



January 3, 2019

Dear Member of the 116th Congress,

On behalf of the Union for Reform Judaism, whose 900 congregations encompass more than 1.5 million Reform Jews across North America, and the Central Conference of American Rabbis, which represents over 2,000 Reform rabbis, I write to congratulate you on the occasion of your swearing in as a member of the 116th Congress and to share with you our mission and policy priorities.

For nearly six decades, the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism (the RAC) has been the hub of Jewish social justice work. We represent the values of the largest and most diverse Jewish Movement in North America. We are inspired by the teachings of our tradition in our pursuit of justice: in Deuteronomy 16:20, we read, “*tzedek, tzedek tirdof*/justice, justice shall you pursue.” Our rabbis teach that not only are we committed to creating a more just, equal, compassionate, and repaired world, but to doing so in a righteous manner. This model of justice guides our advocacy at all levels and branches of government, as do the words of the prophet Micah that inspire us to, “do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God” (6:8).

The RAC mobilizes around federal, state, and local legislation; supports and develops congregational leaders; and organizes communities around more than 70 public policy issues to create a world overflowing with justice, wholeness, and compassion. Our community is organized and engaged on issues at the local, state, and federal levels. There are Reform Jewish congregations in all 50 states as well as the Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia, and we have staff in five states and our historic headquarters in Washington. Complementing the work of our professional staff in DC, we also bring 2,000 young people to Washington each year for weekends of learning about Judaism and social justice, including a day on Capitol Hill meeting with members of Congress. Our rabbis are leaders in your community; they and I look forward to working with you throughout the 116th Congress to advance critical legislation on social justice and civil rights.

The Reform Jewish Movement is proud of our work with administrations, congresses, and elected officials of both parties, knowing that our success as a nation is inextricably linked to our ability to work together for the common good. Especially in this time of increased polarization, this work is more important than ever. As part of a 501(c)3

nonprofit organization, the RAC's work is completely nonpartisan. We pursue public policies that reflect the Jewish values of social justice that form the core of our mandate. Among the landmark laws that we have played a key role in shaping are the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the Violence Against Women Act, the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act, the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Affordable Care Act, and more.

Attached you will find an outline of our legislative and policy priorities for the 116th Congress on issues such as immigration, criminal justice reform, LGBTQ equality, gun violence prevention, and support for a strong U.S.-Israel relationship. We look forward to serving as a resource for you and your staff and working together to move these critical social justice issues forward, ensuring that "justice rolls down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream" (Amos 5:24).

Sincerely,

Rabbi Jonah Dov Pesner
Director, Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism
Senior Vice President, Union for Reform Judaism

Reform Jewish Movement Legislative and Policy Priorities for the 116th Congress

- A humane and just immigration system and responding to the global refugee crisis
- Racial justice, including criminal justice reform and voting rights
- Religious freedom and separation of church and state
- Resisting anti-Semitism, white supremacy, and bigotry
- Access to affordable, quality health care for all
- Preventing the scourge of gun violence
- Support for Israel
- Responding to the genocide against the Rohingya people
- Confronting climate change
- Realizing LGBTQ equality
- Pursuing economic justice
- Women's equality and reproductive rights

A humane and just immigration system and responding to the global refugee crisis

No less than 36 times, the Torah instructs us on how to treat the *ger*, the foreigner among us. God commands, "The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Leviticus 19:34). Guided by this repeated injunction to love the stranger, the Reform Movement has long been committed to fixing our broken immigration system and ensuring just and compassionate immigration policies.

A comprehensive, legislative solution to our broken immigration system has taken on new urgency as the current administration makes it harder to access legal pathways to immigration. Over the past two years, the administration ended the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program; implemented a zero-tolerance policy that criminalizes all border crossings, resulting in the separation of children from their families; attempted to expand detention of migrant children; proposed policy forcing immigrants to choose between advancing their immigration status and accessing essential public benefits like health care, nutrition, and housing; terminated temporary protected status (TPS) for numerous countries; and announced new policy making it harder for migrants to seek asylum in the U.S.

We continue to call on Congress to pass bipartisan legislation that keeps our borders secure, expands the legal channels of immigration, and provides a pathway to citizenship for those already living here. While U.S. law must be respected, we must also strive for an immigration system that treats all people with dignity and respect. As you work toward comprehensive immigration reform, we urge you to take immediate action to

pass legislation that provides permanent protections for DREAMers and for TPS holders, including a pathway to citizenship, and institute increased oversight of and alternatives to child detention.

At the same time, the world is facing the worst refugee crisis in history. More than 68.5 million people worldwide have been forced to flee their homes to escape conflict and persecution, surpassing the record of global refugees set by World War II.ⁱ The scale of the global refugee crisis has shed new light on the importance of the United States maintaining its role as a beacon of hope and a haven for people fleeing persecution and seeking a better life for themselves and their families. Unfortunately, and despite the unprecedented global need, refugee resettlement in the United States has reached an historic low.

We ask Congress to publicly hold the administration accountable to meeting the fiscal year 2019 admissions ceiling of 30,000 refugees and call on the administration to increase refugee resettlement, including setting a ceiling of at least 75,000 refugees allowed into the U.S. in fiscal year 2020. We also ask you to support robust funding for the Office of Refugee Resettlement.

Racial justice, including criminal justice reform and voting rights

The Reform Jewish Movement is committed to advancing racial justice. We seek to heal wounds caused by centuries of prejudice, discrimination, and mistrust by working across lines of race, faith, and class to free our country from systemic racism. We advocate for policies that meaningfully reform our broken criminal justice system and protect the equal rights of all American citizens to vote.

Longstanding criminal justice policies with notably disparate racial impacts, such as mandatory minimum sentences, have exploded incarceration rates to over two million people.ⁱⁱ These policies have been particularly devastating for communities of color who make up 37 percent of the U.S. population but 67 percent of the prison population.ⁱⁱⁱ More black men serve time in our correctional system today than were held in slavery in 1850.^{iv} As we work for a criminal justice system that is truly just, the Reform Jewish Movement draws guidance from the prophet Ezekiel, who said “I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn away from his life and live” (33:11).

The Reform Jewish Movement is grateful to Congress for passing the First Step Act last session, an incremental move towards a more fair, compassionate justice system. There is far more work to be done. We will continue to advocate for legislation that further ends draconian mandatory minimum sentences, expands judicial discretion in sentencing, and increases opportunities for anti-recidivism and re-entry programs. Additionally, we urge you to support equitable pre-trial procedures, accountable police practices, re-enfranchisement for individuals who were formerly incarcerated, and humane prison conditions.

Furthermore, the right to vote, the cornerstone of American democracy, is under attack. In 2013, the Supreme Court's decision in *Shelby County v. Holder* struck down Section 4(b) of the Voting Rights Act (VRA) of 1965, thereby dismantling the preclearance system and opening the door for states and localities with a long history of voter disenfranchisement to more easily make changes to their election procedures. We are taught by the sage Hillel, "Do not separate yourself from the community (*Pirkei Avot* 2:4)." These words are as relevant to us today as they were in ancient times and inspire our commitment to restoring voting rights.

We urge you to act swiftly to update section 4(b) of the VRA and restore this landmark law to its full capacity. The Voting Rights Advancement Act (H.R.2978/S.1419 in the 115th Congress) offers an important framework for ameliorating the challenges to achieving full voting rights for all Americans.

Religious freedom and separation of church and state

The Reform Jewish Movement has long advocated for robust religious freedom rights and the separation of church and state, knowing one cannot exist without the other. This nation's constitutional commitment to religious freedom has allowed the Jewish people – and other religious minorities – to flourish in this country nearly unmatched anywhere else in the world. We unequivocally oppose any measures that target people because of their religious beliefs, or lack of religious beliefs.

We also oppose measures that would entangle the government in religious matters, such as through school voucher programs. A central principle of the First Amendment's Establishment Clause is that members of particular faiths, and not the government, should fund religious institutions. When vouchers are used towards expenses related to religious school education, they become an indirect government funding of sectarian institutions. For similar reasons, we also oppose any efforts to repeal or weaken the Johnson Amendment, a federal prohibition on partisan politicking from the pulpit in place since 1954, located in section 501(c)(3) of the federal tax code. Houses of worship must be able to fulfill their prophetic mandate of speaking truth to power, a role that would be undermined by allowing them to endorse or oppose candidates or parties for office via repeal of the Johnson Amendment.

Resisting anti-Semitism, white supremacy, and bigotry

As Jews, we know the dangers of anti-Semitism first hand. We continue to mourn for the lives lost at the massacre at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. In 2017, there were 1,986 incidents of anti-Semitism in the U.S., a 57 percent increase over 2016.^v This was the largest single-year increase on record and is the second highest number of hate incidents since data collection began nearly 40 years ago. Not only is anti-Semitism on the rise, but so is hateful rhetoric and action toward many marginalized communities

including people of color, the LGBTQ community, Sikhs, and Muslims. Hate crimes reported to police in America's 10 largest cities rose 12.5 percent in 2017, the fourth consecutive annual rise and the highest total in over a decade.^{vi} Yet we also know that hate crimes are dramatically underreported; at least 91 municipalities with more than 100,000 people either affirmatively reported zero hate crimes or did not submit any data to the FBI.^{vii}

We must work together to combat a culture of violent rhetoric that is all too quickly becoming a culture of violent action. It is imperative that our elected officials lead the way. We urge you to visibly and consistently denounce any and all forms of anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, white supremacy, and bigotry, and call on your colleagues in Congress to do the same. We also ask you to support efforts to incentivize state and local law enforcement agencies to more comprehensively collect and report hate crimes data to the FBI and to support legislation such as the National Opposition to Hate, Assault, and Threats to Equality (NO HATE) Act (H.R.1566/S.662 in the 115th Congress).

Access to affordable, quality health care for all

The Reform Jewish Movement has consistently supported universal health care coverage and advocated for quality health care that is affordable and accessible for all. Our tradition teaches us that human life is of infinite value and that the preservation of life supersedes almost all other considerations. We believe that God endowed humanity with the understanding and ability to become partners in making a better world, including the use of our wisdom to cure illnesses.

Few pieces of legislation in the last 50 years have had a greater effect on the daily lives of Americans than the Affordable Care Act (ACA). The health care system before the ACA left almost 50 million Americans without insurance. Although millions remain without health insurance, roughly 20 million people have gained coverage through the ACA and millions more are protected by regulations the ACA established.^{viii}

Congress should build on the successes of the ACA to expand access to affordable health care and preserve the scope and breadth of the ACA, Medicaid, Medicare, and CHIP. This begins by safeguarding the ACA from the currently pending Texas v. Azar litigation. It also includes reviving bipartisan efforts to stabilize the ACA marketplaces and reduce costs for consumers. There are many ways to achieve this outcome that should garner bipartisan support, including increasing funding for reinsurance programs in states, expanding eligibility for subsidies, and reinstating support for enrollment assisters and navigators. Legislation to lower prescription drug costs will also help lower costs for consumers in the ACA marketplaces as well as those who receive health care from employers and through Medicare and Medicaid.

We support an increased focus on addressing health inequities in communities of color, immigrant communities, and rural communities resulting from inadequate and unequal

access to essential medical services. Improved data and payment models that account for racial and geographic inequities will be necessary to assessing the scope of the problem. We ask Congress to devote resources to the health conditions that disproportionately impact communities of color such as sickle cell disease, hepatitis and liver cancer, and HIV/AIDS. Legislation such as the Health Equity and Accountability Act (H.R.5942 in the 115th Congress) and the Equality in Medicare and Medicaid Treatment Act (H.R.6601 in the 115th Congress) would take important steps to closing existing inequities in health care.

Preventing the scourge of gun violence

For decades, the Reform Jewish Movement has advocated for strong gun violence prevention measures. We are inspired by Leviticus 19:16 that instructs us, “Do not stand idly by while your neighbor’s blood is shed.” Further, our texts teach us that “He who takes one life, it is as though he has destroyed the universe, and he who saves one life, it is as though he has saved the universe” (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5). Each victim of gun violence leaves behind loving parents, siblings, family, and friends.

Each day in the United States, an average of 109 people die from gun violence.^{ix} Black children and teens are 14 times more likely than white children and teens of the same age to die by gun homicide.^x This is a uniquely American problem – the U.S. firearm homicide rate is 25 times that of other high-income countries.^{xi} It is also a problem that a majority of Americans support addressing through policy change.^{xii}

After years of inaction by Congress, we implore you to improve public safety, prevent gun violence, and save lives by establishing universal background checks, closing the private sale loophole, and further strengthening the National Instant Criminal Background Check System; banning the purchase and sale of assault weapons and high capacity ammunition magazines; providing funding to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for research on gun violence; and enacting a gun violence restraining order law, which would temporarily prohibit an individual from purchasing or possessing firearms when deemed by a judge to pose a danger to oneself or others.

Support for Israel

A strong U.S.-Israel relationship serves the interests of both nations. For more than seven decades, the U.S. has helped ensure Israel’s security and, in so doing, contributed to regional stability. The American goal of realizing a safer, more secure world is strengthened through an ongoing and deep relationship with Israel, the United States’ premier ally in the Middle East. The security of a Jewish state in Israel is also of paramount importance to Reform Jews worldwide, as the spiritual and ancestral home of the Jewish people. We continue to support a two-state solution, which is essential to

ensuring the Jewish, democratic nature of Israel and to achieving an independent Palestinian state.

We urge continued bipartisan support for foreign aid funding to Israel in line with the current 10-year, \$38 billion Memorandum of Understanding between the U.S. and Israel. We also ask you to support funding for the Palestinians, including through the establishment of the Palestinian Partnership Fund (H.R. 7060/S.3549 in the 115th Congress) to facilitate and finance joint economic ventures and people-to-people exchanges between Israelis and Palestinians. In addition, we encourage Congress to support U.S. leadership and diplomatic initiatives toward achieving a just peace deal between Israel and the Palestinians, including strong support for a two-state solution.

Responding to the genocide against the Rohingya people

Since August of 2017, a campaign of genocide by the Burmese military has forced over 700,000 Rohingya adults and children to flee from Burma to Bangladesh, where they remain in refugee camps with an uncertain future.^{xiii} The Rohingya people have faced decades of discrimination by the government, including the denial of citizenship and freedom of movement and being barred from government positions. Those who didn't flee the violence continue to face discrimination and persecution. As Jews, we know all too well the price paid when good people do not act to protect the victims of discrimination and persecution. In Leviticus, we are commanded, "You may not stand idly by when your neighbor's blood is being shed" (Leviticus 19:16).

We ask Congress to hold accountable those responsible for the genocide of the Rohingya people and call for repatriation of the Rohingya only after key rights and protections are restored.

Confronting climate change

Jewish tradition teaches us that human domain over nature does not include a license to abuse the environment. We are obligated to conserve and not destroy our limited environmental resources.

Our world is already experiencing the devastating effects of climate change, which disproportionately impacts poor and vulnerable communities both in the U.S. and around the world, particularly communities of color. Over the next 85 years, it is predicted that these increasing temperatures could significantly raise sea levels around the globe, causing floods that could displace tens of millions of people, including along U.S. coasts; droughts and changing seasonal rainfall patterns are already affecting farmlands, decreasing crop yields and exacerbating world hunger.^{xiv} By 2030, climate change is expected to result in as many as 250,000 deaths each year worldwide.^{xv}

We ask Congress to take a leading role in addressing the impacts of climate change by enacting policies such as moving to renewable energies and implementing a carbon tax that will help limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius or less to avoid the worst effects of climate change. Any legislation should also include “just transition” provisions to support communities with job training and economic revitalization of areas economically dependent on fossil fuel extraction. We also urge you to protect key environmental protection legislation such as the Endangered Species Act, Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, and the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

Realizing LGBTQ equality

Every person, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, is created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), and deserves the full range of rights and opportunities promised by our Constitution.

Despite progress made in recent years toward reaching full equality for members of the LGBTQ community, significant work remains to be done. There is no federal law that explicitly and consistently protects against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity in employment, public accommodations, credit, education, federally funded programs, and jury service. Twenty-six states do not have explicit nondiscrimination protections for sexual orientation or gender identity with regards to employment and housing.^{xvi} Twenty-seven states do not have explicit nondiscrimination protections for sexual orientation and gender identity with regards to public accommodations.^{xvii} In 2016, one in four LGBTQ Americans reported having experienced discrimination.^{xviii}

We urge you to prioritize the passage of comprehensive LGBTQ non-discrimination legislation, such as the Equality Act (H.R.2282/S.1006 in the 115th Congress). While hate and prejudice may continue to endure, strengthening and enforcing anti-discrimination laws protect LGBTQ people from those who wish to do them harm.

Pursuing economic justice

Jewish tradition teaches that helping fellow human beings in need, *tzedakah*, is not simply a matter of charity, but of responsibility, righteousness, and justice. We are not merely commanded to give to the poor, but to advocate as well. We are told in Proverbs 31:9, to "speak up, judge righteously, champion the poor and the needy."

Just over 12 percent of Americans, or 39.7 million people, live in poverty.^{xix} One in 5 children in America are in poverty,^{xx} and 15.7 percent households with children were food insecure at some point in 2017.^{xxi} Women continue to earn, on average, just \$0.80 for every \$1 a man makes, with women of color facing even bigger gaps.^{xxii} The racial wealth gap, a result of generations of entrenched policy decisions, persists, meaning

that black Americans are less likely to have emergency savings, are less likely to be homeowners, and have more debt than white Americans.^{xxiii} And policy failures such as the lack of a national paid family and medical leave law means that hardworking Americans must choose between their economic wellbeing and caring for a baby, recovering from an illness, or tending to a sick family member.

Congress should enact policies that will support poor and working-class people in this country and improve economic stability and equity, including by passing a living wage through legislation such as the Raise the Wage Act (H.R.15/S.1242 in the 115th Congress) and enacting paid family and medical leave through legislation such as the Family and Medical Insurance Leave (FAMILY) Act (H.R.947/S.337 in the 115th Congress).

Women's equality and reproductive rights

The Reform Jewish Movement was the first Jewish denomination to prioritize and make real the full equality of women in Jewish life. We are proud to be the first movement to ordain female rabbis and to have women serve as synagogue presidents. We similarly advocate for the full equality of women in society. The landmark *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision codifies what we have long known to be true: women are their own moral decision makers, and when decisions about health and sexuality are abridged or denied, women's self-determination and equality are abridged and denied.

We urge you to champion legislation to protect and promote women's rights: ensuring true pay equity such as the Paycheck Fairness Act (S.819/H.R.1869); addressing the scourge of gender-based violence by reauthorizing the Violence Against Women Act (H.R.6545); ensuring access to safe and legal abortion, including by repealing the Hyde Amendment through the Equal Access to Abortion Coverage in Health Insurance Act, or EACH Woman Act (H.R.771); combatting sexual assault and harassment; and providing full access to contraception and other preventive health care measures. Our nation cannot be truly free and equal when half of our population faces barriers that impede their ability to make their own reproductive health decisions or provide for themselves and their families.

ⁱ <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/stories/2018/6/5b222c494/forced-displacement-record-685-million.html>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2018.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.sentencingproject.org/criminal-justice-facts/>

^{iv} <https://www.brennancenter.org/analysis/national-agenda-reduce-mass-incarceration>

^v <https://www.adl.org/resources/reports/2017-audit-of-anti-semitic-incidents>

^{vi} https://csbs.csusb.edu/sites/csusb_csbs/files/2018%20Hate%20Final%20Report%205-14.pdf

^{vii} <https://www.adl.org/media/12148/download>

^{viii} <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/17/us/politics/congressional-budget-office-affordable-care-act.html>

^{ix} <https://efsgv.org/press-archive/2018/cdc-shows-increase-in-gun-deaths-in-2017/>

^x Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. WISQARS Fatal Injury Reports. Data reflect a 5-year average (2012-2016) of gun deaths by race. Analysis includes: ages 0-19, and non-Hispanic only and homicide including legal intervention.

^{xi} Grinshteyn E, Hemenway D. Violent death rates: The U.S. compared with other high-income OECD countries, 2010. *The American Journal of Medicine*. 2016; 129(3): 266-273.

^{xii} <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2017/06/22/views-on-gun-policy/>

^{xiii} https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/iscg_situation_report_27_sept_2018.pdf

^{xiv} https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2018/02/WGIAR5-PartA_FINAL.pdf

^{xv}

http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/134014/9789241507691_eng.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

^{xvi} http://www.lgbtmap.org/equality-maps/non_discrimination_laws

^{xvii} Ibid.

^{xviii} <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/lgbt/news/2017/05/02/429529/widespread-discrimination-continues-shape-lgbt-peoples-lives-subtle-significant-ways/>

^{xix} <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2018/demo/p60-263.html>

^{xx} <http://federalsafety.net/us-poverty-statistics.html>

^{xxi} <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/90023/err-256.pdf?v=0>

^{xxii} <https://www.aauw.org/article/aauw-report-women-still-make-80-cents-on-the-dollar/>

^{xxiii} <https://www.federalreserve.gov/econres/notes/feds-notes/recent-trends-in-wealth-holding-by-race-and-ethnicity-evidence-from-the-survey-of-consumer-finances-20170927.htm>