituality in the daily lives of Reform Jews, but now focus on political activism. Why the change?

Rabbi Knobel: I'm now not worried about spirituality in the Reform movement and have been in the forefront of moving us in those directions. In this day and age it becomes increasingly important for those of us who are faith leaders to continue to carry forth the mission of tikkun olam and to be deeply involved in all of the issues that face our society, Israel and our broader world.

It has become important to re-emphasize that prophetic tradition. The Jewish community as a whole has perhaps moved more to the right politically. In many places congregations find themselves having difficulty attracting and holding members, so they're less responsive to controversial positions because they're afraid how congregants will react. As we move to a much more personalist religion, these issues are seen as less of a concern of religion.

At a particular moment in the life of the Reform movement it was important to emphasize mitzvah and prayer and Torah study, but as we begin to move in those directions it becomes important to remind us that the Jewish people has a responsibility to be an Or l'Goyim [light unto the nations].

What would you say is the greatest challenge currently facing Reform rabbis?

It is to combine the desire for a deep and compelling faith that helps us deal with the everyday exigencies of life, and at the same time maintain a strong public presence on the issues that confront broader society.

What issues currently define the Reform movement?

We have moved away from very clear ideological differences between the denominations. People join congregations not so much for ideology but because they like the style of worship or the congregation meets a particular need at a particular moment. The old arguments between Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist about whether one wears a kipa or not, whether there's too much Hebrew in the service, are not what truly motivate passion. We've become much more congregation-driven than movement-driven today. To the average Jew, differences are perceived more as stylistic than as substantive. This is a wonderful moment for us to begin to re-explore the similarities and the differences between Reform and Conservative.

We are now in a period we might describe as interim Judaism. The great ideologies of the 19th and 20th centuries have played themselves out, but our Jewish thought processes haven't caught up to that to provide a clear and compelling narrative for why we ought to be doing these things.

Is interfaith marriage still a challenging issue for the Reform movement?

Interfaith marriage is certainly a major challenge for all of us. We have appointed a task force on interfaith marriage that will take two years to fully examine the question of how the rabbinate can best serve all of us. One of the questions is officiation, but the central question is how do we make sure we're reaching and helping people who are considering interfaith marriages make the decision to affiliate with the Jewish community and raise Jewish children. That's the central challenge today.

What was your experience as the only rabbi at the U.S.-Islamic World Forum?

I took away the hopeful notion that there were real possibilities if the U.S. rethinks the way it does certain things with other countries, and that there are people in the Islamic world and in the U.S. who want to give the kind of attention and deep thought to that.

I also came away aware of the complexity of it and the need for the Reform movement to engage much more seriously with the domestic Muslim population and to join with business and other faith leaders to work on developing international relationships with projects on the ground, as in some cases Catholic charities and [Evangelical] mega-churches have done.

We don't have the same resources numerically or financially but we can still be involved with them in projects. Just as for many years we had engaged in serious interfaith dialogue with Christians, it needs to be strengthened with Muslims.

How do you, if Muslim groups aren't interested in dialogue with Jews?

A: It becomes our responsibility to reach out and recognize that we're dealing with an immigrant community that is different than ours and to look for partners who can help us engage in a dialogue. Many Islamic organizations are prepared for serious kinds of conversations.

Why the convention theme of "Moral Leadership?"

A: There are xenophobic and homophobic and immigrant-phobic people using rhetoric to divide us. We have serious problems: a war in Iraq, ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine and a failure to provide health care.

I genuinely believe that Jews need to weigh in publicly. As I watch the polarization in mainstream media I believe that this is a moment for rabbis, especially for Reform rabbis, to enter the fray. As we move forward we have to be a powerful force for shaping the future destiny of this country.



[Rabbi Jay Weinstein](#)

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