

Its Ways Are Ways of Pleasantness...

Rabbi Richard Jacobi

The most frequent question addressed to me as a Liberal Jew and Rabbi is 'Why are there separate Liberal and Reform movements in the UK, when there aren't two movements anywhere else in the world?' My heart always drops when it is asked, for as I don't have an answer that convinces me, how will I explain or convince anyone else? So my stock response, especially nowadays when we might say, in a partisan fashion, 'they've stolen all our clothes', is to emphasise history and culture. Over-simplistically, Liberal is a British reforming and progressive movement that emerged from the transformations in society at the end of the Victorian era, while Reform grew in this country from a Sephardi breakaway being integrated over time with ideas and emigres from Germany. Culturally, Liberals pray, Reformers daven; Liberals emphasise integrity over unity; Reform seeks a part in the mainstream.

When I chat to fellow Progressive Jews, rabbinic or lay, I find a majority view that thirty years from now, there will be one broad progressive Jewish movement in this country and we will be the better for it. Thirty years is far enough away for untainted answers. Yet, no-one is wishing to take a first step towards that vision. Rabbis say that the lead must come from the "Jews (mostly not!) in the pews"; many of them look to the rabbis for a lead. Meantime, another thirty years will pass.

A stock argument against a Progressive coalition or broad single entity (note the avoidance of the 'M' word - merger - which is "so-last-century") is that we would lose our radical edge in a larger grouping. So, my question addressed to all of us as Jews is this: Is radical a necessity of Liberal Judaism or should we concentrate on enriching Judaism's progressive flavours?