



RECONSTRUCTIONISTS AND JEWISH UNITY

Arthur Green

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When I first began reading Martin Buber's *Tales of the Hasidim*, long before I knew that I was going to spend much of my life as a student of Hasidism, there were two tales, or perhaps just two lines from within the tales, that impressed me above all others.

One was a statement by Rabbi Zusya of Anipol, who is supposed to have said: "When I get to the World of Truth they won't ask me why I wasn't Moses. They'll ask me why I wasn't Zusya." The other comes from a tale about Rabbi Raphael of Bershad. Embarking on a journey by coach, he asked his disciples to join him. When they protested that there was not enough room in the small coach he said: "So we'll love each other more!"

Within these two tales are embodied the essential principles of living in community. Each of us has to know who he or she is and not try to be anyone else. At the same time, we all have to be willing to move over, to make room for one another, to love each other more. This is true of life in community at all levels: within a small, intimate havurah, in our movement as a whole, in the larger Jewish community, and in the human community of which we are all a part.

We must learn to love others for their differences from us, not for being just like us. God is praised in our tradition as being *Meshaneh haberiyot*, One who makes for variety in Creation. The great wonder of human existence, the Talmud tells us, is that God stamps each human being in the imprint of Adam, and yet each of us comes out different. We differ from one another, the

sages say, in appearance, in voice, and in opinions.

Perhaps it is not too farfetched to read this as saying that because each of us sees and hears differently, each of us is necessarily of a different mind. Our age, like none other, is one that legitimizes personal idiosyncrasy. Each of us revels in his or her own uniqueness. The task in such an era is for us to recognize and accept the uniqueness of the other, not just of ourselves, and to recognize, in this very difference, the shared divine imprint, the common humanity that unites us all. We must learn to love and accept others for who they are, not for who we would like them to be.

Restraint

Loving the other for who s/he is also means exercising a degree of restraint in attempting to change others, even where we think their opinions are wrong-headed. It means that we vigorously reject missionary attitudes within the Jewish community, even if they are well-meant. The missionary by definition cannot respect the other's right to differ. The notion that "I love you as one who is a potential convert to my viewpoint" is something less than love.

Since it is often we who accuse the Orthodox of such attitudes, let me make it clear that I am fully aware that liberals too can be self-righteous and overbearing. While seeking to encourage others to be more pluralistic and open in their relations with us, we should not be caught in the act of telling fellow Jews that their versions of Judaism are oppressive or inferior.



We are now in a period marked by increasing mutual alienation, and a growth of acrimony within the Jewish community, primarily but not exclusively along the Orthodox/non-Orthodox divide. There is a sense that we do not know one another, do not understand each other and—much worse—we do not think it worth the effort to attempt to do so.

Seeking Contacts

It is time to try that which we have not yet tried: to love each other more. To do this, we first have to get to know one another better. We need contact, we need experience of one another in a noncombative environment. This is a time when we need to preserve and build upon those contacts—familial, social, intellectual, and others—that do cross party lines. It is a time to seek out new contacts and ways of working together as a single Jewish people.

Room to Move?

When I go back to my tale of the hasidim trying to get into their rebbe's coach, however, the fact is that they do move over. Do we have any room to actually move, to make room for the other? Is there anything that we could change, give up, negotiate, for the sake of Jewish unity?

"A question out of place!" many will say. "It is they, not we, who have been exclusive, rejecting, rigid! They, not we, should be asked this question."

But anyone who has been involved in negotiations will know, of course, that life is never so simple. Orthodoxy claims that it

is we who have destroyed the one-time Jewish unity, the supposedly idyllic time when all Jews shared a commitment to the world of halakhah. We reply, of course, that it was modernity and the new reality of life in the open society that brought about this change, not the malicious deeds of wayward rabbis and their followers. And so the argument goes. The truth is that if there ever were to be talks on mutual recognition, especially in the thorny areas of personal status, all sides would have to give

**Let us be like
the lines that
lead to the center
of a circle, uniting
there ~**

**Not like parallel
lines,
which never join.
Yiddish
Proverb**

things up.

I am afraid it is not likely that serious progress will be made with the Orthodox on this front. Those within the Orthodox community who are relatively pluralistic in their views of others are literally being terrorized by those more rigid. They live in constant fear of delegitimation, of being read out of the Orthodox world. The right wing of Orthodoxy has been buoyed in recent times by a dangerous sense of triumphalism, due in large part to its surprising successes in gaining *ba'alei te-*

shuvah, penitents from among the children of liberal or assimilated Jews. Feeling themselves the "wave of the future," they feel little need to talk with us and certainly no willingness to compromise.

Denominationalism

For this reason, I feel that most of our work on the Jewish unity front will have to be within the liberal communities. Here too there are stereotypes to be broken down, differences in belief and practice to be examined, and a degree of alienation to be overcome. Denominationalism, for all its blessings, has also been a scourge on Jewish life.

Our own messianic dream should certainly include a vision of a people who can all identify themselves simply as Jews, without any preceding adjective. It is time for us to begin working together within the broadly conceived liberal community toward mutually recognized standards in matters of personal status, both as a step toward unity among ourselves and as a necessary prior step in our ongoing attempts to work on the problems of Jewish unity as a whole. On the crucial matters of personal status, we Reconstructionists have a position on the use of halakhah that stands at the center of the non-Orthodox spectrum. We should offer our services as conveners, hosts, and active participants in all discussions of liberal Jewish unity.

As we prepare ourselves for such discussions, we would do well to ask ourselves just where it is that we stand. What are our bedrock issues, those on which



there can be no compromise? What are those elements really essential to our self-definition? On what points might we have room to move over, in order to live in harmony with other Jews?

No Theological Tests

The first point on which we must take a firm stand is that there be no test of theological belief or religious practice in defining "Who Is a Jew?"—excepting the clear case of one who professes loyalty to a system of religious symbols other than that of Judaism. We are a movement of Jews for whom conventional answers to the basic questions of Jewish theology have not proven adequate. We are also Jews who stand in a relationship of combined affection and challenge to the norms of our tradition. In short, because the answers have not worked for us, we remain *Jews with questions*.

I think this is a good starting point for a self-definition of Reconstructionists that we all share. In Hebrew, incidentally, that makes us *ba'alei she'elah* ("people with questions") as opposed to *ba'alei teshuvah* ("penitents" or "people with answers"). Being collectively dissatisfied with the simplistic notions of God, Torah, and Israel that often pass for Jewish theology, we are Jews in search of more sophisticated, contemporary, and still evolving ways of thinking about our Judaism.

I like to think that this openness to questions and lack of dogmatic theological resolve is in consonance with the best in our tradition. The truth is, of course, that we go further than most

dared in earlier generations, questioning the authority of Judaism in practice as well as the various explanations offered in theory. We insist on our right to the open-ended approach in halakhah as well as in aggadah.

Willingness to Experiment

As Jews who define ourselves

Becoming a Jew means a willingness to join with us in our struggle with the tradition, nothing more and nothing less.

Of course, a prospective Jew should experience aspects of traditional living, having the same open mind and willingness to experiment that we hope to find in those who are born as Jews. But the Jew by choice, like all the rest



as questioners, we cannot insist that a particular set of answers be imposed upon anyone as a token of Jewish legitimacy. This refers in the first instance to the would-be convert to Judaism. We reject the notion that anyone's decision to join the Jewish people is inadequate because s/he has not fully taken on "the yoke of the commandments," or because his/her theological beliefs are not in sufficient conformity to tradition.

of us, retains the freedom to choose those aspects of Judaism that seem most likely to be life-enhancing and helpful in his/her fulfillment as a Jew and as a person.

The same principle we have applied to converts may be applied as well to rabbis and others who serve as witnesses. We vigorously reject the notion that a conversion or a marriage may be declared invalid because the offi-



ciating rabbi was a "heretic" of one sort or another, or because those who witnessed the event were not observers of the Sabbath. The time has long passed in Jewish history when only those who are fully observant may be regarded as trustworthy to testify in court.

We recognize that some Orthodox rabbis have used these ideas for the sake of what they consider a legal leniency, delegitimizing first marriages so that children of a subsequent union that is not preceded by Jewish divorce may be saved from the status of *mamzer* ("bastard," whom other Jews are not permitted to marry). However well-intentioned such moves may be, we must reject them along with the degrading premises on which they stand. We simply cannot be induced to adopt the halakhic mindset to the point of denying our own integrity. We are not babes in the woods (or "children captured among the heathen," as it is said in Hebrew) when it comes to our own practice of Judaism. We want to be respected for the conscious choice we have made about how we live our Jewish lives.

Gender Equality

A second bedrock principle for which we Reconstructionists must stand in such discussions is that of gender equality. This hardly needs to be said in our own circles, but the firmness of our commitment to it must be made clear to others.

In no move toward Jewish unity or interdenominational rapprochement will we compromise the following: the full participa-

tion of women in all levels of Jewish leadership, including the rabbinic; the welcome offered to women to participate and be counted as full equals in all areas of Jewish ritual life; the acceptance of women as partners with men in legal decision making, witnessing, and participation in a *bet din*; or the right of a woman,

American Jews have a debilitating penchant for vicariousness. We want somebody else, anybody else, to do it for us. This stems from a basic insecurity about our own Jewish seriousness, about the depth or authenticity of our own Jewish commitment.

Before the Holocaust, it was

We are *ba'alei she'elah*—Jews in search of more sophisticated, contemporary, and still evolving ways of thinking about our Judaism.

in the absence of other good alternatives, to end a marriage with a Jewish divorce obtained in a nondegrading manner.

Although the commitment to these principles was not always seen as a central priority of our movement, we recognize that our pioneering work in this field, beginning with the first bat mitzvah in Jewish history, has caused us to be identified with the struggle for equality of men and women in Jewish life. We are proud of this association and will in no way abandon it.

Participatory Communities

There is a third principle for which I would like us to stand in this generation, one that is entirely consonant with the history of this movement, but one to which we have perhaps not always lived up as fully as we should. I speak of the principle of full participation in the life of a Jewish community by all its members, and the denial of legitimacy to any sort of Judaism by vicarious atonement. This principle will require elaboration in somewhat greater detail.

East European Jewry that served as our *kapparah*. We in America might be forgetting our Yiddish, might have lost most traces of piety, might be raising our children to be like Gentiles, but back there, *in der alter heim*, where real Judaism had come from, real Judaism would survive.

Those who understood that the day of that old Judaism was passing, even in Eastern Europe, and especially those of us who were not entirely regretful about that great historical transformation, had begun, already before the war, to shift our allegiances from Poland to Palestine, later Israel. Indeed we American Jews might hope to strike roots and "make it" in this new land of opportunity—where the cost of success in assimilation was always quite entirely clear—but a Jewish future could be built *there*, in Israel, and we could participate by paying for it. After the war Israel, was depicted as our *only* hope for the Jewish future, in the very decades when we were making our own future plans quite clear by the move to suburbia, rather than to Zion.

In more recent times, the only



causes that have been able seriously to mobilize American Jewry are those that involve threats to Jews elsewhere—Israel, the Soviet Union, and to a lesser degree, the Arab world and Ethiopia. The cultural starvation of our own community, the decline of Hebrew—as well as Yiddish—among North American Jews, the virtual illiteracy of American Jews in the classics of their own tradition, the style of vulgarity and spiritual vacuousness that have turned entire generations of our brightest and most sensitive youth away from this community—all these have been rallying cries for the relatively few. They must become rallying cries for us in the Reconstructionist community, where our commitment to independent decision making goes hand in hand with a commitment to Jewish knowledge.

Vicarious Judaism

There are two other sorts of vicariousness plaguing American Jewish life that need to be mentioned here. One uses the ultra-Orthodox institution, both here and in Israel, as the object of vicarious Jewish living; the other uses the rabbi. Vastly more American Jewish resources, mostly coming from the non-observant segment of the community, go into supporting Israeli and American yeshivot now than ever went into the sustenance of Polish or other-European Jewry. Apparently large numbers of rather successful and assimilated American Jews are convinced that while their own Judaism is weak, watered down, or ambivalent, they can with their checkbooks give to the Jewish future by supporting varieties of Judaism that

have barely made their peace with the nineteenth, let alone the twentieth or the twenty-first century.

I want to make it clear that I do not speak here of modern Orthodoxy, which I consider to be a pocket of creative energy and tension in the community much like our own. It is not that community, struggling with the unbendable, from its point of view, demands of the law and the real claims of life in the present, that raises vast sums of money in return for facile promises of salvation or survival, but one far to the right of it on the now-rather

daism for you. No one else's Jewish living or Torah study can take the place of your own. Our commitment to Israel, to Soviet Jewry, and other matters of Jewish vital interest *must stem from and be nourished* by the intensity of our own Jewish lives, rather than standing in place of them.

This rejection of vicariousness is not meant to reduce the demands made on the rabbinat—though the lessening of hypocrisy in this area can only be for the good—but to increase the demand made upon the community as a whole. I look forward to the

In no move toward Jewish unity will we compromise the full participation of women in all levels of Jewish leadership and in all areas of Jewish ritual life.

complex Jewish communal and religious spectrum.

The other, vicarious Judaism current in America uses the rabbi rather than the distant or the Orthodox community to plug into someone else's authenticity. Its usual form is the well known: "I may not be an observant Jew, but my rabbi sure has to be." The underside of this insistence, of course, offers protection from any rabbinic demand for real change in the lifestyle of the community. "But rabbi, you're being paid to do that stuff. . . ."

No Vicariousness

In taking a firm stand against Jewish vicariousness, we are asserting *the right, the obligation, and the ability* of every individual and each family to lead a full and rich Jewish life. No figurehead on the pulpit can live out your Ju-

day when all Reconstructionist communities will accept the *havurah* principle that *you cannot, become a member by merely paying dues*. Membership in a community means active participation in the life of that community, not just a financial willingness to support its goals. If there is nothing the community does—educationally, religiously, culturally, politically—in which you wish to take a leading role, this may not be the community for you.

Out of this same principle of demand for active personal involvement, I find myself appalled at the tolerance for Jewish ignorance, including actual Hebrew illiteracy, that exists within our ranks. I do not speak here of newcomers to the community or to the Jewish people altogether, who of course should be welcomed without prior knowledge.



But Reconstructionist communities must stand up for higher, not lower, standards of Jewish knowledge for adults, of Hebrew study for children, *for the erasure of the blot of illiteracy from our otherwise so intelligent and highly educated Jewish population.*

In an age when university education, often including advanced degrees, is becoming nearly universal among Jews in North America, our community is disgraced by the low level of Jewish learning that has become the norm. We as a community all have a part in the terrible embarrassment felt by intelligent and highly educated Jews, successful in the world of professions or business, who get up in the synagogue and blunder in frustration when they try to read a simple blessing in Hebrew. It is time for us to fully commit ourselves to a campaign to wipe out Jewish illiteracy in our lifetime.

I spoke a moment ago of the right, the obligation, and the ability of each of us to lead a full and rich Jewish life. The *right* refers to the acknowledgment that we live in a post-halakhic age, that each of us, as individuals, families, and small communities, has the right to make choices, to accept and reject elements of Jewish tradition, values, and culture for our own lives. None of us retains the right to stand in judgment of others and the choices they have made, or continue to make in their evolving lives, as long as those choices are not frivolous, but serious and well-informed.

This is the essential situation of Jewish modernity: there no longer is an established norm over against which we are all to

be measured. There is no rabbinic authority that can tell us how to live our lives. We Reconstructionists are thankful rather than regretful that we live in such times.

Yet our decisions must be serious ones if we ourselves are to respect them. This takes us from the realm of *right* to that of *obligation*. Each of us stands confronted by our heritage in its entirety, with no pre-selection made of what it is we are to reject. Standing before that tradition, but bearing with us the commitments we also have as late twentieth-century Western humanists—commitments we in no way set aside as we come to our tradition—we seek, on the principle of “a vote”—a serious vote—“but not a veto,” to *reconstruct*, brick by brick, a Jewish life for ourselves.

This is the obligation: to study, to know, to take seriously. In building our Jewish lives we have to live up to the very best potential within ourselves; and that includes intelligence, sensitivity, and making important choices.

The *ability* to live the life of such Jewish seriousness depends on education. Our communities should be, first and foremost, communities of Jewish learning. Study of text, of language, and of the Jewish historical experience should be what we are all about. Jewish learning must exist in infinite varieties, tailored to the many needs and interests of our people. Hebrew poetry, Jewish music, hasidic tales, the modern Jewish experience, should all have their places alongside the more conventional sorts of learning we have known. Learning should lead to experience, to “trying on for size.”

There should be no Reconstructionist community that does not have *shabbatonim* or other sorts of “retreat” periods where experimentation with Jewish living can take place. This is also why a summer and weekend family camp should be a priority for our movement. Such a Jewish life requires a willingness to spend time, not only money, as a token of Jewish commitment.

But we can do it; this is perhaps as much a statement of faith as is anything I have said. The North American Jewish community has the ability, in terms of personal resources, creative participants, intellectual energies, and the like, to bring forth a great age of spiritual growth for the Jewish people as a whole. We Reconstructionists should be a beacon of this vision—a liberal Judaism that demands the full participation of its membership and, in doing so, offers the best of their energies and potentials to the entire Jewish community.

The enunciation of these principles is meant to set forth a positive vision of the Jewish future for which we as a movement stand. We offer them to our fellow Jews as a firm statement of our own self-definition. We have no desire to force them upon others, but neither can we compromise them without compromising our own integrity. At the same time, we remain fully committed to the entire house of Israel. We are all riding in the same-coach. Anything we can do, without compromising these principles, to make room for one another and “love each other more,” we should stand ready to consider. ■



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The RECONSTRUCTIONIST addresses religious, political, social, and moral issues of contemporary Jewish life; explores modes of spiritual growth for the individual Jew and for Jewish communities; and reviews the significance of Jewish civilization in all of its facets, past and present. It strives to be innovative and, when necessary, controversial. Thus, the RECONSTRUCTIONIST serves as a medium for the continuing development of Reconstructionist ideas, practices, and institutions.

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