

## Reform Judaism Makes Inroads in Canada With Its Focus on Social Justice

Unlike in the U.S., the Reform movement has always played second fiddle to the Conservative stream. But things are changing.

Judy Maltz (Toronto) Feb 03, 2016 8:56 PM



City Shul's Rabbi Elyse Goldstein (front row, second from left) marches with her congregation.

TORONTO – At the end of services on a recent Shabbat, a member of City Shul, a new downtown synagogue in Toronto, rises to the podium to announce upcoming events for the week. “The men’s club will be meeting as usual,” he says, “and as you all know, the men’s club is open to anyone who identifies as a man.”

Little gestures like this, which demonstrate an openness to Jews of all types, says City Shul Rabbi Elyse Goldstein, may explain why Reform congregations like hers are attracting a new and diverse following in Canada’s most populous Jewish city – bucking a trend of declining membership for the movement in other countries.

“The Reform movement here has become clearer and clearer about who we are and what we stand for,” notes Goldstein, a former New Yorker, who is one of Canada’s first female rabbis. “We don’t pussyfoot around the issues.”

Of nine Reform congregations in the Greater Toronto Area, two, including City Shul, did not exist five years ago. Its relatively small but growing membership includes black Jews, Asian Jews, an active transgender and many converts.



City Shul's Rabbi Elyse Goldstein carrying a Torah.

Some, like Abby Robins, from Calgary, grew up in Orthodox homes. “When I moved to Toronto, I shul-shopped every September for the High Holy Days,” she recounts, “but nothing felt like it was right. The shuls were too hippy-dippy, or too cold, or too uninspired – kind of like the Jewish version of the ‘Three Bears.’” Only when she stepped into City Shul, she says, did she feel immediately at home.

Israeli-born Steven Katz, who calls himself a “relapsed Jew,” felt uncomfortable elsewhere for other reasons. “My wife and I have no kids, and in lots of shuls, the first question they ask you is how many kids do you have,” he says. “Here, we don’t feel like outsiders.”

Unlike in its neighbor to the south, Reform Judaism has never been the dominant movement in Canada, consistently playing second fiddle to the Conservative stream. In recent years, however, as rabbis from both groups here attest, it has been catching up.

According to the 2013 Pew Survey, 35 percent of American Jews identify as Reform, 18 percent as Conservative and 10 percent as Orthodox, with the remainder unaffiliated or belonging to smaller movements. No such wide-ranging survey has ever been conducted in Canada, but according to a 2006 study commissioned by the Jewish Federation here, 37 percent of Toronto Jews identified as Conservative, 19 percent as Reform and 14 percent as Orthodox.

“The Conservative movement here has been in serious decline for 20 years,” notes Larry Englander, rabbi emeritus of Solel Congregation, a Reform synagogue just outside the city of Toronto, where he served for more than 40 years. “And they are losing members to both sides – the Orthodox and the Reform movements.”

Holy Blossom Temple, established in 1856 by British Jews who had moved to Canada, is the largest Reform synagogue in the country with about 6,000 members. Massachusetts-born Yael Splansky, its spiritual leader, is a fourth-generation Reform rabbi. “My great-grandfather was a classmate of Leo Baeck’s,” she boasts, referring to one of the pioneers of the movement.

According to Splansky, the Reform movement in Toronto has been gaining new members not only because it is more inclusive and welcoming to non-traditional Jewish families, but also because of its strong focus on social action. “We’ve been at the very front and center of social justice issues,” she says, noting that in recent months Reform congregations throughout Toronto have been actively raising money to help finance the costs of resettling Syrian refugees in Canada.



Rabbi Yael Splansky from Holy Blossom Temple in Toronto.

Or as Goldstein points out: “It’s almost been a competition to see which congregation can raise more money for the refugees.”

Although Conservative and Orthodox synagogues have also undertaken fundraising drives for the new arrivals, as insiders note, there has been far less consensus among their congregants on the matter. “Social action is the lifeblood of our congregations,” declares Rabbi Debra Landsberg of Temple Emanu-El, another Reform synagogue. One of the many American-born-and-trained rabbis in this city, Landsberg, also serves as president of the Toronto Board of Rabbis.

The overwhelming majority of her congregants, she points out, were born and raised in the Conservative movement.

“Unlike the United States, the Conservative movement in Canada is still grappling with egalitarianism,” notes Landsberg, “and there are still Conservative congregations in this country that don’t allow women to be part of a minyan [the 10-person quorum required for a synagogue prayer service]. So here in Canada, if you want egalitarianism, there’s really no alternative but the Reform movement.”

Unlike the Conservative movement, she adds, Reform Judaism in Canada is also not wrestling with “core issues” like interfaith and gay marriage. “Our attitude is that if you want to be part of the Jewish future, just come on board. We’re open to that and comfortable with who we are.”

Baruch Frydman-Kohl, senior rabbi at the Conservative Beth Tzedec congregation, Canada's largest synagogue, acknowledges that the tides are turning. "The Reform movement has become much stronger here over the past 30 years," he says. "It's perceived by many on the left of the Conservative movement as a place where they can park themselves with their children."

Still, as Splansky points out, the Reform movement in Canada is far more traditional than its American counterpart. It does not consider all children of interfaith couples to be Jewish -- only those born to Jewish mothers. In addition, its rabbis will not marry interfaith couples, though they welcome them into their congregations. "You will also hear a lot more Hebrew in our services," she notes.

At City Shul, for example, virtually the entire Shabbat service is conducted in Hebrew and is surprisingly resonant of Orthodox-style prayer. "We're left politically, and right religiously, and in Toronto, that formula works," explains Goldstein.

It works so well, she notes, that City Shul -- affectionately dubbed "the little shul that could" by its founders -- even surprised itself when a new group of congregants began showing up not long ago. "We have almost two tables full every Shabbat now at our Kiddush lunch with singles in their twenties," says Goldstein. "So go figure."