

Who Are Those Reconstructionists?

RABBI ARTHUR GREEN

The furor over "Who is a Jew" and the change in Israel's Law of Return has come and gone. Left in the wake of this sudden storm is a world Jewish community that has come to realize how little we really know one another.

Israelis score poor grades in understanding American Jews and vice versa. Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews are filled with stereotypes and misconceptions about one another. It's time for a little solid education. Without accusation or recrimination, let's find out who one another are.

We Reconstructionists are the smallest and newest of the four religious movements in North American Jewry, but we feel we represent the "silent majority" of American Jews. We seek to build a proud and highly committed liberal Judaism, rooted in an unswerving loyalty to the Jewish people and a loving but critical examination of Jewish tradition as we have received it.

Each generation of Jews, we believe, has a responsibility not only to pass Judaism on to its children, but also to see that the tradition it passes on is enriched and improved by its having lived. In a time such as ours, when the Jewish people is undergoing rapid and earth-shattering changes, we need to combine stability and loyalty with an openness to new ideas and fresh approaches to all the questions that confront us. It is this combination of loyalty and creativity that Reconstructionism has to offer.

Most of us became Reconstructionists because we were unable to feel at home with other interpretations of Judaism. For some, this had to do with our understanding of God, for others with the acceptance of Jewish law as ruling our way of living.

Some of us felt we wanted a more complete Jewish life, one that extends far beyond the walls of the synagogue. Others came for more particular reasons, seeking a Judaism that truly accepted equal roles for men and women, one that did not disparage non-Jews or one that was strongly committed to Israel and the revival of Hebrew culture within the Jewish people.

Reconstructionists are religious believers, but in a special way. We address prayer to God in mostly the same language as do other religious Jews. But we are no naive believers: We do not think of God as the superperson who rules the world, rewards and punishes and reveals His will to the Jewish people alone. Our God is rather more abstract, an ultimate reality that cannot quite be expressed in human language.

For some of us, God is the unifying force within the cosmos, the universal mind that contains all minds within it. Others see God as the force within the world and within the human soul that leads us toward goodness. Still others see God as the center of a mysterious inner faith, an "other" so close to us that it is finally revealed to be one with our deepest souls.

We believe it important for Jews to think about these issues and to define a faith that appeals to us as mature and thinking adults. Too many Jews end their education — and their thinking about Judaism — with Bar or Bat Mitzvah. Once they grow beyond their childhood conceptions, they are left with nothing. We are committed to the ongoing search for an honest and believable adult Judaism for our day.

When we speak of the *will* of God, we mean it only in the very broadest and deepest sense. In the face of the endless bestialities that have confronted us in this century, we Jews continue to assert that a life of kindness and decency fulfills the intent with which we humans were created.

A life that takes Judaism seriously demands an ethical way of conduct, a treating of all people as created in God's image. The Torah, representing the most ancient and revered traditions of the Jewish people, embodies our earliest attempt to create that way of life.

Judaism has evolved and grown over the ages, and should

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do so in the future as well. At the same time, we continue to love our Torah, and we consider the basic forms of Jewish religious observance to be holy, sanctified for all time by the ongoing devotion of the Jewish people. These forms, including Shabbat and the festivals, prayer and celebration, kashrut and other aspects of Jewish home life, have a claim upon us at the same time that we seek to reinterpret them to have greater meaning for our own lives as contemporary Jews.

Along with preserving and updating the traditions of the past, Reconstructionists take a positive role in creating new Jewish forms of observance and celebration appropriate to our times.

These include such well-known forms as Bat Mitzvah (a Reconstructionist innovation), naming ceremonies for girls, celebrations of Yom Ha'atzmaut (Israel Independence Day) and memorial programs for Yom Hashoah (Holocaust memorial day). They may also encompass the renewal of Tu B'Shevat as a day of Jewish ecological awareness and Rosh Chodesh (the new moon) as a special time for women's religious celebration.

Above all, Reconstructionists are committed to education. Because we believe in a fully participatory Jewish community, one in which all may share in the decision-making process, we need a community open to constant growth in Jewish knowledge and awareness. Only Jews who know our history and tradition are capable of making informed decisions that have bearing on the Jewish future.

We are committed to obliterating the disgrace of Jewish illiteracy in our otherwise so highly educated community. Ongoing Jewish learning — for adults as well as for children — is a hallmark of Reconstructionism.

The problems that confront Jewry today are manifold and do not admit of simple solutions. How do we build Jewish loyalty in an open society with its tremendous assimilatory pressures? How does a Jewish community so deeply divided by differing versions of Judaism maintain its sense of oneness? How can we create a Jewish education that is truly exciting to our children? Or a synagogue that becomes a real and vibrant community for us?

How do we help Israel both to survive its enemies and to be a state in which we can all take pride? How can our Judaism have a role in making for a more livable, sane and peaceful world?

To deal with these and a host of other problems, we need the help and participation of *all* Jews. Each of us can contribute — intellectually, spiritually and materially — to the great task we all have in common: building a strong and proud Jewish future. We Reconstructionists invite you to join us in this task. ■

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