I was recently reminiscing with my brother about growing up in Geneva, our school life and our shul life. We grew up at what was then the only one of two Reform synagogues in all of Switzerland (the other one was in Zurich). We were both very involved in our community’s youth group, and some of our closest friends were in that same group. Our rabbi, Francois Garai, always made sure that we, the teens of the community, had a place to go and a place to be Jewish in. He would reserve the third row on the left for us in services, and only allow others to sit there once he knew we were not coming or if we didn’t fill the row. It is only a few months ago that I realised just how strictly Reform my brother and I were brought up. I never set foot in a synagogue that was not either Reform or Progressive until I was in my twenties and had begun rabbinic school, and even then, it was, and still is, a very rare occurrence.

Because of my upbringing, while I realised that there were other streams of Judaism that did not agree with or recognise the Judaism that I practise, I never considered that my Judaism was not mainstream and normative. In fact, it was not until I arrived in Israel for the first year of my rabbinic studies and our campus was vandalized, that I appreciated just how deep the misunderstanding and even hatred can be.

Fast forward to 2020 – here I am, a committed, confident, strictly Reform Jew, with still very little experience of a non-Progressive service, and extremely aware of just how deep the divide is, how difficult the challenge is of promoting our stream of Judaism, how unknown and misunderstood it really is.

I have recently returned from the Union for Reform Judaism’s biennial conference in Chicago – the North American Reform Movement’ gathering which brings together nearly 6000 enthusiastic and dedicated Reform Jews. During one of the plenary sessions, Cantor Barbara Ostfeld, the first woman ordained as a cantor in 1975, was honoured for all of her achievements, and during her acceptance speech spoke of Reform Judaism as “mainstream Judaism”. It was the first time I have ever heard my Judaism defined as such. And it is true that in Northern America, Reform Judaism is the largest denomination- this translates into what I can only describe as an unapologetic practice of Reform Judaism- one which gives space to inspiringly forward thinking positions the movement might take on issues of society and an emphasis on a creative and experiential services and prayers. “Lo bashamayim hi” teaches Torah- “it is not in the heavens”, and we can also experience that unapologetic practice of our Judaism – it starts with shifting how we speak of it. We do not compare ourselves to other denominations to describe our Judaism, we should not define ourselves by them- we are mainstream; to quote singer/songwriter Elana Arian – “our voices are powerful”, and we deserve to have them heard.