

The Reconstructionist

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FROM THE EDITOR

Although most issues of *The Reconstructionist* focus on a common theme, from time to time a series of articles come together that are worthy of inclusion and attention despite their diversity.

In this issue, we present pairs of perspectives on four subjects: Reconstructionist Judaism, Jewish identity, health and healing and creativity. We also include several book reviews, and hope that the entire issue will be an enjoyable addition to summer reading lists.

With this issue, I am completing ten years as Editor of *The Reconstructionist* and this issue will be the final one for which I have editorial responsibility. After ten years, it is time for a fresh perspective and new vision in the Editor's chair, and I look forward to using the time that will become available to do more of my own writing. When the Fall 2006 issue appears, we will be announcing and welcoming the next Editor of this journal.

The Reconstructionist began life as a magazine in 1935, published bi-weekly first by the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, then after 1940 by the Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation. When the Foundation closed in 1982, publication responsibilities shifted to the Federation of Reconstructionist Synagogues and Havurot (FRCH, now renamed the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation, JRF).

When, in 1993, FRCH decided that its mission to the growing Reconstructionist movement could better be served by creating a smaller magazine-like publication (what became our sister publication, *Reconstructionism Today*), the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC) assumed the responsibility for maintaining *The Reconstructionist*, which shifted at that time to our current format as a journal. The RRC, the JRF and the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association (RRA) agreed at that time to provide the financial support necessary to keep *The Reconstructionist* growing as an intellectual voice. In recent years, the RRC and RRA alone have sustained this journal, while the JRF devoted itself to expanding *Reconstructionism Today*.

My interest in *The Reconstructionist* began with the gift to me of a nearly-complete set of the magazine from 1935-1970 by my college professor Dr. Emanuel Green, who himself was a contributing editor during the 1940s and 1950s. As a Jewish Studies major, having this document of American Jewish history was a tremendous resource, and it was also a remarkable treasury of the history of the movement for someone who was then a nascent but devoted Reconstructionist.

As such collections so often are, this one was mildly incomplete, with issues missing here and there. Over the years, through the generosity of many Reconstructionist rabbis and laypeople who thought to send boxes of old issues to my attention, I managed to secure many of the issues I was missing. Sometimes,

serendipity would intervene. In the summer of 1996 during a vacation visit to Springfield, Illinois, I wandered into a used book store, and was surprised to find over two dozen bound volumes of *The Reconstructionist*. The owner was delighted to have someone take them off his hands for a minimal price, adjusted downward when he discovered I was the current editor. (Not too many other Reconstructionists were likely to wander into that store.) Eventually, the collection was completed; I'm not sure how many other Reconstructionists can claim the distinction of having read the entire run from 1935 onward.

This past year, as announced in a previous issue, through the initiative of Rabbi Sandy Sasso of Indianapolis, the American Theological Library Association began the process of scanning electronically the entire set of *The Reconstructionist* from 1935 to the current issue. When this project is completed (that's a lot of pages to turn) it will be possible to access every issue on-line for those with subscriptions to ATLA or access to a library that subscribes.

Editing *The Reconstructionist* has been an honor, and particularly so for our recent 70th anniversary issue (Fall 2005; back issues are still available at info@therra.org). Editing is only the final stage in a process that begins with the Editorial Board generating themes, topics and suggestions for articles as well as for authors. I want to thank the members of the Editorial Board for their insight, ideas and devotion to the journal, and for their constant scouting for and recruiting of people to write for *The Reconstructionist*.

I also want to thank the many people who have taken the time to write for the journal and to contribute book reviews. Intelligent and articulate writing seems increasingly difficult to sustain in contemporary culture, and Jewish culture is regrettably no exception. Even (perhaps particularly) in the age of the internet, emails and blogs, the need for sustained, systematic and significant analysis and discussion of important issues remains central, and is especially central to the mission of *The Reconstructionist*. (Of late, I will admit, the image of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of this publication, sitting at his computer writing Reconstructionist blogs has occasionally come to mind. One can only imagine what Kaplan would have done with the resources of the internet at his command.)

In the 70th anniversary issue, Rabbi Judy Gary Brown's name was omitted on the tribute page for previous editors, associate editors and managing and/or production editors. Judy served as production editor from 1996-1999, and I thank her for her assistance and excellent work during those years.

There are people whose contributions to *The Reconstructionist* often go unnamed, but who deserve to be recognized:

Since 2000 Lawrence Bush has been handling the production and layout aspects of publication. He has also contributed articles and reviews, as well as offering creative suggestions and helpful feedback as each issue has come together. Larry recently stepped down as the Editor of *Reconstructionism Today* after 13 years, after bringing that publication into existence and nurturing its growth as it became a

vital voice in the movement.

Marilyn Silverstein has not only been an astute, accurate and demanding proofreader, but someone whose combination of Jewish knowledge and literary grace contributed often towards making our articles clearer and consequently more valuable.

The former and current Executive Assistants at the RRA, Linda Kaplan and Sharon Presser, Arlene Spector at RRC and Phyllis Zeeman at JRF have all been involved in managing the data bases for *The Reconstructionist*. Without them, the issues over which we labor would not reach our readers. Lisa Cohen of the RRC has managed all of our modest financial affairs with patience and good humor.

I want to thank the previous editors of this journal, each of whom spent equally long hours soliciting, editing, revising and publishing articles. It's easy to lose perspective while deciding on such matters as whether to un-split infinitives or remove the serial comma. Sometimes one can forget that what gets bound between the covers of this journal becomes a durable document, a record of thinking that once published represents both the historical legacy of *The Reconstructionist* and the contemporary community of Reconstructionist Jews. I hope that the 19 issues over which I have presided in these past ten years have contributed to the honoring of both.

Finally, I want to thank Rabbi David Teutsch who, as president of the RRC in 1996, agreed to accept my application to become the Editor of this journal. As has happened so many times over the 30 years of our friendship and professional collaboration, David's invitation to me to work on a project on behalf of the Reconstructionist movement allowed me the opportunity to grow in new directions and to learn and to hone new skills. In appointing me as Editor, David gave me the chance to make what I hope has been a modest but significant contribution to the intellectual legacy of a movement that stands on the substantial shoulders of Rabbis Mordecai Kaplan and Ira Eisenstein. I am grateful to him for this opportunity and for his support and friendship over the years. With respect and appreciation I dedicate this issue to him.

—Richard Hirsh

Paradigms for Contemporary Reconstructionism

BY RICHARD HIRSH

This article is dedicated to my current and former students at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, whose probing questions, perceptive analyses, and principled positions have helped me to define and refine the paradigms under discussion.

When Mordecai Kaplan set out to write *Judaism as a Civilization*, he wanted to create a contemporary rationale for Jewish identification, commitment and continuity. Like many Jewish thinkers of the modern period, Kaplan assumed that the fundamental issue was one of ideology or concept, i.e., that without something credible to replace the supernatural assumptions of the pre-modern tradition, there would be no basis on which to build a contemporary Jewish life.

The pre-modern Jewish myth of origins included: a conception of a creator God with whom personal interaction was possible; an understanding of the Jewish people as God's chosen community, whose origins and assured continuity came through divine intervention; a faith in the Torah and *halakha* as being divinely revealed, authoritative and binding; and a com-

mitment to a vision of history that culminated in the arrival of the Messiah. As the credibility of each of these mythic components was called in to question in the open society of America, the taken-for-granted affirmation of traditional Judaism was diminished. And one consequence among many was that patterns of common Jewish ritual behavior soon dissolved.

Kaplan's Context, and Ours

Reconstructionism as defined by Kaplan was a response to a specific community (the American Jewish community) at a specific time (the 1920s-1930s) and a specific profile (immigrants to a degree, but even more so to first- and second-generation Jews born in the United States). When we look at the 21st-century Jewish community, comprised now primarily of third, fourth and even fifth generation American Jews, and increasingly populated by non-Jews married to or partnered with Jews, we find that the questions, concerns and needs are quite different than those of the audience for whom Kaplan wrote *Judaism as a Civilization*.

Rabbi Richard Hirsh is the Executive Director of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association, and was Editor of *The Reconstructionist* from 1996-2006. The views expressed here are the personal views of the author and do not represent the RRA.

Adaptations prior to Kaplan were largely cosmetic: on the analogy of a home, some thought you could simply redecorate (classical Reform's adaptation of Protestant civility for what soon became known as "worship"); or move the furniture around (*korbanot* [sacrifices] to the basement, the prophets to the front parlor); some thought adding on a room would help (political Zionism).

Only Kaplan got it right, because he was the only one who realized that the problem was not in the paint or wallpaper, in the furniture, or in renovations. He saw that the problem was the foundation. Unless the foundation got repaired or rebuilt, anything resting on top would not be sustained.

Building on the Foundation

Part of rebuilding the foundation for Kaplan was the creation of a naturalistic paradigm to replace the inadequate and implausible supernatural paradigm of pre-modern Judaism. That work having been done by the early generations of Reconstructionist leaders, our task is different. Building on Kaplan's foundation, the challenge for our time is to create pragmatic paradigms of Jewish living that are rooted in conceptual consistency.

Kaplan sought to create an ideology that would sustain and support patterns of Jewish living and religious observance that could more-or-less be taken for granted in his time. We face a different problem, insofar as familiarity with such traditional patterns has dissolved. We work with Jews seeking an approach to ritual decision making

as they try to integrate, often for the first time, Jewish practices into their spiritual lives. It is not so much an ideology of Judaism that they seek as an approach to maneuvering through the rich but complex resources of Jewish tradition that can avoid the "all-or-nothing" polarities of secularism and Orthodoxy.

We in the Reconstructionist movement, and especially Reconstructionist rabbis, have an opportunity to contribute something unique to this process, because our approach to ritual decision making stands apart from both the Reform and Conservative options. But we rarely articulate how we differ. Even more crucially, we rarely take enough steps back to get the bigger picture, and see the context within which we are engaged in the reconstruction of Judaism.

In this article, therefore, I want to analyze the moment in Jewish history where we find ourselves, and to seek analogies from the past that can guide us through the present. I then want to propose specific ways of approaching tradition that can be responsive to current needs within that context. While much of what is under discussion here applies specifically to the work of Reconstructionist rabbis, the paradigms described are relevant to the work of the movement as a whole.

I. First Paradigm: Living in "Mishna Time"

By way of identifying our context, I suggest we are living in times more akin to those of the Mishna than of the Ge-

mara and the later codes of Jewish law. This circumscribes our options, defines our choices, and requires us to assess what we can and cannot accomplish under such circumstances.

When the second Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 CE, an already-fractious Jewish community was thrown into disarray. The religious task of the moment was to organize the conversations that needed to happen in order to reconstruct the discourse of Jewish religious life — to try and make order out of chaos. Many of the discussions, debates and decisions that occurred in the first and second centuries of the Common Era found their way into the first authoritative written code to emerge after the crisis of 70 CE — the Mishna. The rabbinic leaders of that time faced the daunting tasks of imposing order on chaos, and sifting and sorting conflicting opinions, practices and principles. It is not an accident that we speak about the six “orders” of the Mishna.

While in many cases the authorities cited in the Mishna were able to reach consensus on matters of Jewish law, including ritual practice, in other cases the discussions were inconclusive, with differing opinions and procedures cited when no definitive positions emerged. Sometimes the emergence of answers (what in our terms we might call policies or procedures) had to wait for different and more stable times and sets of circumstances; hence the Gemara and the later codes. And in other cases, despite the *halakha* of a given issue seeming to have been settled in the Mishna, the rabbinic authorities

cited in the Gemara reopen discussions and even make changes to conclusions cited previously.

Although the short-term resolution of any number of issues of Jewish law was a major achievement, what the Mishna accomplished was more significant than rulings on halakhic questions. The Mishna was able to organize issues, arrange prior and current opinions, and reconstruct the grammar, vocabulary and syntax of the Jewish religious conversation. Put differently, what the Mishna reflects is the religious discourse of the Jewish people (or, perhaps more narrowly, of the rabbinic leaders) in a transitional period following a collective trauma, in which the search for stability was crucial.

Diversity Dominates

The period of the Mishna was characterized not only by halakhic but by theological and ideological differences as well. Our time is characterized by many of the same kinds of debates. Since the explosion of Jews into modernity, we have been struggling to make order out of chaos. The 19th century rabbis/scholars thought they could do that through theological and ritual revision as seen in what became Reform Judaism and in the *wissenschaft* movement that incubated what would later emerge as Conservative Judaism.

But even as the Jewish people was trying simultaneously to rethink its collective identity so as to be able to embrace the option of civil enfranchisement and to rethink its religious ideology in support of that effort, circum-

stances dictated that stability would be ephemeral. The Dreyfus affair, the rise of political Zionism, the world wars, the *Shoah* and the establishment of *Medinat Yisrael* are just a few of the things that have kept us in Mishna-time. We continue to live in a period of readjustment that lacks consensus, and where diversity dominates.

Recognizing and accepting the larger context in which we are doing our work is essential if we are to have a realistic sense of what can and cannot be accomplished in such moments in Jewish history. Rabbis often counsel individuals who have suffered a recent loss or undergone a major life transition to allow for the necessary time to adjust, and to avoid dramatic or definitive decisions for which they may not yet have reassembled the necessary emotional and cognitive resources. Similarly, we should remind ourselves when we do our collective communal work of reconstructing Judaism that we should remain cognizant of the circumstances within which we are doing that work.

Living Post-Trauma

We are living in a time analogous to the second century of the Common Era. Several major traumas have occurred: the impact of modernity on the Jewish people and Jewish religion; the extension of citizenship and the retraction of it in the heart of cultured Europe within a period of 100 years; the repression of Russian Jewry and its reemergence several generations later; the *Shoah*, of course, and the wars of survival that Israel has endured. And

alongside the traumas, we have faced unprecedented circumstances, including the creation of the first Jewish homeland/political entity in two millennia, and the impact of intermarriage within our own North American Jewish community.

The first and second centuries of the Common Era were also similar to our time in that competing ideologies and strategies for survival were very much in play. Jews in the early centuries of the Common Era could choose from a variety of what we might anachronistically call “denominations.” There were the “fundamentalists” (the Sadducees) whose reliance on scripture alone made them hostile to the emergence of rabbinic *halakha*. There were the “secular Zionists” (political zealots whose focus was on the survival of the Jewish nation, and for whom religion was less central). There were the “spiritual seekers” (the Essenes, early mystics, and others) for whom the harsh realities of the world seemed to demand a turning inward to the life of the spirit.

There were the “Jews for Jesus” (the early followers of Jesus and of his disciples) whose messianic mindset took them to the edges of the Jewish community, and eventually beyond them. There were the “modernists” (the Pharisees and their disciples and descendants) who sought to balance “tradition and change” while innovating in the service of adaptation. And there were subsets of each of these, and no doubt other clusters and communities that leaned one way or another in terms of theology, *halakha*, liturgy and a host of other subjects.

Tentative Proposals

If we can agree on anything, it might be that we have not yet been given the chance to reconstruct Judaism in a stable and secure setting — we are working in a moment that is fluid and flexible. We have not yet coalesced into consensus on many fundamental issues. Given our many challenges, everything we propose at this moment in terms of priorities (outreach v. inreach, unilineality v. matrilineality, spirituality v. ethnicity, as examples) is tentative.

Applied more narrowly to the Reconstructionist movement, this suggests that we are not going to use our time, energy and resources well if we try to set definitive guidelines and create rules. As examples: do we require conversion for adopted children? Do we require a *get* for remarriage? Are Jewish rituals appropriate for interfaith life-cycle events, or should alternatives be created? We could create commissions, hold conventions and craft codes that seek to define “the Reconstructionist position” on any number of issues. Or, on analogy to the Mishna, we could instead (as argued above) organize issues, arrange prior and current opinions, and reconstruct the grammar, vocabulary and syntax of the Jewish religious conversation, trusting that later generations will generate consensus in what we can hope will be more settled times.

A Post-Halakhic Era

We know the vocabulary: “non-halakhic, post-halakhic, anti-halakhic, quasi-halakhic.” Rabbi Jack Cohen

clarified the issue when he said the right way to frame the question is to say “we live in a post-halakhic era.” That is, we live in an era in which the assumptions, communal structures, beliefs/faith and attitudes towards authority that sustained the pre-modern halakhic norms of a community are absent. Rabbi Hayim Herring, executive vice-president of STAR (“Synagogues: Transformation and Renewal”) suggests an analogy with the term “post-industrial” — we still have industry, but our economy is no longer defined by it.

What does this mean for the Reconstructionist movement? The Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association (RRA) already has 275 rabbis. The Jewish Reconstructionist Federation (JRF) has 105 affiliated congregations. The Reconstructionist Rabbinical College has graduated over 300 rabbis, and 75 students are currently matriculated. Ownership of Reconstructionist Judaism is now a shared enterprise. We have long passed the time when the writings of the charismatic founder and the early disciples were considered definitive.

We now have a wide spectrum of practice and policy within our movement. With rare exceptions, any “rule” or “policy” we adopt is likely to be ignored by some percentage of rabbis or congregations, and our liberal predilection towards being non-judgmental coupled with our principled preference for pluralism suggests we are unlikely to coerce compliance. What then would it mean to “have a policy” on any ritual matter other than to mimic the Conservative movement’s ephemeral attempt to hold people to halakhic norms that

are routinely ignored?

The Place of *Halakha*

That said, *halakha* continues to inform our entire approach to the Reconstructionist conversation, and while not binding, remains a weighted informant whose norms are generally presumed as a starting point. Some Reconstructionists (like me) operate on the principle of “work within the boundaries of tradition when possible and move beyond them when necessary.” (I acknowledge that “possible” and “necessary” are very subjective terms.) Other Reconstructionists start from the assumptions of defining the need and then creating the response; if the response correlates with tradition, that’s a nice bonus, but if it does not, it’s equally fine to disregard the tradition. Our bumper-sticker slogan that “tradition has a vote but not a veto” (parallel to the Reform movement’s less-well-known but equally pithy “tradition gives guidance but not governance”) is, like most bumper-stickers, mostly meaningless when we actually try to address a specific serious issue.

This is not to suggest that we cannot reach consensus on any issues. On some *klal* (general) issues, finding consensus may be more crucial. On some *pratim* (specific applications) it may be less so. For example: now that our movement finally has its own summer camp (Camp JRF) it becomes necessary to create policies by which the camp community, at least, will live for its time together each summer. But

whatever those policies might be, replicating them in every Reconstructionist community is hardly necessary or even possible. On the other hand, on issues affecting Jewish identity and status, we should have a movement-wide agreement on, for example, “who is a Jew,” one that will not leave the religious status of children to the serendipity of whatever Reconstructionist synagogue a family happens to join.

Without an over-arching theory of religious and ritual practice, we cannot hope to navigate the challenges we face. Here, we have something both unique and uniquely-suited to contribute to the wider Jewish discussion. As Kaplan did in his time, we ought to craft a response to the community as we have it, to the time and place in which we find ourselves, and to the circumstances and challenges that we face. And our response needs to take into account the consequences of living in Mishna-time.

II. The Second Paradigm: *Minbag*

Living in Mishna-time requires us to identify an organizing principle or set of principles through which we can undertake the reconstruction of Judaism. Each of the modern Jewish religious movements has tried to accomplish this in its own way. Before turning to a discussion of what Reconstructionist Judaism might contribute to this discussion, it will be helpful to analyze the other two non-Orthodox approaches.

The Reform Position

The Reform movement, in its official documents and publications, and in many of the books written by its leading thinkers, has for the past quarter-century increasingly been speaking the language of *mitzva*. And by *mitzva* they mean “religious commandment or obligation,” and not “a nice friendly gesture.” Reform Judaism (if not Reform Jews) asserts that Jews are a covenantal chosen community whose faithfulness to God ought to be reflected in a routine of religious obligations. *Mitzva* (“commandment”) implies a *Metzaveh* (“commander”), and for Reform Judaism, this is axiomatic. (See the 1999 “Statement of Principles” of the CCAR under “platforms” [<http://ccarnet.org>].)

For Reform Judaism, however, *mitzva* does not, and should not, imply *halakha* (communal law). Because Reform takes as its point of departure the primacy of personal autonomy, the choice of which *mitzvot* to observe remains up to the individual. The Responsa Committee of the Reform rabbinic association, for example, offers analysis and advice, but cannot mandate compliance. Nor are its positions binding on the Reform seminary or the Reform congregational body.

Because it grounds its approach to Jewish practice in the supernatural assumptions of a commanding God and a chosen people, Reform ideology is suspect for Reconstructionists in terms of its ability to convince contemporary Jews to engage ritual practices. Because it asserts the primacy of the individual over any sense of community or com-

munal norms, the Reform approach to ritual decision making and behavior is incompatible with the Reconstructionist emphasis on community.

The Conservative Position

The Conservative approach to Jewish religious and ritual life is predicated on the priority of the *halakha*. Whatever adaptations, innovations or adjustments to Jewish practice may be proposed, they can only be validated “within the system.” While Conservative Judaism accepts the historical evolution of Judaism, and (to differing degrees) that *halakha* is a humanly-influenced (perhaps even constructed) system, it makes a voluntary choice to define its field of activity as being circumscribed by the norms, procedures and precedents of the *halakha*.

Because it insists on adherence to *halakha*, Conservative Judaism experiences a well-documented gap between folk and elite application. While it can coerce compliance within its institutions (the Schechter day schools, Camp Ramah, USCJ congregations), the ability to influence significant numbers of individual Conservative households and create a halakhically-normative population remains ephemeral. Faced, for example, by the demographic infiltration of intermarriage as well as gay/lesbian populations into Conservative Judaism, the validity and viability of defining Conservative Judaism as “halakhic” has recently been called into question even by some of its leading intellectual thinkers, who imply that halakhic paradigms may

not be adequate for the challenges of the moment.

The Reconstructionist Alternative

So if the paradigms of *mitzva* and *halakha* do not work, what organizing category can perhaps embrace the reality of the Jewish community as it exists at this moment in Jewish history? I want to suggest that the Reconstructionist movement needs to assert clearly that the appropriate category for living a Jewish religious life in Mishna-time is *minhag*, or “custom.”

Minhag is an alternative to *mitzva* and *halakha*, and not (only) in the sense that Kaplan used the term “folkways” to describe Jewish ritual behaviors, such as, for example, use of the *talit*, *mezzuzza* or the observance of *kasbrut*. *Minhag* implies norms, and as a movement, we can have such norms (formal and informal) that we share. *Minhag* allows for individual choices (for example, what level of Shabbat observance to choose) within paradigmatic imperatives (*i.e.*, observing Shabbat is something that can and ought to be one among many places where Jews derive spiritual meaning from their tradition).

To take it one step further, we cannot have the much-vaunted “sense of community” for which we advocate without a shared sense of practice, such as can emerge from affirmation of *minhag*. And insofar as “the search for community” is a commonly articulated imperative for Jews seeking to connect with their tradition, we would do well to consider the importance of a shared

spectrum of practice in shaping and sustaining meaningful religious communities.

Minhag is the appropriate framework for living in Mishna-time: it implies the maintenance of categories of significance, of boundaries that help define a variety of spectrums (*kasbrut*, for example), of pluralism as a value, and of “community” as a determinant in the shaping of norms. *Minhag* embodies Kaplan’s centrality of “peoplehood” in contrast to *halakha*, which embodies the centrality of text and text-guardians (rabbis [only]). In contrast to the *mitzva*-centered approach of Reform Judaism that embodies the centrality of God (and the coordinate implication that Judaism is a religion, not a culture), *minhag* locates divinity in the interactions and resultant responsibilities that emerge from a faithful community that strives to transcend individuality. *Minhag* evolves from the ground up. But like anything that grows, it needs nurturance, sustenance and direction; hence, there is a central and crucial role for rabbis.

III. The Third Paradigm: The Pastor-Posek Continuum

For Reconstructionist rabbis in particular, using the category of *minhag* can be helpful. Our rabbinic work is along a spectrum of what I call “pastor-to-*posek*” with a pastor being someone whose primary referent is compassionate counseling/response, and a *posek* (“one who decides on matters of Jewish law”) being someone whose primary referents are the requirements and/or

expectations of Jewish tradition. At any given moment, in response to the person or people with whom we are dealing, we are moving back and forth on this continuum, trying to balance responsiveness to the situation with responsibility to the tradition for which we are responsible. *Minhag* mandates that both be taken into account, but also suggests that individual cases may see differing accommodations, balances and trade-offs between the two.

Using the concept of *minhag* allows us to lean one way or another depending on the circumstance, and also validates the variety of ways Reconstructionist rabbis might respond to the same situation. It also allows us to approach the same situation in different ways depending on the people involved and on the circumstances. It affirms that we see pluralism and diversity as enriching, and as a value, and not merely as something we will tolerate until a policy can be reached.

Using *minhag* as an organizing principle for communal conversation helps us to avoid the pitfalls of the pursuit of policies over which we may argue passionately but for which we will not have, nor would we want to have, consequences for non-compliance. (See the discussions below on conversion and divorce as examples.) If we predicate our conversation on the assumption that we strive for a consensual covenantal spectrum of Jewish practice that still allows for choices within that spectrum, and makes no judgment about where on the spectrum we position ourselves, we can redefine questions of policy so that they become

“inquiries of opportunity.”

IV. The Fourth Paradigm: Locating Authority in Relationship

Minhag also helps us clarify where a contemporary Jewish community might locate authority. As Kaplan rightly noted, and as the experience of American Judaism in the 20th century clearly demonstrated, simply appealing to the authority of tradition will not convince very many people. The Reform model of *mitzva* locates authority in the individual. The up side of this is it validates the “right to choice” that American Jews have absorbed as inalienable. The down side is it makes the construction of community difficult as each person’s choice (and comfort level) is implicitly assumed to require validation.

The Conservative model of *halakha* perpetuates the assumption of tradition, namely, that the rabbi is the source of authority. If Judaism is primarily a legal tradition, then it makes sense that experts be entrusted with it, just as we want lawyers and judges managing civil law. The up side of this position is that it reasonably assures that decision making is well-informed and that decisions are made that are consonant with tradition. The down side is that American Jews do not experience or live Judaism as a legal tradition but as a cultural-religious experience into which they step more often at events and intervals than on a daily basis. Rabbinic authority is not so much dismissed as it is invisible and irrelevant.

The category of *minhag* locates religious authority in the relationship between the individual and the community. In other words, norms evolve out of the ongoing life of a community, as individuals interact with the community and as the community places expectations on the individual. “Community” is a corrective to the dominance of individual autonomy, but it is also a leavening and lightening agent with regard to “the *halakha*.”

Conversion as an Example

Consider conversion as an example. Who sets the ritual requirements for conversion, the rabbi or the *ger/geriyoret* (prospective convert)? Option A: “I, the rabbi, require *mila* (covenantal circumcision) and *tevila* (immersion in a *mikva*) in addition to *limud* (study).” Option B: “Here are the norms of the tradition and community for conversion, including *mila* and *tevila*. Here’s what I recommend and why. The decision of which to use is yours.”

I am not suggesting we avoid striving for a recommended procedure, or that we avoid asserting the value of conforming to historical and contemporary consensus. But by using *minhag* as the organizing principle, we avoid the necessity of coming to a conclusion in favor of articulating a consensus of preference. A consensus would, one hopes, be compelling, but not coercive.

(Interestingly, the Reform Central Conference of American Rabbis, in their current *giyyur* [conversion] guidelines, makes it clear that the members are about evenly split on the question of

who owns the policies — the rabbi or the convert. All they do is state that fact as part of a statement of norms. They do not attempt to resolve it at this moment in their history. [See <http://data.ccarnet.org/glgerim7.html>] I think that is a wise approach, and would hope the Reconstructionist rabbinic heads in a similar direction.)

Towards New RRA Guidelines

If we adopted a “Mishna/*minhag*” perspective, what might, for example, new RRA guidelines on intermarriage and on conversion look like?

In terms of conversion, I will focus on the case of adopted children. How do we approach the issue of defining Jewish identity for adopted children? (Note the way the question is framed — I am not asking “Do we require conversion for adopted children?”) Instead of debating whether we require conversion, and if so, what rituals we require, what if we responded to this concern instead? I imagine a document of the RRA that explains the norm of conversion for adopted children, but in terms of the larger context of “community,” not in terms of “the *halakha* requires.” We understand that “identity” may be an individual choice, or in this case a choice of the parents, but that “status” is the community’s evaluation/acceptance of that claimed identity. Both are important.

But conversion guidelines that reflect our current context should acknowledge the concerns that some adoptive parents have raised, especially the perceived “penalty for infertility”

issues that are so poignant and painful for many. (Requiring conversion for adopted children because the parents had been unable to conceive is experienced by some adoptive parents as punitive.) We might explain how in a given case, leaning towards the “pastor” end of the “pastor-*posek* continuum” we would work with a family towards a series of affirmations of identity (like a naming) rather than a conversion to an identity. Values attached to both positions could be articulated, and rituals for each might even be shared, with the meanings being defined differently. (See Michael Fessler’s article “Adoption and Jewish Families: A Proposal” in *The Reconstructionist*, Fall 2001, and Renée Bauer’s article “‘Patrilineal Descent’ and Same-Sex Parents: New Definitions of Identity” in this issue.)

In other words, rather than trying to arrive at a consensus on whether conversion is or is not required in cases of adoption, we could construct guidelines that provide explanations, rationales and rituals that could equally be elected depending on the parties and particulars involved. The common concern, to affirm Jewish identity for the adopted child, might be met in more than one way.

The Use of Sancta

Another example: The 1983 *RRA Guidelines on Intermarriage* oppose the use of Jewish sancta for a wedding presided over by an RRA rabbi if both partners are not Jewish. Despite that, there are many RRA rabbis who routinely use Jewish sancta, including

full rituals of *kiddushin*, for intermarriages. In constructing new guidelines on intermarriage, we could debate whether to reaffirm the 1983 position. Or we could indicate out of a Reconstructionist understanding of sancta the reasons why, and values behind, not using (some/any) Jewish sancta for intermarriage. (I leave aside the issue of what constitutes sancta — for some, it is *ketuba*, or the ritual formula “*harei at/a*,” for others it is the *huppa* or the breaking of the glass.) We could also indicate how, if rabbis want to incorporate Jewish elements, other choices could be made. And we could explain how in some cases using (some) sancta of *kiddushin* could make sense or might be considered.

In other words, given the fluid nature of the impact of intermarriage on the Jewish community, a Mishna/*minhag* perspective would suggest that trying to set rules while things are very much in motion is not productive. Creating a variety of approaches, and articulating how each might be considered as one possible legitimate response to a specific situation, would seem to be a better use of our collective time and energy as a movement.

V. The Fifth Paradigm: “Before and After the Fact”

Another paradigm for contemporary Reconstructionism should be mentioned. Rabbinic tradition (as well as other traditions) often employs the distinction between *lekhatzila* and *b’diavad* (a-priori and ex-post-facto, or “before the fact” and “after the fact.”)

The import of this for *minhag* should be transparent. What might be optimal at the outset may not be possible at a later stage. We might have different recommendations, priorities or procedures depending on when we come into the story being presented by an individual, a couple, a family or a community.

This does not mean we have nothing to say, or nothing for which we stand. It means rather that if we look at Jewish tradition as being a spiritual resource, then the goal becomes to help people take as much advantage as possible of that resource in their own lives, rather than having the goal be compliance with an abstract set of policies or requirements under all circumstances.

Jewish Divorce as an Example

If we apply this paradigm to the case of a *get* (Jewish divorce), we can see the usefulness as well as the uniqueness of what could be a Reconstructionist approach to the issue. Rather than framing the question as “does Reconstructionist Judaism require a *get* for remarriage?” we could instead ask “under what circumstances would we recommend a *get* as a meaningful ritual?” The focus becomes the people involved in the divorce, rather than their compliance with the requirements of *halakha*. While not a universal indicator, we could presume that in many cases, the further the interval between a civil divorce and when the discussion of a *get* arises, the less likely it is that a *get* would carry significant meaning.

Therefore, many Reconstructionist rabbis might say that if we have an

opportunity to work with a couple in proximity to a civil divorce, we would urge that a (Reconstructionist) *get* be included as part of the work the couple does in closing the partnered stage of their relationship. Conversely, if someone comes to us for remarriage ten years after a civil divorce and there was no *get* back then, we could explain the issues involved, and assess with the person if there would be any spiritual or emotional value to arranging for a *get* at this later stage. If there were not, we could proceed with the remarriage even without the *get*.

Similarly, we might urge converts *lekhathila* to include *mikva* (ritual immersion) as a ritual of conversion, but if we meet someone years later whose conversion did not include immersion, we would not question *b'diavad* the person's Jewish identity or status. The question of “what is required” gets translated into “what can be meaningful at this stage of your life?” While some might anticipate anarchy in such an approach, my experience as a congregational rabbi, and my assessment of anecdotes shared with me by many Reconstructionist rabbis suggests that more often than not, people are willing, even eager, to take advantage of the ritual and spiritual opportunities in Judaism if presented to them as choices rather than as requirements.

VI. The Sixth Paradigm: Corridor of Consequence

When considering how wide a spectrum of choices might be optimal, we should factor in what I call the “cor-

ridor of consequence.” This simply means that the upshot of certain ritual decisions, including those that attach to issues of *ishut* (personal status) may or may not be of consequence beyond the immediate situation and moment.

Using divorce again as an example, if a couple decides to marry and each person had a prior Jewish marriage that ended without a *get*, and (the/each) woman is past the age of childbearing, the consequences of their second marriage in the absence of a *get* are minimal in terms of the wider Jewish community. Since a major consequence of remarriage without a *get* is that Orthodoxy considers offspring of the second marriage to be *mamzerim* (illegitimate as defined by Jewish law), if no children are anticipated in the second marriage, the corridor of consequence is narrow.

Conversely, if a 30-year-old Jewish woman whose prior marriage ended without a *get* remarries and has children, despite the fact that *mamzerut* is not an issue for Reconstructionist and Reform Judaism, and has been ruled as inoperative by the Conservative movement, there is at least the potential of a problem down the line. As the corridor of consequence is wider here, a longer look at the advisability of a *get* before remarriage might be in order, even if a *get* is not required.

Reframing the Questions

As Reconstructionists, we should be able to say how we approach making decisions about religious and

ritual practices. We don't want to be “all things to all people,” nor do we want to say it makes no difference what choices people make. We do stand for the continuity of Jewish tradition and for the preservation of its integrity, even while we are making changes appropriate to our time. Towards that end, we do need to state from time to time what our positions are.

But what is the question to which guidelines are the answer? I suggest we frame the question as:

Living in a Mishna-time/*minhag* paradigm, how do we articulate the issues, identify norms, explain related values, and begin to define the positions along a spectrum of options that could, with equal integrity, be chosen by Reconstructionist rabbis working in relationship with people in a specific circumstance at the time they come into contact with those people?

If we adopt some form of that question as a guideline, we will be on the way to doing the sort of work the rabbis of the Mishna did in a similar period of transition following trauma: organizing the issues, arranging prior and current opinions, and reconstructing the grammar, vocabulary and syntax of the Jewish religious conversation. We may then hope and trust that the common sense and wisdom of the Jewish people, infused with the guidance of God/liness, and informed by the teaching and leadership of Reconstructionist rabbis, will lead towards more definitive positions in future generations.

Reconstructing the Jewish Future

By JOY LEVITT

In the tractate of the Mishna called *Pirkei Avot* (“Teachings of our Ancestors”), Simeon the Righteous says that the world rests on three things: on Torah, on *avoda* (the Temple service, later understood more generally as “worship” or “prayer”) and on *g’milut hasadim* (acts of loving-kindness) (*Pirkei Avot* 1:2).

The teachers in *Pirkei Avot* love lists. This first chapter opens with three such sets, and lists are a running theme throughout the tractate. Lists are charming and easy to remember, which may be the point, but they are also enormously useful, because they suggest a beginning, a middle and an end — a finite set of tasks that, when accomplished, yields a sense of satisfaction. Anyone who has finished the day with a fully crossed-out “to-do” list knows this.

I want to suggest that what Simeon had in mind when he created his list was to give us a way out of our normative sense that the world and its tasks are overwhelming. No, says Simeon, they are not overwhelming. It is all Torah, *avoda* and *g’milut hasadim*; the rest is commentary.

I chose this text because when we think about reconstructing the Jewish future it is useful to narrow the playing field, particularly because I do not think

the world has actually changed that much since Simeon’s time. The world still stands on Torah, *avoda*, and *g’milut hasadim*, although we may understand each of those terms in ways Simeon might not recognize.

Prior Perspectives

First, a few caveats. The institution I work in, the Jewish Community Center in Manhattan, is precisely non-elitist. Our mission is to offer multiple pathways into Jewish life without prejudice, judgment or pressure. We do not even ask if someone is Jewish. We just make it clear that the mission of the institution is to help bring people into Jewish life in all its diversity. We are, in this way, decidedly not a synagogue. We are less about who is in than who is out, and how to help those who are out walk through one or more of the variety of doors we have created. So what I have to say about Torah, *avoda* and *g’milut hasadim* derives from that place, both tangibly and spiritually.

Second, my remarks are colored by a certain perspective. My grandfather threw his *tallis* overboard into New York harbor right before he landed at Ellis Island, but his grandchildren and great-grandchildren have retrieved it. My Jewish world is richer, more

Rabbi Joy Levitt is the Associate Executive Director for Programming of the Jewish Community Center in Manhattan.

interesting, more full of possibilities than his ever was, trapped as he was in the economic (and I dare say spiritual) wasteland of a Polish *shtetl*. He did not eat lobster until he was 20 years old, and he could read a *blat gemarra* upside down, but he would tell you it meant nothing compared to the yearning for a life of freedom. When he finally got here, it was Judaism that he shed along with Poland. So whatever is going on in this great and free country we now call home, I will not argue that my grandfather or even his grandfather was a better Jew than am I. I do not long for the *shtetl*. I do not think that Judaism was meant to thrive in an oppressive intentional community where everyone knew what you were doing, and cared as well. That is not to say that some of the substance of Jewish life has not been lost in the succession of the generations, but I prefer to look ahead and not behind.

Teaching Torah

We begin with the first item on Simeon's list — Torah. For my grandfather, it meant leaving his home to go to a bad *heder* fifty miles away, then learning all day long with a bad teacher who abused his students. On his 80th birthday, I bought him a tractate of the Talmud and, though his wife was thoroughly disgusted at this old-world gift, he could still remember much of it by heart and translate it. This was more than I could do then.

For the thousands of people who walk through the doors of the JCC, Torah has never been more accessible

and more elusive. It's everywhere — TV, the Web, radio, classes, seminars, workshops; Torah is everywhere. But we are still plagued by an astonishingly low standard of pedagogy in afternoon Hebrew schools, day schools and adult-education programs. The Jews of the Upper West Side are blessed to be living in a neighborhood with more good teachers of Judaism per square inch than anywhere in the world, and I include Jerusalem. If they leave this little *shtetl* they often land in a Jewish wasteland that has no excuse. We have too often settled for a mediocre education for ourselves and our children, and we did not have to.

Our poorly supported afternoon synagogue schools disappoint and often even oppress children. We do not hit our kids, as my grandfather remembered being hit in *heder*. But sometimes we just bore them, numbing their imaginations, communicating that Judaism is to be endured, not enjoyed. It is way past time to acknowledge that Hebrew school does not work (and never will) and the alternative is not necessarily day school, at least not for the majority of Jewish children. Models of Jewish education that separate children from families are hopeless, particularly when the families (parents) are in need of similar education. Judaism is not algebra; you cannot hire a tutor to transmit a culture you yourself do not know or live.

What Torah Has to Offer

What we actually have to offer is an extraordinarily rich array of texts and traditions that can help guide our kids

as they hit bumps in the road, that can celebrate the sense of gratitude they will hopefully feel at peak moments in their lives, and that can provide meaning and context and beauty and a sense of connection and community in an often lonely and difficult world. What we often give them is a language they never learn to speak, read with fluency or understand. Prayers have often been drummed into their heads, but the ability actually to pray, actually to express hope or thanks or need has been sadly neglected.

A Torah for the 21st century will need to get much more serious about family-based learning and start with many more resources for Jewish education. Letty Cotton Pogrebin once wrote that Hebrew schools will get better only when we parents hope that our children grow up to be Hebrew school teachers. Until and unless we develop a radically different model for the transmission of tradition and culture to our children — a model that is substantial and serious and fun and interesting and values-based and integrated into a family's life-cycle — we will have squandered the freedom that my grandfather so cherished.

What is true for our kids is equally true for ourselves. It is shocking to me how many Jews carry around resentment and embarrassment about their lack of knowledge about Jewish tradition. It keeps them out of synagogues and study halls; it keeps them away from communities that could nourish their souls. They will go to therapy to resolve problems, but they cannot seem to get this particular monkey off their

back. We need to do a better job of helping them do just that.

Connecting to Real Life

A Torah for the 21st century will be a Torah of the marketplace. Just as the Torah used to be read on Mondays and Thursdays in the public square because that was where the people were, this Torah will need to meet people in the busy-ness of their lives. It will need to be much better taught, yes, but it will also need to be easy to get to, easier to afford and wide open in its pluralism and inclusiveness. It will need to judge less and welcome more; it will need to care less about who than what, and less about what than why. It will need to stop making assumptions about what people want and need and start listening to what people say and do not say. It will need to meet people where they are, giving them resources to explore the issues they confront daily.

We should know what Judaism has to say about gossip, because we do it every day, and we both love it and wish we didn't love it so much. We should know what Judaism says about money, because we think about it a lot of the time, and we might be helped by a perspective that is larger than our own and different from the material culture in which we live. We should know what Judaism says about the end of life, because what it teaches is extraordinarily wise and might actually give us some peace as we face death with a loved one or by ourselves.

We love Torah because it makes us think beyond the scope of our narrow

existence. It puts our life into a context, connects us back thousands of years and ahead thousands more. We study so that we can study more, because there is wisdom in the answers and more wisdom in the questions — but also because the process itself ennoble us. It makes us kinder, more generous people. It helps us organize our time so we are less wasteful, and expands our horizons so we use time in more meaningful ways. Any Torah for the 21st century will need to be able to use everything we know about marketing and communication to make this process accessible to everyone who wants it and to help people understand that they need it.

Repairing and Renewing

The second on Simeon's list is *avoda*. When my grandfather threw his *tallis* overboard he thought he was shedding the burden of a God who disappoints, who does not hear prayer, and who kills innocent children and allows others to starve. Faced with the alternative of his naïve and childlike concept of God or the God of America—freedom, individuality, success, opportunity — his choice was simple, and he never looked back.

Not so simple for his granddaughter. As the beneficiary of his success, I never had to choose between warring Gods. But in eliminating the need for basic survival — it now being possible for me not to worry about my next meal or the roof over my head or how to pay for a doctor, should I need one — I now face in bold relief what had

been obscured for my grandfather by poverty and disappointment. I need to express gratitude; I need to express hope; I need, even, to express despair. I do not want conversation; I want, as the mystics would put it, to have my heart broken so that it might be repaired and renewed.

I need to remind myself every now and again that without me the sun does rise in the east and set in the west, that I am not, in fact, the center of the universe. I feel, on good days, that there is a power built into the universe that enables me to do the right thing instead of the wrong thing — that, indeed, I have that choice and can act upon it. On bad days, I can acknowledge that I have missed the mark and move beyond my sense of failure. I need to wake up every morning, as the prayer says, with a pure heart, and I need to say so even on the days when I do not believe it, so that I will be able to say it on the days when I do.

Becoming Serious about Prayer

We liberal Jews have made something of a mess of prayer. We have complicated it and badly edited it and refused, on some level, to take it seriously, because we are so busy thinking we are taking it seriously. As the famous story goes, we don't come to services to talk to God, as Yankl does, but to talk to Yankl. Nothing wrong with talking to Yankl; that's what community is. But prayer is something different. Prayer is an opportunity to take us out of ourselves and the everydayness of our

lives. It is a chance, as Sylvia Boorstein put it in a different context, not to do something but to sit there.

I once convinced Fred, a congregant who was dying, to go to a healing service. Truth be told, I had no idea what a healing service was but I had nothing else to offer him, and he took me up on it. We were going to meet in the city at the service because I had a funeral that day in Westchester for premature baby twins. I had spent the day before arguing with the funeral director because he had insisted on two caskets when the parents wanted one, feeling somehow consoled by the image of the babies being together. I had had to play hardball, threatening the funeral director. It is an ironic thing that sometimes a rabbi's finest moments are lived in someone else's pain. I think I was very helpful, if such a thing is possible. I felt good about what I had managed to do for the parents. I was flattered by their gratitude and disconnected on some level from the overwhelming awfulness of what I was actually doing. I got in the car and drove to the city to meet Fred. I, super rabbi, was about to strike again.

I sat down next to him, hoping I might fall asleep without being too obvious. But with my cynical defenses down, I was swept away by the music and the words. They did not speak of death or pain or illness — healing services rarely do. Frankly, I don't remember what the words were. Perhaps the very unfamiliarity of the liturgical structure captured my attention. I was suddenly aware that I had buried two children a few hours before. I began to

cry silently. I began to realize that while I had not lost my children, someone else had and it was unspeakably sad. I felt embraced by a room full of strangers who had no idea of my pain but somehow held it. And I realized that the value of the service was that it simply allowed people to sit with their pain, be it physical, spiritual or emotional, without anyone telling them not to feel bad, without anyone telling them to look on the bright side and without anyone telling them anything but that hope is built into the universe and there can be healing even when there cannot be cure.

Had I not gone to that service, I would have taken my unacknowledged feelings and shoved them down deep where they would join all the rest of my pain, continuing to weigh me down, little by little. Instead, I left feeling more aware of my sadness and strangely lighter as a result.

Awake, Aware, Connected

That is what prayer should do. It should make us more awake, more aware, more connected to the disparate parts of ourselves and the larger world around us. Instead, most people avoid communal prayer like the plague, attending synagogue only when they absolutely have to and then feeling entirely alienated. There are no easy answers here. Prayer is a little like exercise—you can't expect to get the benefits if you do it only once in a while. But unlike exercise, in whose efficacy most of us believe, few of us are convinced that routine prayer

yields results. Maybe it's because we carry around immature expectations of what those results might look like. Maybe it's because the structures that have evolved over time simply don't work anymore.

Clearly we have done a poor job of talking to children about prayer. Communities that want to teach prayer to children generally are more concerned with getting the words right than with helping kids reach down deep into their considerable souls and express what they feel. We communicate our own ambivalence when we make services feel like an obligation, a place where children need to sit still and not talk and read a language they can't understand. How can that not feel like school? A 21st century Judaism will need to care about children's spiritual needs and try to respond to them without ambivalence.

This Judaism will need to think more about prayer than it has in the past, and it will need to struggle better and more effectively with the tension between the tradition and the contemporary moment. Services, at least for those curious but alienated folks who tentatively enter the doors of the synagogue, will need to be shorter and more joyful; they will need to be more contemplative and more open to the stranger. They will need to do all of this while still remaining rooted in the tradition and being serious about what is being done. And congregations that care about the curious and the alienated — and not all do and perhaps not all must — will understand the importance of welcoming people and connecting them to one

another and to what is going on, while respecting the place from which each person has come.

Connected and Disconnected

I recently taught a parenting class at the JCC on how to think about the family's religious life. There were 20 people in the class, half of whom were expecting a child for the first time. When I suggested that they might want to attend services at various synagogues to see where they felt comfortable, one woman raised her hand to ask whether it was okay to attend a Friday night or Saturday morning service if you weren't a member. There wasn't a person in the room who knew that you could walk into a synagogue any Saturday morning regardless of affiliation. The gap between the connected and the disconnected is growing, and will only narrow if those of us on the inside start to care about those whose faces are pressing up against the glass.

Creating a community of people who are comfortable with the traditional liturgy but also able to experiment in order to meet the needs of an evolving Jewish civilization is the particular challenge of Reconstructionist synagogues. But the solution is not simple, and there are no magic answers except to remain open to all the possibilities. It may very well be that in order to reach the curious seeker, some of us will have to give up some measure of comfort in the liturgy to which we have grown accustomed and have come to enjoy.

A 21st century Judaism will have to do more than rescue the *tallis* from

the bottom of the harbor. It will have to do more than restore the *tallis* or even make a new one. It will need to convince the wearer that in wrapping a *tallis* around your body, you are wrapping yourself in the web of an extraordinary tradition and an extraordinary people. When the wearer feels that, and feels a connection above and beyond himself or herself, then we will have saved prayer for ourselves no less than for our children.

Moving Beyond the Self

And finally, the last item on Simeon's list: *g'milut hasadim* — acts of loving-kindness. This is the area that needs perhaps the least reconstruction. The *g'milut hesed* of my grandfather's *shtetl* looks remarkably similar to what we need to practice today. Visit the sick; welcome the stranger; feed the poor; help those in need. I find it striking that Simeon placed it third on his list. I read that to mean two things. First, that Torah and *avoda* are important prerequisites to *g'milut hesed*, that we become inclined to deeds of loving-kindness through our study and through our prayer. We understand what is expected of us, not only through experience, but through learning, and we summon the resources to move beyond our self interest through prayer. And, second, that Torah and *avoda* alone are insufficient in sustaining the world. There is no world without action; there is no purpose to learning and praying if they do not ultimately lead to acts of goodness in the universe.

I used to understand *g'milut hesed* in

its grand sense. I even used to create fantasies in my head in which I was the hero in some desperate scenario. My very favorite was finding missing children. I used to fantasize that somehow I found a child who had been kidnapped and was able to return him to his family. What an act of loving-kindness! How I had repaired the world!

Interestingly, the first time the term *tikkun olam* (repair of the world), surfaces in rabbinic literature, it is in relation to how a *get* (Jewish divorce) is delivered. The Gemarra is quite concerned about the way a divorce is delivered: Anything that is humiliating or confusing needs to be avoided *mipnei tikkun ha-olam* — for the sake of the stability of the social order. Far from the grand ideas we have since appropriated regarding the repair of the world, the Talmud saw repair in everyday acts of kindness, in the simple ways in which we treat one another. While you're waiting for the opportunity to rescue a child or bring about world peace, it would be a good idea not to cut someone off when you're driving on the expressway.

Cultivating Awareness

A 21st century Judaism widens the markers of Jewishness to include the way we treat one another as being no less significant than any other halakhic category. It means, to borrow from the title of Michael Strassfeld's recent book, "embracing Judaism as a spiritual practice" so that we might learn how to cultivate a heart that is open and generous. Such things don't just happen

because we want them to. They happen when we develop an awareness that first started with Simeon — that the very stability of the world is depends upon my ability to let you finish your sentence without interrupting you. It depends upon your ability to make very sure that in any discussion you are having — whether it's in a Torah discussion or at a board meeting or in a conversation with a stranger — that you avoid embarrassing that person at all costs. The stability of the world actually depends upon whether we construct a life in which acts of loving-kindness are woven into the fabric of our day.

Unless synagogues and community centers and schools become places that help people construct such lives, places that understand that people really want to live lives of *g'milut hesed*, they will continue to attract only people who are otherwise predisposed. And I suspect the number of those will diminish over time. What we ought to expect from our Jewish institutions is that, on some very deep level, they help us build our character — they help us be the people

we really want to be.

Living in the Present

For thousands of years, Jews have lived in the past and in the future. We have recalled the past — in fact, memory is a commandment — in all its pain and glory. We have longed for the future when all will be right with the world. We have, until now, avoided the present, because the present was not always so nice. But America has, for the most part, changed all that. The present is actually a wonderful thing. And we need to start learning how to live in it.

And when we live this way and call it Judaism, we will be able to stop worrying about the future of the Jewish people. When our Torah is inclusive and expansive and welcoming, when our prayer is serious and created in such a way as to be helpful, when our everyday behavior is generous and kind and openhearted, the future will take care of itself. And in the meantime, our lives will be filled with purpose.

“Patrilineal Descent” and Same-Sex Parents: New Definitions of Identity

BY RENÉE BAUER

When the Reconstructionist (1968/79) and Reform (1983) movements adopted their resolutions affirming “patrilineal descent,” the frame of reference was exclusively heterosexual. When examined in light of the welcoming of same-sex couples into the progressive Jewish community, the failure of those resolutions to address the circumstances of such couples becomes evident. This essay examines how new understandings of “identity,” of “family” and of “parents” necessitates a rethinking of the “patrilineal” positions.

The Situation

Ruth and Kate are active members of their local Reconstructionist synagogue, where they celebrated their wedding three years ago. Ruth is Jewish and Kate is not. The couple comes to see the rabbi to discuss the arrival of their first child. Kate is five months pregnant and the couple is overjoyed that their dream to have children together is coming true. The child was conceived with sperm from an anonymous, non-Jewish

donor. The couple has a Jewish home and has been living an active Jewish life together for years. The decision to raise their child as a Jew was an easy one, despite the fact that Kate is not Jewish. Kate has thought about converting but has decided that it would be too painful for her Catholic mother. She has worked hard to create a loving and open relationship with her mother since she came out as a lesbian and thinks that becoming Jewish would ruin the progress she has made.

Ruth and Kate had originally made an appointment with their rabbi to discuss a welcoming/*brit* ceremony they were planning for their baby. However, a few days before the appointment, a larger issue arose. A friend of theirs told them that their baby would not be Jewish because Kate is not Jewish. They were surprised and hurt when they heard this and want to know what their rabbi thinks. They have two questions: Will the baby be Jewish at the time of its birth? Must the baby go through a conversion ritual in addition to a *brit*/welcoming ceremony to be considered Jewish?

Renée Bauer is the rabbi of Congregation Mayim Rabim in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Ruth's Position

Ruth is defensive and hurt when she comes to talk to the rabbi. She explains that the process of having a child has been more difficult than she had anticipated because the larger society does not recognize her as a soon-to-be parent. She has been learning about the procedures for second parent adoption, and is angry that the courts will require that a social worker visit her and Kate to deem whether they have an appropriate home for an adoption. She perceives these laws as homophobic and they infuriate her.

She says to the rabbi, "Any straight woman can get knocked up without giving it a second thought and everyone considers her a mother. Kate and I have been talking for years about having children and how we want to raise them. But I need the courts to sanction my family." The language of adoption seems wrong to her. She is not "adopting" someone else's child. She and her partner have created this baby together.

She heard about a lesbian couple in San Francisco that received an edict from a judge that made the non-birth mother a legal parent before the baby was born. She knows that the courts in Pennsylvania would not grant this ruling, but she wishes they would. Such a ruling would acknowledge that the baby was hers from the time of conception, and recognize that the intentionality of the couple from the beginning has been that both women will be equal parents of the child that Kate is carrying.

The pain Ruth has felt in secular society heightens her feelings of anger and sense of being threatened when she learns that Jewish community may question the identity of her child. She had assumed that her baby will be recognized as a Jew because s/he will have a Jewish mother: her. For Ruth, requiring conversion is a message that the Jewish community does not see her as a parent of the child. It is equivalent in her eyes to the civil courts requiring adoption. It would tell her that her family needs to be sanctioned in a way that is not required for heterosexual families. Ruth tells the rabbi that she is dedicated to living a Jewish life and has created a Jewish home with her partner despite the fact that many parts of the Jewish community will not accept their family. She has always felt validated and welcomed as a lesbian at this synagogue and assumes her rabbi will agree with her point of view.

Kate's Position

Kate is less angry than Ruth. She has made a commitment to raise their child as a Jew and is concerned that things be done correctly to assure that the child is acknowledged as a Jew. She does not want her decision not to convert to be an obstacle for her child. Yet she is also very protective of Ruth and of her status as the baby's second parent. She is clear that the baby she is carrying is just as much Ruth's child as it is hers, and she is sensitive about any implication that this is not the case. Kate tells the rabbi that even though civil law views her as a single mother having a baby out of

wedlock she does not perceive it this way at all. She would not have gotten pregnant had she not been in a committed relationship with Ruth. Kate has witnessed the tension that can arise in lesbian couples who have children when the non-birth mother feels insecure about her status as parent. She and Ruth have been discussing these issues in depth and are trying to assure that they do not have this experience.

Ruth's Parents

Ruth explains that her parents see this baby as their grandchild. After Ruth and Kate's wedding, Ruth had many conversations with her parents about her intention to have a family. It took some time and processing for her parents to understand that when she and Kate had a child, regardless of who bore the child, it would be their grandchild. The fact that they have embraced this future child as their own is, for Ruth, the final step in their full acceptance of her lesbian identity and her partnership. Ruth explains to the rabbi that she does not know how she could explain to her parents that the baby must be converted without undermining her hard work to have them see this baby as their grandchild.

The Rabbi Responds

This is a complicated issue for a rabbi to respond to, because certain primary values are in conflict. The Reconstructionist value of creating inclusive communities and embracing gay and lesbian Jews is in tension with

the halakhic understanding of who is born a Jew, and who requires conversion. Reconstructionist communities acknowledge the validity of same-sex families yet these families are invisible in *halakha*. Therefore, trying to reconcile the range of contemporary understandings of family with the traditional Jewish notion of family is difficult.

For liberal rabbis, personal status questions (of which this case is one) are often the most complex and troublesome questions they face. The issue of whether this baby will be considered Jewish at birth is a question of status and not of identity. Status is decided by the community and not by the individual. Furthermore, it presents a binary choice. Either a person is Jewish or is not Jewish. There is no in-between when it comes to status within a given Jewish community.

Identity, however, is self-determined and can be fluid. One can identify Jewishly in different ways and to different degrees throughout one's lifetime. Being raised with a Jewish education in a Jewish home could result in a child having a strong Jewish identity. But without either having Jewish parents (or at least one Jewish parent, female by tradition, male or female according to the patrilineal policies) or a conversion, the child would not have Jewish status. Lay people in the liberal Jewish world often focus primarily on Jewish identity, but rabbis must consider issues of status as well as of identity. What is difficult for the rabbi is that while she certainly needs to act in a pastoral way, the couple wants a specific answer about the status of their child. The

rabbi is therefore required to function more in the role of a *posek* (decisor) than a pastor.

Is This Adoption?

To determine how to respond to this case, the rabbi would need to look for precedents in traditional Jewish sources as well as in Reconstructionist understandings of identity, status and lineality. First it must be determined into which (if any) traditional category this baby fits, since traditionally there is no category for a child born to two mothers. The case that would seem most closely to match the situation of Ruth and Kate's baby would be that of an adopted child. The United States legal system has used the adoption statutes to determine the rights of the non-birth parent in a same-gender couple. Adoption in civil and Jewish law is a classification for children who are parented by an adult who is not biologically related to them. Ruth indeed will be parenting a child to whom she is not genetically related, so looking for halakhic and contemporary discussions around adoption to determine how to respond to this case would be logical.

So we need to look at how Jewish law defines adoption. Rabbi Isaac Klein succinctly explains the *halakha* when he writes, "In Jewish tradition . . . ties of blood and kinship can neither be destroyed nor created. Therefore, an adopted child has the same status as his natural father."¹ And "[if] the [natural] mother is not Jewish . . . the child is required to undergo conversion."² Thus, according to *halakha* the case of Ruth

and Kate's baby should be treated the same as the case of an adopted child because both the baby's biological mother and biological father are not Jewish. Kate and Ruth's baby would need to undergo conversion to be considered a Jew under Jewish law.

The idea that adopted babies need to undergo conversion has troubled many couples who adopt and is also a matter of concern to some Reconstructionist rabbis who, while respecting the traditional requirement of conversion for adopted children, are sympathetic to and want to respect the affirmation of some adoptive parents that bringing the child into their Jewish family establishes the child's Jewish identity without conversion. Many such adoptive parents feel that the Jewish community is questioning whether their child is really part of the new adoptive family. Similar to Ruth, adoptive parents can fear that they will not be recognized as the real parents of the new baby. Additionally, they often struggle emotionally as they go through the adoption process.

Adoption as Conversion

Rabbi Michael Fessler suggests one way of addressing the adoptive parents' painful feelings while still remaining loyal to the halakhic requirement for conversion. He transvalues the conversion ritual and makes it into an adoption ceremony.³ Since Ruth and Kate's baby is seen by *halakha* as an adopted baby it is appropriate to consider using the rituals associated with conversion for them because they have the potential to address the couple's emotional

concerns while solving their halakhic problem.

Yet, although the case of adoptive parents and the case of lesbian mothers have many similarities, this new ritual does not satisfy the unique issues in this particular scenario. The new understanding Fessler places on the ceremony that includes immersion, *bet din* and circumcision is that the ceremony “would focus on welcoming the child into his or her new family and effecting a change of status of a different kind: Jewish adoption as the transfer of lineage, such that the adoptive parents are considered the real parents.”⁴ The problem with applying this idea to the lesbian family is that there is no transfer from one family to another. There is an intact family that has decided to conceive a child together. Therefore, the proposed adoption ritual cannot be used for Ruth and Kate’s child.

There are important spiritual needs that are met by Rabbi Fessler’s ritual. There is often a compelling need for adoptive parents to ritualize the inclusion of an adoptive child into their family. It is true that adopting a child, even an infant, is different from birthing a child. Pregnancy and birth are powerful experiences that prepare people to be parents and connect them to the child in a way that the adoption process normally does not. It can be helpful to mark this difference without giving it lower value. However, this is not relevant for Ruth and Kate because they are experiencing pregnancy and birth together. They are not incorporating someone else’s child into their family and therefore it must be questioned

whether adoption is the correct paradigm to use to decide upon the status of Kate and Ruth’s future child.

Civil Law Positions

The civil legal understanding of adoption differs from the halakhic understanding and casts further doubt about viewing Ruth and Kate’s family in the same category as an adoptive family. Explaining New York’s state adoption law, Rabbi Klein writes:

Though adoption is a legal fiction whereby a person who is a member of one family becomes a member of another family, in classical law, in the laws of the West today, the fiction became a fact, and “an adopted child assumes towards adoptive parents the status of a natural child, and assumes towards natural parents the status of a stranger so far as legal obligations are concerned, and adoptive parents become clothed in law with responsibilities of natural parents” (New York State Domestic Relations Law, #110, in McKinney, *Consolidated Laws of New York*, bk 14, 255).⁵

According to this civil description of adoption, Ruth and Kate’s baby is not an adopted child. The baby is not leaving one family to become part of a new one. The other natural parent, besides Kate, is the sperm donor. The sperm donor is not even aware that his sperm has led to conception. He is certainly not “another family.” He gave up his

legal rights to any future child when he donated at the sperm bank. The baby, since conception, has been part of Ruth and Kate's family. It therefore seems misguided that the United States legal system classifies same-gender families as adoptive families. Because the Reconstructionist movement is committed to embracing gays and lesbians and supporting their full legal equality in civil society, Reconstructionist rabbis are challenged to question these civil definitions of family, because they do not mirror the movement's embrace of same-sex families. With the emergence of new family structures new legal classifications, both civil and Jewish, must be created in order to make fair decisions.

Resolutions on Patrilineal Descent

The models of adoption, traditional and contemporary, are not the right models from which to make the decision about the status of Ruth and Kate's baby. Another framework must be examined. The Reform and Reconstructionist resolutions on ambilineal⁶ descent, commonly referred to as "patrilineal descent," may apply to this case. These resolutions address the status of children with one Jewish parent. According to *halakha* only children who are born of a Jewish mother are considered Jewish. But both the Reform and Reconstructionist movements have agreed to recognize as a Jew any child who is born to one Jewish parent and who is identified and raised as a Jew.

Ruth and Kate are clear that they will

raise their child with a Jewish education and the appropriate Jewish lifecycle rituals. The question here is whether the case of lesbian mothers where one partner is not Jewish can be included under these resolutions. When the (Reform) Central Conference of American Rabbis resolution states that "the child of one Jewish parent is under the presumption of Jewish descent,"⁷ or when the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association's "Guidelines on Conversion" state, "If one parent is Jewish, either mother or father, the offspring is to be regarded as Jewish . . . no special conversion procedure is required,"⁸ are these statements concerned strictly with biology?

When these positions were adopted, same-sex parents were not in the minds of the rabbis who were voting. The assumption was that "a child born to one Jewish parent" meant that she or he had a biological parent who was Jewish. The question now, nearly three decades after these documents were written, is whether these resolutions can apply to the increasing number of same-gender couples in our communities that are having children. The difference between these families and heterosexual families is that one parent is not related biologically to the baby. Thus, we must ask whether the case of Ruth and Kate would be different if the sperm donor was Jewish, and whether the sperm donor is a "parent" of the child.

Reconstructing Models of "Descent"

It seems that the child born to a same-sex couple, in which only one

partner is Jewish and in which the couple decided and acted on having the child together, indeed has “one Jewish parent.” There is a strong tradition of Jewish identity being passed biologically, but as the nature of how some babies are conceived changes, the question of how Jewish descent is passed on needs to be reconsidered. Making the genetics of the anonymous sperm donor the determinative factor in Jewish descent would place “Jewish descent” entirely in the realm of genetics. Jewish identity by way of “descent” should be expanded to include the children of either parent who causes the child to be conceived, regardless of whether that parent is genetically related.

The way in which the Hebrew language describes birth can help demonstrate why a non-birth mother can be likened to a biological father. The Hebrew root *y-l-d* creates the verbs for birthing. This root is only used in the *kal* (active) form when describing the action of the mother who physically gives birth to the child. The *hifil* form, “to cause to birth,” is used to describe the actions of both a father and of a midwife. In different ways, a father or midwife “cause the baby to be born,” but neither literally births the child. Similarly, the *hifil* form can thus describe what the non-birth mother in a lesbian couple does. Although in a different way than either a father or a midwife, she also “causes the baby to be born.” She participates in the insemination of her partner and she supports her partner through the pregnancy. The major difference between her and a biological father is that her genes are

not given to the baby.

This analogy has its problems. For example, most lesbian mothers do not want to be seen as fathers. Also, discounting the importance of the sperm donor can be seen as devaluing the role of the biological father in the birth of their children. Despite these dangers, the comparison is helpful in determining into what legal category the non-birth mother fits. It helps to clarify how children that are conceived by same-sex couples are not the same as adoptive children. They have their own unique identity issues that are different from those of adopted children. The spirit and/or intent of the ambilineality positions can be used to decide the status of these children.

Dr. Bethamie Horowitz, in her report to the Commission on Jewish Identity and Renewal of the UJA-Federation of New York, teaches that in our multicultural contemporary world it is more useful to view a person’s “Jewish identity as necessarily linked to that individual’s experience over time.”⁹ People form their Jewish identity through the experiences they live through over the course of their lives and they create a narrative of their Jewish lives based on their experiences. Accordingly, rabbis must be sensitive in handling lifecycle moments because these events stand out in people’s narratives.

A Resolution

The lineality positions of both the Reconstructionist and Reform movements are in need of clarification, and

not only with regard to being inclusive of same-sex parents. But in terms of that specific concern, and based on the above analysis of Ruth and Kate's situation, an inclusive emendation to the Reform and Reconstructionist lineality positions would be to have them read "A child born of or to a couple, one of whom is Jewish. . . ."

In light of that reframing, and through this process of careful consideration, it should be concluded that even in the absence of the proposed rewording, the current ambilineality decisions of the CCAR and the RRA should govern Ruth and Kate's case and therefore their baby will not need to undergo conversion to have status as a Jew. Because the baby is being born to one Jewish parent, Reform and Reconstructionist communities should recognize the baby as a Jew at the time of his/her birth.

Ruth and Kate will need to know that this decision would challenge some people in the liberal Jewish world because it redefines what it means to be "born a Jew." In the Conservative and Orthodox worlds the child would not be seen as a Jew, so the couple would need to decide if they wanted to go through conversion for this reason. But the rabbi should be reiterate that the child will be fully recognized as a Jew in Ruth and Kate's congregational community.

Rabbis should not decide status issues solely on the basis of how the lay person will respond and how it will affect her/his personal Jewish story, but

they must be aware of this phenomenon when they make their decisions. For example, Kate and Ruth's narrative of their Jewish journey and their baby's future story will be shaped by how the rabbi decides their case. It is important that the narrative be one of acceptance. In a world that questions the validity of same-sex families, the Jewish community should be a beacon of validation. We can do this by affirming the truth not of the blood relations of the family but of the intentionality behind the creation of the child.

1. Isaac Klein, *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, KTAV, 1992), 436.

2. *Ibid.*, 437.

3. Michael Fessler, "Adoption and Jewish Families: A Proposal," *The Reconstructionist*, Fall 2001.

4. *Ibid.*, 58.

5. Klein, *op. cit.*, 436.

6. ". . . often mislabeled 'patrilineal,' which would imply that only Jewish fathers and not mothers convey Jewish status to offspring. This may have been the case in the biblical period, but does not accurately describe the liberal movements' current position." Fessler, *op. cit.*, 59.

7. Walter Jacob, ed., CCAR Responsa #38 in *Contemporary American Reform Responsa* (New York: CCAR Press).

8. From RRA Guidelines on Conversion, as quoted in Jacob Staub, "A Reconstructionist View on Patrilineal Descent," *Judaism*, #133, 34:1, Winter 1985, 98.

9. Bethamie Horowitz, *Connections and Journeys: Assessing Critical Opportunities for Enhancing Jewish Identity*, UJA-Federation

From “Two Civilizations” to Multiple Identities

BY SUSAN P. SCHEIN

In many ways, Jeun Benjamin Smith is a typical 12-year-old American boy: he plays basketball, loves watches re-runs of *The Simpsons*, and always needs to be reminded that it's his turn to set the table. But, in other ways, Jeun is unique: he is Korean by birth, was adopted into an interfaith home, and is Jewish by conversion.

Conferring of Jewish Identity

Jeun's mother, Sarah Levi, was born into a traditional Jewish home. When she and Tony Smith were married, Tony agreed to raise their children according to Jewish custom even though he was born a Catholic (now “recovering,” as he puts it) and had no intention of converting to Judaism. After four years of marriage, the latter two of which involved fertility treatments, the couple decided to pursue adoption. The following year, 10 month-old Jeun arrived from Korea and became the center of Sarah and Tony's life in West Podunk, Washington. Three years later, the family adopted a baby girl, Leesa, also from Korea.

After the initial excitement of bringing their new son home, Sarah and Tony contacted a Reform rabbi nearby

in Seattle to find out what would be involved in ritually welcoming baby Jeun into the family. Since the baby was still relatively young, the rabbi suggested *brit mila*, but the parents were ambivalent. Instead, the rabbi performed a conversion that involved *évilá* (immersion) in a local stream (witnessed by a *bet din* comprised of the rabbi and Sarah's two Jewish friends from childhood) and a baby-naming ceremony in the couple's backyard. Leesa's conversion and baby-naming were essentially identical. As Jeun and Leesa grew up, the family lit *Shabbos* candles together most Friday nights and visited Sarah's parents in Chicago to celebrate Passover and Hanukkah.

When Tony's job transferred the family to the Philadelphia suburbs five years ago, the Levi-Smiths finally had an opportunity to participate in Jewish communal life. They immediately joined Reconstructionist Congregation Beth Am, and, at ages 7 and 4, respectively, Jeun and Leesa were enrolled in the twice-weekly religious school. Beth Am's student body was comprised of children from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds. Both Jeun and Lisa got along well with their new Jewish peers and enjoyed the Jewish curriculum.

Susan P. Schein is the assistant rabbi of Congregation Kol Emet in Yardley, Pennsylvania.

Questioning Identity?

It is now just over a year away from Jeun becoming bar mitzva. Although he still regularly attends Beth Am's religious school, Jeun often puts up a fight about going. He much prefers to spend time with his Korean-American friends from public school. A week before he and his parents are scheduled to discuss the year-long bar mitzva preparations with me, Beth Am's rabbi, Jeun blurts out that he doesn't want to become bar mitzva. After a long conversation with his parents, Jeun finally reveals that he had heard that the rabbi at the neighboring synagogue would not allow an uncircumcised boy to become bar mitzva without first having a *bris*. Jeun is terrified. The next day, Sarah calls to inform me of the situation.

What is going on for Jeun? As a pre-pubescent male, he is understandably terrified by the physical implications of *brit mila*.¹ Although Jeun was not born Jewish, he has been Jewish for as long as he can remember. In Washington, this identity rarely was expressed publicly, because few Jews lived in West Podunk, and there were few or no expressions of Jewish life in the community. If classmates teased him or gave him a hard time about being different, it was because of his externally visible identity as a Korean.

In Philadelphia, Jeun has been able to explore more of what it means to be Jewish by learning about Judaism and celebrating Jewish holidays and rituals with the congregation. His religious school teachers and classmates always treat him like all of the other children,

so he never has questioned his status as a Jew. The idea of becoming bar mitzva had always seemed "kinda cool" to him, even though it's supposed to be a lot of work; but, when he heard that this other kid needed to be circumcised in order to become bar mitzva, Jeun no longer was interested. Not only did it seem weird (not to mention painful) to cut off his foreskin, it also made him wonder why his Jewish status might be in dispute at all. Hadn't he undergone conversion as a baby? Who gets to decide? There were enough unknowns in Jeun's life these days — like, what teams should he try out for, what does he think of girls, and who is he going to be? He had thought that his Jewish identity was one of the stable parts of his life!

Affirming Ethnic Identity

Another issue for Jeun had to do with his Korean identity. While his sister, Leesa, is also Korean, Jeun feels a sense of disconnect with his "white" parents and many of the kids in public school and at Beth Am. His Korean-American friends try not to be too cliquey, but there is no question that they have a special camaraderie with one another. They can relate to what it means to be both at home and out of place in America.

Some say that conversion to Judaism is challenging, because Jewish ethnic identity only comes through birth. But Jeun doesn't have problems with the ethnic Jewish piece, because he did grow up Jewish. Moreover, he likes Jewish religious expressions, like

holidays, prayers and the Hebrew language, because they make more sense to him than Christianity. Still, Jeun doesn't look Jewish and, consequently, he feels a bit like an outsider. None of Jeun's Korean friends are Jewish, but they "get him" on a different level. One could say that Jeun considers Judaism to be his religion, while his ethnicity is Korean. Overall, he feels rather betwixt and between right now.

Jeun's mother Sarah always wanted to raise a storybook Jewish family of her own. This dream was modified when she and Tony fell in love in college, and shifted once again when they discovered they were unable to conceive. Fortunately, at some point Sarah realized that her life was richer for these deviations from her original norm. Tony is a fabulous husband, and she could not imagine more loving and sweet children. While she had thought that Jeun should be circumcised at the time of his conversion, she simply could not put her precious little baby through yet another trauma.

Autonomy and Connection

In general, Sarah and Tony did the best that they could to juggle their professions in light of the best interests of the children. When the opportunity arose for Tony to be transferred to Philadelphia, Sarah lobbied for it strongly, despite complications in her own career, because she wanted the kids to live in a vibrant Jewish community. She was thrilled to find Beth Am, but she began to worry when Jeun started to rebel against religious school this

past year. He was coming to a point in his life where his upbringing (descent) alone would not sustain him. Like all of his Jewish peers, Jeun would have to make his Jewish identity a priority (assent) over other interests and enticements when it came time to prepare for his bar mitzva. In the past, without coercion, he simply had done what Sarah had told him to do; now, he would have to choose bar mitzva of his own volition. Jeun was about to take his first steps on the path to adulthood, and bar mitzva would be an important time of transition. Would Jeun be able to assert his autonomy while remaining connected? What could Sarah or anyone else do to help him maintain continuity with his Jewish life experience thus far and enable him to continue to mature Jewishly?

Jeun's father, Tony, had agreed to raise any children as Jews, but he personally had little interest in organized religion. Although Shabbat and holiday celebrations were enjoyable and helped him feel connected with his wife and children, he founds some of the rituals to be downright weird. Kissing the Torah seemed idolatrous, and circumcision was barbaric! Tony had not been circumcised; why should his son be any different?

Jeun's sister, Leesa, loved being Jewish. She always got the "Most Outstanding Student" award in religious school and could read Hebrew better than anyone in her class. She would be willing to be circumcised if she could. Why can't she do something to show how important her Jewish identity is to her?

Jeun's maternal grandparents were always worried about their daughter, Sarah: would she make a living, find a nice boy to marry, have children? Of course, it hasn't turned out the way they had expected, but they know that she's happy with her life, and that's all that really matters now. When Sarah called to tell them that Jeun was afraid of having to be circumcised, they suggested she talk with her rabbi. The rabbi would know what to do.

Synagogue and Rabbi

Beth Am's president, Larry Greenberg, knows about Jeun's fears. Sarah had called him the day after Jeun's blow-up to ascertain the congregation's policy on conversion. Larry informed her that Beth Am doesn't have a policy; that's the rabbi's domain. Sarah then told Larry that Jeun was never circumcised and that she worried that the rabbi wouldn't allow him to become bar mitzva. Larry tried to comfort her by explaining that he personally didn't care if Jeun was circumcised. Actually, he was more interested in Jeun's Korean extraction and how that relates to his Jewish identity and his participation in Jewish life at Beth Am. Larry suggested that perhaps Jeun should talk about what it means for him to be a Korean-American Jew at the bar mitzva.

While on the topic, he let Sarah know that the issue of bar mitzva has been addressed at recent board meetings, because these celebrations seem to be taking over Shabbat services at Beth Am. The board is looking to find a better balance between the bar/bat

mitzva family's needs and those of the community.

When Sarah phoned to tell me, the rabbi, about Jeun's predicament, I let her know that I appreciated the heads-up and would think about it before our scheduled appointment. In analyzing the situation, I first considered the motivations of the other rabbis involved. The Reform rabbi in Seattle sought to uphold tradition by suggesting *brit mila*. Nonetheless, both his training and the fact that he suggested, rather than required, *brit mila* show that he was influenced to a greater extent by the modern concept of choice, rather than fate or obligation.

Had the Levi-Smith family remained in Washington State and become members of that same Reform rabbi's congregation, it is possible that Jeun would have been required to have *brit mila* before becoming bar mitzva. This would have adhered to the language and intent of the Reform rabbinate's 1983 "Resolution Regarding Children of Mixed Marriage" which presumes Jewish status "to be established through appropriate and timely public and formal acts of identification with the Jewish faith and people."² The Conservative rabbi at the neighboring synagogue is obligated to uphold *halakha* (Jewish law). Accordingly, she would expect that a Jewish male on the verge of accepting the "yoke of Torah" as a bar mitzva, or as an adult Jew, would be circumcised. In both of these cases, the rabbi's decision reflects a model in which rabbis are the gatekeepers of the Jewish (sacred) symbol system.

Religious Humanism

As a Reconstructionist rabbi, the first thing that comes to my mind is Mordecai Kaplan's question: do the Jewish people exist for Judaism, or does Judaism exist for the Jewish people? Is it more important for me to respond to this human being whose concerns exist in this very moment or to worry about the *halakha* and the Jewish people of the past and future? Reconstructionism is a humanistic movement; we are as concerned about people as we are about issues. Even so, how do I balance my obligation to *klal Yisrael* (the greater Jewish community) both horizontally (across the spectrum of Jews living today) and vertically (with Jews of the past and the future)? After all, according to Manfred Vogel, any presumption of definition must be grounded in the group, not in the individual. While the halakhic question of "who is a Jew?" is not at work here, the more modern question of "what is a Jew?" is.³ When Jeun approaches the congregation, wanting to become bar mitzva but not having had *brit mila*, we can either: 1) exclude him from doing so, by reaffirming an existing policy; 2) find a way to accommodate him within the group model (through transvaluation); or, 3) revisit our congregational norm and then perhaps reconsider it.

To some extent, it's fortunate that Beth Am has no congregational policy on the matter. Still, do we have a common set of norms that dictate what a bar mitzva should be, do or know? Yes, but these expectations are grounded more in action/praxis (such as chant-

ing from the Torah) than in status. Using the traditional legal concepts of points of intervention — *lekhatzila* (in advance) and *b'diavad* (after the fact) — the decision becomes much clearer. Were I helping the family decide whether to perform *brit mila* at the infant's conversion ritual, based on the needs and particulars of that family, I could lobby for circumcision on many grounds. However, encountering the family these many years later, it's *b'diavad*.

Then, there is the issue of embodiment. Some uncircumcised boys, born to Jewish parents,⁴ experience the physicality of their Jewish identity by virtue of the fact that they have Jewish biological/genetic ancestry. As an adopted non-Jewish child, Jeun's physical being will not embody his Jewish identity without *brit mila*. Oddly enough, that same absence of circumcision will maintain his connections with his adoptive family. Jeun has the most in common with his sister, Leesa, with whom he shares his ethnic Korean heritage and lack of genetic bond with the Jewish people. Since she will not be able to experience *brit mila* when she becomes bat mitzva, this ritual might only serve to distance him from her.

Jeun's adoptive father, Tony, is uncircumcised; *brit mila* would physically distinguish these two men of the family from one another when they already differ in their religious and ethnic identities. The only family member to whom Jeun may be brought closer by virtue of the embodiment of *brit mila* is his Jewish mother, Sarah. But Sarah did not accept the Reform rabbi's

suggestion to circumcise her newly adopted ten-month-old son, and it is unlikely that she would suddenly advocate strongly for *brit mila* at this juncture in Jeun's life. It seems that circumcision will not connect Jeun with the very same family with whom he will be living out his Jewish identity.

Establishing Priorities in Context

Given the particulars of Jeun's situation — being terrified, pre-pubescent, and of Korean ethnic background, not to mention having a non-Jewish father — requiring or even recommending *brit mila* would likely do more harm than good. At the same time, the situation is *lekhathila* with regard to bar mitzva. At this juncture, there is still time to help this boy and his family feel more connected with his Jewish identity and to affirm his Jewish status in the eyes of the wider Jewish community. Rituals such as *brit mila* have mythic power, but so does bar mitzva. What this child lacks in descent, he certainly can gain through assent, that is, through positive, identity-and-status-affirming rituals. Jeun can become a link in the chain of tradition by leading the community in prayer and chanting from the Torah.

Rather than being a passive recipient of Jewish tradition, Jeun is ready to be an active and engaged Jew. Bar mitzva is precisely the time for the nexus of the descent and assent vectors of identity. In Jeun's case, an emphasis on assent will allow him to take ownership of the identity that does not belong to

him through birth. Requiring *brit mila* at this juncture would be a halakhic technicality and might discourage Jeun from becoming bar mitzva and, therefore, from further exploring his place on the ethnic-religious vector. If Jeun needs to be a Jewish (religious) Korean-American (ethnic), then his bar mitzva process and ceremony should affirm him in this multi-dimensional identity.

According to Michael Chenlov's research, religious identity generates the ethnic in certain cases.⁵ While much of American Jewry reflects the opposite direction/vector, that is, ethnicity generating religious identity, the combination of Jeun's ethnic Korean identity and his lack of association with the Jewish community during his early years may trump Jewish ethnicity. Jeun's religious identity was assigned to him upon adoption; let's find a way to help him actively choose Judaism as one of his ethnic identities as well.

Ultimately, as Mordecai Kaplan taught, we can only work with the community we are handed. As always, rabbis can shape the conversation about a particular issue, but the people will decide, over time, what the norm is. Today's fourth and fifth generation Jews who make up the majority of the Jewish community in America have a very different relationship with Judaism than their relatives from the "old country" did. While on a local/individual level the rabbi can determine what this young man should do, on the wide/long-term level the community will decide what should be done in similar situations.

Rabbinic Response

At this point in time, as the rabbi I must remain true to my values. My bottom line has less to do with my overall attitude toward *brit mila* than with my commitment to individual meaning-making that does not sacrifice the integrity of the community. It is fairly clear that pressuring Jeun to conform to *halakha* and tradition will only serve to alienate him, and probably his family, from Judaism. Finally, before my meeting with Jeun's family, I will remind myself that how I am responsive is much more important than what my response is.

After welcoming the Levi-Smith family into my office and shmoozing for a few moments, I would explain that Jewish identity is a fluid process which has not one but many defining moments along the way. While birth/adoption and infant conversion confirm Jewish identity, they are passive moments, because they are determined by an outside force, such as heredity or the decision of one's parents. Bar/bat mitzva is the first identity marker that a Jewish person determines, albeit most commonly in conjunction with one's parents. Bar/bat mitzva is a "moment when you affirm who you are and choose who you will become."⁶ It is both an affirmation of who one has been and an opportunity to shape who one will become. For Jeun, as someone who was converted before he was cognizant of what was happening, bar mitzva is all the more powerful as an affirmation of Jewish identity.

Managing Multiple Identities

In order to clear the air early on, I would next speak to Jeun's concern about *brit mila*. First I would acknowledge that Sarah had informed me that Jeun knew of someone who could not become bar mitzva without *brit mila*. Then I would explain that I am available to speak with Jeun and his family about *brit mila* — its origins, history and meaning today, and what would be involved in the circumcision of a young man rather than a baby.

Finally, I would make clear that I do not consider circumcision a necessary pre-requisite to Jeun becoming bar mitzva. Neither I nor this congregation questions Jeun's status as a Jew. Once Jeun's fears had been assuaged, we would discuss this matter for as long as the family felt necessary.

Thereupon, I would address Jeun's interest in his Korean friends. As this family knows from my teaching, Mordecai Kaplan, the first Reconstructionist, identified the situation of the Jews in America as "living in two civilizations." In 21st century America, we actually live in multiple civilizations, because of our many identities and overlapping communities, such as gender, interfaith, gay/straight, ethnicity, disabled or elderly, to name a few. At different times and in various ways, particular aspects of our identity need attention or nurturing.

Conversion makes this particularly obvious, since one's family of origin — whether known or unknown — belongs to another faith group and sometimes, as in Jeun's case, a differ-

ent ethnic and/or national grouping. Some Reconstructionist rabbis consider conversion to be akin to taking on citizenship, that is, becoming a member of a group. Certain countries allow dual citizenship; some do not. If we were to apply this formula to Judaism, it is fairly evident that Judaism does not permit dual “citizenship” when it comes to religious identity.

However, dual or multiple ethnic identities are part of what makes Jewish tradition so interesting! It is essentially for this reason that we have distinct Ashkenazi and Sephardi *minhagim* (customs). Jews in Central and Eastern Europe were influenced by Christian society in Germany, Poland, Russia and neighboring countries, and incorporated elements of those cultures into Jewish life there (whether they were aware of it or not). Similarly, Jews in Spain, Portugal, Morocco and other Mediterranean countries were influenced by their Muslim neighbors and adapted some of the customs being practiced there into their Jewish rituals. The same applies to us today: had American values, such as equality for men and women, not been incorporated into Jewish life, I would not be a rabbi!

Behaving and Belonging

Judaism is very much about behaving, that is, about what we do: for example, lighting Shabbat candles, teaching our children, helping those in need (with *tzedaka* and *g'milut hasadim*), and preventing the suffering of

animals (*tza'ar ba'alei hayyim*). Jeun has participated in all of these *mitzvot* with his family and in Beth Am's religious school.

Another very important aspect of Judaism is belonging. This is expressed through participation in community. Bar mitzva is an important time to affirm one's sense of belonging to something bigger than oneself.

When Jeun's family came to Beth Am five years ago, they had not previously belonged to a Jewish community; now, they are an integral part of this congregation, both as a family and as individuals. The community has been enhanced by their presence, because they have brought themselves as they truly are. Jeun has shared his love of sports and his commitment to animals; Leesa, her musical abilities; Tony brought his passion for the environment by designing the congregational vegetable garden; and, Sarah's artistic talents have helped to beautify our sanctuary. In these ways, each of them has acted to support our community.

However, and this is important, even if they had not lifted a finger to contribute tangibly, they would have enriched the community by their very presence. Jeun and Leesa, as Korean-American Jews, have helped to broaden Beth Am's understanding of who we are as a Jewish community. As Leesa and Jeun continue to learn about their Korean ancestry, we hope that they will educate us about these parts of themselves and share with the congregation what it means for them to have such a rich cultural heritage.

Nurturing Existing Connections

When making a decision regarding a congregant's status as a Jew, a rabbi must consider that person's individual situation in the context of his/her family, community and the wider Jewish world. A circumcision alone will not make someone Jewish. In this case, a rabbi's insistence on circumcision might negatively impact Jeun's feelings toward Judaism and compromise his identification with the Jewish people.

Given his young age, it is important for Jeun to experience the rhythms of Jewish life and to find meaningful expression of his Jewish identity. As the rabbi, I can best nurture and enrich his existing connection with Judaism by affirming his interest in becoming bar mitzva, supporting him in his Jewish learning and challenging him to continue to grow Jewishly. Whether the greater Jewish community regards Jeun as a Jew should not be the primary concern at this time. Should his Jewish status become an issue, he can choose

circumcision later in life.

For now, Jeun's sense of Jewish identity resides within himself, his family and his congregation and has the best chance of remaining strong through continued positive affirmation.

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1. Which would terrify most males but would be exacerbated during this pre-adolescent's liminal time of sexual development and identity formation.
 2. "Report of the Committee on Patrilineal Descent on the Status of the Children of Mixed Marriages," adopted March 14, 1983, in *American Reform Responsa. Collected Responsa of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1889-1983*, ed. Walter Jacob (New York: CCCAR, 1983), 550.
 3. Manfred H. Vogel, "Some Reflections on the Question of Jewish Identity" in *Reform Judaism*, 30:1, 120, Winter 1983, 1-2.
 4. Regardless of patrilineality.
 5. Michael A. Chenlov, "Patterns of Jewish Identity in the Modern World," *Midstream*, 46:6, Sept.-Oct. 2000, 2-7.
 6. Richard Hirsh used this formulation in a class at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College.

Seeking the *Tzelem*: Making Sense of Dementia¹

BY DAYLE A. FRIEDMAN

The specter of dementia is terribly frightening. We dread the humiliating prospect of losing continence, the agitation of no longer knowing where or who we are, the vulnerability of being at the mercy of strangers caring for us. This is terrain no one wants to enter.

Undoubtedly, anyone who has encountered dementia in a family or at work has witnessed scenes of great tenderness as well as heartrending pathos. I have been confronting the mysterious world of dementia for more than 25 years in my work with elders. What follows is an exploration of the meaning of dementia and an effort to put it in a theological context. My hope is that this reflection will shed light on the work of spiritual accompaniment with individuals with dementia. Since the challenge of dementia is not abstract, but a lived reality, I begin this exploration by describing a few of the elders whose journeys inform my reflections.²

Profiles

Mr. Shapiro, a retired pharmacist, was always impeccably dressed in a suit and tie when he lived at the nurs-

ing home. He often stopped me to ask if I ever got headaches, and if I'd like to know how to get rid of them. I replied that I did, on occasion, get headaches, and would appreciate learning a technique to cope with them. Mr. Shapiro showed me that by rubbing my forehead with thumb and finger, I could reduce the pain of the headache. Though he did not remember our encounters when next we met, I understood that he was a helper and a healer, and he was striving to continue to be authentically himself.

I met Mrs. Schwartz as I came onto her nursing home floor to conduct Shabbat services. Obviously distraught, she was near tears. She asked me to help her. "I must find my way home. I'm very late, and my mother is waiting for me. She'll be so worried."

I could count on meeting Mrs. Applebaum whenever I approached the nurses' station on her floor. She was always pacing frantically back and forth, stopping every passerby to ask the time. I watched as she got a variety of answers from the staff and visitors, some more patient than others. After perhaps the tenth such exchange, Mrs. Applebaum shouted out in exasperation, "This day is never going to end!"

Rabbi Dayle A. Friedman is the founding director of Hiddur: The Center for Aging and Judaism of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College.

Mrs. Goldberg was an East-European-born woman with quite advanced dementia. She could no longer speak, but she could sing, and sing she did, all day and all night. She had an amazing ability to take up any melody you started, in any genre — Broadway, folk, liturgical, klezmer. She didn't sing the words, only "la-la" — but with great gusto. Teenage volunteers in the nursing home adored being with Mrs. Goldberg. They lovingly called her "the la-la lady" and competed to sit next to her in the synagogue.

Mrs. Stein was always brought to Shabbat services in her nursing home unit. She would sit slumped over in her geri-chair through the entire service; it was not clear if she was asleep or awake. When we sang the *Shema*, Mrs. Stein would invariably open her eyes and murmur the words.

Encountering dementia is demanding, often surprising and sometimes even exalting. Confront it we must, for it is all around us as our community continues to age. In this quest to make sense of dementia, I want to explore what dementia means to the person, to those around her, and, with supreme *hutzpa*, to God. I will then suggest how these observations can guide the work of spiritual accompaniment with individuals with dementia.

Defining Dementia

Dementia currently affects about four million Americans. Given the dramatic graying of the American population, this number is expected to rise to 14 million by 2050. According

to current estimates, about 10 percent of those over 65 and 50 percent of those over 85 have dementia. Based on the 2000 National Jewish Population Survey's estimate of 956,000 Jewish elders in the United States, there are at least 95,000 American Jewish elders with dementia today.³

Dementia is often equated with Alzheimer's disease. In reality, it is broader than Alzheimer's disease. Dementia refers to a number of related disorders that feature ". . . significant, progressive losses in mental ability, usually but not always in the elderly. Symptoms of dementia include impairment in judgment, thinking, memory and learning as well as possible changes in personality, mood and behavior."⁴ Dementia can last for years, and is sometimes broken down into early, middle and late stages. The early stage is characterized by loss of short-term memory and mild confusion; the middle stage includes more dramatic confusion and loss of memory and judgment, and also often includes incontinence; the late stage involves nearly total deterioration of physical functioning, including, eventually, the ability to eat, to speak and to move about unaided.

The Challenge of Dementia: A Phenomenological Description

What is it like to live with dementia? Is it solely a journey of suffering? Can we even know? Any characterization I offer must be with humility, since I have not been there; I have only witnessed this experience from the outside.

One way to conceive of dementia

is as a *midbar*, a wilderness. For the ancient Israelites, the 40 years of sojourning in the *midbar* after their liberation from slavery were mysterious and difficult. They wandered with few guideposts toward an unknown destination. They could not sustain themselves without divine help. They were vulnerable before people they met along the way, and before the harsh realities of nature. They could not return to Egypt, the place of their memories, and they could not truly imagine what lay ahead.

Perhaps people with dementia experience their lives as a kind of *midbar*. The loss of memory is the hallmark of their condition. This memory loss is distinct from the ever-duller recall with which those of us in midlife or beyond contend. For example: I am constantly misplacing my keys, desperately trying to recall the name of that colleague I always enjoy running into at professional conferences, and searching for the word that is on the tip of my tongue. Annoying though it is, this memory loss is normal, and not symptomatic of dementia; it is what gerontologists call “benign forgetfulness.”

The person with dementia experiences a progressive loss of memory as first short-term and eventually nearly all memory becomes inaccessible. The awareness of this loss is most acute in the early phase of dementia. The sense that one is losing one’s memory can be terrifying. Depression and agitation are often concomitants of early-stage dementia. Losing our memory means losing our connection to ourselves and, eventually, to those who have shared

our lives.

The Present Moment

When you cannot remember the past and cannot conceive of the future, what you are left with is the present moment. Being present in and aware of the moment at hand can bring joy if the moment is positive and despair if it is not, for in that moment of *midbar* nothing else is imaginable. It can be a sweet and tender privilege simply to sit with a person with dementia, just holding hands, just being there, without distraction or agenda.

The *midbar* in which the Israelites wandered contained places of beauty and moments of amazing power. This is also true for the *midbar* of dementia. While memory and other faculties may fade, many people experience an unabated capacity for joy and love, at least until the final stages of the disease.

Diana Friel McGowin wrote a fascinating memoir of her journey through *dementia*. In it, she passionately asserts her continued engagement with life:

If I am no longer a woman, why do I still feel I’m one? If no longer worth holding, why do I crave it? If no longer sensual, why do I still enjoy the soft texture of satin and silk against my skin? If no longer sensitive, why do moving song lyrics strike a responsive chord in me? My every molecule seems to scream out that I do, indeed, exist, and that existence must be valued by someone!⁵

When short-term memory fails,

the world around one can offer many surprises. Rita Bresnahan observed this about her mother's experience with dementia:

And she [my mother] is constantly surprised — by flowers that have been in her room for days, or by visitors who just step out of the room for a while. “Oh,” she exclaims, smiling broadly at their return, delighted to see them as if they have just come. She lives David Steindl-Rast's words: “Any inch of surprise can lead to miles of gratefulness.”⁶

Oases of Connection

There are remarkable oases of connection to be found in the *midbar* of dementia. Against the background of so much loss, I have sometimes seen an especially keen appreciation for life's goodness. For example, one daughter described a sublime afternoon spent sitting with her father as they wordlessly watched the autumn leaves falling outside the window of the nursing home. The two of them were completely absorbed in nature's drama. They had no need for words or action.

In the *yotzer* (creation) prayer, we praise the Eternal for “renewing in goodness each day the work of creation.”⁷ The person for whom a familiar, beloved person or object can continually seem a surprise is living those words. In this experience of delight, in which each moment seems new, the person with dementia may experience what the rest of us are too

busy to notice: each moment is a gift, and not to be taken for granted.

Depersonalization

Unfortunately, the person living with dementia often suffers from being treated as a non-person. In his courageous book *Dementia Reconsidered*, Tom Kitwood decries what he calls the depersonalizing tendencies of malignant social psychology. He lists seventeen dehumanizing responses to people with dementia, of which the following seem particularly salient:

Treachery: using deception to distract, manipulate or force the person into compliance;

Disempowerment: depriving the individual of control over his or her life;

Infantilization: treating people with dementia like “wrinkled babies” instead of mature adults with history, dignity and will;⁸

Invalidation: failing to acknowledge the subjective reality of a person's experience or feelings; and

Objectification: treating the person as if he or she were “a lump of dead matter to be pushed, lifted, filled, pumped, or drained, without proper reference to the fact that they are sentient beings.”⁹

These dehumanizing responses are rampant in settings in which elders with dementia receive care. There are extreme examples, such as a staff member telling an elder who asks to be taken to the bathroom that she wears diapers and should just urinate in them. But there are also more insidious forms of dehumanization, such as using terms of endearment in speaking to an elder;

perhaps the retired physician doesn't want to be called "sweetie," nor does the homemaker necessarily want to be told how "cute" she looks. Every time staff members speak about an elder as if they are not present, the elder's dignity is assaulted. Each approach by an escort who begins pushing a wheelchair without addressing the person in it is a diminution of that individual's personhood.

The experience of wandering in the *midbar* of dementia is made harsher by the social context that surrounds it. Just as the Israelites were at the mercy of sometimes hostile others in the wilderness, so those with dementia are vulnerable to attacks on their dignity through dehumanizing treatment. Conversely, the suffering of the person with dementia can be eased by love, respect and tenderness.

Family Caregivers: Loving the Stranger

When our family's beloved Grammy Anne suddenly became extremely impaired, unable to converse sensibly or relate to anything but frightening delusions, my sister Jill continued to visit her almost daily, and cared for her with great devotion. My sister sadly remarked, "This is not Grammy. The person we loved is gone." Encountering dementia in someone we love raises painful questions about what it is that makes us ourselves. This questioning is why David Keck teaches that dementia is a theological disease.¹⁰

As my family discovered, it is demanding to relate to someone you love

whose personality has been distorted by dementia. Often, the change is negative, as when a distinguished woman whose inhibitions have been diminished by dementia suddenly shouts profanities she would never have dreamed of uttering. Sometimes, the change can be a salutary one, as I learned when I met the family of Esther, the woman who loved to sing. "You must enjoy her so much. She is such a delight," I said. "We do," her daughter said, "especially since she was not always like this. She was tough to live with!" Esther's dementia brought her family a new opportunity to know and appreciate her, in a way that was never before possible.

Loving a person with dementia means facing a long, slow farewell, losing your dear one a little bit at a time. You experience the loss anew every time you see the person you love, and see again how different she is from the way she used to be. This is an ongoing bereavement, but one without routine social or spiritual acknowledgment or support.

Reverence and Honor

The person who loves someone with dementia faces a Herculean task of caring for an ever-diminishing body and mind with *mora* (reverence) and *kavod* (honor).¹¹ One may need to adjust to radically changed roles as a loved one copes with dementia. The direction of power and dependency may shift. There may be weighty new responsibilities and knotty dilemmas as one balances respect for the person's wishes with concerns for his or her safety and

well-being. Becoming a caregiver for a parent does not mean that you are now your parent's parent, but it is a painful realignment of roles nonetheless.

Bresnahan suggests that acceptance is a key part of the task in caring for a parent with dementia. It is so painful to surrender to our inability to fix the inexorable fading of the one we love. "More than anything," she writes, "I need to accept Mom where she is — and accept my own limitations as well. I once heard another caregiver explain to a fellow elevator-rider, 'There is nothing I can do for him, and I am doing it.'"¹²

One way of articulating the caregiver's spiritual challenge is: "You shall love the stranger."¹³ The Torah teaches us in Exodus 23:9 that we must treat the stranger with care, "for you know the soul of the stranger." The stranger before us is the very person you have known and loved for all these years. In the confrontation with dementia, you are asked: can you love this so-familiar and yet totally strange person before you? Can you let go of the expectation that she will behave or appear as she used to, and appreciate her for who she is now? In loving the stranger, can you learn from this person and her journey? The poet Betsy Sholl puts the challenge eloquently:

This old woman...
isn't my mother,
is not what I think.
She's a spiritual master
trying to teach me
how to carry my soul lightly
how to make each step

an important journey,
every motion and breath
anywhere
as though anywhere
were the center of the earth.¹⁴

It is a supreme challenge to love the stranger. Certainly, we have a mandate from the Torah to do just that, hard and painful though it be. That this challenge of caring for a loved one with dementia can go on for years, or even decades, makes it even more heroic to overcome impatience, grief and frustration and lovingly do what needs to be done.

Professional Caregivers: Transcending Assumptions

Taking on the job of professionally caring for a person with dementia is provocative. In our society, many of us are hypercognitive, primarily identified with our intellectual sides. We believe we are our brains, so we believe that witnessing the erosion of cognition is witnessing the diminution of personhood. Tom Kitwood suggests that in confronting dementia two primal fears are aroused: fear of frailty/dependency and fear of dying/death.¹⁵

Many people distance themselves from people with dementia in order to be spared these frightening prospects. In their study of life in an assisted living community, Susan McFadden and her colleagues describe a meeting with a local parish pastor in the elevator. When asked about his visit, he replied, "Well, I have three members here . . . but two are out of it so I just said hello

and left my card.”¹⁶

The stigma that our society attaches to those with cognitive impairments such as dementia can lead caregivers to form powerfully negative assumptions about the limitations of those for whom they are caring. Christine Bryden, a woman living with dementia, decries what she calls the “toxic lie of dementia,” the assumption that “the mind is absent and the body is an empty shell.”¹⁷ The impact of caregivers’ assumptions can be devastating, as she writes:

This stigma leads to restrictions on our ability to develop our spirituality. It threatens our spiritual identity. It is assumed that the limits due to our failing cognition place us beyond reach of normal spiritual practices, of communion with God and with others. But to what extent are these assumptions due to the limits placed upon us due to the stigma attached to our dementia? . . . The question is, where does this journey begin, and at what stage can you deny me my self-hood and my spirituality?¹⁸

Even the most dedicated caregivers face frustration as they seek to respect the person with dementia. It is often so hard to know what the person is feeling, experiencing, longing for. The caregiver’s ability to understand the person and his or her wishes is limited. Although each individual’s experience is wholly unique, narratives like those of Bryden and Diana Friel McGowin give caregiv-

ers a window into the experience of dementia. This glimpse of their reality may help those of us on the outside to understand better and more respectfully relate to people with dementia.

Dementia in God’s Eyes: Seeing the *Tzelem*

The biblical creation narrative tells us that God created humanity *b’tzelem Elohim*, in God’s own image (Genesis 1:26). Stephen Sapp suggests that the task in approaching a person with dementia is “to see as God sees.”¹⁹ I would suggest that God sees the *tzelem* in the person with dementia, the divine spark within. Rabbi Hershel Matt, *z”l* reflected on his experience in providing pastoral care for people with dementia, and wondered where that *tzelem* could be in those diminished by confusion and incapacity. He suggested that what he was witnessing was “the fading image of God.”²⁰

Others would argue that the image of God can never be diminished in a living human being. For example, the Maggid of Mezeritch, an 18th-century Hasidic master, taught that the *tzelem* is an intrinsic element of the human being. The Maggid compared the creation of human beings in God’s image to a father who has a son. Even if the son goes far away, the father always holds the son’s image in his heart and mind. According to the Maggid of Mezeritch, God had an image of humanity in mind before we were even created, and this image is unchanging in past, present and future. We always look the same to God.²¹

Based on this teaching and my own encounters with people with dementia, I would suggest that the *tzelem* is not dependent on cognition or capacity. Amid all of the changes of dementia, the *tzelem* remains, for it is the very essence of our humanity.

God Sees the Soul

Another way of understanding what God sees in the person with dementia is that God sees the *neshama*, the soul. We are taught that the soul within us is pure, and remains within us until we die.²² If so, then perhaps the idea that the person with dementia is suffering might be our own projection. How do we know that the person with dementia is not on a higher spiritual *madrega* (level)?

In some spiritual practices, the ideal is “to be present in the present moment.” People with dementia are probably more able to do that than the rest of us. In mystical terms, we speak of the ideal of shedding the *klipot*, the outer shells of superficial, utilitarian identities. Dementia accomplishes this purpose, stripping souls down to their essence. One daughter who flies across the country every few weeks to care for her father, a man with advanced dementia, says it is not a burden but a privilege. “He’s just pure *hesed* (loving-kindness),” she says, “That’s all that’s left.”

According to our tradition, God remembers for us, even when we cannot. In the High Holy Day *zikhronot* (remembrance) prayers, we quote the prophet Jeremiah (2:2): “Thus says

the Eternal, I remembered for you the kindness of your youth, the love of your wedding day, how you followed Me into the wilderness.”²³ Even when we are mired in the moment, bereft of all perspective on our lives, God sees more, in boundless compassion. God holds all of who we have been. We may forget, but God does not. God “for eternity remembers all of the forgotten ones . . . and there is no forgetfulness before Your throne of glory.”²⁴ We are always whole in God’s eyes.

Spiritual Caregivers

The role of spiritual caregivers for people with dementia is to emulate God in seeking the *tzelem*. We need to remind ourselves that even when the *tzelem* is not apparent, it is there. In the person who is disoriented, regressed or even unresponsive, somehow the image of God resides.²⁵ Bryden reminds us of the power of seeking the *tzelem*: “By rejecting the lie of dementia and focusing on my soul rather than on my mind, I can be free of fear of loss of self, and in so doing can also help you to lose your fear that you are losing me.”²⁶

Remember for them: Spiritual caregivers can also emulate God by remembering for people who cannot remember for themselves. We can connect them to memory. The Talmud contains a poignant narrative about Rav Joseph bar Hiya. Rav Joseph was called “Sinai” because he held all of the laws of the Torah systematically in his head, as if he had heard them directly from God at Sinai.²⁷ Rav Joseph apparently became ill and suffered major memory loss. The

Talmud recounts a number of cases in which his student, Abaye, gently reminds him of his own teaching. Upon hearing a complex legal discussion, Rav Joseph says, "I have never heard this tradition," and Abaye reminds him, "You yourself have told this tradition to us, and it was in connection with the following that you told us."²⁸ Abaye connected Rav Joseph not only to his memory, but to his very identity and worth.

In reminding his teacher of his own wisdom, Abaye upheld another of Rav Joseph's teachings:

Rav Joseph teaches that the tablets [of the law] and the broken tablets [that Moses shattered upon discovering the Golden Calf] are both kept in the ark. From here we learn that a scholar who has involuntarily forgotten his learning should not be treated disdainfully.²⁹

As we recall their personhood, we remember those with dementia in an additional way. According to Stephen Sapp, by recalling the Latin root of "remember," which comes from the word for "limb," we learn that our role is to return the person to the community: ". . . re-mem-bering those individuals in the sense of bringing them back into the human community, refusing to let them be cast aside and forgotten, which is in effect to dis-member the body."³⁰ Whenever we respond to an individual as one created in the image of God, we are helping him or her to rejoin the community.

Respond to the Neshama (the Soul): In accompanying individuals with dementia, we are challenged to relate to the soul within them. As Bresnahan writes,

It is not Mom who must remember who I am. Rather, it is I who must remember who my mother is. Who she truly is. Not merely "an Alzheimer's patient." Nor merely "my mother." It is up to me to [continue to be] . . . keenly aware of her spirit, honoring her soul-essence. Meeting her with caring and love and respect in that sacred place of wholeness which nothing can diminish.³¹

We relate to souls when we let faces shine through the power of ritual. We witness the power of symbol, song and holy times to connect to the part that is whole within the person, as with Sylvia, who found connection through the familiar words, melody and message of the *Shema*. When we use ritual to empower individuals to live in sacred time, there is a chance that, at least in the moment, Rose will feel that the day is more than an endless expanse of waiting that will never end. We are called to adapt our celebration and worship to make them accessible to individuals with dementia, harnessing our creativity to engage people at the time and in the manner that works for them.

Forging Connection

In accompanying individuals with dementia, we forge a life of connection

for them. In our simple presence, in our caring and fervent commitment to strive to understand the individual, we provide a response to the pastor who said, "There's nothing to do with them because they're out of it." Our response is to be with them in the *midbar*. Diana Friel McGowin eloquently states the urgent need for this accompaniment:

Without someone to walk this labyrinth by my side, without the touch of a fellow traveler who truly understands my need of self-worth, how can I endure the rest of this uncharted journey? I thirst today for understanding, a tender touch and healing laughter.³²

The work of accompanying elders with dementia requires curiosity. We will do best to follow the advice of Melvin Kimble, who suggests that we practice "hermeneutical phenomenology," inviting the old to be our teachers about aging and meaning.³³ In this learning process, the teaching happens at levels beyond words and surface conversation. We search agitated behavior or speech to unearth the profound concerns the person is trying to communicate. When Shirley tells us she needs to go home to her mother, we may learn worlds about the enduring mother-daughter bond if we inquire into the *derash*, the meaning of this quest. When we acknowledge and validate the emotions reflected in apparently "unreal" content, we can reach and honor the confused elder. As Rita Bresnahan observes, ". . . I am learning that 'the facts' do not matter. Only the relationship does."³⁴

We will learn much if we open ourselves to the person with dementia. I learned from Mr. Shapiro, the pharmacist, not only how to relieve a headache, but also how to retain one's essential goodness amid change and brokenness.

Magic Moments

This work requires patience. We struggle to be with the person in silence, to be satisfied when nothing seems to be happening. Sometimes, we learn that a great deal is happening, as did the daughter who discovered anew the wonder of falling leaves as she sat in silence with her father. In accompanying people with dementia, we ambitious caregivers need to measure accomplishment in a different way. Any progress may register in millimeters, not inches. Yet we must be prepared for "magic moments," when a person who seems generally quite confused may suddenly speak or connect with great clarity and profundity. One such magic moment occurred in conversation with Anna.

Anna was a feisty, fun-loving woman who had formed many close friendships with other elders during her years in the nursing home. Only when she passed age 100 and painfully fractured a hip did she begin to be confused. One day, as she sat in her geri-chair, Anna was moaning, saying over and over, "Oy, Mama, oy, Mama." I sat down next to Anna and took her hand. "You're thinking a lot about your mother, aren't you, Anna?" Anna turned to me and said, "It's always Mom in the end."

Anna could not have said what day

of the week it was, nor did she necessarily remember the chaplain sitting next to her. Somehow, though, Anna knew what really counted. She realized that she was near the end of life. She was aware that she longed for the comfort of her mother, and she believed she would soon be joining her.

Ultimately, dementia is a mystery. If we can find the courage to walk alongside those who journey in this *midbar*, we, too, will be transformed. Debbie Everett has identified the “surprising paradox” of ministry with dementia: It leads us, the spiritual caregivers, to live more authentically. Everett writes,

As we open ourselves to embracing [persons with dementia] as wholly worthwhile and valuable persons that need motivated and loving care, they expel us from our intellectual theological boxes. In the process, they introduce us to a God who is also dancing and laughing in the bizarre places where chaos reigns.³⁵

As we learn from those we accompany that the human being is more than intellect, more than memory, even more than cognition, we learn that we are, as well. We learn to value ourselves for our very essence.

A Concluding Blessing

Confronting dementia puts us in touch with the profound fragility of so much that we cling to in this life—memory, identity, relationship. In this awesome and mysterious journey, may

we remain connected to the One whose compassion is boundless, who remembers us, and remembers the Covenant that binds us in eternal love. May we bring that compassionate connection to all of our relationships.

Resources

- The Foundation for Alzheimer’s and Cultural Memory has developed collective reminiscence work that gives voice to elders with dementia: www.memorybridge.org.

- “Island on a Hill” is a CD recording of elders from San Francisco’s Jewish Home who became Psalmists and singer-songwriters with the help of Rabbi Sheldon Marder and musician Judith-Kate Friedman: www.cdbaby.com/cd/judithkate

- Sacred Seasons Celebration Kits, produced and distributed by Hiddur: The Center for Aging and Judaism, enable elders in residential settings to join in Shabbat or holiday celebrations, even when a Jewish spiritual caregiver is unavailable. Comprehensive, easy-to-use kits for Shabbat and holidays include everything a staff member or volunteer without Jewish background needs to facilitate a joyous observance: www.sacredseasons.org.

- The TimeSlips Project has collected hundreds of stories, and produced plays and art exhibits based on narratives of individuals with dementia: www.timeslips.org.

1. This essay is adapted from my chapter by the same name in *Jewish Pastoral Care*:

A Practical Handbook from Traditional and Contemporary Sources, Dayle A. Friedman, ed. (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, second edition, 2005). An early version of this paper was delivered at the National Association of Jewish Chaplains' 2005 conference.

2. Details have been changed to protect the confidentiality of these individuals.

3. Miriam Rieger, *The American Jewish Elderly*, United Jewish Communities Report Series on the National Jewish Population Survey 2000-2001 (New York: United Jewish Communities, September, 2004). Note that this number is likely an underestimate, since the study did not include elders in nursing homes or other institutional settings, which are likely populated with disproportionate numbers of individuals with dementia.

4. Debbie Everett, "Forget Me Not: The Spiritual Care of People with Alzheimer's Disease" in *Spiritual Care for Persons with Dementia: Fundamentals for Pastoral Practice*, Larry VandeCreek, ed. (Haworth Press, 1999), 79.

5. Diana Friel McGowin, *Living in the Labyrinth: A Personal Journey through the Maze of Alzheimer's* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1993), 114.

6. Rita Bresnahan, *Walking One Another Home: Moments of Grace and Possibility in the Midst of Alzheimer's* (Lingouri, Missouri: Lingouri/Triumph), 82.

7. Daily morning service, *Shaharit*, my translation. See, for example, *Daily Prayer Book*, translated by Philip Birnbaum (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1977), 71.

8. I learned this term from the late Maggie Kuhn, founder of the Gray Panthers.

9. Tom Kitwood, *Dementia Reconsidered: The Person Comes First* (Buckingham, England/Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1997). Kitwood developed a list of 17 depersonalizing tendencies of what he calls

"malignant social psychology" in relating to individuals with dementia.

10. David Keck, *Forgetting Whose We Are: Alzheimer's Disease and the Love of God* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996).

11. These are the two basic aspects of obligations toward parents, according to the Babylonia Talmud, tractate *Kiddushin*, 31b.

12. Bresnahan, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

13. See Deuteronomy 10:19 for one of the many examples in Torah of this commandment.

14. Betsy Sholl, in *Mother to Daughter, Daughter to Mother, Mothers on Mothering: A Daybook and Reader*, Tillie Olsen, ed. (Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1984), 245, cited in Bresnahan, *Walking One Another Back Home*.

15. Kitwood, *Dementia Reconsidered*, 14.

16. Susan McFadden, Mandy Ingraum, Carla Baldauf, "Actions, Feelings, and Values: Foundations of Meaning and Personhood in Dementia," *Viktor Frankl's Contribution to Spirituality and Aging*, (Haworth Press, 2000), 83.

17. Christine Bryden, Elizabeth MacKinlay, "Dementia—A Spiritual Journey Towards the Divine: A Personal View of Dementia," *Journal of Religious Gerontology*, Vol. 13, No. 3/4 (2002), 69-75.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Stephen Sapp, "To See Things as God Sees Them: Theological Reflections on Pastoral Care to Persons with Dementia," in *Spiritual Care for Persons with Dementia: Fundamentals for Pastoral Practice*, Larry VandeCreek, ed. (Binghamton, N.Y., Haworth Press, 1999), 37.

20. Hershel Matt, "Fading Image of God? Theological Reflections of a Nursing Home Chaplain," *Judaism*, Vol. 36, No. 1, (Winter, 1987).

21 Cited in *Itturei Torah*, Aaron Jacob Greenberg, ed. (Tel Aviv: Yavneh, 1985) on *Parashat Bereshit*.

22. See the prayer *Elohai Neshamah* from the daily *Shaharit* service, my translation. “The soul that you have implanted within me is pure. You created it, you formed it, and you are destined to take it from me and to return it to me in the time to come [after death].” For the context, see, for example, *Daily Prayer Book*, translated by Philip Birnbaum. (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1977), 15-16.
23. Translation mine. For the context, see, for example, *The Metsudah Machzor*, Avrohom Davis, translator (Brooklyn, NY: Metsudah Publications, 1985), 317f.
24. Translation mine. For the context, see, for example, *The Metsudah Machzor*, 320.
25. Interestingly, the Babylonia Talmud (*Berakhot* 10a) indicates that the soul “sees and is not seen.”
26. Bryden, “Dementia: A Spiritual Journey.”
27. Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot* 64a.
28. Babylonia Talmud, *Eruvin* 10a.
29. Babylonian Talmud, *Menahot* 99a. My translation. I’m grateful to Rabbi Beth Naditch for pointing me to the connections between these texts.
30. Sapp, “To See Things as God Sees Them.”
31. Bresnahan, *Walking One Another Back Home*, 50.
32. Friel McGowin, *Living in the Labyrinth*, 14.
33. Melvin Kimble, cited in McFadden, et al., “Actions, Feelings, and Values.”
34. Bresnahan, *Walking One Another Back Home*, 38.
35. Debbie Everett, “Forget Me Not: The Spiritual Care of People with Alzheimer’s Disease” in VandeCreek., et al., *Spiritual Care for Persons with Dementia*, 87.

Praying for Healing in Community

BY LOUIS E. NEWMAN

Most people are not strangers to prayer. Yet we seldom take much time to reflect on what the familiar words mean and on what makes them so powerful. After many years of attending Shabbat services regularly and a good number of years studying and teaching Jewish texts, I know a number of prayers by heart — but only a few of them have really entered my heart. Those few that have speak to me in an especially powerful way. Why is it that no matter how many times I say them, some prayers never grow tiresome? What gives certain prayers the ability to touch us, even moving us to tears at times, drawing us back to a place deep within which we have lost touch, but long to rediscover?

Giving Voice to Our Humanity

I suggest that the power of prayer lies primarily in its ability to give voice to our essential humanity. Whatever else may separate us from one another, we share certain basic human traits: We have parents (or had them); we have basic physical needs for food, shelter and a

modicum of creature comforts; and we have social needs for companionship and love. We are also, by nature, rather fragile creatures. All of us, no matter how strong, competent or accomplished, are often weak, vulnerable and needy. We are susceptible to being hurt, to becoming ill, to failing in the very things that matter to us most. We are vulnerable to the devastation of natural disasters, to the emotional wound of a harsh word from someone we love, to disappointment and tragedy, and to the slow, steady effects of aging. And we are fragile, most of all, in that our time is limited; as the psalmist reminds us, each of us walks “in the valley of the shadow of death.” (Psalm 23:4)

Prayers speak to us when they address these basic aspects of our human experience, when they call attention to our vulnerability, to all those ways in which we are subject to “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,” most of which we would just as soon forget. When a prayer really enters the heart, look and see: It is because the words express something that we recognize as deeply true about our experience as human beings.

Dr. Louis E. Newman is the John M. and Elizabeth W. Musser Professor of Religious Studies and Director of the Program in Judaic Studies at Carleton College, Northfield, Minnesota.

Acknowledgment in Community

Public prayers are powerful in yet another way, for it is only in community that we have the possibility of acknowledging our deepest human fears and aspirations with one another. We walk through our lives maintaining a strict barrier between these very personal and human aspects of our experience and the public persona that we share with others.

I have a colleague, a native of Switzerland, who once remarked how startled she was when she first came to the United States and discovered that when people ask, “How are you?” they do not really want a long, personal, fully truthful answer. We are conditioned to respond with a perfunctory “Fine, thank you, and how are you?” and then continue on with our day.

Public prayer is the antithesis of such superficial interactions. In a worship community, we come together to acknowledge who and how we really are, to affirm our shared humanity, to look past what superficially divides us and to affirm what deeply unites us: our joys and sorrows, our vulnerability, and our ability to support one another. The power of prayer is magnified many times over when we recite in community, for then prayer enables us to express what the famous scholar of ritual Victor Turner called “*communitas*,” our common humanity.

Facing the Future

Prayer is most powerful and moving

when it gives voice to our hopes for the future. Perhaps, because we are by nature so limited and so easily hurt, we long for things that will make us feel safe and whole: financial security, a strong community, a just government, a loving family. In asking for these things in prayer, we are not engaging in magical thinking. It is not the case — certainly it need not be the case — that we believe that saying the right formulaic words each week will bring about the desired result. Petitionary prayer is not the adult equivalent of the child who asks a parent for an increase in his allowance or for the keys to the car for the evening. It is rather more like reciting a poem or playing a piece of music, where we try to infuse the words or notes that others have written with our passion, our yearning, our desires and our concern for our lives and the lives of those we love.

Because such prayers put into words the deepest desires of our hearts, they are themselves ennobling and sustaining, whether or not we “get” what we most hope for. Abraham Joshua Heschel put it this way:

Prayer clarifies our hope and intentions. It helps us discover our true aspirations, the pangs we ignore, the longings we forget. It is an act of self-purification, a quarantine for the soul. It gives us the opportunity to be honest, to say what we believe, and to stand for what we say.¹

Death and Illness

I learned many of these things about

prayer years ago, in the course of my training as a scholar of religion, but I only really began to understand them when tragedy touched my life. It was in the spring of 1995, just a week before Passover, when my mother, *zikhrona l'vrakha*, passed away. She had been diagnosed with advanced cancer eighteen months earlier and in those final months we watched her strength wane as the life gradually drained out of her. Her death was a huge loss for our whole family, and remains so to this day. At the time, we grieved and, as the season required, we did our best to pull ourselves together and celebrate the holiday.

But our respite was short-lived, for as the last days of Passover began, we received the news that my sister had chronic myelogenous leukemia (CML). I remember clearly the shock I felt, the sense of unreality, and the unspeakable fear that, having just lost my mother, and having lost one of my brothers years earlier, I might very well lose my only sister as well.

The only known cure for CML is a successful bone-marrow transplant from a donor with matching marrow type, most likely a relative. We were all tested; none of us matched. Moreover, no match existed in the worldwide registry of bone-marrow donors. Her life expectancy was approximately three to five years, we were told. The family seemed to be unraveling. My dreams of living into ripe old age with my siblings were evaporating. Most of all, I felt my own powerlessness to control the course that my sister's disease would take. The fragility of life was never so painfully

evident, or so terrifying.

Course of Treatment

The doctors at the university offered her an autologous transplant, a procedure whereby her own stem cells would be harvested. She would undergo massive radiation and chemotherapy, and her own cells would be returned to her body. It would not cure the disease, but it would buy her time, perhaps a few more years. The university was doing groundbreaking research in this area, and it was her only choice.

She underwent the transplant in early 1997 and, like so many treatments for cancer, it ravaged her body, destroying her immune system in an attempt to have it regenerate itself. It left her demoralized. In the weeks and months following the transplant, she was surrounded by a virtual army of devoted friends. She received extraordinary care from her health-care providers, began a drug regimen to treat the effects of the leukemia, took herbs, saw an acupuncturist, and joined a cancer-patient support group. Slowly, she began to regain her strength and the sparkle in her eyes, to return to work, even to play tennis. The cancer was not gone, but it was in retreat.

Saying the *Mi Sheberakh*

Beginning with the first Shabbat after I learned of my sister's diagnosis, and continuing through her treatment and subsequent years of recovery, I recited the *mi sheberakh l'holim*, our traditional prayer for those who are ill. Saying that

prayer was not an effort to cure the disease or restore my sister to health, but quite the contrary, an admission of my own impotence to do either. At times, my fear overwhelmed me and I was actually unable to say the words out loud. At other times, when her condition was improving, I recited the same words with profound gratitude for the gift of her renewed health. But always I prayed with the awareness that it could as easily have been me who was afflicted with cancer and was fighting for life. Offering that prayer invariably connected us, even when I was far away, and even when we had not spoken in many days. Each time I stood up to offer her name in prayer, I felt that I was affirming my love for her, my profound desire for her health and my hopes for her future — and for mine.

But in the course of reciting this prayer, I discovered much more than a wonderful way to express my connection to my sister. I discovered the meaning and power of a ritual when it truly connects us to our deepest human needs and to one another — for I never said the *mi sheberakh* alone. As I rose to offer her name, others throughout the congregation rose to offer other names, names of people I did not know. This weekly ritual of praying for her healing was inextricably bound up with prayers for the healing of others, and so her illness was connected to many other such stories. Such is the power of offering the names of those in need of healing within the context of our communal worship, just as, *l'havdil*, we offer the names of those for whom we rise to recite *Kaddish*. When the name of an

individual is made public, the line between the personal and the communal dissolves. We are each praying for our respective friends and loved ones, and as a community we are praying for all who are ill.

Merging the Personal and Congregational Families

If we reflect upon this, we see that we are praying for ourselves as well. For we know that our time will come, that time when we ourselves will be in need of healing and someone close to us will be reciting our name. So, when we say the *mi sheberakh*, we are really inviting everyone into one community — those who are sick today and those who may be in the future, those who are here and those who are not, those who are named and those whose names we do not know. Through this ritual, my personal family merges with the congregational family, which in turn merges with the larger human family.

It is not necessary that we know the stories of each of those for whom we pray; it is enough that in saying the *mi sheberakh* together we express our bond with those we love and with one another. That, after all, is the purpose of bringing our greatest fears and our most private hopes into this public space, where, as the rabbi of our congregation always says at the conclusion of this prayer, we may “find comfort amidst the community.” As with all prayers that truly touch us, it is in the very act of saying them together that we find support. It is comforting to know that we are not alone in our fears, that my

most heartfelt wish may also be yours. This support and comfort are what we give to one another—or, better, what the *mi sheberakh* gives to all of us when we recite it in community.

That is why we continue to say the *mi sheberakh* even when someone is suffering from a terminal illness. For even where there is no hope for “a complete healing of body and spirit,” we still feel the need to express our deep desire for health. We still wish to acknowledge our fragility as human beings who sometimes suffer and, always, eventually die. And we still feel a sense of solidarity with others who share our desires and our human needs.

When We Stop Praying for Healing

But there is also a time to stop reciting the *mi sheberakh*, and that time arrived for me this year. The story of my sister’s battle with leukemia, for all intents and purposes, is over. For the last four years, her annual biopsy has detected no trace of leukemia in her bone marrow, and it shows no signs of returning. She has far outlived the most optimistic expectations of her doctors and our wildest dreams. Ten years after her diagnosis, she leads a perfectly normal life (as normal, that is, as life can be). She is now as healthy as any of us who never faced a life-threatening illness. Her son, whom she once feared she would not live to see finish grade school, is now a high school junior. And so, while I will continue to recite *mi sheberakh* for others each week, I

have stopped reciting it for my sister. For her, I will recite other prayers, prayers of gratitude, and I will continue to celebrate with her each passing year of health and vitality. But the time for saying *mi sheberakh* is over; it makes no sense to ask for what we already have.

A Prayer for Healers

My experience with my sister’s illness, and of praying for her healing, also taught me to value the extraordinary people who are the vehicles of our healing. Healing, like all divine gifts, makes its way into our world only through human hands. To experience the joy of healing is always to be filled with gratitude for those who devote their lives to restoring health and wholeness. So, I offer the following prayer for all those whose work makes health and healing possible for all of us:

“Source of healing, give of your healing power to those who care for us. Enable them to nurture the life force within us when it wanes. Help them to care for us when we are ill and cannot care for ourselves.

“Source of knowledge and wisdom, grant our caregivers the discernment to diagnose our ailments and the insight to guide our treatment. Give them the expertise they need to restore us to health and the devotion they need to master the art of healing.

“Source of hope, provide all who care for us when we are sick with confidence in themselves and in us. Help them to point us toward a healing of the spirit, even when healing the body is beyond

their reach.

“Source of peace, bestow wholeness and serenity on our physicians and on all who offer us healing. Grant them compassion, patience and gentleness in all that they do. May they always know that in caring for us, they are doing your work, that in restoring us to health, they are bringing peace to us, to our community, and to the world.”

The *mi sheberakh* binds us to those for whom we are praying, but also to those with whom we are praying. In reciting it, we simultaneously acknowl-

edge our human frailty and affirm our ability to support one another in our most vulnerable times. Finally, the *mi sheberakh* reminds us of our common humanity. As John Donne wrote, “never send to ask for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.” So, too, every time any one of us recites this prayer for healing, it is ultimately a prayer by and for us all.

1. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Between God and Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1959), 198.

Elijah Knocking: Opening Doors in the Creative Process

BY DAVID HARRIS EBENBACH

Of all the Jewish holidays, few cause a life to be turned upside down the way that Passover does. There are the bursts of spring cleaning and the kashering, and dietary changes that last eight days. There are multiple meals, often involving long-distance travel and complex family dynamics. And upon reflection, it seems only fitting that Passover should cause so much upheaval in one's life; certainly the ideas that lie at the heart of the festival are intended to be earth-shaking themselves.

We encounter this drama in the holiday's vivid, crazy story, in the complexity and provocation of the metaphors and imagery, and — most importantly for our purposes here — in the spotlight that gets thrown on a character who is arguably Judaism's most enduring folk personality: Elijah.

Every year, we pour an extra glass of wine, and wait to see whether this will be the year that our much-anticipated prophet will finally make his appearance. This is always a tremendously significant moment for me. As a writer, I take special pleasure in the possibility

of his knock on the front door, because I see in that possibility a powerful metaphor for the creative process.

At the Open Door

Painter Marc Chagall, in his memoir, *My Life*, describes a childhood memory of a Seder experience:

My father, raising his glass, tells me to go and open the door. Open the door, the outside door, at such a late hour, to let in the prophet Elijah? A cluster of white stars, silvered against the background of the blue velvet sky, force their way into my eyes and into my heart. But where is Elijah, and his white chariot? Is he still lingering in the courtyard to enter the house in the guise of a sickly old man, a stooped beggar, with a sack on his back and a cane in his hand?¹

In the young Chagall we can see ourselves. How many of us have stood at the open door, one Passover or another, looking for signs of Elijah? Of course,

David Harris Ebenbach teaches writing at Vermont College. He was awarded the Drue Heinz Literature Prize for his short story collection, *Between Camelots*.

we usually assign this optimistic task to children — who better to approach the task with earnestness and true-believer expectations? Yet I want to argue that this brand of optimism is at least as crucial to the adults sitting around the Seder table. It is these adults — and particularly those working in the arts — who can see in Elijah's presence at the open door an opportunity to aid in the prophet's task of bringing perfection and meaning to the world.

The Importance of Being Elijah

In the foreword to Peninnah Schram's wonderful book, *Tales of Elijah the Prophet*, folklorist Dov Noy asks this crucial question:

Why has Elijah become a favorite hero who overshadows other biblical and post-biblical heroes in the Jewish folk-tradition, heroes who undoubtedly play a more important role in Jewish thought and tradition (such as Abraham our father, Moses our Teacher, King David, and others, among them many folklore protagonists like King Solomon, Maimonides Maimonides, and Chasidic rabbis)?²

Elijah entered the Jewish consciousness as a biblical character, a prophet who does all kinds of miraculous things — but his central importance to the Jewish people developed primarily in post-biblical times. As scholar Louis Ginzberg put it in *Legends of the Jews*,

Elijah's removal from earth, so far from being an interruption to his relations with men, rather marks the beginning of his real activity in time of need, as a teacher and as a guide.³

Elijah's significance grew largely through the medium of the folk tale. In these tales, he acts as a kind of superhero, a powerful magical force for good. He shows up at weddings and circumcisions to make sure nothing goes wrong, keeps the angel of death away from the sick, and brings riches to the poor. He is also the person who is supposed to usher in the messianic age, when perfection will be brought to the world. One does have to wonder why it's Elijah, of all figures in Jewish tradition, who is entrusted with such important responsibilities.

The Choice of Elijah

After raising this question, the folklorist Dov Noy goes on to raise and dismiss several possible answers, and ends up by focusing the prophet's name itself: *Eliyahu*. This name has the unique characteristic of containing letters from two different names of God. There are the *aleph* and *lamed* of El, the name that rabbinic tradition believes stands for God's justice (*din*), and there are the *yod*, *hey* and *vav* of the tetragrammaton, YHVH — the name that the rabbis say stands for mercy (*rahamim*). His name, thus, captures the full range of God's attributes; part of Elijah's appeal is that one can find in him this same range. To look into

Elijah's eyes is to see the entire universe and all its possibilities.

This matters to me above all as a writer, a person who looks at the world as something worth exploring and recording with language — and when I write, I have Elijah in mind. I think of Elijah metaphorically, as the doorway into the universe in its fullness, into our highest state of understanding, inspiration, of connectedness to what is meaningful all around us.

If this has been the popular experience of Elijah over the centuries, it's no surprise that he has become our most cherished figure. It is also not surprising that we attribute to him such a range of impressive powers. Yet those powers themselves raise another question. As Peninnah Schram puts it:

Since Elijah can be everywhere and anywhere, why do we need to open the door and call out a welcome? Why can't he just come in on his own, through the window or a keyhole? The rabbis say that we must also do some work on our own to bring redemption.⁴

In this view, Elijah is an entirely Jewish hero. His influence over our lives depends, as do all things, on our own actions. We cannot sit passively and wait for him to show up. We have to go to the door, open it, welcome him in.

Again, I think of this in terms of what it might mean for the creative process. Most artists have been rocked at one time or another by the power of a sudden inspired thought or emotion, and the intensity of that experience can lead us to believe that inspiration

always comes like lightning, striking us wherever we happen to be at the time. But more often, it does not work like that. If we wait for those lightning strikes, we will probably sit and stew and watch while time steadily passes us by. Much like the people at the Seder table, artists cannot wait passively for inspiration; we have to open the doors that keep it from entering in the first place. And we have to open them no matter who might be waiting on the other side.

Opening the Door

One of the most interesting and important things about the folk tales' portrayal of Elijah is that he usually comes in disguise. He is not glowing, not dressed in white robes, not haloed or winged. Instead he might be dressed as a prostitute, a stranger, a sickly person, or — most often — a beggar, filthy, in rags. And in this form, he waits to see whether the door will be opened wide for him, or slammed in his face.

I always find myself thinking about this in terms of encounters with the homeless — considering the possibility of a homeless person coming knocking on the door, asking to be invited in for a meal and a place to stay. Many people in this situation would turn the person away, perhaps even refusing to crack the door at all after glimpsing the visitor through the distorting lens of the peephole. And so many people — if the visitor is indeed Elijah — would thereby lose out on everything he has to offer. It is only the person who opens

the door, who opens the world up to magic, to wonder, to possibility — and, as we will see, to art — who can take advantage of the opportunity.

This, too, is a deeply Jewish idea. One of our early stories of Abraham, whose name is often associated with the trait of hospitality, reads very much like an Elijah folk tale. Just a few days after his circumcision, Abraham spots three strangers approaching his tent and, despite his weakened condition, rushes around to welcome them with food and comforts. Lo and behold, they turn out to be angels, messengers of God, and Abraham is amply rewarded by God for his hospitality. Unless we are open to the possibility of God's presence, we will be unable to discern it when it is manifest.

A Rare Presence

William Carlos Williams was a poet and fiction writer, but also a doctor who worked long hours making house calls in Paterson, New Jersey, his patients most often being recent immigrants who were deep in poverty. In his book *The Doctor Stories*, he talks about why this kind of work — which one might expect to be draining, and to leave little time for writing — was in fact so crucial to his writing process. It was through his medical practice that he was able to meet so many people, and, in them, find what he calls a “rare presence” — a spark of meaning or truth that for him could serve as the essence of a poem. He said about finding that rare presence:

But one of the characteristics of this rare presence is that it is jealous of exposure and that it is shy and revengeful. . . . Its face is a particular face, it is likely to appear under the most unlikely disguises. You cannot recognize it from past experiences — in fact it is always a new face . . . It will not use the same appearance for any new materialization. And it is our very life . . .⁵

Finding Inspiration

In other words: just as you never know which beggar will turn out to be Elijah, you never know where you will find inspiration, if you are looking for it. You have to open the door and greet whoever is on the other side, no matter who it is. Poet Marge Piercy says of this process that

You have to stay open and curious and keep learning as you go. Poems come from a whole variety of sources. When you're younger, you believe in inspiration. As you get older, you believe most in receptivity and work.⁶

Not surprisingly, this approach to the creative process is relevant not just to writers but to all artists. Dance choreographer Anna Sokolow once said “If [the choreographer] draws on the ever-changing life around him, his work will always be fresh and new.”⁷ And Sokolow was known for this; rather than being committed to a particular style of dance, she typically worked

out each piece by studying the dancers she had at hand. How does this person move most naturally? How does this person dance? Rather than imposing a style on her dancers, she tried to bring out a style that was inherent in them. And that is our calling as artists: to find the power and meaning in whatever lies before us, no matter what it is.

Welcoming the Beggar

Part of our heritage as Jews generally and as artists in particular is our calling to find meaning not only in the beautiful and easy things of the universe but in those things that challenge us, that seem ugly, difficult to like or understand. After all, we are the descendants of those unhappy fruit-eaters, Adam and Eve, our risk-taking forebears who gave up everything so that we could have consciousness, full awareness of both good and evil. And thank God for that bite of fruit — in Eden, there could be no Torah scrolls, no Judaism, no poetry or music to elevate us; Eden was already perfect, and needed none of these things. Only afterwards were there such needs — and only afterwards were there human beings capable of meeting them. From that moment forward, we could truly know all the things of creation, good and evil, and participate in their redemption.

Artists have to be willing to find inspiration in unlikely places, to find meaning in situations or people that make us uncomfortable, that seem prosaic, that perhaps even repel us. And it is crucial to remember that this does not necessarily mean we will find beauty in

all these situations and people. Above all, we must not pretend there is beauty or goodness in every disturbing nook and cranny of the world. But surely we can find meaning everywhere. Whether the goal is beauty, or power or just truth and meaning, we have to be able to welcome the beggar in.

Chagall took this charge quite literally. In his famous painting, “The Praying Jew” (also called “The Rabbi of Vitebsk”) a man is *davening* in *tallit* and *tefillin*, portrayed as pious, engaged in the sacred, a singular spiritual model for the community — and, as with many of his other pieces, Chagall paid a penniless beggar to sit as the model for his subject. His model was a man that in his normal garb might inspire only discomfort or even disgust in many people. Chagall, however, literally welcomed the beggar in.

The Importance of Being Open

Again, this openness is our calling as artists. In an interview with Bill Moyers, former United States Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky described this process aptly:

There’s a process of the human imagination’s taking in its surroundings and discovering how to make art of them. What could be more unpromising than a steel oil drum? Smells bad, gets rusty, it’s not attractive. But people took the steel oil drum and made music from it — a new kind of music. . . . If there’s something in your ex-

perience that moves you but seems without poetry, your challenge is to make it poetic.⁸

I once went to Montreal, and on the train met a young woman who insisted on talking to me throughout the trip. It turned out she was basically a narcissistic, difficult person, and the trip became very long. But after we parted ways, I found myself thinking about her, about her story. As she had explained it to me at length on the train, she was coming to Montreal to try to get some love from her lousy-sounding boyfriend. I found myself imagining her stay in Montreal, her probably futile efforts to force her boyfriend into a mutually rewarding relationship.

Then I began to write. This woman became the main character in a story that now almost always moves me close to tears when I read it. She may not have been an ideal train companion — and she is not an entirely likable character in the story (again, the goal is not to sugar-coat one's subjects but to find meaningful truth) — but she, like all of us, had something in her that was worth exploring.

As a teacher of writing, I ask my students to consider those people, situations and things around them that nag at them, that stay on their minds, but that do not seem like they could be art because they are scary, enraging, disgusting. Art does not have to be beautiful or easy. I ask my students to consider trying to turn that powerful emotion into the fuel for art.

Underneath the Rags

Often what is required of an artist is to get beneath the surface of the subject, to find its deeper significance. In the kabbalistic understanding of the universe, every person and object in the world contains holy sparks, and those sparks are concealed under many layers of covering. Often, as with the woman on the train, those outer layers are off-putting, and in some cases they can be absolutely disturbing. But those emotions can be productive, can be so jarring and motivating that we end up wrestling with them until something gives and that spark ends up being released. For that reason, the most disturbing subjects are not necessarily the artist's biggest challenge.

Indeed, we are often required not only to go digging under unpleasant surfaces; we are also challenged by something potentially much more difficult — to go beyond what is easy or plain or ordinary to find what's compelling. This has been a regular part of songwriter Leonard Cohen's creative process:

I find that the easy versions of the song arrive first. Although they might be able to stand as songs, they can't stand as songs that I can sing. . . . To be able to find that song that I can be interested in takes many versions and it takes a lot of uncovering.⁹

Underneath the beggar's ragged clothing, I tell my students, consider that a spectacular heart beats, that

there may be a gorgeous or muscular or wildly contorted body, a brain filled with love or lusts or hate or compassion — that beneath the ordinary may lay the extraordinary.

In my short story collection, *Between Camelots*, I was concerned not with peak experiences, but with the everyday lives we lead. As far as I can tell, we spend our lives not on the peaks but on the ground, and there must be art where there is life. We have to find what matters about the ordinary. This may be more difficult than finding art in the unpleasant. Unpleasant things give us energy, whereas things that seem ordinary may make us feel nothing much at all. But that just means we need to go deeper.

The Red Wheelbarrow

Williams demonstrates this in his classic poem “The Red Wheelbarrow:”¹⁰

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

One might think it’s impossible to write a meaningful poem about something as boring as a wheelbarrow. Williams shows us what happens when you go deeper. By describing the wheel-

barrow in precise, vivid, sensual detail, he makes it bright and new again, reminds us to slow down and look at it. He not only tells us, but helps us to see for ourselves, just “how much depends/ upon” such an ordinary object.

Receiving Elijah

In this understanding of the creative process, then, the main task is the same task laid upon all Jews — to uncover and redeem the sparks in all things. In our case, that means to look around in our lives for those places that do not immediately suggest themselves as art, and see if there might be more there than we suspect.

Yet this process is not all about those active moments of going hunting; it is also about working to create that state of receptivity that Piercy describes. It has been said that Abraham, our biblical model of hospitality, had his tent open on all four sides so that there could be no mistake as to whether a stranger was welcome inside. And so, even if he had not rushed around to prepare for his three visitors, even if he had not been outside to spot them, Abraham had already set his life up in such a way that strangers would feel welcome to enter his home — and, as a result, he wound up face-to-face with angels.

Consider that on Passover we do not go out into the streets looking for Elijah; we prepare our kitchens, clean up our homes; cook great food; we engage in ritual and prayer; we work hard to create a warm home in the expectation that our hard work will entice Elijah to

come knocking. Spiritually, this means opening ourselves to the possibility of his arrival.

Work and Receptivity

We have to do the same thing in our artistic lives. We have to create that inviting setting. And how do we do that? Recall that Piercy mentions “work” and “receptivity” in the same breath. And so indeed we work. We sit down at our desks or in our studios and put in daily effort. We engage in this kind of work every day, seeking meaning anywhere and everywhere. In doing so, we seek to create a habit, an ongoing state of receptivity in ourselves.

Piercy offers us a vision of this experience: “The more you actually see . . . then the more stuff you will have within you that will rise and suggest itself as imagery.”¹¹ Composer John Zorn says, “It’s like self-hypnosis, in a sense. When I’m writing, sometimes it gets to that place where I feel like the piece is writing itself and I’m trying not to get in the way.”¹²

When we are in the habit of creation, the world opens, even at times when we are not consciously trying to make it open. We in fact create a world where meaning will begin to leap out at us from the most unexpected places.

We will have readied our doors for that sharp and promising knocking.

1. Marc Chagall, *My Life* (New York: The Orion Press, 1960), 39.
2. Peninnah Schram, *Tales of Elijah the Prophet* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1991), xii.
3. Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 202.
4. Schram, *op.cit.*, xxxvi.
5. William Carlos Williams, *The Doctor Stories*, Robert Coles, ed. (New York: New Directions, 1984), 126.
6. Marge Piercy, interview in Bill Moyers, ed., *Fooling with Words* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1999), 179-180.
7. Anna Sokolow, “I Hate Academies . . . Modern Dance is an Individual Quest.” *Dance Magazine* (July 1965), 38.
8. Robert Pinsky, interview in Bill Moyers, *op. cit.*, 198.
9. Leonard Cohen, interview in Paul Zollo, ed., *Song-Writers on Song-Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2003), 331.
10. Williams, William Carlos, “The Red Wheelbarrow,” University of Pennsylvania Writing Program Home Page, 8 April 2006, www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/wcw-red-wheel.html.
11. Marge Piercy, interview in Bill Moyers, *op. cit.*, 179.
12. John Zorn, interview in *Bomb Magazine*, www.bombsite.com/zorn/zorn.html.

Life-Long Jewish Learning: The White Spaces in the Text

BY JEFFREY SCHEIN

Many of us are familiar with the notion that there are white spaces providing deeper meaning than the black letters we find in a Sefer Torah. I think it can safely be said that the same is true of many other Jewish texts.

Judah Ben-Tema's evocation of the life cycle found in the *Mishna* tractate *Pirke Avot* (5:21) is an example of Judaism's invitation to probe continuously for the deeper meaning in our tradition. (See full citation below.) On the surface, the text presents us with a tightly prescribed picture of the Jewish life cycle, with each age being matched to an appropriate life task or accomplishment. When, however, we explore the white spaces surrounding the text something of the deeper mystery of human living emerges.

For rabbis, educators and lay leaders, this mystery can sometimes be lost in a whirlwind of activity. We appropriately are engaged in helping individuals and communities move through the life cycle in ways that enhance Jewish and spiritual meaning. Rarely do we have an opportunity to step back and ask more fundamental questions about the core questions of what it means to pass through life's stages.

My goal here is to open up several reflective "white spaces" for the reader in relationship to the Ben Tema text by:

- comparing and contrasting the text with portraits of the life-cycle drawn from other cultural matrixes; and
- asking a more practical, programmatic question. Whatever else we mean by the life cycle, it is by definition "life-long," and being alive means always to be learning. The concept of life-long Jewish learning is high on the communal and educational agendas of the Jewish people. What ought a rabbi, educator or committed lay-leader do with a concept as tantalizingly rich yet as elusive as "life-long Jewish learning?" How might each of us conceptualize our own role as a facilitator of healthy and creative movement through Jewish life cycle?

Ben Tema, Shakespeare and Confucius

Western civilization, Jewish civilization and Far-Eastern/Oriental traditions are often touchstones for complex worldviews. Here I have placed side-by-side one text from each tradition.¹

Dr. Jeffrey Schein is Director of the Center for Jewish Education and Professor of Jewish Education at the Siegal College of Judaic Studies in Cleveland.

Judah Ben Tema:

He used to say: At five scripture, at ten the study of oral tradition, at thirteen the fulfillment of the commandments, at fifteen the more advanced study of the oral law (Talmud), at eighteen marriage, at twenty seeking a livelihood, at thirty full strength and vigor, at forty understanding, at fifty giving advice, at sixty the status of an elder, at seventy one is white-haired, at eighty one enjoys the gift of special strength and heroism, at ninety one bends over, at one hundred it as if we have left the world (*Pirke Avot* 5:21).

William Shakespeare:

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women
merely players:
They have their exits and their
entrances;
And man in his time plays many
parts,
His acts being seven Ages. At
first the infant,
Mewling and puking in the
nurse's arms.
Then the whining schoolboy,
with his satchel
And shining morning face,
creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school. And then
the lover,
Sighing like furnace, with a
woeful ballad
Made to the mistress' eyebrow.
Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths, and
bearded

like the pard,
Jealous in honour, sudden and
quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon's mouth. And
then the justice,
In far round belly with good
capon lined,
With eyes severe and beard of
formal cut,
Full of wise saws and modern
instances;
And so he play his part. The sixth
age shifts
Into the learn and slipper'd
pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and puch
on side,
His youthful hose, well saved, a
world too wide
For his shrunk shank; and his big
manly voice,
Turning again toward childish
treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound.
Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful
history,
Is second childishness and mere
oblivion,
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste,
sans everything.

(Jacques in *As You Like It*,
Act II, scene VII)

Confucius

The Master said, at fifteen I
set my heart upon learning. At
thirty, I had planted my feet upon
the ground. At forty, I no longer
suffered from the perplexities. At
fifty, I knew what were the bid-

dings of heaven. At sixty, I heard them with docile ear. At seventy I could follow the dictates of my own heart: for what I desired no longer overstepped the boundaries of right. (*Analects of Confucius*, Book Two)

Contrasting Texts

In my most recent teaching of these texts to a group of graduate students at Siegal College, I noted that the cadence of each text is carried by a different grammatical/syntactical structure. Nouns (representing achievements) are the core of the Ben Tema text. Adjectives describing the appearances of the people/players on life's stage are at the center of the Shakespeare text. Verbs reflecting states of being capture the movement through the life cycle in the Confucius text.

More generally, viewing these texts in the sharp cultural relief provided by the comparisons leads me to three "big picture" comments:

1. Shakespeare and Ben Tema: Would one expect anything less of Shakespeare than a wonderful aesthetic eye? The focus on the body and the physicality of life's changes help one realize by comparison and contrast what a relatively academic and intellectual portrait of the life cycle we find in the Ben Tema text.

2. Ben Tema as text and proof text: Within the Ben Tema text one notes alternating cycles of formal learning, applying learning to life-experience and just living. The sub-cycles within the text itself (study leading to action leading to wisdom leading eventually

to physical dissipation) are certainly worth exploring. With some amusement, however, I note that one cannot with integrity (though people have tried) use Ben Tema as a "proof text" for life-long Jewish learning. Arguably, it points more persuasively to a "windows of opportunity" understanding of the place of learning within the Jewish life cycle. The text itself is as much permission for lapses and interludes with other concerns as a rallying cry for life-long Jewish learning happening with equal intensity across the whole life-cycle.

3. Ben Tema and Confucius: On the surface at least, Confucius's view is all about the ascent to wisdom with little of life's detours and other preoccupying and competing virtues that we see in the Ben Tema text. I have been struck by the keen interest teens often show in this text. I believe the single-mindedness of the text is the source of attraction. Given life's very real bumps and detours (many of which they are beginning to experience) I believe the simplicity of doing one thing extraordinarily well — pursuing and achieving wisdom — seems more appealing than either the circular return to our first physical condition in Shakespeare or the somewhat uneven plateaus projected in the Ben Tema text.

As a *hashkafa* (worldview), however, the Ben Tema text is a powerful reminder that life-long Jewish learning is always about the complex blends of living and learning that constitute our Jewish world. Akiva's and Tarfon's students will later have it out regarding the priority of study or action. Ben Tema will remind us implicitly that Judaism

prizes both. And rabbis, educators and lay leaders will alternately lift cups of wine and toast *l'hayim* to the rich complexity of our task, or secretly envy the apparently simpler educational task of a Christian or Confucian educator educating towards faith or enlightenment.

Living with Ben Tema

Ultimately, Jews experience the Ben Tema text as our text in a way that is different from the Shakespeare or Confucius texts. So how do we work with the Ben Tema text? It is clear to me that the text needs to be reconstructed in order to live. I am particularly troubled that we actually (and ironically) allow the text to serve as a guide when it comes to thinking about the question of when life-long Jewish learning begins (age five) and ends for all practical purposes (age 80). Despite the elevation of early-childhood Jewish education to a higher place on the Jewish communal agenda, we are still likely to think life-long Jewish learning means adding a few tot-Shabbat programs for kids and parents. The full impact of the revolution in brain research about the creation of early memories in Jewish neural circuitry has hardly been incorporated into our planning.² By default we begin life-long Jewish learning just as Ben Tema suggested at age five (or worse yet, eight or nine) when the child becomes part of a synagogue school.

We have a good deal of catching up at the other end of the life cycle as well. Joan Erikson revised her husband Erik's understanding of the life-cycle to include a ninth stage, "gerotrans-

cence," that can go well into the 80s and 90s for people blessed with relatively good health.³ This understanding may be available to Jewish chaplains specializing in geriatrics or institutionally embraced at Hiddur: The Center for Aging and Judaism of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, but it has hardly entered the everyday the thinking of most rabbis, educators and lay-leaders. Again, we either wittingly or unwittingly let Ben Tema and Shakespeare serve as our guide, expecting that the ninth and tenth decades of a Jew's life will be ones of *shuakh*, bending and dissipation.

Programmatic Strategies

I take it as axiomatic that life-long Jewish learning is linked to life-long Jewish living. How then do we promote this journey of Jewish living and learning?⁴ I suggest that there are three different strategies that we can deploy for this purpose of movement through the life cycle. A wise rabbi, educator or lay leader — even before reaching the ages of "discernment and wisdom" of forty or fifty — can utilize these strategies eclectically and in a balanced way depending on his or her own skills and internal resources as well as those of his or her community. I call these strategies staged conflict, environmental design and immersion, and intergenerational learning.

Staged Conflict:

A line of developmentalists that includes Jean Piaget (cognitive devel-

opment), Lawrence Kohlberg (moral development) and James Fowler (faith development) have argued that the schemas for our intellectual, moral and religious lives are fluid in a way that is both dynamic and fragile. We are creatures who can grow into new structures for experiencing and interpreting the world. The key to such growth might be called “moderate novelty.” If we are exposed, says Kohlberg, to moral reasoning that is below our stage of comprehension we are remarkably unengaged in that reasoning. If our exposure is to reasoning that is several stages beyond us, we are bewildered and uncomprehending. Exposure to moral reasoning one stage beyond ours (“moderate novelty”) is a doable stretch, and challenges us to think (and arguably to act) in more sophisticated ways. In the world of Jewish education, *Moral Development for the Jewish Educator* by Earl Schwartz remains a leading example of such thinking.⁵

The value of cross-age teaching and more generally intergenerational learning flows from this particular understanding of human development. Here the educator has both direct and indirect roles. Directly, the educator who is tuned in to a child or adult’s present stage of development will creatively disequilibrate by asking a stretching question or exposing the learner to the new cognitive structure. A ten-year-old, for instance, who pictures *matan torah* (the giving of the Torah) in one way only will be exposed to a *midrash* calculated to present a new way of thinking about God. Instead of the polysyllabic revelation of the entire Torah, perhaps

the ten-year-old will be allowed to focus on the possibility that only the (first, silent letter) *aleph* of the word *anokhi* (“I am” [the Lord your God...], the first word of the Decalogue) was revealed. The challenge for the educator working in this mode is not to present the entire *shivim panim* (seventy faces) of Torah, but the correlation of a particular face with a particular developmental stage.

More indirectly, the educator has a second role as intergenerational *shadkhan* (matchmaker). The rich chemistry of different structures of experience and understanding is best unleashed through exposure to other learners at other stages of development. Creating the community of learners where an individual will experience these developmentally differentiated perspectives becomes the educational challenge. Once created the role of the educator is more facilitative than pedagogic.

Environmental Design and Immersion

Anyone who has attended an *ulpan*, a Jewish summer camp, or studied at a *yeshiva* knows the strategy of environmental design and immersion. The key to moving through the life cycle lies in creating “hot-house” environments where the learning is of great intensity and earnestness. Only by reaching such points within a given stage of development will the seeds for moving on to another stage of Jewish living be properly sown and later reaped. In contrast with the “managed conflict” strategy I have outlined above, the key for the immersion method is not exposure to

a higher stage of development but the maximal engagement at a student's current stage. The process of moving on to the next stage will presumably happen of its own accord.

Mordecai Kaplan believed deeply in such a strategy at a communal level. The following excerpt from the chapter on "Jewish Education" in Kaplan's *Judaism as a Civilization* still motivates many of us as a dream for an organic Jewish community with many entryways and much intensity along any trail.

Jews must abandon the notion that the Jewish school, or the class for adults, is the primary conveyor of Jewish education. The mistake of limiting education to formal instruction is the primary cause of the complete failure and breakdown of the Jewish educational endeavor. . . . The solution lies in altering completely the conception of the Jewish educative process, and in learning to regard formal classroom instruction as only one link in a chain of agencies, which must be instrumental in transmitting the Jewish heritage to the young. All organizations and institutions, which represent the body of Jewish life and manifest the Jewish collective will-to-live should make provision for training the young so that they will ultimately take over these activities.⁶

A rabbi, educator or lay leader who believes that this is the path to greatest Jewish growth might create week-long summer or winter camps or *ulpanim*

in their congregation, or might switch the hours of religious instruction from school to *shabbatonim* out of a belief that "business-as-usual" religious school lacks the quality and intensity to move our learners forward in their Jewish journey.

The designer of immersive educational environments will have an abiding belief that designing educational "greenhouses" where learning can occur holistically and from many different angles is the key to the organic Jewish educational environments Kaplan suggests. (To use the camp example: in the bunk, through the peer group, in collective Jewish living.)

Intergenerational Education: Becoming an Entrepreneur

Webster's Dictionary defines an entrepreneur as "a person who organizes and manages a business, assuming the risk for the sake of the profit." This definition characterizes the mind-set of many people who engage in the work of family and intergenerational learning. The "risk" element is the messiness of managing complex intergenerational chemistries, learning styles and developmental stages. Some of the worst educational programs I have ever witnessed came about in this venue, with all learners leaving frustrated because no one educational age/stage cohort had been properly targeted. (*Tafasta meruba, lo tafasta* — reaching for everything one gets nothing.)

The potential benefit of the entrepreneurial model is captured in a *drash* by my mentor and colleague Dr. Norman

Newberg about the life work of Erik Erikson. Near the end of his career, Erikson (and perhaps even more so his wife Joan) came to believe that you could not have a healthy movement through the life-cycle if you did not have rich exposure to all stages of the life-cycle well before reaching the stage at which you were. We need constantly to experience where we are headed in our life and in our Jewish journey. We equally need to review the road we have traveled. (In a more programmatic context, the Christian educator James White trenchantly critiques stage focused strategies as a form of “ageism.”)

In accepting this critique and challenge I became an entrepreneur of the Jewish and human life cycle. I looked for every conceivable context for taking age-separate education and turning it into a more comprehensive context for intergenerational Jewish education. Whether it was 7th graders partnering with kindergarteners as their *haverim* and mentors in Jewish prayer, families rather than individuals developing a bar/bat mitzva *d’var Torah*, or seniors being trained as Hebrew tutors for children in the religious school the meta-goal was always larger than the rich learning that accompanied the activities.

The goal was to create wholeness out of the often-splintered stages of the Jewish and general life-cycles. In the short run, this often led to good educational experiences. It is hoped that it made a small contribution to the learners moving more meaningfully through the new stages of human

development they encountered down the road. (The programs mentioned above are described in greater detail in the chapter on “Intergenerational Religious Education” in *Growing Together* eds. Schein and Schiller.)

Pushing the Practical Envelope

If we can grant that each of these three modes (staged conflict, immersion and intergenerational learning) has its own validity as a form of promoting Jewish growth across the life-cycle, we are left with an enormous practical dilemma. On what basis does a rabbi, educator or lay leader choose one over another? The dilemma is doubly challenging because each of these three modes is itself labor-intensive. It is much easier to program as usual with long-inherited paradigms of religious school, early childhood education and adult learning driving the congregation.

In truth, there is no “silver bullet” here in regard to life-long Jewish learning. There is little empirical evidence to suggest that moving in one direction over another is more efficacious. If, for instance, we think of the impact of staged conflict as a strategy, we immediately come up against the reality that both general and Jewish education has a paucity of longitudinal research. We simply don’t know the long range impact of being exposed to the kind of moral and religious dialogue that from the point of view of a particular paradigm pushes us to new ways of believing and behaving.

Hence, our tool chest of sophis-

ticated evaluation tools and well-grounded research is generally sparse. Similarly, most of our accounts of the impact of immersive environments like Israel trips, camps and *ulpanim* are anecdotal. And if Jewish education has invested heavily (as it has) in family and intergenerational learning as creative responses to perceived continuity crises we still know little about the empirical effects of such programming.

Thematic Learning: Synergy and Integration

Lacking full confidence in a single methodology, and believing that each of these approaches has potency, I suggest that educational leaders look toward the creation of conscious synergy between these modes. One way of creating such synergy is thematic learning as a way of integrating the power of each mode. Such learning is often values-based and captured by the Hebrew phrase *iyyun* (an issue or idea to be explored).

What I'm suggesting, however, is more along the lines of a *shnat iyyun* (year-long learning) rather than the more familiar *yom iyyun*, day of thematic inquiry. It would be initiated and ended by immersive learning experiences that were also intergenerational (a *shabbaton* or retreat beginning and ending the experience). In between, dialogue would occur in age/stage specific and intergenerational formats. (A programmatic outline of such a *shnat iyyun* focused on the theme of Jewish hope and messianism can be found at www.siegalcollege.edu/jewish-learning.)

Summing Up

In this article, I have attempted to:

1. Explore alternative conceptualizations of the human life-cycle embedded in text from different cultural contexts (Confucius, Shakespeare, and Judah Ben Tema); and

2. Suggest three different modes of stimulating Jewish growth across the life-cycle embodied in staged conflict, immersive/environmental design learning and intergenerational learning.

It may already be clear to the reader that there was a third "meta-goal" as well. I want very much to open up dialogue about new ways of thinking about life-long Jewish learning and living. My concern is that we run the risk of trivialization if valuable (even holy) concepts such as life-long Jewish learning are invoked but not analyzed. I also believe that a body of educational *midrash* about successful practices in each of the three realms would be of great value to the emerging field of adult/life-long Jewish learning.

Obviously, nothing here is beyond critique. The very invocation of a developmental perspective of staged conflict will, for instance, invite a feminist critique in the name of Carol Gilligan and others that a male view of the life cycle is implicitly guiding the discussion.⁹ In another context, a long and fruitful debate might ensue.

Situated Knowing

Perhaps it is helpful to conclude by drawing something from the feminist lexicon in terms of the importance of

“situated knowing.”¹⁰ More specifically, much of the impetus for this work comes from a challenge issued to me by my wife Deborah, who is a teacher of early childhood educators. During a sabbatical year in 2001–2002, Deborah visited Reggio Emilia, Italy, the center for the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education, which has captivated many progressive early-childhood educators in North America. Based on her work there, Deborah suggested that the work I had been doing in family education and adult learning all these years and her work in early childhood were really different facets of a single continuum of Jewish learning.

Out of that insight, Deborah and I have begun to develop seminars entitled “The 100 Languages of Children Meet the Seventy Faces of Torah and Four Questions of Life-Long Jewish Learning,” which we have taught at Siegal College in Cleveland, the annual conference of the Coalition for Advancement of Jewish Education (CAJE), the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, several synagogue communities as scholars in residence, and at the Leo Baeck College and Center for Jewish Education in London. Many of the insights in this article derive from teaching those seminars.

Not surprisingly we end up with more questions than answers. We are still searching for the larger whole — undoubtedly part of the mystery of the human/Jewish life cycle — to which even integrated family/early childhood/intergenerational are only a part.

1. “Side by side” does not imply equal weight within each tradition. I don’t claim to be a scholar of either Confucian tradition or of Shakespeare though I have had conversations with such scholars in regard to how “representative” these selections are of the worldview of Shakespeare and Confucius. It is also the case that traditional Jewish commentary will assign a very specific rather than a broadly metaphorical meaning to a particular life stage and task (twenty for levitical service rather than any kind of livelihood and fifty for leaving that service for instance rather than the advise giving stage of life) Here, I present them for their heuristic value in a spirit once suggested by the scholar Emile Fackenheim, that in looking at these traditions one engenders a “mutually critical” dialogue where one understands the unique cultural emphasis, strength, and “inattentions” of each tradition.

2. William Craine, *Theories of Human Development: Concepts and Applications* (New Jersey, Prentice Hall, 2000).

3. Joan Erikson, “Gerotranscendence” in *The Life-Cycle Completed*, Erik Erikson, New York, Norton 1982.

4. A more general and academic way of framing this question might be: how does one promote human/Jewish development? How does one promote growth in the sense of moving from one stage to the next? I note two arguments with the very task that I have bracketed. One is *mah rabu ma-asekha Adonai*, how great are all of God’s creations. If we’d just step back and step aside, the natural forces that make for salvation will facilitate the movement quite well.

A quite opposite argument also undermines my framing of the task: namely, that the very nature of development is hierarchically suspect. In a totally “constructivist”/deconstructionist world the challenge I am musing about is the wrong one. Why I

favor a modified form of developmentalism where the challenge for the rabbi or educator has a strong role in moving individual and community through a healthy Jewish/human life cycle is a long story. Here I am simply clarifying the context for my assumptions.

5. Earl Schwartz, *Moral Development: A Practical Guide for Jewish Teachers* (Denver: ARE, 1983). The book is currently out of print but may be available via online booksellers.

6. Mordecai Kaplan, *Judaism as A Civiliza-*

tion (New York: Schocken, 1934).

7. James Whitem, *Intergenerational Religious Education* (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1987).

8. Jeffrey Schein and Judy Schiller, *Growing Together: Resources, Programs, and Experiences for Jewish Family Education* (Denver: ARE, 2001).

9. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

10. Mary Belenke, et. al., *Womens' Ways of Knowing* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

Emancipation and Modernity

After Emancipation: Jewish Religious Responses to Modernity
by David Ellenson
(Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2004)

REVIEWED BY REENA SIGMAN FRIEDMAN

David Ellenson's *After Emancipation: Jewish Religious Responses to Modernity* is a fine collection of essays that sheds light on the often challenging transition of Jews into the modern era. The essays address a wide range of topics, including, for example: the debate between early Reformers and traditionalists over the use of an organ in the Hamburg Temple, the early curriculum of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and the views of some Orthodox rabbinic authorities on artificial fertilization.

While the author's major focus is on the evolution of the various Jewish religious movements in 19th-century Germany, he extends the scope of his studies into the 20th century and beyond, and to the United States and Israel, including a discussion of the ways in which gender issues have been addressed in 20th-century responsa and recently published prayerbooks. Throughout, Ellenson displays a non-judgmental approach and a respectful appreciation for the valuable contributions made by all Jewish religious movements to the development of modern Judaism.

Written in a lucid style, these essays

reflect Ellenson's scholarly and practical concerns as both a modern Jewish historian and president of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. They demonstrate his erudition and versatility, as well as the breadth of his intellectual interests. Some of the essays are most suitable for scholars in the field and college and graduate (especially rabbinical) students; others would appeal to the general public. This collection brings material that has previously appeared in various scholarly journals and volumes to the attention of a wider audience.

Movements in Context

Ellenson appropriately sets the development of the Reform, Orthodox and Positive-Historical movements within their historical context: political emancipation, secularization and modernization in 19th-century Western and Central Europe. Jews, like the population as a whole, were powerfully affected by the political, economic, social and cultural trends of the time. As Jews became citizens of their respective countries, they were expected to surrender much of their tra-

Dr. Reena Sigman Friedman is Associate Professor of Modern Jewish History at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College.

ditional communal structure, including judicial autonomy. They were also profoundly influenced by secularization, which sociological theory defines not as the absence of religion, but the restriction of religion to more limited spheres in the lives of individuals and communities.

The process of modernization led to a bifurcation between the public and private realms, resulting in the increased privatization of religion. This, in turn, promoted greater religious pluralism and voluntarism; individuals could choose among a variety of religious options. Jews modified their communal structures and religious formulations to accommodate the new realities.

In describing the confrontation between Judaism and modernity, Ellenson draws significantly upon modern sociological theory, as developed by Max Weber, Ferdinand Tönnies and others. He especially acknowledges the contributions of his mentor, the famed historian Jacob Katz, who pioneered in the application of sociological constructs to the field of modern Jewish history. In so doing, Katz was able

. . . to illuminate with unparalleled clarity what was at stake in the transition of Judaism from the medieval to the modern world. It is Jacob Katz who provided the conceptual framework that has dominated the writing of the modern Jewish experience (51; 66).

Differences and Similarities

While many of the general themes

discussed in these essays will be familiar to students of modern Jewish history, Ellenson explores aspects of the story that are not addressed as fully or pointedly elsewhere. His comparative analyses of the Jewish religious movements highlight both the differences among them and what they have in common. The author recognizes that in the 19th century (as well as now), a range of opinions existed within each movement. Ellenson profiles individuals who were able to reach across the divides of Jewish life to connect with other segments of the community. The author views 19th-century Germany as the crucible in which various Jewish religious approaches were forged. He shows how the roots of contemporary Jewish religious discourse can be traced back to this formative period.

Ellenson draws mainly upon two types of source material for his comparative studies: liturgy and responsa literature. He illustrates the ways in which liturgy serves as both a forum for creative religious expression and a battleground for opposing religious views. As he observes,

. . . With the advent of modern Jewish religious denominationalism in 19th-century Germany, the production of new *siddurim* increased markedly . . . Jews . . . encountered a constant stream of new prayer books as rabbis of every denominational stripe on both sides of the Atlantic employed the siddur as a major vehicle for making their own doctrinal statements. The impulse to utilize the

siddur for such programmatic expression has continued unabated throughout the 20th century, and Hebrew liturgical creativity has flourished until the present moment (473).

In a separate section of the book, the author also analyzes responsa written by Orthodox rabbis on a variety of subjects. This time-honored genre of rabbinic literature can, in Ellenson's opinion, serve as a useful guide for contemporary Jews on all points of the religious spectrum:

Ours is an age where the coercive power that formerly characterized the political structure of the medieval Jewish community has dissolved, and the religious certainty that formerly informed so many in prior ages now appears to be elusive. In such an age, Jews may or may not assign responsa literature the authority that it once possessed and such literature may or may not be considered definitive or binding. Nevertheless, it remains a crucial resource for the expression of Jewish teachings and a fundamental part of our patrimony as Jews . . . Responsa . . . aid us in our search for a renewal of contemporary Jewish life rooted in the resources provided by a common Jewish heritage in an authentic Jewish idiom (421).

Struggles and Sects

Ellenson does not minimize the

important differences among Jewish religious movements in 19th-century Germany. Those often-bitter struggles paved the way for later polemics over ideology and practice that have persisted to this day. In "Traditional Reactions to Modern Jewish Reform," Ellenson explains that Orthodox leaders such as Rabbis Moses Sofer and Jacob Ettlinger attacked the early Reformers not only on matters of religious practice, but on belief as well. In fact, he maintains, faith and dogma, often associated with Reform ideology, were equally important to the Reformers' Orthodox opponents. Orthodox leaders charged that the Reformers denied the divinity of Jewish law and therefore were heretics and a sect apart from the community of Israel. According to Ellenson,

This emphasis (on dogma) allowed the Orthodox to distinguish themselves from every variety of Liberal Judaism and provided them with a warrant for their refusal to cede even a modicum of legitimacy to religious Reform. This posture has remained the foundation for Orthodoxy's principled objection to religious Reform up to the present day (182).

In delineating the differences among the various streams of Judaism, Ellenson points to the significance of what he refers to as "markers" that identified synagogues with a particular movement. In 19th-century Germany, it was the presence of an organ more than anything else that distinguished Liberal synagogues from their more

traditional counterparts. The organ was first introduced by Reformers in the Hamburg Temple in the early 19th century, provoking a bitter debate with the traditionalists. Both proponents and opponents referred to the use of an organ in the Maisel Synagogue in Prague in the late 17th century, but drew different conclusions from this precedent.

In subsequent decades, tensions intensified. In fact, a codicil was appended to the diplomas of graduates of the Orthodox rabbinical seminary in Berlin, stipulating that if they served congregations that used an organ either on Shabbat or weekdays, their ordination would be annulled. (Ellenson includes the text of the codicil, never before published in English translation.)

The American Context

“Markers” distinguished different types of congregations in other countries as well. For example, in the United States toward the end of the 19th century, as historian Jonathan Sarna has pointed out, mixed seating, the absence of *kippot* and *tallitot* and the presence of an organ and mixed choir identified synagogues as Reform rather than Orthodox.

Turning to the American context, Ellenson explores key distinctions among Jewish religious movements through the prism of curricula developed by the various rabbinical schools. Focusing on the early curriculum of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTS), which was modeled

on the program of the Breslau Jewish Theological Seminary, the author offers an insightful comparison with the curricula of both Hebrew Union College (HUC) and Yeshiva College (YC) in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He points to initial similarities, but also to eventual divergences in curricular emphases that reflected deep-seated ideological differences among the movements.

Although JTS and HUC began with fairly parallel programs of study, JTS continued to emphasize rabbinic literature (Talmud and Codes), while HUC later stressed Bible (especially the prophetic writings) and downplayed Talmud. (Because of its early anti-Zionist stance, HUC also did not offer modern Hebrew until 1923, during Julius Morgenstern’s presidency.) At JTS, biblical criticism was not employed until later in its history (although critical scholarship was applied to other texts), while HUC used critical scholarship in biblical studies as well. YC, on the other hand, prided itself on nearly exclusive Talmud study, with very few courses offered in other subjects. JTS gave little attention to practical rabbinics, introducing a few such courses only in 1919. While the ideological positions of the three movements are well known, it is revealing to see how these played out in terms of rabbinic training.

Responding to Common Concerns

Though the various Jewish religious movements developed distinctive approaches during this period, there were

important similarities among them as well. These parallels stemmed from the fact that leaders of all of the movements were responding to the same trends in the larger environment, particularly emancipation and acculturation. Many scholars have recognized that several German Orthodox leaders, such as Rabbis Samson Raphael Hirsch and Esriel Hildesheimer, had much in common with their Reform counterparts. Like many acculturating Jews of their time, they wore European-style clothes, spoke German and modified their religious services by introducing choirs, sermons in German and decorum. Ellenson demonstrates, however, that the traditionalists' immersion in German culture went beyond such externals. S.R. Hirsch, for example, applied Kantian philosophy in some of his biblical commentaries; Hirsch, no less than the Reformers, looked to German philosophy to defend Judaism in his time.

Ellenson also points out that Abraham Geiger, the major theoretician of German Reform, and Manuel Jöel, associated with the Positive-Historical School, were not far apart, ideologically, as seen in a comparison of the prayerbooks that they authored. Jöel, who succeeded Geiger as rabbi of the Breslau community, was charged with revising Geiger's 1854 prayerbook. Jöel's version, published in 1872, was very similar to that of his predecessor. Both *siddurim* retained much of the traditional liturgy, although they deleted certain phrases that the authors viewed as derogatory references to non-Jews, as well as invidious distinctions

between Jews and other nations. The consensus between these two thinkers helps explain why Reform and the Positive-Historical School did not develop into separate movements in Germany, but rather became two branches of what was known as Liberal Judaism.

Diversity within Movements

Ellenson's studies highlight both the complexity of the movements and the multiplicity of viewpoints within each of them. For example, in many of these essays, Reformers, especially in the early 19th century, emerge as more traditional than we might expect, while Orthodox spokesmen are not as uniform or strident in their views as we might imagine. Thus, the author shows how early Reformers in Amsterdam were extremely respectful of tradition, as reflected in their liturgical publications. His analysis of *Melitz Yosher*, a pamphlet published in 1808 explaining the liturgical practices of the new Adat Yeshurun congregation, established in 1797, is a case in point. The congregation was founded by younger Jewish intellectuals who had split off from the existing Ashkenazic community. They instituted a service with greater decorum, a rabbinic sermon and some Sephardic-style aesthetics, but one that was otherwise quite traditional.

Ellenson presents a range of Orthodox rabbinic opinion regarding the issue of women's suffrage and political office-holding in the *yishuv* (Jewish settlement in pre-state Palestine). He analyzes selected responsa by Rabbis Abraham Isaac Ha-Kohen Kook, Ben-

Zion Meir Hai Ouziel and Isaac Halevi Herzog over the period from 1920-1948. Kook served as Chief Rabbi of the *yishuv* from 1921-1935, Ouziel served as the first Chief Sephardic Rabbi from 1939-1953, and Herzog was elected as Kook's successor in 1936, and served as Chief Ashkenazic Rabbi from 1937 to 1959.

Including Jewish Women

Surprisingly, Rav Kook, writing in 1920, when the issue of women's suffrage was first debated in the *yishuv*, opposed women's participation in public political life. He viewed such a step as antithetical to Jewish law and tradition, which mandated particular roles for men and women. Ouziel favored complete equality for women in the political realm, because, he argued, there was no halakhic reason to prohibit women from voting. He declared that women were intelligent, created in God's image and should not be denied this basic human right.

Herzog, though personally opposed to granting women the vote for religious reasons, ultimately spoke out in favor of it, based on practical considerations. He believed that women's suffrage was inevitable in the modern world, and that the Orthodox community must accept that fact in order to maintain its political influence in the new state. Thus, Ellenson points out, even among Orthodox leaders, there were pronounced differences of opinion on important issues, such as women's political participation in the emerging State of Israel.

This essay on women's suffrage in the *yishuv* is one of several in the volume (particularly those analyzing responsa) that address women's equality and gender issues. For example, a 1941 responsum by Orthodox Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin regarding women and Torah study presents highly traditional arguments in support of women's study of both the Written Law and parts of the Oral Law. The responsum served as an important guide for subsequent Orthodox spokesmen, ultimately providing more opportunities for women to engage in such study.

Ellenson also has high praise for the *Va'ani Tefillati siddur* (recently published by the Israeli Masorti movement) for its innovations related to gender. Among these are the inclusion of the *imabot* (matriarchs) as an option in the opening of the *Amida* prayer, naming ceremonies for baby girls, an illustration of a woman donning *tefillin* and reference to both parents in connection with the blessings for the *brit mila* ceremony. Moreover, Ellenson offers a positive evaluation of poet Marcia Falk's *The Book of Blessings: New Jewish Prayers for Daily Life, The Sabbath and the New Moon Festival* (1996), a work with a pronounced feminist bent.

Ellenson devotes attention to Reconstructionism in several of these essays. He notes that the movement broke new ground in assigning religious significance to American holidays, and credits Reconstructionism, along with Reform and Conservative Judaism, with promoting an egalitarian vision of women's participation in public Jewish religious life. In his discussion

of *Va'ani Tefillati*, Ellenson compares its approach to various issues with those of the Reconstructionist prayerbook *Kol Haneshamah*, as well as *siddurim* published by other movements.

Liturgy and Ideology

In an essay exploring the treatment of traditional prayers for rain (the *gevurot geshamim* and *tal umatar*) in the *siddurim* of Abraham Geiger and Isaac Mayer Wise, Ellenson comments on the position taken in the *Kol Haneshamah* prayerbooks. The prayers for rain are inserted into the *Amida* with seasonal variations, based on the agricultural cycle of the land of Israel. Geiger, as noted above, was the major theoretician of German Reform, and Isaac Mayer Wise was the chief organizer of Reform Judaism in America. Both Geiger and Wise had difficulty with the Israel-centric nature of these prayers. They decided to retain the passages in their *siddurim* (Geiger's was published in 1870 and Wise's *Minhag America* in 1857), but to recite them as fixed elements rather than seasonal insertions.

Ellenson explains that, in contrast, the Reconstructionist *Kol Haneshamah Limot Hol siddur* (1996) includes these passages, to be recited at the traditional times. "In so doing," he concludes, "the authors of this *siddur* have consciously affirmed the centrality the reborn Jewish state has for contemporary Jews" (235). He observes that other liberal movements in the Diaspora, more universalist in their orientations, might choose not to follow the Reconstruc-

tionist approach in this regard.

Although there are references to Reconstructionism throughout this book, the movement's history and development could have been explored in greater depth. In particular, the addition of an appendix dealing with the curriculum of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC) would have enriched Ellenson's essay comparing the curricula of JTS, HUC, and YC. While the founding of RRC in 1968 is beyond the chronological scope of the curricula essay, which extends only through the 1930s, such an afterword might have discussed later developments in all of the rabbinical seminaries, including RRC, where the curriculum also has reflected the movement's core ideology.

Transcending Differences

Ellenson clearly appreciates the distinctive approaches of the movements and what each has to contribute to the richness of Jewish life. However, his heroes appear to be individuals who remained firm in their own religious convictions but were nevertheless capable of transcending ideological differences to embrace the broader Jewish community. Nehemiah Anton Nobel, a well known rabbi in Frankfurt during the Weimar period, was such a person. Nobel was a staunch traditionalist who often critiqued the activities of Reformers, yet he proved willing and able to relate to all segments of the Jewish community. He was opposed to Orthodox separatism, as had been championed by Samson Raphael Hirsch, and advocated for united Jewish communities.

Nobel served as president of the General German Rabbinical Association, which included both Orthodox and Liberal rabbis. Admired for his warm and charismatic personality, he had a following of young Jewish intellectuals and influenced large numbers of German Jews through his lectures at the Frankfurt Lehrhaus, a famed institute for adult Jewish education.

Nobel eloquently expressed his views in 1897, early in his career:

I hold that a rabbi can fulfill his task successfully only if he stands above all parties within and outside his community. He himself must have a firm and unflinching standpoint — one not given to appeals — on all the religious issues of his time. For myself, this standpoint is that offered by Judaism in its historical tradition. This alone seems to me to guarantee the proper development toward a sound future. But, I consider it my duty to examine every religious trend within Judaism, to meet it with objective arguments only, and to treat the representatives of opposition movements and viewpoints with the kind of respect we owe to ardent opponents. I want to lay greater stress in my public activities on that which unites different trends than on those causes which separate them . . . This is my ideal of the rabbi as I see it, and to strive for its realization is my life task (263-64).

It is not surprising that Ellenson

should focus on a figure like Nehemiah Nobel, since he is clearly committed to similar goals. Even his choice of subject matter ranges over the Jewish religious spectrum and demonstrates his pluralistic outlook. In tracing the history of the movements, Ellenson encourages greater mutual understanding and tolerance among contemporary Jews. As historian Michael Meyer points out in his foreword to the book,

Although he is a fervent Reform Jew, Ellenson is every bit as much devoted to *klal Yisrael*. For him, modern religious Judaism in its broad variety is a single whole . . . The essays included here do not propagandize for a particular point of view . . . (The author is interested in) what Jewish life as a whole can gain from many and diverse sources. (10)

Antipodean Trends

Ellenson is clearly concerned about the future of Judaism in America. In his essay “Judaism Resurgent” he points to contradictory trends in American Jewish life today. On the one hand, Jews appear to be better accepted and more visible in American life than ever before. They have been able to enter previously restricted professional fields and hold public office in greater numbers. In addition, there are pockets of highly committed Jews, and more Jews feel comfortable asserting their Jewish identity and observing Jewish practices in public. On the other hand, the intermarriage rate is rising to un-

precedented levels, and many Jews appear to be blending into the American mainstream. Ellenson concludes:

American Jewry has thus entered a postmodern situation with antipodean trends: record rates of non-affiliation and abandonment of Jewish religion and identity are competing with intense pockets of Jewish commitment and public expression . . . Jews have been blessed with freedom in America. Such blessing has allowed for the strengthening of Jewish commitment, values, and identity. At the same time, it has proven to be the solvent in which a distinctive Jewish identity and values often dissolve . . . The story of Jewish resurgence in the United States during the twentieth century is multivalent and complex, and the adaptive capacity of the Jewish people will surely continue to be tested in the future (44; 49-50).

Nevertheless, the author is optimistic that Jews will continue to respond creatively and effectively to the challenges of our time, as they always have in the past. Citing his teacher, Ellenson notes:

As [Jacob] Katz would put it, Judaism and the Jewish people did not simply collapse and expire when they faced the challenges of the modern world . . . Instead, both the Jewish community and Jewish religion were reconfigured and reinvented in light of a changed cultural, social, political, and religious order. Modernity did not simply foster assimilation. It also promoted an integration and adaptation that allowed Jews to create new ways — some more, some less successful — of being Jewish . . . (56; 60).

The 19th century, as David Ellenson has demonstrated, offers many models of such creative adaptation, a process that continues to the present day.

From Self to Community

Spiritual Community: The Power to Restore Hope, Commitment and Joy
by David Teutsch
(Jewish Lights Publishing, Woodstock, Vermont, 2005)

REVIEWED BY SPEED B. LEAS

David Teutsch is an experienced rabbi, a scholar, former president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and former executive director of the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation. From reading *Spiritual Community*, I can tell that the author is a man who knows organizations from the inside and has studied them as an academic. In this book, he has brought together experience and research in a way that is at once engaging, encouraging and pragmatic.

The book is a meditation on community. It is a celebration of, a study of and an apology for community — real community. Teutsch argues that real community is what should be at the heart of synagogues and churches, which are his prime examples of how community gets lived out.

Beyond Feelings and Friendship

Teutsch is not romantic about community; he avoids over-focusing on warm feelings and friendships (though he does not play down this important

aspect of community life). Instead, he lifts up other dimensions of community life: vision, a focus on transcendent worth, discipline, responsibility and values-clarification. I was pleased to see that he emphasizes many dimensions of community life and does not narrow his discussion down to a “right answer” or a simple program that will put it all together for a congregation.

In each chapter, Teutsch carefully and clearly defines the dimension he is exploring, and then shares ideas that will help move a community toward living into that dimension in a meaningful way. I was especially engaged by his section on “Taking Responsibility.” He notes that in community we make mutual demands on one another. “Minding your own business” is individualism at work (individualism, in this case, undermines community). One must speak up and call attention to individual or organizational dysfunction. Quoting from Leviticus, “Thou shalt surely reprove,” he recommends taking responsibility, even risking relationships, to make community work. This is an irony that is at the heart of a

Speed B. Leas is a consultant to religious organizations and an educator of church leaders, including pastors, laity and church executives. From 1992 to 2004, he was Senior Consultant of The Alban Institute.

healthy congregation. In order for community to work, one does not overlook problematic behavior; one addresses it in the hope of a better future.

Visioning

Another theme that captured my attention is at the heart of Teutsch's discussion of visioning. Taking an idea from sociologist Carl Sheingold (the current executive vice-president of the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation), Teutsch says that a congregation should have "radiant centers." By this he means persons, activities, programs and worship that draw us into community. Such a center could be, for example, a wonderful teacher, a choir, a circle of people who provide support in time of crisis or a fellowship group. Radiant centers create connection and generate feelings of belonging; indeed, they are tools of outreach. As radiant centers develop, more people who are on the periphery of a community bask in their warmth. These centers bring institutional vibrancy, programmatic change and religious renewal. "Vision," says Teutsch, "grows out of the raised expectations that come from living in a caring community energized by its radiant centers." What a concept!

Another concept explored here is commitment. Community does not just happen. Community involves work, sacrifice and serious intentionality on the part of those who want to make it happen. One has to make room for community in his/her busy life and engage in activities that nurture it. While the work to make it happen is significant, the rewards can be great.

Thoughtful Reflection

Teutsch is a writer who has been in the trenches. He is not naive about congregational life and, thank goodness, he does not propose a nostrum guaranteed to fix each ailment of a congregation. His advice comes out of thoughtful reflection on his own experience and wide reading of the research of others. The reader of this book will not get a plan outlining where to start building community or a step-by-step schema for putting it all together. It is not a user's manual or a compendium of strategies to guarantee organizational excellence. It is more an apologia for community than a handbook. But if you are looking for a gentle, thoughtful reflection on what real community can mean and some ideas about how to make it happen, this book is for you.

Women of the Bible

The Women Who Danced by the Sea
by Marsha Mirkin
(Monkfish Book Publishing, 2004)

Praise Her Works
by Penina Adelman
(Jewish Publication Society, 2005)

REVIEWED BY MARGOT STEIN

Just when you thought you already knew everything there was to know about the women of the Bible, along come two books that cast our foremothers' stories in a new light.

Women of Valor

In *Praise Her Works*, Penina Adelman uses as her framework the twenty-two "Women of Valor" found in *Midrash HaGadol*, a 13th-century Yemenite collection of *midrashim*, which assigns one female biblical figure per line of the traditional *Eshet Hayil* ("woman of valor") passage from the Bible (Proverbs 31:10-31). (Working with a circle of women writers to uncover and expand upon these *midrashim*, Adelman adds Vashti to the list.) The writers develop a template for each chapter that gives voice to the selected text, the writer, the specific "woman of valor," and the wider world. The result is akin, in Adelman's words, to Judy Chicago's

"Dinner Party" meeting the "Women's Night in the *Sukkah*."

Each chapter of *Praise Her Works* is introduced with a text from *Midrash HaGadol* that links the line from *Eshet Hayil* to a specific biblical woman. The text is presented in Hebrew with an English translation. A brief synopsis of the biblical account follows, supplemented by a commentary written by one of the contributors that explains how she understands the connection between the line in *Eshet Hayil* and the designated story.

The next section of this template allows the biblical woman to speak in her own voice, expressing her own previously unarticulated thoughts or clarifying some action or statement of hers that may have been misinterpreted by others through the intervening centuries. This is followed by a few brief paragraphs in which the woman of valor distills the message she wants the reader to take away from this encounter. The final section ("For Further Thought")

Rabbi Margot Stein is a writer, composer and educator who specializes in teaching Judaism through the arts.

offers discussion questions and related reading if one wishes to learn more. An appendix gives the source text (in Hebrew and in English) of *Midrash HaGadol's* commentary on Genesis 23:1, the Torah portion called *Hayei Sara* (the life of Sarah). An index of scriptural passages and a subject index add to this book's utility as a reference tool for research and teaching.

Qualities and Commentaries

There are two dimensions to *Praise Her Works*: it is part recorded ritual, and part in-depth tour of the unique strengths of our female biblical ancestors. Initially, Adelman was seeking source material for a ritual she wanted to create in honor of her daughter Laura becoming a bat mitzva, and the list of twenty-three women of valor came alive as she assigned to each of twenty-three female friends (girls and women) one of these biblical ancestors. Each was asked to give the bat mitzva girl a blessing in the name of that biblical character, the sort of blessing the character herself might have given if she could have been present.

The second aspect of the book then emerged from the first: each blessing highlighted a unique human strength, a particular gift and an approach to meeting life's challenges. Each woman of valor had a *midda*, a personal quality, to transmit as part of her legacy. The result is an eclectic combination of styles and voices, blended into a conversation that stretches from the time of the Bible to the present.

The commentaries provide both

well-known and fresh interpretations of each biblical woman and her story, each speaking in her own voice, ranging from mundane to soaring and poetic. Andrea Cohen-Kiener offers us a Yael saturated in Tennessee Williams: "Hey girls, I am probably what you would think of as a southern girl." Adelman's Hannah endures words from her co-wife that "chomped on (her) unwitting flesh and drew blood." Marsha Mirkin shows us a banished Miriam, brimming with sadness as well as gratitude. The reader is amply thanked for taking the time to "listen" to these stories so carefully, a self-consciousness perhaps resulting from the book's division into part midrash, part study guide.

The most difficult task for the editor and contributors was that each chapter needed to follow the template, be coherent with the rest of the material, and offer up nuggets of insight. As is common in such collections, the quality of each midrash depends somewhat on the individual contributor.

How well the book succeeds depends on one's purpose in reading it, and upon the level of erudition one brings to it. I would not hesitate to recommend this book for adult study groups, or for adults and teens seeking to write *divrei torah* or life-cycle ceremonies. For the professional, the occasional *hidush* (innovative insight) provides a delightful twist on the biblical text. Go ahead and comb this book to supplement your knowledge of such little-known heroines as Hatzleponi, the wife of Manoah (Judges 13), the widow from Tzaraphath (I Kings 17), Serakh (Genesis 46:17, Numbers 26:46

and I Chronicles 7:30) and the wife of Obadiah (II Kings 4).

We can marvel at the realization that the rabbis of the 13th century respected and admired the women in their lives enough to imagine that their biblical ancestors, both well-known and obscure, merited inclusion in their commentaries on *Eshet Hayil*. These rabbis managed to uphold traditional texts while being quite (perhaps unintentionally) subversive, a combination which many of these women of valor might recognize with some mutual appreciation.

Psychological Perspectives

Marsha Mirkin draws upon her many years as a psychologist to re-imagine our biblical ancestors negotiating relationships and growing into maturity through the challenges they face. She interweaves cases from her psychotherapy practice, juxtaposing contemporary dilemmas with biblical tales, often to startling effect.

Mirkin was busy thinking about biblical women, being a contributor to Adelman's *Praise Her Works* while also working on her own exploration of women's lives in *The Women who Danced by the Sea*. In this book, Mirkin examines stories of biblical women through the lens of psychology in "an effort to cull meanings that promote our fullest emotional, spiritual and social development and support both our growth-in-relationship and Tik-kun Olam" (xxii). Just as it is difficult for us to create and sustain meaningful relationships — with ourselves,

our loved ones, and the Divine — so, too, did our foremothers struggle with these issues. The life of each sheds light on the lives of the others, helping the reader learn from the experiences of our ancestors while better understanding those ancestors based on our own life experiences.

If the "cornerstones of mental health are mutuality, empathy and authenticity" (xix), an understanding that undergirds Mirkin's work as a relational and cultural family therapist, then Eve eats the fruit in search of her own budding authenticity, and an empathic God clothes this first couple before they leave the Garden. Sarah abuses Hagar because, like so many women who suffer devastating infertility, she feels defective and wishes to use Hagar as a vehicle for her own restoration. Rebecca, a survivor of childhood abuse at the hands of Bethuel and Laban, intuitively understands Isaac as a fellow survivor, one damaged more than she. Miriam must learn mutuality if she is to stop mothering Moses and instead become his sister.

Rich with psychological insight, these stories and the case studies that are interwoven serve to illuminate each other in a fascinating journey through time and back again. Although unheralded, the book also embraces such tenets of feminism as non-gendered God-language and the use of culturally diverse case studies that casually feature gay and lesbian couples, runaways, welfare mothers, high-powered career women, anorexics, adult children of alcoholics, people with Alzheimer's, cancer patients and more. Reflective,

teeming with life and appreciative of each person's experience, the stories

leap off the page and begin to dance. Indeed, we are invited to dance along with them.

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