

## Monthly Musings From Rabbi Rene

### Progressive Jews join as one

The recent decision by Reform and Liberal synagogues across the UK to unite under the banner of Progressive Judaism marks a historic moment in British Jewish life. This unprecedented merger represents not merely an administrative restructuring, but a profound statement about the future of Jewish practice and identity in the larger British Jewish community and society. To understand the significance of this development, we must first trace the remarkable journey that brought us here.

The story of Progressive Judaism begins in the transformative period following the Napoleonic wars, when the ideals of the French Revolution began reshaping European society. The watershed moment came in 1790-1791, when the French National Assembly granted full citizenship to

French Jews, declaring them equal in rights and duties to all other citizens. This “emancipation” fundamentally altered the trajectory of Jewish life, liberating communities from the physical and social confines of the ghetto and opening new possibilities for Jewish participation in broader society.

In Germany, this newfound freedom sparked the earliest expressions of what would become Reform Judaism in the 1810s. German Jewish thinkers such as Leopold Zunz, Zacharias Frankel, and Abraham Geiger considered key questions, like: how could ancient traditions adapt to modern realities? How might Jewish practice evolve to reflect contemporary values while maintaining its essential character? This gave birth to a movement that sought to harmonise tradition with enlightenment

principles, emphasising reason, ethics, and universal human dignity.

The movement found fertile ground in England in the 1840s, where Jewish families had grown dissatisfied with existing options. In 1842, a few families broke away from both Bevis Marks Synagogue, which followed Sephardi customs, and the Ashkenazi Great Synagogue of London. Their declaration was both bold and brave: they identified themselves as “neither German nor Portuguese, but British Jews.” This statement encapsulated the idea that Jewish identity could transcend geographical and cultural boundaries while embracing local loyalty to a country and its values. These English families, inspired by the Reform principles emerging from Germany, adapted those ideas to their own British context and sensibilities.

In 1902, a group of families broke away from this synagogue and created the JRU (Jewish Religious Union), the ancestor of Liberal Judaism, centred around St.

John’s Wood and the Liberal Jewish Synagogue.

Now, both movements have about 80 communities, represent over a third of the British Jewish community, and can appeal to all Jews who are not members of a community. Progressive Judaism is the home for Jews who do not see themselves as primarily religious, but who identify with the Jewish tradition through culture, language, art and food.

The fundamental difference between Orthodox and Progressive Judaism lies in their approach to revelation and religious authority. Orthodox Judaism maintains that the Torah represents direct divine revelation given to Moses at Mount Sinai, creating an unchanging framework for Jewish law and practice. This perspective views halakha (Jewish law) as eternally binding, with rabbinic interpretation serving to apply ancient principles to contemporary situations without altering their essential character.

Progressive Judaism embraces

the concept of “progressive revelation”, the understanding that divine truth unfolds gradually through human experience and historical development. This recognises that while the Torah contains eternal spiritual truths, our understanding of these truths deepens and evolves as humanity grows, and each generation brings its unique views and insights. Progressive Jews view tradition as a valuable inheritance that must be thoughtfully examined, preserved and adapted where necessary to align with the values of the generation that live by it.

This theological difference manifests in practical ways: Progressive communities ordain women or LGBT+ people as rabbis, embrace egalitarian worship, and adapt liturgy to reflect contemporary language and sensibilities. They approach questions of ritual observance, lifecycle events, and ethical decision-making through the lens of informed choice rather than strict obligation, emphasising the individual's responsibility to

engage meaningfully with tradition, endlessly asking, what is the meaning and purpose of my observance. Progressive Judaism in the early decades of the 20th century looks very different from its descendant a century later, because it is an evolving tradition.

The term "Progressive" in our movement's name carries profound theological significance beyond its current political associations. Progressive revelation suggests that God's relationship with humanity is dynamic, unfolding through history as human consciousness evolves. This concept stems from the work of the German-Jewish philosopher Hermann Cohen, who has profoundly influenced Progressive Jewish thought. Cohen argued that religious truth emerges through the ongoing ethical development of humanity, with each generation contributing to our understanding of divine purpose. His vision of religion as an infinite task, always approaching but never fully achieving perfect ethical understanding, provides

the intellectual framework for progressive revelation. This concept allows us to honour our ancestors' wisdom while remaining open to new insights from contemporary experience.

Consider how this principle has guided Jewish responses to modern challenges: the development of Jewish medical ethics in response to advances in healthcare, such as the current discussion about end of life, the articulation of Jewish environmental responsibility as we confront climate change, or the evolution of Jewish thought on gender equality and LGBTQ+ inclusion. Progressive revelation enables us to ask not merely "What did our ancestors do?" but "What would they do if they possessed our current understanding?"

This approach demands both reverence for tradition and courage to innovate. It requires serious engagement with classical texts while acknowledging that our interpretation of these texts may differ from earlier generations. Pro-

gressive revelation calls us to be partners with God in the ongoing work of creation and moral development, bearing responsibility for how Jewish tradition continues to unfold. Tikkun Olam, the repair of the world, is central to progressive Jewish thought.

The merger of the Reform and Liberal movements into Progressive Judaism creates unprecedented opportunities for British Jewish life. By combining resources, this new movement can address challenges that individual communities might struggle to meet alone. The consolidated structure enables more effective advocacy for Progressive Jewish values in public discourse, a greater authority on modern issues, stronger educational programs, and more robust support across the country. It does not require each synagogue to change its ways and customs. Maidenhead Synagogue (note that the name of the community does not include the adjective “Reform”) will remain Maidenhead Synagogue and grow and evolve organically.