

# CROWNS OF TORAH – RE-FORMING JUDAISM

RABBI ANGELA WARNICK BUCHDAHL, ROSH HASHANAH 5776

## FACILITATOR'S GUIDE

### BIG QUESTION: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A REFORM JEW?

---

Rabbi Buchdahl's sermon challenges the conventional wisdom that to be a Reform Jew is somehow less "serious" or "authentic" than being more traditionally observant. This discussion will allow participants to reflect on the interplay between tradition and change within Judaism, and to consider what it means to "re-form" it.

### DISTRIBUTING THE SERMON:

---

Links to a video recording of the sermon, as well as a copy of the written text, are available on the CORE Groups page of the Central Synagogue website. A few days before your meeting, you should contact your group members to let them know which sermon you will be discussing, so that they can watch and/or read it in preparation for the discussion. (It is helpful to include a link to the materials in your email). In order to keep the sermon fresh in everyone's minds, you may wish to recommend that participants make a note of any questions or reactions they have immediately after watching it. Even if you saw the sermon in person, please at least review the written text before the meeting, so that you can participate fully in the discussion.

### NAME TAGS:

---

For at least the first several sessions, please ask everyone in the group to wear a name tag (or, if seated around a table, to place a name card in front of them). Even if most people know one another, it is important that no one feel uncomfortable for not remembering everyone else's name.

### INTRODUCTION AND ICE-BREAKER:

---

Ask each person to introduce themselves, and to share with the group:

- (a) their name; and
- (b) One word that comes to mind when they hear the word "Reform Jew"

## OPENING ACTIVITY

---

**For this activity, you will need space for participants to walk around and arrange themselves in a line.**

Attached, you will find a sheet entitled “What Kind of Jew Are You?,” which lists statements about Jewish practice and belief, and then asks participants to agree or disagree. Before the session begins, clear a space to allow for people to move, and post the “Agree” and “Disagree” signs on opposite ends of the space.

- (1) Tell participants that you will be reading a number of statements about Jewish belief and practice. You may wish to note that these statements do not necessarily reflect your own views. After each one is read, participants should arrange themselves along a continuum between the “Agree” and “Disagree” signs, depending on whether they strongly agree, somewhat agree, disagree, strongly disagree, etc. In other words, on a scale of 1-10 of agreement, 1 being completely disagree, and 10 being completely agree, where would they place themselves?

[If you do not have space to walk around, or if participants are limited in their mobility, you may have people note their agreement or disagreement on a piece of paper and then debrief, but the exercise is much more powerful if people are moving.]

- (2) After each question, when participants have claimed their spot, allow a moment for the group to see who is standing where, and then move to the next statement.
- (3) Once all the statements have been read, you may wish to ask questions such as:
  - a. What similarities did you notice in the group?
  - b. What questions provoked strongly divergent answers?
  - c. Did anyone regularly find themselves in the minority?
  - d. What is the effect of seeing how you measure up against a larger group? Did you find that you were tempted to follow the crowd?

## TEXT STUDY: CROWNS OF TORAH

Attached is a text-study sheet entitled “Crowns of Torah” that you may use to facilitate a discussion of the themes and issues raised by the sermon. Please make sure to either make a copy for each member or ask everyone to bring it themselves, in paper or electronic form. If you choose the latter course, you may still wish to print a few extra copies for those who may forget to bring theirs.

Here are some things to consider:

- (a) It is customary to recite a blessing before studying Torah.

**BARUCH** atah, Adonai  
Eloheinu, Melech haolam,  
asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav  
v'tzivanu laasok b'divrei Torah.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה, יי  
אֱלֹהֵינוּ, מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,  
אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו  
וְצִוָּנוּ לְעִסוֹק בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה.

**BLESSED ARE YOU**, Adonai our God,  
Sovereign of the universe,  
who hallows us with mitzvot,  
commanding us to engage with words of Torah.

- (b) Our tradition teaches us that Torah study can be a source of healing and blessing. You may want to ask members of the group if they would like to dedicate their study to anyone in particular. This is a nice way to help the group get to know one another, and to learn about significant events in each other's lives.
- (c) Depending on the preferences of your group, you may choose to distribute this sheet the week before the meeting, so that participants will be familiar with the texts, and can begin to think about their own responses.
- (d) You can choose to either work through the texts as one group, or to break up into pairs (“hevruta”) for an initial period of discussion, and then allow the pairs to share something they learned with the group.
- (e) The ultimate goal of these groups is not for participants to master a particular number of Jewish texts, but to connect with one another. If group members are sharing their own stories and experiences in a way that seems fruitful, there is no need to cut off that conversation in order to make sure you “finish” the text sheet. If you are unsure, you can always poll the group to decide whether it is time to move on.

## CONCLUSION

We recommend that you wind down the text study about 15 minutes before the end of the session, to allow for a meaningful conclusion. This conclusion may take any shape you wish. Some possibilities are:

- (a) Ask each person to name one insight they have gained, or one question that they are taking with them.  
 (b) Ask each person to offer a blessing to the group, drawn from your learning together.  
 (c) Ask each person to say one word to represent how they are feeling coming out of your discussion.

# What Kind of Jew Are You?

## EXAMINING OUR ATTITUDES TOWARD JEWISH PRACTICE

Please read each of the following statements, and then have participants arrange themselves on a continuum of strong agreement to strong disagreement:

- (1) I am comfortable with my level of Jewish observance.
- (2) In a group of Jews with different levels of observance, we should accommodate the needs of the most observant. (For example: if some people would be unable to pray if men and women were seated together, we should create separate seating out of respect for that belief).
- (3) Reform synagogues should serve only kosher meat.
- (4) When I make an ethical decision, it is important to me to know what Jewish tradition says.
- (5) I feel uncomfortable among Orthodox Jews.
- (6) Engaging in social justice work is more important than observing ritual commandments.
- (7) I live my life differently on Shabbat than on other days of the week.
- (8) Being Jewish affects what I choose to eat.
- (9) I feel comfortable making my own decisions about how to practice Judaism.
- (10) I would refuse to attend a prayer service where men and women were seated separately.
- (11) Jewish ritual is important to me.
- (12) Traditional understandings of Jewish law are outdated and irrelevant.

---

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- a. What similarities did you notice in the group's answers?
- b. What questions provoked strongly divergent answers?
- c. Did anyone regularly find themselves in the minority?
- d. What is the effect of seeing how you measure up against a larger group? Did you find that you were tempted to follow the crowd?
- e. What surprised you?