



# BIENNIAL THATROCKED







t was the largest Biennial ever—6,000 strong—and by all accounts the most exciting. President
Barack Obama, the first sitting U.S. president to address a Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) convention, thrilled the delegates with his praise of the Religious Action

Center, his shout out exchange with 200+ NFTY representatives in the packed hall, and his promised "unshakable" commitment to Israel. Eric Cantor, the majority leader of the U.S. House of Representatives; Ehud Barak, the deputy prime minister of Israel; and Natan Sharansky, chairman of the Jewish Agency for Israel, were among the featured speakers. For the first time in decades, the 71st General Assembly of the Union for Reform Judaism and the 48th Women of Reform Judaism (WRJ) Assembly convened under the same roof, at the Gaylord National Hotel and Convention Center outside Washington, DC. More than 4,000 people—the largest number ever recorded—enjoyed Shabbat dinner as one community. Delegates from 541 Reform congregations demonstrated exuberance, a thirst for knowledge,



Emotional embrace of two URJ presidents: incoming Rabbi Rick Jacobs and retiring Rabbi Eric Yoffie.



## NOTABLE QUOTABLES



"I want to congratulate all of you on the golden anniversary of the Religious Action Center....I am very familiar with the work that you've done...and so is the rest of America.

"And that's because you helped draft the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act.... You have made a difference on so many of the defining issues of the last half-century. And without these efforts, I probably wouldn't be standing here today....

"America's commitment...and my commitment to Israel and Israel's security is unshakeable.... I'm proud that even in these difficult times we've fought for and secured the most funding for Israel in history. I'm proud that we helped Israel develop a missile defense system that's already protecting civilians from rocket attacks.'

> —Barack Obama, U.S. President



"Now is the time for Washington to send a clear signal to the emerging governments in the Middle East and the international community that it is not OK to vilify Israel and it is not OK to demonize Jews."

—Eric Cantor (R-VA), U.S. House Majority Leader



"I will stand rock solid against any attempt to curb freedoms or undermine our democracy. The only Jewish democratic state in the world must remain exactly that, a Jewish and democratic state."

—Ehud Barak, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense, Israel



"We accept this award for the Matthew Shepards and everyone else who has suffered, and fought, and stood up—not in a courtroom, where you are safe, but on the streets where you are not. We all deserve to thank them for what they did and to carry on the work until it is really finished."

—David Boies (past chief counsel of U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee), defender with Theodore Olson (former U.S. Solicitor General) of marriage equality for gays and lesbians, and co-recipient of the Maurice N. Eisendrath "Bearer of Light" Award



"Young adult trips to Israel strengthen Jewish pride and commitment....And the best way to strengthen the Jewish identity of Israelis is for them to have a Diaspora experience."

—Natan Sharansky, chairman, Jewish Agency for Israel



"One of my most vivid memories was our Sunday School class. Every week we passed around a small bank to make our offering, and it had a little light. When you put in your quarter, nickel, or dime, the light would go on. It taught us that even our humble donations could light up the world-and it's a simple lesson, but one that stayed with me all my life."

—Ambassador Nancy Brinker, founder of the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure and recipient of the Maurice N. Eisendrath "Bearer of Light" Award



"If we hope to engage our children, we will need to provide answers that are religiously compelling and intellectually engaging, as well as authentically Reform."

—Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie, outgoing president, Union for Reform Judaism



"Think of children as snowflakes; no two are alike. Or better... see your child as a seed that came in a packet without a label. Your job to provide the right environment [and] nutrients, [and] pull the biggest weeds. You can't decide what kind of flower you'll get or in which season it will bloom."

—Dr. Wendy Mogel, author of The Blessing of a B Minus



"Why does Diaspora
Jewry need Israel? If
Jewish identity is contracted to a religion
only, or limited to a
personalized religious
expression without a
sense of Jewish peoplehood, we run the risk of
being reduced to another American religious
sect....Without the
closest ties to the Jewish land, Jewish culture, and the Hebrew





language, Jewish identity will disintegrate."

—Rabbi Richard
Hirsch, former executive
director, World Union
for Progressive
Judaism, and recipient
of the Maurice N.
Eisendrath "Bearer of
Light" Award



"Here are the three most pressing tasks for our Union for Reform Judaism to focus on as we invite our partners to join in this critical work with us:

- 1. Catalyzing congregational change
- 2. Engaging the next generation
- 3. Extending the circles of our responsibility."
- —Rabbi Richard Jacobs, incoming president, Union for Reform Judaism



"Our primary goal [at the URJ] should be to do things that individual congregations cannot do for themselves, and to act where we can be far more effective when we act collectively."

—Stephen M. Sacks, incoming chairman, Union for Reform Judaism Board of Trustees



"If this journey has taught me anything, it is this: Each of us is personally responsible for the future of Reform Judaism."

—Peter Weidhorn, outgoing chairman, Union for Reform Judaism Board of Trustees



"Let's pledge to join our hands and hearts and the collective power of our heads—to energize, invigorate, and activate every woman connected to our Reform congregations! Let's ensure—together—that the second century of this phenomenal organization is as powerful and transformative as the first."

—Lynn Magid Lazar, president, Women of Reform Judaism



"We have heard 1,000 voices in conversation—parents and grandparents, Jewish professionals and clergy, congregational leaders—all crying out: We must act and act now to make sure bar and bat mitzvah is an entrance, not an exit!"

—Rabbi Jonah Pesner, incoming senior vice president, Union for Reform Judaism, introducing the resolution to ratify the Movementwide Campaign for Youth Engagement



"Identifying what it will take to inspire and connect with younger women is perhaps the most critical challenge facing our sisterhoods. We will need to be nimble and flexible enough to respond to their interests and needs, and courageous in piloting new models without any guarantees of what will, and what will not, work."

—Rabbi Marla J. Feldman, incoming executive director, Women of Reform Judaism

#### How the Biennial Changed Me: 12 Delegates Speak Out

- 1. "I am changed forever because of the sincere commitment to Reform and the bravery shown by leadership to do that which is right even when it is not popular."
- 2. "I understand for the first time the connection between my synagogue and the Reform Movement."
- **3.** "Singing with 6,000 people was just wonderful. I'll take that with me."
- 4. "I realized how much we do well in our synagogue and how much more we can do."
- **5.** "I was able to reconnect with many of the reasons why I practice Reform Judaism."
- 6. "The insights I received in the breakout sessions will go a long way to improving community life, outreach, membership, and many other categories in my temple."
- **7.** "I was on a 'high.' I came to the Biennial directly from business in China and never even experienced jet lag."
- **8.** "It cemented my desire to become a rabbi and Jewish educator, to be the change I wish to see in the world."
- **9.** "I am more of a Jew today than I was on December 13."
- **10.** "The session called Making Prayer Real gave me hope that there is a way to pray that will work for me."
- **11.** "It caused me to remember that we are part of something big."
- 12. "I have rarely felt so completely in tune with a group as I did at Biennial. It changed a 'they' into a 'we.' "



## Resolutions

The Union for Reform Judaism passed 10 resolutions (urj. org/about/union/governance/reso), among them the following two that will strengthen the URJ's Campaign for Youth Engagement:

### Campaign for Youth Engagement

To place full-time Jewish youth professionals throughout North America...and designate a senior leader at the URJ with responsibilities for youth engagement...champion the HUC-JIR's Certificate in Jewish Education for Adolescents and Emerging Adults...provide recognition for congregations that integrate Jewish youth into their communities in exemplary ways.. expand resources for early childhood, day school, camps, etc.... lower financial barriers...implement a long-term development effort....

#### Founding of the Reform Youth Professionals Association

To congratulate the Reform Youth Professionals Association (RYPA) on its founding and support its growth to become a future URJ affiliate...recognize and applaud the important role of Jewish youth professionals... encourage congregations to support youth professionals and emphasize the importance of their active participation in RYPA.

and a commitment to recharge their home communities.

The convention also marked significant transitions of leadership: Rabbi Richard Jacobs soon to succeed Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie as URJ president, Stephen M. Sacks taking the URJ Board chairman's gavel from Peter Weidhorn, and Rabbi Marla Feldman becoming WRJ's new executive director. The URJ launched the Campaign for Youth Engagement with a Movement-wide Education Summit. Delegates participated in their choice of dozens of learning sessions and forums and met with URJ profession-

als for expert consultations. Ten resolutions were adopted, from youth engagement and access to lifelong learning for Jews



with disabilities to economic justice in a time of fiscal crisis and the prevention of genocide. Nearly 100 Jewish musicians—including Theodore Bikel—performed at the Biennial, many participating in tributes to Debbie Friedman, z''l. A mobile based website (the first ever), live streaming, Facebook, Twitter, Foursquare, YouTube, and the RJ blog informed and connected delegates as well as thousands of Reform Jews around the world.

Special thanks to Carole Sterling and Edward Burger, Biennial chair and vice-chair; Rabbi Elliott Kleinman, Biennial director; Robin Hirsch, director of Meetings and Conventions; and 800 volunteers from Washington, DC area congregations.

See you in San Diego, December 11–15, 2013.



The world's largest Shabbat dinner.

REFORM JUDAISM 40 SPRING 2012



Right: A Biennial learning session. Below: The NFTY Board leads *Motzi* at Shabbat dinner.





Right: Yoga service. Below: Women join together in prayer at WRJ's Havdalah service.





Left: Captured by the spirit.... Below: Temple presidents confer on strengthening the Movement.





Folk singer Theodore Bikel receives the first Debbie Friedman Award for Contributions to Jewish Music.

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