

**WUPJ International Humanitarian Award Dinner**  
**September 14, 2008**  
**Women of Reform Judaism Tribute, by Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie**

I have faced many difficult challenges in my years at the Union, but I have never had a more impossible task than the one that I have been given today: to pay a comprehensive tribute to the Women of Reform Judaism, doing full justice to their achievements while staying within a time framework that absolutely, positively is not to exceed five minutes. It cannot be done. And so I apologize in advance for the many things that will not be said, and I place the blame squarely on the shoulders of Rabbi Uri Regev and the chairpersons of this event.

I want to say two things about the Women of Reform Judaism. The first is that without our sisterhoods, there would be no Reform Movement, and there probably would be no Reform synagogues—at least not as we know them today.

From the mid-nineteenth century until the mid-twentieth century, the activities of the Reform temple, apart from worship services, consisted almost entirely of religious school, sisterhood, and helping the needy of the community—what we would now call social action. All three of these activities were the realm of women, carried out under sisterhood auspices. In those days, there were no religious school principals or directors. When the temple board wanted a Sabbath school created—or, for that matter, when they wanted virtually anything done—they turned to the ladies of the sisterhood.

When the National Federation of Reform Sisterhoods (NFTS) came into being in 1913, it understood the tremendous power that sisterhoods could have if their efforts were combined. And so the new organization brought Reform sisterhoods together and focused them on new challenges. In the 1920's and 30's, NFTS encouraged women to strengthen the Jewishness of their households and promoted the idea of sisterhood-sponsored Judaica shops in Reform temples; sisterhood women, it believed, if properly trained, would not only sell ritual objects but would promote their use by teaching women what these objects were about. Then, in the late 1940s, NFTS stepped forward again: Maurice Eisendrath had convinced the Union to move from Cincinnati to New York, a move that would turn the Union from a very small, primarily regional organization into the pre-eminent synagogue movement in North America. There was only one little problem: all those men on the Union board couldn't figure out where the money was going to come from to make the move possible. And so guess what: Rabbi Eisendrath turned to NFTS, which funded the new structure and built the House of Living Judaism.

In the last half century, there have been tumultuous changes in our society, and women's groups have been impacted in a variety of ways. NFTS was not immune to all this, but its leaders have been remarkably adept at keeping up with the needs of modern women. Along the way they changed their name, continued to speak out for social justice, and just completed what may be their most significant accomplishment of all: the creation of the Women's Commentary on the Torah, a pioneering work of scholarship that showcases our Movement's best teachers and affirms, by its very being, the equality of women in Reform Jewish life.

And now the second thing that I want to mention about WRJ: their deep and enduring commitment to the World Union and to the institutions of Reform Judaism in Israel and around the world.

It's interesting. Much of WRJ's strength is in the Midwest and in smaller communities, and there are those who think of the Midwest and small town America as an America First kind of

place, exclusively concerned about American institutions and American values, in religion as well as in politics. But from its earliest days, WRJ has had a very different vision.

It has believed that the story of Judaism is the story of the covenant at Sinai, which married a people to God and God to a people. And to be a Jew is to embrace the shared history and the shared destiny of that people. And it believes that if we are serious about our liberal Jewish values, we need to promote them wherever Reform Jews are found.

And so, in partnership with the World Union, WRJ has a remarkable record of helping Reform institutions in Jerusalem and in Russia, in Germany and in India, in Argentina and in England. It has supported the Abraham Geiger Music Library in Potsdam, the Israel Religious Action Center in Jerusalem, Jewish curricular work in Moscow, and the list goes on and on. And perhaps most important of all is its support over many, many years for overseas rabbinic students studying at Hebrew Union College, as well as for students at the Reform seminaries in England and Potsdam. Because the Women of Reform Judaism are wise enough to know that we do not sustain Judaism with programs and projects; we sustain Judaism with people—with rabbis and teachers who know what it means to renew Torah in the life of the Jew.

And finally this: what an extraordinary group of women they are! When I meet with their board—which I do regularly—you can feel the energy in the room the minute you walk in. They are vibrant, dynamic, very charming, very tough, and absolutely unstoppable when they set their minds to something. You know, I didn't think that they were really going to produce this Torah commentary, and boy was I wrong! But to underestimate these women is always to be wrong.

I haven't mentioned names, because there is just no way to start down this path without mentioning everyone. So I will only say that the current president, Roseanne Selfon, and the current executive director, Shelly Lindauer, are the latest in a long line of outstanding leaders that WRJ has somehow managed to produce and that we all have been blessed to have.

There are too many people in our Movement who do not know the story of WRJ. The major reason, it seems to me, is that WRJ is not engaged in a continual campaign of self-promotion—which tends to be the norm in the Jewish world. They are simply too busy encouraging the grassroots efforts of their members, and in doing the everyday, nitty-gritty work that sustains our synagogues and strengthens the Jewish people.

But: "*M'oded anaveem adonai*" "God upholds the humble," we read in Tehilim (Ps. 147:6)

God upholds, and we honor, praise, and thank these women for their untiring efforts to advance the cause of Liberal Judaism.

Ladies and Gentleman, I am honored to present, on your behalf, the World Union for Progressive Judaism International Humanitarian Award to the Women of Reform Judaism.