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## **REFORM JEWISH LEADER ERIC YOFFIE ASSAILS ANTI-OBAMA EFFORTS**

### **Also cites Orthodox leadership for lack of communal efforts**

Fort Lee, NJ -- At a time when many American Jews are wondering whether a Barack Obama presidency would hold any surprises with regard to the US senator from Illinois' support for Israel, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, is outspokenly critical of attempts to sway Jews against Obama, including e-mails suggesting the candidate is either anti-Semitic or anti-Israel.

"There has been an ongoing effort to demonize Barack Obama and to present him as a hater of Jews and a hater of Israel," Yoffie states in an exclusive interview with Shalom TV's Mark S. Golub. "We've seen that in an e-mail campaign that's been particularly vicious. I think this is a terrible mistake. I think it is objectively wrong."



Careful to avoid endorsing any specific presidential hopeful, Yoffie refers to both AIPAC and ADL with respect to giving guidance on the candidates. "There are no significant differences" with respect to the various stands on Israel. "It's an objective mistake and it's a tremendous political error for the American Jewish community to be drawn into this campaign of vilification."

Yoffie also expresses concern that anti-Obama campaigns may simply be partisan efforts. "Some people with very conservative political credentials and who've been activists in the Republican party...are using positions in the Jewish community to smear Senator Obama. I think that is profoundly wrong. If they want to get involved in the campaign, let them resign their positions, let them enter the political realm, and nobody has any issue with them."

At the Union for Reform Judaism, "we need to remain nonpartisan and above the fray and recognize that there are Reform Jews who support all of the candidates, but at the same time we need to find a way to say that these particular charges are untrue."

Throughout the candid interview, available on the cable network starting today [Sunday, March 9], URJ President Rabbi Yoffie also speaks to the growing rift between Orthodox and non-Orthodox communities. Yoffie points out that the "Orthodox monopoly" in Israel is detrimental to the country, while the Orthodox minority in the US has cut itself off from broader society.

"I believe religious monopolies always end up destroying the religious tradition that they are meant to serve," Rabbi Yoffie observes. "There is no exception to that in human history."

"The Orthodox monopoly in Israel has been very destructive. It's tragic. All Jews suffer from a system which makes religion an object of contempt in the eyes of Israel citizenry."

"We want a positive orientation towards Torah and Jewish religious tradition, and the best way to get that is to get the government out of the business of supporting one group and not supporting another."

"Having said that, we've seen gradual improvement over the last twenty years. For example, coercive policies on Shabbat are far less common than they once were. And we are now running a rabbinical program for Israelis. In ten years you're going to have 100 native-born Israel rabbis serving the Reform movement [and] that's going to totally change the landscape."

(MORE)

Representing the largest Jewish religious movement in North America, with more than 1.25 million Reform Jews and 900 congregations, the leader of the Union for Reform Judaism expresses dismay at the widening gap between movements here at home.

"We look at an Orthodox world that's become increasingly inward-looking; that has cut itself off from the broader society; [and] which has spoken, in many cases, with a deeply distressing extremism on a whole range of issues--including the non-Orthodox," notes Rabbi Yoffie.

"It would be absurd for me to suggest that Orthodox Jews shouldn't operate according to Halacha. That's their self-definition. I understand and appreciate that. I also understand and appreciate that during the course of history, there's been greater and lesser degrees of flexibility and openness in interpreting the Halacha."

But, "for the first century and a half of American Jewish existence, we were able to transcend denominational boundaries and talk together and work together. That's much less possible now."

For Rabbi Yoffie, this current division goes well beyond the decades-old issue of patrilineal descent, through which the Reform movement counts as Jews those whose fathers are Jewish and who are raised as Jews, in addition to following the matrilineal line.

"In the last thirty years, for example, we might have established a common conversion process for Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox Jews," explains Rabbi Yoffie. "It would have meant compromises on the part of the Reform and Conservative movements in terms of higher expectations and demands, and, on a part of the Orthodox, a certain measure of flexibility without abandoning the halachic framework."

"That didn't happen because of the Orthodox world, and not because of us. My own view is that there's plenty of blame to go around, [but] let's see if we can find a way, as Jews, to embrace this notion of a single Jewish people and a single Jewish destiny."

Rabbi Eric Yoffie has served as president of the Union for Reform Judaism since June 1996, during which time he has discovered that "on the national level, contact between the religious movements in terms of any ongoing discussions or cooperation is essentially nonexistent."

"The good news is there are still local communities throughout America where congregations and rabbis--Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox--find a way to sit together, to talk together, to work together. They understand the importance to the broader community. That's a case where the people are ahead of their leaders. It's encouraging, and we need to follow their example."

"There are different expressions of Judaism. I find them all to be authentic. The pluralism of Jewish religious life is a blessing and it's a reason for our strength. It's not something to fear; it's something to welcome."

Shalom TV, America's first Jewish cable television network, offers a broad array of English-language programming of interest to the North American Jewish community. Available coast-to-coast on Comcast, as well as on Time Warner Cable in New York and New Jersey, and on Blue Ridge Communications, the free network now reaches more than 15 million households. For additional information, visit [www.shalomtv.com](http://www.shalomtv.com).

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