

The president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College offers a vision of the Reconstructionist present and future

WHERE WE STAND Theory and Practice of Contemporary Reconstructionism

BY ARTHUR GREEN

Reconstructionists are Jews who have strong commitments both to tradition and to the search for contemporary meaning. We are engaged in the ongoing task of building a relationship to our Judaism that is faithful to the past and relevant to the present. We want to create a Judaism for our day that is richly traditional, spiritually alive, and intellectually honest. We encourage contemporary Jews to enhance their own Jewish lives by reclaiming our shared heritage and becoming active participants in the building of the Jewish future.

Reconstructionists define Judaism as *the evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people*. By *evolving* we mean that Judaism has changed and grown over the many centuries of its existence. The faith of the ancient Israelites in the days of Solomon's Temple was not the same as that of the early rabbis, nor of Maimonides, nor of our more recent European ancestors. Each generation of Jews has received the traditions of its ancestors and has subtly reshaped them, adding to them of its own creativity. We believe that this process is the very lifeblood of Judaism, making it a vital tradition, and should continue in our day.

By *religious* we mean that Judaism is our people's response to its ongoing encounter with the Divine. Since ancient times Jews have struggled to articulate their own innermost religious feelings and experiences in the lan-

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guage of our tradition. We affirm that Judaism can deeply enrich our spiritual lives by leading us to moments of transcendence in which we glimpse the ultimate reality that we call God. This reality embodies all of our highest aspirations, ideals, and dreams. It is this ongoing process of discovery that leads humanity toward fulfillment of our greatest creative potential.

In calling ourselves "religious" Jews, we do not mean to say that we affirm any simplistic notion of a God who controls the universe and intervenes in human affairs. In this sense, our faith is not a "supernaturalist" one. We believe rather in a God who inhabits this world and especially the human heart, who makes us

more generous, sensitive, and caring people. It is this inner sense of godliness that ever inspires us both toward personal religious search and communal sharing. Reconstructionism may thus be called a *Jewish religious humanism*.

By *civilization* we mean that Judaism is more than a religion. The Jewish people shares historical memory and historical destiny. We have a renewed commitment to our ancient homeland and our reborn language, as well as to the creation of Jewish culture in the many languages of our Diaspora. Judaism includes Jewish philosophy and Jewish morality, as well as our people's entire literary and artistic heritage, a legacy of creativity in many realms, which continues to grow and develop out of its ancient roots. It in-

cludes the Jewish calendar and our way of marking time by Sabbaths and communal festivals. It includes the life-cycle of the Jew and the daily application of our people's ethics and values to the way we live.

The bearer of this heritage is *the Jewish people*. This people, throughout the generations, has chosen to live in a covenanted relationship with its spiritual and moral heritage. It is we who proclaim that covenant, through which our tradition becomes holy to us. The Reconstructionist approach here diverges from those definitions of Judaism that see God as choosing Israel from among other nations, initiating the covenant, and revealing the law. While Reconstructionists' prayers may continue to refer both to covenant and revelation, we reinterpret these traditional terms in accord with our contemporary understanding.

All Jews, whether by birth or by choice, are members of the extended Jewish family. Reconstructionists insist on the unity of the entire Jewish people. We recognize a diversity of religious ideology and practice within the Jewish community, and seek to join with all other Jews in *accepting* that diversity while working toward a shared vision of Jewish peoplehood. Reconstructionists accept all Jews as full partners in Jewish life. We call upon all Jews to share in the responsibilities of learning, action, and commitment.

Our philosophy affirms the uniqueness of the Jewish people and its heritage among the peoples of the world. We believe in our people's historic mission, to witness the divine presence throughout the world, and especially to testify that every human life is sacred, created in the divine image. We remain committed to the highest values of our tradition. At the same time, we believe in the human authorship of all religious traditions, including our own, and realize that no tradition has a monopoly on religious truth. Our affirmation of Judaism's uniqueness implies no sense of superiority or exclusiveness with regard to others. Reconstructionists believe that all peoples are called to the service of righteousness, and we welcome dialogue with persons of good will in all traditions.

A Unique Approach

The starting point of our self-understanding is the Jewish people, including its historical experience and our commitment to its creative future.

Our Judaism must address openly and honestly such questions as the nature of God and our beliefs, the relationship between religious and scientific world-views, the relationships of men and women, the value of Jewish uniqueness in a world where all societies are growing closer to one another, and the role of religion in a universe threatened by both ecological and nuclear disaster.

Judaism is in crisis in our day. If it is to deal with the many challenges posed to it by contemporary life, it will have to restate its most fundamental tenets. Each new age in Jewish history has called forth new expressions of our faith and new forms of Jewish living. These are much needed in our age, a period of great changes in the history of the Jewish people. We believe that a vital Judaism for our day must respond fully to the tremendous changes wrought by Jewish history in our era: the Holocaust, renewed Jewish statehood, and life in the open society. Our Judaism must address openly and honestly such questions as the nature of God and our beliefs, the relationship between religious and scientific world-views, the relationships of men and women, the value of Jewish uniqueness in a world where all societies are growing closer to one another, and the role of religion in a universe threatened by both ecological and nuclear disaster. We must seek nourishment within our tradition for personal spirituality and the renewal of Judaism as a language of expression for contemporary seekers.

We call for a reuniting of the spiritual and activist values of our tradition: Jewish prayer and Jewish study joined to Jewish deed. Only a combination of deep searching within our tradition and honest questioning of it makes for a Judaism that speaks convincingly to today's Jews.

It is this self-understanding that differentiates Reconstructionists from Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Jews. *Orthodox Judaism* has about it a seriousness of purpose and a level of devotion that are truly admirable. We seek to retain that seriousness. Unlike Orthodoxy, however, Reconstructionism does not view Judaism as supernaturally revealed by God to Moses and passed down essentially unchanged through all generations. We see Judaism as the ever-evolving product of the historical experience of the Jewish people and their ongoing attempt to forge a society that lives in awareness of God's presence and acts upon those values we consider to be holy. We believe that free choice, rather than a sense of legal obligation, should bring us to live full Jewish lives.

Conservative Judaism has made an immense contribution to Jewish life in the realms of education and scholarship. While we support this effort, Reconstructionism diverges from Conservative Judaism, out of which it emerged, on the question of *priorities*. We believe that Judaism's deepest truths need to be re-examined and

restated for our age. This need is far more pressing than the particular questions of Jewish law and how it changes. Jews need to know *why* they should be Jewish at all before they worry about changing details of observance. When it comes to observance, we differ specifically on the issue of how far one may go in emending Jewish law and who has the right to be involved in that process.

We Reconstructionists see ourselves as living in a post-halakhic age, in a historical period when the Jewish people, with the exception of an Orthodox minority, no longer looks to our classic legal sources or to the rabbi as binding guides to practice. We feel that the clock cannot be turned back on this process in Jewish history. We are lovers of tradition and are full supporters of observance—for those who choose it—in both the synagogue and the home. We believe in rich celebration of the Jewish sacred year and the life-cycles of individuals and families. We also believe, however, that Jewish life is changing and that our traditions need to be adapted to new circumstances. We are thus supportive and affirming of Jews who choose a less traditional observance pattern for themselves, especially when such choices are informed by study and experience. It is the behavior of the Jewish people that will determine what Judaism is and how it is practiced in future generations. We believe that rabbis and scholars should work together with committed lay members of the Jewish community in formulating guides to Jewish practice for our time. These guides should be formulated as suggestions for enhancing Jewish life rather than as binding laws or “standards.” They should reflect a desire to protect and preserve tradition as well as an openness to creativity and evolution as we face a new age in Jewish history.

Reform Judaism's greatest gift has been the recovery of the prophetic tradition and the insistence that it be applied universally. We Reconstructionists affirm this recovery and share in a full commitment to it. Reconstructionism and classical Reform Judaism part company, however, over the question of how much of tradition needs to be preserved. Reconstructionists believe that no aspect of our heritage should be declared a “dead letter.” There are areas of observance that were ridiculed by many Jews a generation ago that are now being given serious consideration and reinterpretation by Jews returning to tradition. We encourage Jews to give honest consideration to the whole range of traditional practice, except in those few areas where such practice contradicts other values that we hold dear. As firm believers in *klal Yisrael*, the unity of the Jewish people, Reconstructionists affirm the place of traditional forms and observances in the public life of the Jewish people, including both the synagogue and other forums. Thus, such observances as *kashrut*, covering of the head, the wearing of a

tallit, and so forth, while not observed by all Reconstructionists in their individual lives, are respected as public norms for the Jewish community.

We note with joy the changes within some sectors of Reform Judaism in recent decades. As that movement moves toward a warmer embrace of both tradition and the values of Jewish peoplehood, we see Reform as embracing many principles of Reconstructionism.

In saying that we view ourselves as *religious humanists*, we affirm openly that our traditions are of human origin. Yet we continue to believe that study of our sources and observance of tradition, including prayer, lead us to a deeper awareness of the mysteries of self and universe. In this we differ from secular humanists, with whom we share an activist commitment to the bettering of the human condition. We believe that religion is the historic, unique, and most satisfying way by which the Jewish people can find ongoing meaning in the great moments in our history. Through Judaism, we dedicate ourselves also to universal spiritual values that transcend any one individual, society, or tradition. These values have provided people with hope since the beginning of history, even as they inspire us still to move that history toward its fulfillment.

An Example: The Status of Women

The Reconstructionist movement has a full and firm commitment to the equalized roles of men and women in all areas of Jewish life. This includes full equality in synagogue practice, the promulgation of new rituals for the lives of women where these have been lacking, and the acceptance of women in rabbinic and lay leadership roles. The Reconstructionist commitment to egalitarianism began as far back as the first Bat Mitzvah ceremony, created by Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan, the founder of our movement, in the year 1922.

The example of *get*, or Jewish divorce, might serve to illustrate where Reconstructionists stand on the question of religious observance. The traditional *get* may be issued only by a husband to his wife. Should the husband disappear or refuse to grant his wife a divorce, she is called an *agunah*, an “anchored one,” who may never remarry. Orthodox rabbis have long bemoaned the fate of such women and have sought various leniencies within the law to help them. Conservative Judaism, while affirming traditional laws of Jewish divorce, has sought recourse to the civil courts to force the recalcitrant husband to grant his wife a Jewish divorce if their marriage has been civilly ended. Reform Judaism has essentially done away with Jewish divorce, accepting that this area has passed into the realm of civil legislation.

While Reconstructionists are not satisfied with the treatment of women in traditional Jewish divorce law, neither are we willing to abandon this important area to the civil realm alone. We believe that the ending of a marriage is an act of great personal and even spiritual significance, and that it should be commemorated by a proper and meaningful Jewish ceremony. Accordingly, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association has pioneered in the issuance of an egalitarian *get*, in which the wife responds to her husband's bill of divorce by issuing him a similar document in return. When the husband is not willing to act, Reconstructionist rabbis have also allowed for a female-initiated Jewish divorce. In doing so, we have tried to give new vitality to an ancient form, and to bring Jewish observance into line with contemporary views of marriage.

Our Commitment to Pluralism: Being a "Good Jew" In Our Day

Since the advent of modernity, Jews have found varying ways in which to express their commitment to our people. Some Jews have remained fully committed to traditional practice. Others, especially in Israel, have felt no attraction to religious tradition, but have given their lives to the building of a just and humane Jewish society, to the rebirth of our language, or to the development of Jewish culture. In the Diaspora, too, there are Jews who have committed themselves to the highest teachings of our ancient prophets, living a life of goodness and Jewish fulfillment outside the usual canons of tradition. Jews have made remarkable contributions to the scientific and cultural advancement of humanity and have worked toward ameliorating the sufferings of the sick, the poor, and the underprivileged.

As Reconstructionists, we fully endorse these efforts as legitimate expressions of Jewish values, all of which represent viable options for the realization of Jewish ideals in our time. While we see ourselves as religious Jews, we fully recognize that *the goals of religious life are sometimes lived best by those who proclaim them least loudly*. We are committed to tradition as well as to study of Jewish sources, but we acknowledge that there are many ways for Jews to contribute to the building of our people's future, and affirm them all as legitimate and important ways of being Jewish.

Our support for Israel is unconditional, despite much debate and variety of opinion within our movement with regard to particular policies of the Israeli government, especially those relating to the achievement of peace and the treatment of Israel's Arab minority.

"To Learn and to Teach": The Need for Education

Reconstructionists are deeply committed to ongoing study of Jewish sources *both by children and adults*. Jewish study is not meaningful for children unless their parents are models of serious Jewish learning. Reconstructionist congregations reach out to members of all ages and backgrounds, with programs of study that will be attractive to them.

We see Jewish learning in its broadest dimensions, including texts, the Hebrew language, our people's history, and Jewish cultural expression in its many forms. Liturgy, music, and artistic creativity are all part of this tradition. We are committed to wiping out the blot of Hebrew and Jewish illiteracy in our otherwise highly educated Jewish community. We are also committed to providing a Jewish education for our children that is solid in content and creative in approach, so as to produce a more literate next generation of North American Jews.

Twin Centers: Israel and Diaspora

Since its inception, Reconstructionism has been a Zionist movement. We are firmly committed to the building of the State of Israel and the establishment of a just and humane Jewish society there. We consider the Jewish national rebirth centered in Israel to be the greatest accomplishment of the Jewish people in our century. We emphasize the importance of visiting Israel and establishing ever closer ties between Israel and the diaspora communities. We commend those Jews

who commit their lives, through *aliyah*, to the rebuilding of our people's homeland. Our support for Israel is unconditional, despite much debate and variety of opinion within our movement with regard to particular policies of the Israeli government, especially those relating to the achievement of peace and the treatment of Israel's Arab minority. We are united in deploring the ultra-Orthodox attempt to dominate religious life in Israel, and we support efforts by the World Union for Progressive Judaism and others to change this situation.

At the same time, we believe that diaspora communities, particularly those as strong as the ones in North America, can be important centers of Jewish learning and communal growth. While Israel alone serves as a laboratory for the creation of a fully Jewish society, the

integration of Judaism with the highest values of contemporary civilization can be developed in different and significant ways where Jews live as active and equal citizens in a multi-ethnic society. Reconstructionists believe that certain values of contemporary Western thought need to be added to Jewish life. Such values include the notion of participatory democracy, opposition to racism and religious bigotry in all their manifestations, and a full commitment to the equal treatment of men and women. We recognize that these values may come to us from outside our tradition, but we believe that they serve to enhance the divine image of humanity and we thus see them as fully integral to our Jewish faith.

The evolution of Judaism in our time will be enriched by their integration and acceptance. The inclusion of such ideas and values is the special contribution of diaspora Jewish life.

We look forward, as Israel matures as a society and achieves peace and stability, to a more properly balanced and mutual relationship between Israeli and diaspora Jewries. We believe that each has much to give to the other, and that, through mutual respect and cultural exchange, they will serve to enrich one another.

Liturgy and Worship

As religious humanists, Reconstructionists believe that prayer can have a central place in the spiritual lives of all people. While we are not literalists regarding prayer or a God who answers it, we believe that worship calls forth the most profound of human emotions and can have a transforming effect upon the way we live. This is the "answer" we seek in prayer. Religious services are a central feature of all Reconstructionist communities.

The Reconstructionist Press has published prayer books for daily, Sabbath, and festival use. These prayer books, which were issued as early as 1945, are currently under revision. *Kol Ha-Neshamah*, a new Friday evening prayer book, was published in 1989 to wide acclaim. A home book for Shabbat and holiday use, *Shirim u-Verakhot*, will follow. Publication of a new Sabbath and festival prayer book and of a new High Holiday *maḥzor* are also anticipated.

These Reconstructionist prayer books represent the commitment of our movement to weaving a richly-textured Jewish traditionalism together with the new currents of spiritual life in our age. The contemporary interest in spirituality and meditation is reflected in

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these volumes, as is the need for proper balance between prayer as private inward act and prayer as communal affirmation. The largely traditional Hebrew text has been emended where concepts outside the purview of contemporary belief were encountered. Specifically, references to the Jews as chosen by God and to the existence of an individual afterlife have been emended. Other traditional beliefs, including the creation of the world, the giving of the Torah, and the coming of the messiah, have been reinterpreted by a combination of liturgical change and commentary. The prayer books contain commentary by several contemporary authors who grapple with these and other theological issues.

A new poetic translation represents the first full commitment of a religious movement to gender-neutral language in Jewish liturgy.

Religion and Social Action

The role of religion in society has been transformed in recent decades by the leading role that clergy and religious persons have taken in movements for racial justice, the elimination of poverty, and the pursuit of peace. Reconstructionists support these efforts and participate actively in using religious tradition as a positive force for social change. We believe that Jews today are heirs to the prophets as well as the rabbis and applaud the application of prophetic values of justice and compassion to all segments of our society. At the same time, we unequivocally affirm a belief in the separation of church and state.

Personal as well as social ethics are an integral feature of our Judaism. Reconstructionists affirm the centrality of ethical behavior in our lives and insist that traditional religious behavior, when not accompanied by the highest ethical standards, becomes a desecration of Judaism. We challenge our own communities to reach for the highest application of ethical standards.

Within the realm of social action, the Reconstructionist movement has committed itself in particular to issues concerned with the environment. The legacy we leave to those who come after us must begin with an earth that is habitable and sufficiently rich in resources to allow for an acceptable quality of life. As we Jews concern ourselves with the spiritual and cultural legacy that we leave to future generations, we must also commit ourselves fully to such legacies as clean air, pure water, and unpolluted soil. The Reconstructionist movement, through Shomrei Adamah, is committed to working closely with other

groups concerned with the environmental future, with special focus on North America and Israel.

The Reconstructionist Style: Synagogue and Havurah

The Reconstructionist congregation is a highly participatory and informal one. We are dismayed by the conversion of the modern synagogue into lecture or concert hall, where the congregation becomes a passive "audience" to both the service and the rabbinic sermon. We view worship as highly participatory and involving. We encourage lay participation in the leading of religious services. Preaching is often alternated in Reconstructionist congregations with dialogues, study sessions, discussions, and question-and-answer sessions.

Believing as we do in intimacy and informality in Jewish life, Reconstructionists find value in small synagogues and havurot. We have a special interest in helping such congregations develop their full potential as meaningful and fulfilling communities.

As congregations grow larger, we actively encourage the development of havurot and sub-communities within the congregation, so that closeness and community can be maintained.

Reconstructionist congregations undertake activities that build community and share a spirit of warmth and caring. These may include such programs as *Shabbatonim*, or study retreats, Shabbat seders in the homes of members, holiday celebrations, and the shared communal celebration of life-cycle events. The development within congregations of mutual support groups for visiting the sick, for helping single parents, for observance of *shiv'a*, and so forth is also actively encouraged. We recognize that many Jews today no longer have the protection of close extended families that so long characterized our community. Wherever possible, Reconstructionist congregations or havurot try to adopt some part of that positive role of extended family in the lives of its members.

Our Vision of the Jewish Future

American Jewry has come a long way since the days of Mordecai Kaplan (1881-1983), the founder of Reconstructionism. The North American Jewish community has a security and self-confidence that was unknown to the prewar generations. It has developed tremendously in institutional growth, in financial stability, in educational programming, and in the creation of

an American tradition of Judaic scholarship. All of these are to be greatly applauded. But many questions remain. How assimilated a community do we want to be? How fully integrated do we want our grandchildren to be in American society? What do we as Jews have to offer to America? Might we have some values in our tradition that could serve as correctives to the rapid growth of a society dominated by mass media and electronic information? How distinctive a group will we have to remain in order to offer such a vision? What is the place of Israel in our commitment to what is clearly an ongoing Jewish life here in North America? Can we have—and do we want—a distinctive Jewish culture in America? What sort of religion, and how much observance, do we seek for our grandchildren? Can we create a religious language and style that is both authentically Jewish and capable of speaking to people of our age?

We cannot build our future unless we know what we want that future to be. The true crisis in Jewish life is a crisis of vision; we need a vision of the future that would serve to animate the present and give meaning to our commitment to the Jewish past.

We Reconstructionists envision a *maximalist liberal Judaism* for the future of our communities. This means a Jewish life that is deeply engaged in study, worship, and action, yet is aware and supportive of Jews' full participation in the civil and cultural life of our open society. We hope for a Judaism that once again will serve as a rich source for the spiritual self-expression of its adherents and as a moral challenge to them in the way they conduct their lives. We dream

of a Jewish people that will overcome its deep divisions and realize once again its commitment to the single goal of transforming this world into one in which God is realized in human life and all people are respected as bearers of the divine image. We look forward to an Israel at peace and to a Jewish people, both in Israel and in the Diaspora, that will have the dedication, knowledge, and prosperity to develop an ever richer tradition to be handed on to future generations. We affirm that undertaking these tasks will also enrich our ability to contribute to the welfare of the general society to which we belong.

Like all Jews, Reconstructionists are firm believers in the future. We are optimists, convinced that Judaism will once again play a major role in the spiritual and moral growth of humanity. It is dedication to that future, *characterized by commitment and creativity, by the faithful heart joined to the open mind*, that makes us proud of our movement's ongoing contribution to the ever-evolving heritage of the Jewish people. ■

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