

The Reconstructionist

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FROM THE EDITOR

70: Shades of Gray

According to the sage Judah ben Tema (*Pirke Avot* 5:24), the age of seventy (*shiv'im*) is reckoned as *l'sayva*, which in its literal sense means something like "the age of the graying head." In the midrash (*Bereshit Rabba* 59:3), the rabbis raise the question of what the difference is between *sayva* and *zikna*, which appear together in Psalm 71:18: "... and even in hoary (*zikna*) old age (*sayva*), do not forsake me . . ." Since both have the connotation of advanced age, are they merely synonyms? Rav Aha explained: "If I am given old age, may I also be given the [wisdom, dignity and] venerability that comes with it." Put differently, *zikna* is quantitative; *sayva* is qualitative.

With this issue, we celebrate the 70th anniversary of *The Reconstructionist*. Seventy years of continual publishing is no small accomplishment, and we are appropriately proud of our record. But it is not only the *zikna*, the longevity, that we honor with this issue; it is the *sayva* that we honor as well. To have maintained an ongoing discussion on the important issues of Jewish life over seven decades, while keeping the level of discussion on a sophisticated as well as a civil plane, has been a major contribution not only to our movement, but to North American Jewish life.

Shiv'im l'sayva; age 70 is the gray head. What an appropriate observation for this publication, which has as its legacy a refusal to reduce complex issues to simple solutions. For those who need black or white answers, *The Reconstructionist* is not the right publication. This is a journal for those who understand and appreciate the importance of shades of gray when discussing issues of consequence about which good people can have a variety of viewpoints.

The Reconstructionist is not merely a document of a small but influential philosophy of Jewish life. As one reads through the back issues, major world and national events of the past seventy years are all reflected in editorials and in articles. Of course, the legacy of seventy years also records the unfolding story of the Jewish people in the 20th century, and *The Reconstructionist* is a remarkable record of the challenges, transitions and adaptations that affected the North American Jewish community.

In its seven decades, the editorial board of *The Reconstructionist* has included many devoted, thoughtful and articulate people. Space does not allow for a full listing of all the men and women who volunteered their time to reflect together on the important issues of their time, and to shape a progressive Jewish response to those issues. The list of contributing editors is equally distinguished, and reflects the many people who took the time to put their thoughts in writing. Elsewhere in this issue, we pay tribute to those who have served *The Reconstructionist* in a professional capacity as editors, assistant editors and managing editors.

For most of its first four decades, *The Reconstructionist* appeared biweekly, with twenty or thirty pages of tightly-packed text per issue. Even when the publication schedule became monthly, each issue included a full offering of reviews, articles and editorials. As I labor to get two issues of our journal out each year, I marvel at the abilities and dedication of the editors who came before me, who largely worked without the benefits of computers, electronic files, word-processing and email. I still am not sure how they did it, but we are all in their debt.

I am pleased to be able to take the opportunity of our 70th anniversary to announce that the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) has begun the project of scanning the entire run of *The Reconstructionist* from 1935 in order to make it available online on the Internet. I am grateful to Rabbi Sandy E. Sasso of Congregation Beth-El Zedeck in Indianapolis for initiating the contacts with ATLA that have enabled us to take this important step.

We will keep our readers posted as to the progress of the ATLA project, and we will certainly announce when *The Reconstructionist* goes online, along with the steps necessary to gain access. Meanwhile, remember that all of the issues from 1994 on are available online at www.terra.org or www.rrc.edu.

It is truly an honor to be in the editor's seat as we celebrate this milestone. May the future of *The Reconstructionist* extend at least as far into the future as we have come so far. *Barukh . . . shehehianu, v'kiyamnu, v'higianu lazman hazeh.*

In This Issue

Our 70th anniversary is an appropriate moment to reflect on Reconstructionist Judaism. In this issue, we have invited many of the key professional and lay leaders of the movement to offer reflections on different aspects of Reconstructionist thought and practice in a symposium devoted to our past, present and future. We also feature a series of articles exploring various aspects of Reconstructionist thought and practice.

In the "Viewpoint" section, we feature an exchange on the concept of values-based decision making (VBDM) that raises some important questions about that process. Three book reviews round out this issue on topics pertinent to Reconstructionism: one is on the relationship of science and religion; another chronicles the 1960s, the same decade in which Reconstructionist Judaism emerged as a full and separate denomination; the third explores the impact of American Jews on the formation of the American soul.

We invite reactions and responses from our readers, who are today, as they have been for the past seven decades, an integral part of intellectual adventure of *The Reconstructionist*.

—Richard Hirsh

On the Occasion of Our 70th Anniversary

We Honor the Editors, Assistant Editors and Managing Editors

Who Have Sustained *The Reconstructionist*

Mordecai M. Kaplan, Founding Chairman

Ira Eisenstein, Managing Editor, Associate Chairman, Editor, 1935-1983

Eugene Kohn, Managing Editor, Editor, 1935-1959

David Sidorsky, Managing Editor, 1959-1960

Emanuel Goldsmith, Assistant Editor, 1966-1968

Jacob J. Staub, Editor, 1983-1989

Joy D. Levitt, Editor, 1989-1993

Herb Levine, Editor, 1994-1996

American Jewish Life since 1935: A Reconstructionist Retrospective

BY RICHARD HIRSH

When Mordecai Kaplan published *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American Jewish Life* in 1934, the original “Reconstructionist” synagogue, the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, was already fourteen years old. Kaplan’s radical rethinking of Judaism was documented in articles dating back to 1915. A 1927 offer to Kaplan to become president of the independent Jewish Institute for Religion in New York had been rejected more than once. Kaplan himself was fifty-three years old, and one could argue that the book was too much, too late.

Remarkably, *Judaism as a Civilization* provoked an enthusiastic response in the Jewish community (as well as some not unexpected criticism from traditional quarters). One consequence of this reception was the creation of *The Reconstructionist* magazine, whose first issue was dated “January 11, 1953-Shebat 7, 5695,” as the masthead pointedly noted in two-civilization shorthand.

A New Voice

Appearing as a biweekly in its first

decades, *The Reconstructionist* was the preeminent Jewish journal of the American Jewish community. Many of the Jewish magazines and journals we take for granted today did not come into existence until after World War II, or even later. Organizational publications that today increasingly devote pages to discussion of topics rather than just reporting on activities began their lives primarily as house-organs. *The Reconstructionist* was the first Jewish journal to engage substantive conceptual, theological and ideological issues, just as second-generation American Jews were coming of age and seeking ways to integrate their Jewish and American identities.

The early *Reconstructionist* editorial boards were comprised of many of the leading intellectual figures of the American rabbinate as well as leaders in the fields of Jewish education and communal service. If one wanted to make a statement about, influence opinion on, or comment on critical issues of American Jewish life, one wrote for *The Reconstructionist*.

The Reconstructionist that appeared in 1935 was, in fact, an expanded version

Rabbi Richard Hirsh has served as Editor of *The Reconstructionist* since 1996 and is the Executive Director of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association. This article is adapted and expanded from “The Reconstructionist: A Window on Jewish Life” (*Reconstructionism Today*, Autumn 1999).

of *The SAJ Review*, which Kaplan had been publishing (until the Depression intervened) as part of his vision of the SAJ as more than just a congregation. In typically innovative fashion, Kaplan had used *The SAJ Review* as a forum for discussion of important issues of Jewish life, and not only as an organ of congregational communication. *The Reconstructionist* continued to be published by the SAJ until 1941, when the newly-formed Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation assumed responsibility.

Finding a Name

When *Judaism as a Civilization* appeared, a group of Kaplan's disciples, including Rabbis Ira Eisenstein, Milton Steinberg and Eugene Kohn, saw an opportunity to capitalize on the excitement and interest generated by the book. The creation of a magazine devoted to Reconstructionist thinking was seen as a timely and crucial vehicle for keeping Kaplan's program before the Jewish community.

But what to name the nascent publication? In his autobiography, *Reconstructing Judaism*, Ira Eisenstein reported that many options were floated, but those who would become the core of the editorial board kept circling back to "Reconstructionist," despite the somewhat cumbersome terminology. Milton Steinberg argued for the name as an indispensable and authentic representation of the magazine's mission, and thus was born *The Reconstructionist*.

Those called together for the initial editorial board represented the very spectrum of the Jewish community

that Reconstructionism sought to bring together under the slogan "Judaism as a civilization." Included were several leading Conservative rabbis, all Kaplanian disciples: Ira Eisenstein, Eugene Kohn, Israel Goldstein, Ben Zion Bokser and Milton Steinberg. The Reform rabbinate (at least that wing sympathetic to the concept of peoplehood that Kaplan advocated) was represented by Barnett Brickner and Edward Israel. Educators Alexander Dushkin and Jacob Golub, and Hillel rabbi Max Kadushin rounded out the roster.

The Importance of Editorials

From its inception, *The Reconstructionist* was committed both to publishing articles and reviews and to producing editorials in which contemporary issues — including Jewish, American and global — were analyzed through a progressive Jewish perspective. Appearing in the midst of the prewar Depression years, and with the rumblings of war from Europe already beginning to be heard, *The Reconstructionist* understood immediately the importance of applying Jewish perspectives to issues that confronted Jews on a daily basis.

The editorials were the product of regular meetings of the editorial board members, and normally appeared as unsigned consensus statements. (Guest editorials normally came with attribution.) Rabbis Kaplan and Eisenstein generally assumed responsibility for the actual writing, with Eisenstein presiding at the meeting so that Kaplan could participate freely.

The very first issue included seven

editorials. The lead editorial, "The Reconstructionist Position," included a summary of key Kaplanian concepts and then went on to address social issues, opposition to fascism among them. Reflecting the economic times, the editorial bluntly states, "we dare not be reconciled to an economic system that crushes the laboring masses and permits the existence of want in an economy of potential plenty. Social righteousness is possible only upon the establishment of a cooperative society, the elimination of the profit system, and public ownership of all natural resources and basic industries." This flirtation with socialism would permeate *The Reconstructionist* up to and into the early years of the Second World War

Other editorials in that first issue dealt with a critique of Zionist thinking that saw Zionism as self-sufficient rather than as part of a larger program; an endorsement of an American Communist weekly for being the only publication that cared as much about anti-Semitism as did those published by Jews; a critique of President Roosevelt's New Deal for failing to achieve more equitable distribution of income; a warning to avoid the rhetoric of Vladimir Jabotinsky, spokesperson for right-wing Revisionist Zionism; a tribute to educator Alexander Dushkin on his departure for Palestine to become head of education at Hebrew University; and a statement of support for the attempt of "Jewish Soviets" to establish an "independent Jewish territory" in Biro-Bidjan, Russia, noting the anticipated endorsement of the Russian government for this move.

The Particular and the Universal

From 1935-1945, *The Reconstructionist* was the primary voice of American Judaism, as it mirrored the community's involvement with the major external issues (the gathering war in Europe and American involvement after December 1941) and the internal issues facing the Jewish community.

In the October 22, 1937 issue, an editorial on the anarchy of *kashrut* regulation suggested a coordinated communal response in which the rabbinate, the American Jewish Congress, the American Jewish Committee, the Federations, the Synagogue Council and the Jewish Welfare Board were each asked to enter into cooperative communal planning, a key Reconstructionist position.

The general as well as specific issues of Jewish ritual policy were addressed in 1941 in a series of four articles entitled "Toward a Guide for Jewish Ritual Usage" (October 31, 1941-December 12, 1941 issues). This first attempt to delineate Reconstructionist adjustments to Jewish ritual practice was a defining issue in the separation of several leading Conservative rabbis from active association with *The Reconstructionist* magazine. This early skirmish, with the liberals arguing for adaptation and the traditionalists settling for interpretation, was an overture to the eventual separation of the Reconstructionists from the Conservative movement.

World War II

These sorts of internal Jewish issues

soon paled before the larger issues facing America and American Jews. Even as the final article on the ritual guide was on press, the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor brought the U.S. into the war. An editorial, "Our Country at War" (December 26, 1941), stated that "We are fighting . . . not only against an immediate evil but for an ultimate good — the achievement of that era of universal freedom, justice and peace which the prophets of Israel first envisaged and proclaimed to mankind." During the war years, *The Reconstructionist* continued to comment on overseas as well as national issues, and despite the natural tendency to subordinate all discussion to the allied war effort, articles continued to come forth on topics of contemporary Jewish concern.

As the second decade of publication approached, the war effort was shifting towards what would eventually be a successful conclusion. While celebrating the increasing Allied victories in Europe and the Pacific, American Jews in particular were stunned to learn of what would later be named as the Holocaust. A 1943 editorial stridently rebuked those Jews "who seem to be wholly indifferent to the tragic plight of their European brethren . . . out of fear of raising an undue clamor . . . nothing too bitter can be said about such Jews." While American Jewish leadership divided over whether to push for the rescue of European Jewry, *The Reconstructionist* advocated action, or "we shall be guilty not only as Jews but as Americans . . ." Against those who feared provoking anti-Semitism, the editorial board concluded "Nothing must

stand in the way of organized united action on the part of all American Jews to save European Jewry" ("Save European Jewry Now!" March 5, 1943).

On December 14, 1945, a half-year after the end of the war, an editorial entitled "In Memory of Six Million Dead" captured the emerging reality that the extermination of European Jewry had no parallel in the catalog of Jewish suffering. Anticipating the debate which would emerge in the 1950s and which continues to this day, *The Reconstructionist* urged that appropriate liturgical and ritual forms be created through which memorial could be mediated, including the "setting of a day in the calendar when all . . . might join in saying the *Kaddish*."

The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 was the fulfillment of the Zionist dream, which Reconstructionism had embraced from its inception. The creation of a homeland in which Jewish civilization, Hebrew, Jewish arts and culture and literature and Jewish history would be primary rather than secondary thrilled the editorial writers. An editorial entitled "The Miracle Has Happened" (May 28, 1948) stated "Who would have believed possible fifty years ago what has happened today? . . . It is an evidence that men can draw on a Divine Power to make dreams come true if those dreams conform to the law of righteousness that expresses His transcendent purpose in the evolution of human society."

New Intellectual Currents

The Reconstructionist message

in the fifties and early sixties found its rational (naturalism) as well as its sociological (peoplehood) approaches in competition with new forces. On the intellectual front, the existentialist religious thinking that had arisen in Europe after World War I reached American shores in the years after the Second World War. Disillusionment with reason, despair about human nature and a hopelessness about the amelioration of human suffering posed a challenge to the Kaplanian emphasis on rationality, the “Power that makes for salvation” and the hope for the “achievement of that era of universal freedom, justice and peace which the prophets of Israel first envisaged and proclaimed to mankind.”

Milton Steinberg, a close friend of Ira Eisenstein and a loyal disciple of Kaplan, was among those affected by the new existentialist theologies. In an article entitled “The Test of Time” celebrating the fifteenth anniversary of *The Reconstructionist* (February 24, 1950), published shortly before his tragic and untimely death, Steinberg responded to Kaplan’s avoidance of ultimate questions: “For me, the riddle of the universe is not so readily to be dismissed, and faith is not only a psychological and ethical venture but a cognitive one also, an affirmation concerning the ultimate nature of things.” While endorsing the essential validity of the rest of the Reconstructionist platform, Steinberg’s theological dissent proved to be a preview of the new thinking that was to take center stage in American Jewish life.

Jewish Suburbia

While the intellectual elite struggled with such issues, the social circumstances of the new Jewish suburbanites stood in sharp contrast. Thousands of returning Jewish soldiers moved with their new families to the suburbs surrounding the major cities, and as they did, they created the suburban Jewish congregations and culture that would become the context in which that generation would adapt Judaism to its needs. In community after community new temples and synagogues sprouted, as the third generation of American Jews proudly took their place in an America comprised, in the title of Will Herberg’s famous study, of Protestant, Catholic and Jew.

The price of this easy accommodation, however, was an emerging identification of Judaism as a faith, rather than a civilization, which was inconsistent with Reconstructionist approach. “Believing” now took priority over “belonging” as American Jews sought a position of social equality premised on a shared American “faith in faith.” “The Christians have their church; the Jews have their Synagogue” wrote Abraham Fleischman in “The Urban Jew Goes Suburban” (March 6, 1953). It would not be until after the 1967 Six-Day War in Israel that a reassertion of Jewish ethnicity would find a receptive audience among Jewish college students.

Roots of Jewish Feminism

The fifties also saw the emergence of what would burst into full flower

a decade later as the movement for equality of women in Jewish life. In the March 6, 1953 issue, Ira Eisenstein reported on the now-equal status of women at the SAJ after the vote to grant full religious access to all ritual. He attributed the change in part to “the open testimony of one of the young women [at the SAJ] who had previously been the bulwark of those who fought [against equality]. She described her experience with her own five year old in the synagogue . . . ‘only the men?’ . . . after this touching testimony, the vote was taken. The rest is history.”

Dr. Judith Kaplan Eisenstein, well-known as the first contemporary *bat mitzva*, also had the distinction of being the first woman named to the editorial board, appearing on October 2, 1942. From the policy change at SAJ in 1951 to the entrance of the first female rabbinical student at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in 1969, *The Reconstructionist* continued to document and to endorse the expanding claim to equality by Jewish women.

The Turmoil of the Sixties

On February 19, 1960, the “25th Anniversary” issue of *The Reconstructionist* was published, just in time to usher in a new decade. The editorial, “On The Threshold of a Quarter Century,” saw an opportunity to capitalize on the new beginning and reassert a key Reconstructionist teaching: “At the start of a new quarter century, we pledge our best endeavors to teach the perfectibility of man based upon the conviction that the Power that makes for

salvation is an invincible Power, before which no man-made evil can stand.”

The Reconstructionist also weighed in on the then-thorny issues surrounding presidential candidate Senator John F. Kennedy, whose Catholicism was being used to call into question his ultimate loyalty if he were to be elected. Beyond the obvious and easy dismissal of such accusations, the editorial “Religion in the Elections” (May 13, 1960) suggested that religion properly understood as a way of life and not merely belief indeed legitimately invited questions of candidates for office. “Such questions should not be regarded as intolerance toward a religion not one’s own. They should rather be regarded as showing respect for honest religious differences.”

Just three years later, in December of 1963, *The Reconstructionist* joined in the nation’s mourning for the assassinated president. “We were shaken to think that any [assassin] should have had such scant respect for the office, if not for the man. David’s words on hearing of the death of Saul, echoed in our ears: ‘How wast thou not afraid to put forth thy hand to destroy the Eternal’s anointed?’” (“The Martyred President and a Nation’s Journey” December 13, 1963.)

Cultural Critiques

The sixties also witnessed cultural reflections on Jewish identity emanating from literature and music, in addition to those issuing from rabbis and social analysts. In the March 4, 1960 issue, Judd Teller and Harold Ribalov offered essays on the controversial collection of stories by Philip Roth, *Good-*

bye Columbus. Roth had lampooned and lambasted what he portrayed as the bland, insecure, superficial and social-climbing suburban Jews of the late 1950s, and not all American Jews were happy.

Siding with those who felt that Roth wrote out of self-hate, and that his stories could not be “good for the Jews”, Ribalow represented one side of the Jewish debate. In contrast, Teller dismissed the hand-wringing of “American Jewry’s so-called national leaders and their organizations” for “pursuing the wisp of public relations.” *The Reconstructionist* presented both sides of the debate, reflecting its long commitment to publishing diverse perspectives.

In 1963, comedy writer Alan Sherman scored a hit with a novelty record entitled “My Son the Folksinger” in which Sherman’s original songs about suburban Jewish life were set to popular folk tunes. Sociologist Herbert Gans wrote an essay (“Alan Sherman’s Sociologist Presents . . .,” May 3, 1963) on what those songs reflected about Jewish identity. “Sherman’s Jews . . . have relinquished the nostalgia for traditional Judaism, and they worry little about the Jewishness of the third generation. Indeed, they are Jewish only in that they live in Jewish neighborhoods and earn their living in typically Jewish occupations.”

The criticism of Roth and the satire of Sherman suggested that there was a spiritual hollowness at the center of the plenitude of suburban Judaism, notwithstanding the comfortable presence, socially and congregationally, that Jews had achieved in “The New Frontier.”

As the sixties exploded in protest over civil rights and Vietnam, and as assassinations continued to eradicate hope and faith, the quest for meaning and value and the place of religious communities in confronting societal crisis became more important.

Reconstructionism Becomes a Movement

The Reconstructionist magazine was in fact the first step in the long development of Reconstructionism as an independent fourth Jewish denomination. By the 1960s, what had earlier been a Jewish journal of wide readership and influence had narrowed to a publication that increasingly spoke to a smaller audience: the slow but steadily growing numbers of Jews who sought to create a Reconstructionist movement that would stand apart from the Conservative and Reform movements.

With the establishment of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC) in 1968, the long-awaited final step was taken. From that time forward, *The Reconstructionist* increasingly became a voice for discussion and debate about issues indigenous to an emerging movement. While editorials continued to address general and wider Jewish issues, the content of the magazine shifted towards analysis of issues within the movement and the application of the Reconstructionist perspective to contemporary issues.

Student Radicals

The instability of the late sixties and

early seventies, particularly as played out in the so-called “generation gap,” found its address in *The Reconstructionist* as well. An editorial, “Riots at Columbia, Quiet in Jewish Life” (May 31, 1968), sympathetically acknowledged the concerns (if not all the tactics) of the college students who that spring had shut down that university, applauding their passion and social concern. The editorial then asked: “How strange it is that there are no riots, no sit-ins, no picketing, no demonstrations at Jewish institutions – synagogues, temples, seminaries, social agencies...we must confess that we look wistfully at the burning zeal of the students, and wish that some of it would make its appearance within Jewish ranks.”

In November of 1969, the Jewish student unrest that *The Reconstructionist* once longed for surfaced at the General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds. Students disrupted the proceedings, demanding a shift in allocations from overseas efforts to Jewish education and spiritual issues here at home. *The Reconstructionist* applauded the “decorum which characterized their demonstrations” but more importantly, saw that “they put their collective finger upon the most sensitive point in American Jewish communal life, namely, the failure to assign the proper priorities in the distribution of communal funds” (“Jewish Youth Demonstrate for Jewish Education”, December 12, 1969).

But the protests applauded by *The Reconstructionist* were not necessarily welcomed as warmly closer to home. The inaugural years of the RRC were

in fact marked by struggles between students and faculty and administration over policy, procedure, principle and practice. A March 5, 1971 editorial criticized “those radical Jews who, ostensibly devoted to Judaism and Jewish sancta, misappropriate both in the interests of causes inimical to the Jews and Judaism.” This brought forth a sharp response from a group of students at the RRC, published in the May 7, 1971 issue: “We . . . dissociate ourselves from the views expressed [in the editorial] . . . which heaps abuse on so-called Jewish radicals . . . We utterly reject this attempt by the unrepresentative Editorial Board (alas, their age does show) . . .” In his reply to the students, editor Ira Eisenstein concluded with the observation that “. . . if our age shows, [the rabbinical students] should know that, with our last, waning strength we are trying to create a school in which younger leaders may be educated so that they can take over whenever they are ready.”

A New Direction

In 1982, an organizational restructuring of the Reconstructionist movement took place. Beginning in 1983, publication of *The Reconstructionist* was taken over by the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Havurot (now the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation, or JRF). Rabbi Jacob Staub became editor after the 1982 retirement of Ira Eisenstein, who had served as editor for many years.

For the next ten years, under the editorship of Staub and later of Rabbi

Joy Levitt, *The Reconstructionist* tried to strike a balance between editorials and articles that dealt with contemporary issues, and the need for a house organ to bring Reconstructionism into the increasing number of households affiliated with the movement.

Staub and Levitt, both graduates of the RRC, inaugurated a formal process whereby the intellectual evolution of Reconstructionism could be engaged. Articles and symposia offered new perspectives on such topics as the Chosen People, democracy in Reconstructionism and liturgical revision.

Editorials and articles maintained the courageous and pathfinding tradition of the earlier decades. A symposium on intermarriage in the November 1983 issue anticipated by a decade the shift in attitude on this issue from “threat” to “opportunity.” The editorial “The Best Interests of the Child” (October-November 1985) boldly advocated for the right of gay and lesbian parents to adopt children, have custody rights, and all other options available to heterosexual parents. The attempt by the Israeli government to direct the flood of Russian Jewish immigrants to territories over the Green Line generated this observation: “A fanatical obsession with a tiny piece of real estate cannot be permitted to signal the collapse of [the Zionist dream.” (Spring 1992, “What’s An American Zionist To Do?”)

From Magazine to Journal

As the Reconstructionist movement continued to grow rapidly in the 1990s, the content and function of *The Recon-*

structionist became subject to reevaluation. There was a need for a publication to come into the increasing number of Reconstructionist-affiliated households that briefly and easily communicated Reconstructionist thinking on issues of personal and communal Jewish living. Within the movement there was also an emerging need for a sustained intellectual analysis of Reconstructionist positions as well as an exploration of larger issues.

In 1993, the JRF decided to create a new publication, *Reconstructionism Today* to fulfill the role of popular journal. The RRC took over the publication of *The Reconstructionist* in the spring of 1994, recasting it as a journal appearing twice yearly, in which ideas could be explored in depth by focusing each issue on one topic. The intellectual rigor, debate and discussion which *The Reconstructionist* was created to support continue to fill the pages.

Past and Future

In the fall of 1934, when a handful of Jewish leaders convened to launch a new publication, it is doubtful that they anticipated seventy years of continual publication. They certainly could not have imagined that someday there would be more than 270 Reconstructionist rabbis (many of whom contribute articles and reviews) and 105 Reconstructionist congregations (many of whose members also contribute articles and reviews).

In our time, when religion is reduced either to a bland and generic sense of “spirituality,” or wielded as a weapon

in the hands of cultural and political conservatives, the need for a rational voice devoted to embracing the complexity that characterizes issues of substance remains. *The Reconstructionist* continues to represent the importance of ideas, the value of using language in a meaningful and constructive manner, and the centrality of discussing and debating ideas in the light of reason.

As *The Reconstructionist* celebrates its 70th anniversary, the words on the

cover of the first issue — “Dedicated to the advancement of Judaism as a religious civilization, to the upbuilding of Israel’s ancient homeland, and to the furtherance of universal freedom, justice and peace” — continue to influence our current mission: “To serve as a medium for the continuing development of Reconstructionist ideas, practices, and institutions, by addressing religious, political, social and moral issues of contemporary Jewish life.”

Exploring Judaism and Finding Reconstructionism

BY REBECCA T. ALPERT AND JACOB J. STAUB

The first edition of *Exploring Judaism: A Reconstructionist Approach* (1985) emerged out of the experience of young Reconstructionists who realized that we needed a simple text to introduce the basic ideas of Reconstructionist Judaism to a broader audience. While most of us had fallen in love with this movement by reading Mordecai Kaplan's classic *Judaism as a Civilization*, we knew that dated and weighty book was really not a helpful introduction. Something easier and more accessible was necessary to introduce Kaplan's ideas to a broader audience.

One of us (Rebecca) had been raised in the Reform movement. The other (Jacob) grew up in the world of modern Orthodoxy. Reconstructionism represented for us (in diametrically opposite ways) a rich and promising path that would enable us to thrive as Jews, and we shared a passionate commitment to spread the word about this movement that had brought meaning to each of us.

What made us think that we were prepared for the job? Most of all, what

allowed us to do this was simply the hubris of youth. When we wrote the first edition, we were both under 35 years of age and less than ten years past rabbinic ordination. Each of us was already serving as a leader of the movement: Rebecca was dean of students at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC) and Jacob was director of RRC's Medieval Civilization department and editor of the *Reconstructionist*. We took on the task because we were tired of answering the question, "What is Reconstructionism?" We hoped to write a brief and accessible book that could provide a clear answer. We had already collaborated on writing projects for *The Reconstructionist* and were excited about undertaking a joint writing project of such importance.

The First Edition

As we set out to unpack the definition of Reconstructionism — Judaism is the evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people — high on the list of our goals was to explain that Kaplanian ideas could actually be lived by Jews,

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providing an inspiring, viable model to enrich our lives through an engagement with Jewish tradition. We knew it was possible because we were living it.

We were also all too familiar with the usual questions:

- What does it mean to believe in a non-personal God who neither hears prayers nor intervenes supernaturally in life?
- Why bother studying our people's sacred texts if you don't believe that they were divinely revealed?
- Why be ritually observant if you don't believe that Jewish practices are literally commanded?
- Aren't you really just picking and choosing whatever suits you?
- Why is Kaplan's "ethical nationhood" preferable to Ethical Culture?
- What makes Reconstructionism different from Reform?
- Isn't it really just the left wing of the Conservative movement?

In formulating our responses, we were addressing both traditionalists who might question our authenticity and the rising numbers of members of Reconstructionist congregations and *havurot*, as well as potential members who sought a foundation on which to base their involvement in warm and welcoming Reconstructionist communities.

Descriptive and Prescriptive

Beyond defining Reconstructionist approaches to Jewish peoplehood, God, Torah and the idea of an evolving religious civilization, we found ourselves describing communities that were still in the process of maturing.

In many ways, our characterizations of Reconstructionist processes and programs were descriptions of the ways that things worked at that time in a single congregation or in several specific communities. These included the idea of a support system network, the participatory decision-making process, intermarriage and non-Jewish partner participation policies, family and values education programs, creative life-cycle rituals, social action programs, less formal synagogue structures and relationships between rabbis and congregants, among others.

We were describing real communities, but in a very real sense, we were also creating guidelines for how we thought all Reconstructionist communities ought to work. In some cases, positions had been approved by delegates at annual national conventions. But for the most part we were trying to capture the most exciting work in our movement, which, then as now, often blossomed locally without movement-wide imprimatur.

Fifteen years later, in 2000, the Reconstructionist movement had grown rapidly to 100 affiliates, and a substantial number of them had been around long enough to have experienced growing pains, capital campaigns, and the development of intricate infrastructures. In revising *Exploring Judaism*, we found ourselves with much more to describe.

Changes Since 1985

The first half of the book — the chapters on "Evolving Civilization," "God," "Torah," and "Peoplehood"

— had stood the test of time, with a few notable exceptions.

Among the most striking was the realization that the theological range and the liturgical life of the movement had become much richer and more diverse. The publication of the *Kol Haneshamah* prayer book series transformed Reconstructionist worship in many ways: through its poetic and gender-neutral translations; by opening up new possibilities for naming God in both Hebrew and English; through its commentaries and *kavannot*; and by expanding the use of Hebrew for non-Hebrew readers by its inclusion of same-page transliterations. In 1985, we had embraced feminism but not understood its implications for liturgy; by 2000, those implications had been embraced and adopted.

In addition, many Reconstructionists had become far less wary of using traditional liturgical language that might be thought of as “supernatural.” We had come to understand and appreciate the mythic power of poetic images and could, for example, use the *mi shebeirakh* prayers for healing without worrying whether God was literally listening.

Similarly, whereas in 1985, meditation and chanting were not popular means of liturgical expression in the Reconstructionist world, fifteen years later Reconstructionists embraced these spiritual practices as valuable in cultivating prayerful, reflective and contemplative states of mind. In the revised edition, we sought to include these new developments and to explain how they might be understood as compatible

with Reconstructionist principles.

With fifteen years of experience, a second striking exception to the first edition that we noted was that the scenarios we had painted for ritual and ethical decision making were unrealistic. People were not, for example, going to study Jewish texts with a group of fellow congregants in order to decide whether to have an abortion; nor were they going to decide together how to observe *kashrut* on a personal basis. Accordingly, for the revised edition, we created new decision-making scenarios that we hoped could be used in the process of congregational and private decision making.

Major Revisions

By contrast, the second half of the original book required major revisions. One piece that had been missing from the first edition was a description of how a Reconstructionist Jew actually lives her or his life, day by day, month by month. Many readers had asked us to include models of Reconstructionist practice if we wrote a second edition. So we composed chapters on how a Reconstructionist might live a Jewish life on a daily basis and through a year of *Shabbatot* and holidays.

In many ways, this was the most challenging aspect of the revision. We wanted to avoid generalizations that imply that all Reconstructionists are identical in how we live and practice our Jewish lives. One favorite passage of ours in this regard is the description of the range of ways in which a Reconstructionist might observe *kashrut*. We went into great detail about which

eating practices might or might not appeal to people based on their personal histories and, in this way, we succeeded in presenting a wide variety of options. We sought to keep our pluralistic principles in mind at all times, so as not to establish inadvertently a hierarchy of preferred behavior.

A second area that required extensive revision was the chapter on “Women” that we replaced with a chapter on “Creating an Inclusive Community.” In the intervening fifteen years, there had been major reports produced by a movement commission on homosexuality and by a Jewish Reconstructionist Federation task force on the role of the non-Jew in Reconstructionist communities. It was clear to us that the movement’s pioneering stands on gender equality were the model for subsequent approaches to intermarried Jews and to queer Jews, as well as to Jews of color, differently abled Jews, and other groups that have felt excluded and disenfranchised by the Jewish community. By placing peoplehood at the center and by locating decision-making power in communities of committed people, Reconstructionism has from the outset represented a challenge to the traditional rabbinic authority structures that define inclusion. It was exciting for us to be able to record the ways in which that dimension of Reconstructionism has developed.

Changing Role of the Rabbi

A third area of revision had to do with the role of the rabbi. The experiences of Reconstructionist communities

had, by 2000, surfaced the inadequacy of the rhetoric of “lay-rabbinic partnership” that had emerged in the 1970s. Mordecai Kaplan and Ira Eisenstein had actually rarely explored in their writings the implications of our commitment to equality and democracy for the definition of rabbinic leadership. In the early years of RRC, somewhat naively, the idea emerged of rabbi as “facilitator”—someone who would use his or her Jewish learning to teach others and to help them make their own decisions. While this construct functions well enough on a one-to-one counseling level, it works far less well in the complicated and charged dynamics of synagogue systems. The movement’s Commission on the Role of the Rabbi had done exhaustive and insightful work to explore useful models for rabbinic authority and power within a community system, and we sought to incorporate those insights into the revised edition.

The Next Revision

What might we predict about a third edition?

We stated in the preface to the second edition that we would not be involved in the next revised edition, if others decide that there should be one. It is important to note that we are now in our mid-fifties, and by 2015 we should be thinking about the new worlds we’ll be entering during our retirement, not writing another version of *Exploring Judaism*. To our great pleasure, we won’t have to. There is a new generation of able leaders to take up the challenge of a third edition. This is a measure of the

movement's growth and vitality and a fact to be celebrated.

We are reluctant to predict the future, but not because of a lack of interest or commitment. Rather, the Reconstructionist movement and the world itself are significantly different than they were when we first took on positions as spokespersons and leaders. Today, leaders of JRF congregations and RRC rabbinical students often have Reconstructionist backgrounds, and with the growth of our youth and camping programs, that will become ever more common.

While Reconstructionism is still frequently omitted by those who refer to "the three major movements," we have definitely achieved a measure of recognition in the Jewish world that would have been difficult to imagine in 1985. With our representatives on many national Jewish boards and conferences, we are more a part of the "establishment" than we might care to admit.

We have high hopes for another edition of *Exploring Judaism* as Reconstructionist Judaism meets the challenges of the future. Blessed with the Reconstructionist legacy of intellectual honesty and acceptance of what is new, we know that we shaped and changed the Reconstructionist world that we inherited from Rabbis Kaplan and Eisenstein in ways they might have anticipated, as well as ways they might not have imagined. So as we both try to envision Reconstructionism's future, we know it to be beyond our imagination. Rather than make predictions, we will describe some challenges, in no particu-

lar order, that we think those who write the next revision are likely to face.

Future Challenges

1. **Maturing:** Our coming of age as a movement itself presents challenges. The affiliation rate of North American Jews is not on the rise. The hallmark of Reconstructionism has been our willingness, even eagerness, to challenge conventional thinking, to acknowledge that just as Jewish civilization has always evolved in response to unprecedented circumstances, so must it continue to do so. Going out on a limb to take unpopular positions has been our sacred task. Our challenge will be to remain faithful to that legacy, even though doing so may expose us to risks and criticism.

2. **Spirituality:** Already since 2000, movement developments in the area of spirituality have been significant, and that is likely to continue. The RRC's program in Jewish Spiritual Direction — the first at any rabbinical seminary — is thriving, and new rabbis are comfortable talking about the divine presence in their daily lives in terms that are consonant with Reconstructionist theology. As rabbis, they can then address those yearnings in the people with whom they work. When a journalist from the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* wanted to report recently on North American developments in spirituality, he knew to spend a couple of days at RRC. This is an important development in Reconstructionism that will require ongoing nurturing.

3. **Israel:** Reconstructionists have

always placed *Eretz Yisrael* at the center of Jewish civilization. This follows directly from our emphasis on Jewish peoplehood and civilization. Israeli society, by definition, embodies the intensive flowering of Jewish civilization in the Holy Land, in the holy language. Younger generations, however, have a much weaker emotional link to the State of Israel, and many members of Reconstructionist communities are likely to be ever more alienated from certain Israeli policies. The challenge will be to find ways to cultivate in them the visceral attachment to Israel that leads to loving attachment as well as to pained criticism, rather than alienation or disinterest.

4. *Tikkun Olam*: Kaplan and his earliest disciples were political radicals in their day. They understood the prophetic mandate of Jewish civilization as an imperative to oppose injustice and oppression. As Jews become increasingly affluent in North America, that imperative must be maintained, even if it is more difficult to remember our own humble, immigrant origins. Our society and the world as a whole are in need of our strong voices and concerted action, emerging out of the values of our traditions.

5. The place of non-Jews: It is now twenty-five years since the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association developed its groundbreaking policy on intermarriage, in which it pioneered the position that Jews who chose non-Jewish partners should not be treated as traitors, and that interfaith couples and families should be welcomed wholeheartedly. The landscape in this regard has continued to change dramatically, and pressure is

likely to continue to increase on rabbis to officiate at interfaith marriages, and on congregations to go yet further in integrating non-Jews. The JRF task force report on the Role of the Non-Jew was a major step forward in addressing the issues, but we should be prepared for ever more consideration and reconsideration as the years go by.

6. Ethics: With each new publication of RRC's Center for Jewish Ethics, the richness and depth of the Reconstructionist approach to values-based decision making becomes more manifest. We have long claimed to engage traditional Jewish teachings seriously, but the Center's recent and projected work will be concrete testimony of that claim that should become central to our self-definition. We are liberal Jews who are not commanded, but are nevertheless meaningfully guided by the past in constructing Jewish lives of righteousness and justice.

7. Ritual Practice: Similarly, the planned multivolume *Reconstructionist Guide to Jewish Practice* will be completed in the years to come, providing Reconstructionists and many others with an invaluable tool for navigating the complicated journey to Jewish living and practice in the 21st century. The multivocal commentary to the Guide does a wonderful job of embodying how pluralism and serious practice build on each other. This work promises to transform the way in which the movement understands our relationship to our traditions.

8. Gender and Inclusion: The Reconstructionist record is exemplary: The first *bat mitzva* in 1922; women

counted in a *minyan* in 1950; women ordained as rabbis in 1974; egalitarian divorce in 1983; openly gay and lesbian Jews admitted to rabbinical school in 1984; endorsement of same-sex commitment ceremonies and communities that welcome gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Jews in 1993.

The challenge here is to avoid resting on our laurels. Kolot: The Center for Jewish Women's and Gender Studies at RRC continues to do powerful work in confronting and healing the wounds caused by our texts' and traditions' treatment of women, and that work should be integrated into our communities. And we still have much work to do beyond formally welcoming GLBT Jews into our communities — rereading hurtful texts, moving beyond the inadvertent assumption that heterosexuality is normative and creating atmospheres in which being out as lesbian or gay is unremarkable. There are many exciting developments in regard to inclusion of other communities that have experienced disenfranchisement in Judaism, most notably multicultural Jews, Jews with disabilities (and their families), and transgender Jews. Our commitment to inclusion means finding bold and creative ways to involve these groups in our world as well.

9. Graying Jews: This may appear self-serving coming from a pair of baby-boomers, but the aging of the Jewish community proceeds inexorably. Reconstructionist programs and institutions, like all others in North America, will be challenged to self-transform in order to address the needs

of our members. Hiddur: The Center for Aging and Judaism at RRC is likely to become an essential resource in this enterprise and should lead the way with creative thinking.

10. Youth: Has anyone noticed that, however young we think we are, many of our communities are not attracting a lot of twenty-something members or singles? That may reflect a larger trend with regard to synagogue (and church) affiliation, but we should recall that Reconstructionist synagogues and *havurot* were once populated by young people who weren't comfortable in more established settings. JRF's Noar Hadash youth groups and camping program are addressing the needs of the pre-college set, and those young people promise to become committed twenty-somethings. But it would be wise to explore seriously how we can transform our services and programs to attract younger people.

Mandate and Legacy

Twenty years ago, we set out to write an introduction to Reconstructionism with the following goal:

Kaplan set the standard for us: to reconstruct. It is up to us to study the program he created for the reconstruction of Judaism in his generation, and then to build upon it for our own. This is how we understand his mandate and legacy to us.

And this is the mandate and legacy we pass on to the next generation.

Kaplan After Sinai: Evolution or Revelation?¹

BY MEL SCULT

Mordecai Kaplan said many times that in order to be a religious person, one must be honest. “There is no spirituality without honesty,” he would tell the future rabbis whom he taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS).

Well, let’s be honest. A significant number of people within the Reconstructionist movement see Kaplan as vestigial and irrelevant. For them, Kaplan’s ideas are unrelated to contemporary problems and are from another era, one whose values and answers do not speak to our fundamental questions or problems. Having spent the better part of the last thirty years trying to make Kaplan’s thought available and understandable, I disagree.

The issue of Kaplan’s continuing relevance was highlighted for me by my recent experience teaching a course at JTS, from which Kaplan retired in 1963. I was very surprised to find that Conservative rabbinical students in the year 2005 appreciate Kaplan’s questions and find his solutions stimulating. I also came to a deeper understanding of Kaplan, not only as the founder of Reconstructionism, but also as a rabbi

within the Conservative context. As much as he was an original and creative thinker, Kaplan was also a Conservative rabbi struggling with the problems that Conservative leaders faced and still face. Seeing Kaplan in this context will help us to see the long-term principles that became the basis of his Reconstructionist system.

Problems with Revelation

Perhaps the most threatened area of Conservative commitment in the early 20th century involved the belief that the Torah came directly from God at Sinai. While the question of revelation does not seem to be a problem for Reconstructionists these days, exploring Kaplan’s dismissal of divine revelation will be productive and will shed light on his continuing relevance.

In the early decades of the 20th century, Darwin was still very much on everyone’s mind. His evolutionary model seemed to undermine the basic tenets of Western religious consciousness. It was not merely the physical and biological sciences that threatened religious faith, but the emergent social

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sciences as well. Religion was now seen to be a product of the humanly created cultural environment.

In such a context, the divine origins attributed to holy scripture seemed to be undermined in a fundamental way. How could people continue to believe in divine revelation and in “the word” as coming from the mouth of God if they knew that religion arose from the collective consciousness of a given society and served primarily to express the values of that society and the forces that held it together?

Kaplan’s Bold Response

Many of the younger generation abandoned their belief in the Torah as they began to enter the American cultural mainstream. Conservative rabbis were at a loss as to how to convince young people that the Torah was still relevant. As one of the then-younger members of the faculty at JTS, Kaplan proposed a rather radical solution: Let us accept the conclusions of the new social sciences and of textual criticism; let us accept biblical criticism and then see whether the Torah can still be maintained as supremely worthwhile.

Accepting the fundamentals of biblical criticism was a very radical move. Solomon Schechter, the president of the Seminary, had branded biblical criticism as “higher anti-Semitism.” If the event at Sinai was a myth and the Torah was really written later by many hands over a long period of time, the whole edifice of traditional Judaism seemed poised to crumble. Revelation and all that flowed from it

were severely threatened. Jewish law (*halakha*) would have no basis. If the voice of Sinai is silent, what was it that commanded us? What was the basis of the *mitzvot*? Where did the experience of being commanded come from, if the statements in the Torah were not from God but from human beings in their search for the good and the true and the beautiful?

The Value of Tradition

Kaplan did not dismiss traditional beliefs easily. He had grown up in a strictly observant home, where he lived until he was twenty-eight. The “vote” that he would give to the tradition was not a matter of idle rhetoric. Kaplan did not often express the supreme value that he put on the tradition, but when he did his remarks were deeply moving. Listen to him on the tradition:

The great value which the religious tradition had for mankind lay not so much in the specific beliefs and practices that it prescribed as in the general orientation that it provided. As a result of such orientation, human beings felt at home in the world. Men struggled and suffered, but they had, so to speak, a roof over their heads. Nowadays, they no longer have that feeling of being at home in the world. The sense of homelessness, of forlornness, dampens all our joys and adds torment to our sorrows . . .²

At the same time, as a deeply committed social scientist and historian

of Judaism, Kaplan felt that the belief that the Torah came down to Moses on Mount Sinai simply made no sense and, moreover, the implication of absolute truth inherent in it was more than he could tolerate. He confided the following to his journal:

The problem of Judaism would not be so acute if the traditional doctrine of revelation were merely obsolete. The trouble is that to cherish that doctrine is as unethical as being guilty of bigamy. To believe that we are in possession of the authentically revealed will of God is incompatible with religious tolerance, to say nothing of religious equality . . . I have come to feel about the traditional doctrine of revelation as the prophets felt about the baalized worship of YHWH and as Maimonides felt about the anthropomorphic conception of God. That doctrine must now be opposed as being a vestige of ancient idolatry.³

Obligation and Inspiration

There remain two central problems that must be addressed in a “post-Sinaitic era.” One has to do with the source and meaning of obligation and the other has to do with inspiration.

The question of obligation has been a problem for all liberal forms of Judaism. Reconstructionists are familiar with Kaplan’s substituting the concept of “folkways” (*minhagim*) for “commandments” (*mitzvot*), but that is not helpful in understanding why

we should practice those customs in the first place.

The other issue is inspiration. In a naturalistic, Kaplanian world, what do we do with the concept of divine inspiration? Must we give it up altogether or can it be reconstructed? What would a naturalistic theory of revelation look like?

Kaplan did not shrink from these issues but faced them boldly. In a pathbreaking article in the 1914 *Students Annual* of the Jewish Theological Seminary, he stated his thesis that the conclusions of biblical criticism had to be accepted without reservations. He then proposed an interesting and novel approach to maintaining the centrality of Torah: The supremacy of Torah can and must be maintained through the concept of function. This central methodological idea came from the sociological realm and from the philosophy of pragmatism. As applied to scripture, origins did not matter — it was function that determined value. In other words, if the Torah continued to be the center of Jewish moral discussion and the Jewish search for meaning, its origin was of no consequence. Function was determinative; origin was not.

Fulfilling Our Potential

On the matter of being commanded in the post-Sinaitic world, Kaplan’s pragmatic answer is clear and familiar: The Torah and Judaism will be fundamental in our search for self-fulfillment, both individually and collectively. In its modern formulation, “salvation” as the goal of religious life always comes

down to self-fulfillment. One of the most illuminating and characteristically pragmatic versions of the concept is to understand salvation as “becoming effective.” Kaplan believed that for human beings, being effective is part of the urge to live. Human beings, by nature, have a desire to be effective. Kaplan here is shifting the traditional philosophical emphasis on human nature away from the Aristotelian emphasis on knowledge to the very pragmatic desire to be effective.⁴

To put it another way, we have an obligation to fulfill what it means to be human, to fulfill the potential of our humanity. At first, this argument for obligation struck me as weak, but then I realized that this is the strongest obligation we have. It is what Socrates sought when he searched for the answer to the question of the essence of our humanity. What do we owe to ourselves, not just in a personal way, but as a part of the human project in general?

In the area of modern religious ethics and religious ritual, what we need is a way to convince people that the right is what they ought to choose. We can no longer frighten, command or coerce them. We must convince them. Why do the right thing? Kaplan’s answer is “because it is the most fulfilling,” because by doing the right thing, we fulfill our potential.

Duties and Rights

Although the goal of self-fulfillment may work most of the time, there are times when we need a sense of obligation that is stronger. Where does it

come from? There are a number of ways in which duty or obligation makes sense in a naturalistic realm. The most illuminating discussion of this for Kaplan comes to us via the well-known legal theorist Oliver Wendell Holmes (1841-1935). Holmes was a pragmatic thinker whom Kaplan read and admired. In a casual diary remark, where Kaplan noted Holmes’ “robust skepticism,” he refers to him as “one of the few men after my own heart.”⁵

Holmes believed that in common law “duty” was more fundamental than “rights,” although in ordinary conversation we tend to talk more about rights than about obligations. For Holmes, duty flows from the obligation to care. If you own a house, you have an obligation to care for it so that it is not dangerous for people to be inside it. In the same way, if you are a parent, you have a natural obligation to care for your child. Such obligations issue from the essence of the situation rather than from any command from on high.

Exile and Expectations

Extending this understanding of obligation, we might say that certain moral obligations naturally flow from the historical experience of the Jewish people. This line of thinking begins in the Torah, which commands us to be concerned for the stranger because we were strangers in Egypt. Because we were strangers we should identify with the uprooted and the exiled everywhere.

What people more than the Jewish people understand the suffering of exile

and alienation? Of course, the ultimate exile, the ultimate “otherhood,” is the dehumanization of the Holocaust. Is it not natural — indeed, a command — for Jews to identify with those who are suffering from “ethnic cleansing”? After the Holocaust, we know the meaning of genocide better than anyone. Should we not strongly identify with the defense of the rights of minorities as a general principle, because we have so often been an unprotected minority? Kaplan at the end of his creative life wrote of the imperative of “ethical nationhood” and there is no command more important than this.

The concept of self-fulfillment functions as well in the area of morality and in the area of ritual. Like many born into the late Victorian age, Kaplan had no trouble seeing the lawfulness of moral behavior as primary. He often refers to Immanuel Kant’s categorical imperative as the essence of the moral life, despite his deep dedication to the pragmatic mode of thinking.

Ritual Regulations

While ethical imperatives were binding for Kaplan and other liberal Jewish thinkers, ritual rules were less compelling. In the traditional understanding of ritual, for example, God commands us to refrain from certain foods in the same way as God commands us to refrain from violating the person or property of our neighbor.

Jewish law, like any system of law, lives in its specifics. The Rav (Rabbi J. D. Soloveitchik) emphasized the essentially mathematical nature of *halakha*.⁶

In seeking the meaning of a *mitzva*, Soloveitchik argues, the *halakha* almost always ends up asking a quantitative question. For example, how much milk does one have to drink to make a meal “a milk meal”? One may walk on the Sabbath, but how far? There were always attempts at finding the reasons for the ritual commandments (*ta’amei hamitzvot*), the most famous of which is found in the work of Maimonides, but the quantitative question was always much more pressing.

In considering ritual law as “custom,” Kaplan hoped to move this category away from the essentially detailed and quantitative nature of law into a greater emphasis on meaning. He expressed his attitude quite clearly on a number of occasions, but none is more compelling than a conversation he had with Louis Finkelstein in 1930. Finkelstein, the future head of JTS, was at the time the assistant to JTS president Cyrus Adler. The issue in question was the reorganization of the Law Committee of the Rabbinical Assembly. The Law Committee had been reorganized to include both liberal and traditional participants. Kaplan did not think the newly organized committee with different factions would work. His refusal to join also came from his expectation that the law committee would deal with matters of ritual. Kaplan records the incident in his journal:

Finkelstein is after me that I should work with the Committee on Law. At first I tried to put him off with excuses about my being unwell (which is true to a large extent),

but after a while I explained to him that in my opinion the Committee was [of] too heterogeneous a character ever to arrive at anything like a unanimous opinion about any issue . . . Secondly I could not sanction the legalistic attitude in questions of ritual and therefore if I am to cooperate with the committee it would have to confine itself in matters of law only to civil and domestic problems.⁷

Minhag or Halakha?

Kaplan is quite radical in his dismissal of ritual *halakha* and in the acceptance of pluralism implied in such a stand. To some, his position would have seemed almost an advocacy of anarchy. In one diary passage in the 1930s he states that the supernatural revelation of the Torah must be equated with “*hashelemut haenoshi*” (“human perfection”)⁸ and the “ideology and the laws must be calculated to achieve that end.” He then continues:

When a number of Jews find any element in the traditional or prevailing ideology or code of laws that fails to further that purpose, [i.e., perfection] and all the more if it hampers that purpose, they are duty-bound to see to it that such an element be removed . . . We must . . . regard modification of the Torah as the only means toward its preservation. Even if the entire weight of tradition were to resist modification of the Torah, as it apparently seems to, it would be necessary to proceed with such

modification since the weight of experience counter-balances that of tradition and that experience points to the irresistible fact that intransigence must lead to moral disaster.⁹

Thus Kaplan’s stand on *halakha* is quite clear. It is well to remember, however, that the use of “custom” as the rubric for (ritual) *mitzvot* does not mean the absence of all obligations. Kaplan pointed out that customs are often so strong and deeply ingrained that to we do not really experience having a choice of departing from them. The concept of custom is significant because it carries the connotation that one can say when and where the custom will be observed; it allows for personal, communal and regional variety.

Kaplan always went for the approach that allowed for more choice. His vision of the “messianic time” was of a Jewish community in which the members could express their different approaches in various synagogue communities, even as they supported the overall community (the *kehilla*). The *kehilla*, in turn, looked after each member and the interests of the Jewish people as a whole.

From Revelation to Inspiration

As indicated above, the dismissal of revelation leaves us not only with the problem of obligation, but also with the issue of inspiration. Or, to put it in the form of a question: When we dismiss revelation, does that mean that no concept of inspiration is necessary

or possible?

Kaplan did not deal extensively with this problem, but he does point us in a productive direction. In his dissatisfaction with the traditional liturgy, he proposed that the renewal of prayer (and hence the uncovering of new sources of inspiration) might come from the use of modern poetry, especially Hebrew poetry. The poet is the seer, and it is through him or her that we begin to gain access to the contemporary formulation of eternal verities through which we can renew our commitments.

The poet often feels like the vehicle for the poem rather than its creator. Perhaps the very notion of revelation could be reconstructed and ultimately could come from poetry. Buber quotes Nietzsche: "We take and do not ask who it is that gives . . ." ¹⁰ Indeed, one sometimes feels that a poem preceded its creation and was here before, just as the talmudic rabbis said that the Torah existed before creation. When words are sublime, we can almost imagine that they existed from time immemorial. Ralph Waldo Emerson put it this way: "For poetry was all written before time was, and whenever we are so finely organized that we can penetrate into that region where the air is music, we hear those primal warblings. . . ." ¹¹ For the Greeks, we ought to remember, the poet and the prophet were one and the same. It is the poet who gives voice to the eternal.

Poetry Is Paramount

The notion that poetry could not only become paramount but even

substitute for religion is not a new idea. The most recent expression of this notion comes from George Santayana. He said it many times and in different forms. Discussing the function of religion and poetry as the primary vehicle for the imagination, Santayana put it this way:

Religion, when pure, contemplates some pertinent ideal of intelligence and goodness. Both religion and science live in imaginative discourse, one being an aspiration, and the other a hypothesis. Both introduce into our midst an ideal society. ¹²

Or, as one of Santayana's students astutely put it:

Santayana believed that the dogmas of all supernatural religions can be justified only as imaginative portrayals of human aspiration. For him, religion is, and of a right ought to be, nothing more than poetry supervening upon life. ¹³

But revelation not only embodies the eternal: It "commands." What is the connection between the poetic and the demands of morality and ritual? Kaplan is the man of reason who believed that the rational is central to an intelligent view of the universe. Rabbi Jacob Agus, very much an admirer of Kaplan, believed that revelation, no matter where it comes from, must always be judged by the cannons of reason. ¹⁴

If I may be allowed the freedom of a Reconstructionist, we might say that perhaps the scribe who wrote the words "*naaseh venishma*" ("we will do and we

will listen,” Exodus 24:7) really did fall asleep for a nanosecond and so got it wrong, because it is clear that in the blinding light of revelation, the thought is always followed by the command — naturally, seamlessly.

Emerson’s Influence

This central point is expressed in a compelling manner by Ralph Waldo Emerson, whom Kaplan read and admired. Emerson tended toward the naturalistic, although many of his writings anticipate what Kaplan later designated as “transnaturalism.” In one very powerful passage, Emerson speaks about the concept of revelation and the commands that flow from it. Emerson’s point here can be viewed within a traditional realm or naturalistically.

In these communications [revelations], the power to see is not separated from the will to do, but the insight proceeds from obedience, and the obedience proceeds from a joyful perception. Every moment when the individual feels himself invaded by it is memorable. A certain enthusiasm attends the individual’s consciousness of that divine presence. The character and duration of this enthusiasm varies with the state of the individual, from an ecstasy and trance and prophetic inspiration — which is its rarer appearance — to the faintest glow of virtuous emotion, in which form it warms, like our household fires, all the families and associations of men and

makes society possible.¹⁵

Thus, we live in a naturalistic world where we are free (or hope to be free) from the overwhelming power of divine authority. Kaplan understood our situation better than any other contemporary thinker. The pressures of modernity force us to look within for the imperatives. Our *halakha* (if indeed we are to have one at all) must be an individualized *halakha* where there are indeed obligations, but we decide when, where and under what conditions we are obligated or “commanded.”

Yet whether or not we have a *halakha*, the problem of obligation does not let us alone. In a post-Enlightenment world, we must be in charge of our lives. Imperatives of a moral and ritual nature remain strong but they come from us. More than any other modern thinker, Kaplan helps us honestly face our obligations and the fact that, although we have passed beyond the traditional, we remain accountable for our actions and our lives.

1. In the course of discussing the traditional notion of supernatural revelation and the need to reinterpret it, Kaplan notes in the diary, “I wasn’t sure what our slogan should be, whether it should be ‘comes the evolution’ or ‘comes the revelation.’ Kaplan Diary, entry for April 14, 1948.

2. Kaplan Journal, entry for February 8, 1950.

3. Kaplan Journal, entry for July 11, 1943.

4. The well-known first sentence in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* reads, “All men by

nature desire to know.” See Aristotle in his “Metaphysics” in *Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon, (New York: Random House), 689. I am indebted to my brother, Professor Allen Scult for this insight.

5. *Communings of the Spirit—The Journals of Mordecai M. Kaplan*, Volume 1 1913-1934 ,ed. Mel Scult (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), entry for September 3, 1932, 484; our discussion of Holmes is drawn from *The Essential Holmes: Selections from the Letters, Speeches, Judicial Opinions, and Other Writings of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.*, edited by Richard Posner (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992) passim.

6. J.B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, translated by Lawrence Kaplan (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1983). See especially section 1, part VI.

7. *Communings, op.cit.*, entry for April 2, 1930, 397.

8. Kaplan writes the term in Hebrew here, which echoes Maimonides

9. Kaplan Journal, entry for December 14, 1938.

10. Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York : Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958),110.

11. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Poet,” in *The Portable Emerson*, edited by Carl Bode (New York: Penguin Books, 1959), 244.

12. George Santayana, *The Life of Reason or Phases of Human Progress* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1955), 183.

13. Irving Singer, *George Santana— Literary Philosopher* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 21.

14. Jacob B. Agus, “Torah M’Sinai,” in *Guideposts in Modern Judaism* (New York: Bloch Publishing Co. 1954), 271-306.

15. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Over-soul,” in *The Portable Emerson*, ed. Carl Bode (New York : Penguin Books, 1959), 218.

Zionism Today: A Reconstructionist Reflection

BY MICHAEL M. COHEN

The centrality of Israel in Reconstructionist thought has been a constant since Mordecai Kaplan's seminal work, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward the Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life*, was published in 1934. With the Reconstructionist civilizational orientation this was, and is, a logical stance. As Rebecca Alpert and Jacob Staub point out:

The Reconstructionist understanding of the civilizational character of Judaism predictably has led us to Zionist conclusions from the very outset. If Judaism is recognized as the civilization of the Jewish people, then there is no denying the particular attachment of our people to the Land of Israel – the site of our origins and genesis, and the focus of our hopes and ideals through the millennia.¹

The early recognition of the importance of Zionism also touched on another key point of Kaplanian philosophy: the challenge to the concept of a supernatural God. On this, Ira Eisenstein wrote:

Zionism was, for Kaplan, the great revolutionary movement which carried the Jewish people over the threshold from medievalism to modernism because it interpreted the ancient yearning of Jews to “return” to their millennial Messianic aspirations in naturalist instead of supernaturalist terms. Thus, rather than wait for the Messiah to redeem them from exile, the Jews themselves undertook the task.²

It is now more than seventy years since Kaplan put forward the idea of the importance of Israel in the lives of Jews living outside of Israel. The question for us today is: How relevant is Israel to Diaspora Reconstructionist Jews?

Zionism in Reconstructionist Judaism

As a movement, we invest energies in ensuring that Israel plays an important role in what we do. The web page of the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation (JRF) has a serious multi-faceted section dedicated to Israel.³ Students at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College are expected to have a high level of pro-

Rabbi Michael M. Cohen, the Executive Director of the North American office of the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies, is currently spending two years with his family on Kibbutz Ketura.

iciency in Hebrew. They are required to spend a year studying in Israel. This year we are running a Reconstructionist slate for the first time ever in the World Zionist Congress elections. The study of Israel is a part of Reconstructionist youth and adult education. There is a Reconstructionist *minyan* that meets monthly in Jerusalem.

We can and should be proud of these accomplishments. But is there more that we could be doing? Early Zionism saw the Diaspora as a poor second choice of where to live a Jewish life. While Kaplan saw the importance of Israel to living a Jewish life, even making *aliya* when he was in his 90s, he never negated the idea of Jews living outside of Israel. Like many other Zionist thinkers, Kaplan foresaw an ongoing relationship between the Jewish community in Israel and communities outside of Israel. The question is: What should that relationship look like today for Reconstructionists?

Israel and the Diaspora

There are those in the Zionist movement today who still say that living outside of Israel is like being in the audience when the real action is happening on the stage. As Reconstructionists, we reject that viewpoint as a false and even insulting dichotomy. One can make the argument that the explosion of Jewish creativity and learning in North America in the past quarter century is, in part, a direct result of Israel's existence (there are other factors as well). This gives Jews in the Diaspora the emotional, psychological and physical security to

act Jewish and live Jewish lives in ways with which previous generations would not have been comfortable. And that is exactly how it should be. Israel as a hub reaching out to Jewish communities throughout the world was a model that Reconstructionism felt was very important. But that relationship is a two-way street as well, with a Torah also going out from the Diaspora to Israel. And that is also exactly how it should be.

One of the great ironies of the establishment of the Zionist state is that Kaplan's Diaspora model of living in two civilizations also holds true in Israel. In the United States, for example, the challenge is to know how to navigate through a *humash* with the same ease with which one can find the "Arts & Leisure" section of the Sunday *New York Times*. In the Diaspora, most Jews define their Judaism as being religious, while in Israel most Jews indentify more with a secular-national identity.

National and Religious Identities

It was Martin Buber who pointed out that the religious/national split, going back to the "Sanhedrin" convened by Napoleon in the early 19th century, is false. As he wrote:

I am setting up Hebrew humanism in opposition to that Jewish nationalism which regards Israel as a nation like unto other nations and recognizes no task for Israel save that of preserving and asserting itself. Israel is not a na-

tion like other nations, no matter how much its representatives have wished it during certain eras. Israel is a people like no other, for it is the only people in the world which, from its earliest beginnings, has been both a nation and a religious community. In the historical hour in which its tribes grew together to form a people, it became the carrier of a revelation . . . Israel was and is a people and a religious community in one, and it is this unity which enabled it to survive in an exile no other nation had to suffer, an exile which lasted longer than the period of its independence. He who severs this bond severs the life of Israel.⁴

The challenge for Jews in the Diaspora is to understand that while the challenge is to live in two civilizations, a national one and a Jewish one, the latter contains a national element as well as a religious one. The challenge for the Jews of Israel living in a secular-national world is to learn how to integrate the religious aspect of Judaism into their lives.

The argument can be made that this is already happening: The language of Israel is Hebrew, the language of the Bible; the Jewish holidays are national holidays. But the holidays are approached from a nationalistic perspective (which can be limiting) and with a content that can often be shallow and superficial. There are those Jews who live a mostly religious Jewish life and put up a wall between themselves and the rest of Israeli and Western influences; and then there are those

who combine the two but in ways that most Reconstructionists would find problematic, in particular with regard to an all-too-prevalent negative attitude toward non-Jews. The ideal that we are talking about here is a wholesome integration based upon an interaction of the values and traditions of Judaism through the lens of experience, intuition, and reason.⁵

Challenges in Israel Today

We read in the Torah, “You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the Land of Israel” (Exodus 23:9).⁶ We once were powerless, so we should remember when we have power not to abuse it. While Israel’s relationship with her minorities is made complicated by the ongoing conflict, it can be said that the often painful lessons of centuries of being a minority in the Diaspora have not always been applied as Jews find themselves in the majority position. As an example of this dynamic, there is Israel’s national anthem, *Hatikva*, which reflects the aspirations of eighty percent of the country, but not the twenty percent Arab minority.

The Law of Return

The Law of Return is another sacred cow that needs to be addressed. While Jews should always know that they can come to Israel, the Law of Return as it stands now is based on the assumption that the phenomenon of Jews living in the Diaspora should be understood as

temporary. The truth is that most of Jewish history has taken place in the Diaspora, a history that may be complicated, but that also produced some of our greatest accomplishments.

From an environmental perspective, the belief that the land can hold an endless number of people is untenable. From the perspective of physical survival, the notion of all Jews being located in one physical location may also have its drawbacks. Finally it is time to face up to the inequality and injustice of allowing Jews whose ancestors have not lived on the land for thousands of years to return at will, while Palestinians who lived on the land in their and their ancestor's lifetime are denied that right.

There have always been two prevailing perspectives in Zionist thought: the political Zionists, who primarily focused on obtaining a refuge for Jews who suffered from persecution, and the spiritual Zionists, who were more concerned with the type of Jewish society that was to be built in the Land of Israel. The Reconstructionist movement has seen itself more situated in the spiritual Zionist camp.

That said, there remain many areas where many Reconstructionists can easily find Israel wanting: the non-recognition of non-Orthodox streams of Judaism; the treatment of minorities; the ongoing occupation (despite the withdrawal for Gaza); the state of the environment;⁷ and the growing social gap, to name a few. For many Jews in the Diaspora, these blemishes also become reasons to distance themselves from both Israel and Zionism.

The Centrality of Israel

My family and I have been fortunate to have spent several of the past nine years living on Kibbutz Ketura⁸ in the southern Arava valley of Israel. The kibbutz, founded in 1973 by the Young Judaea youth movement, is an Israeli community that is democratic, egalitarian, environmentally conscious and pluralistic, with religious and secular Jews living side by side. Being the home of the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies,⁹ the kibbutz also includes Israeli Arabs, Palestinians and Jordanians as part of its community. If the rest of Israel looked like this, my guess is that more North American Jews would feel more comfortable with and better connected to Israel.

Ahavat Yisrael, the love of Israel and the Jewish people, is an existential state of mind that transcends the particulars of how the story gets played out, especially when we don't like the direction in which the script has gone. As Reconstructionists, we should consider engaging with Israel to a greater degree than we do.

- We need to understand Israel on a deeper level, beyond the issues of the conflict on which we so often focus (The web site www.israel21c.org is an excellent source of information about Israeli developments in health, technology, culture and democracy.)

- It is easy to invest the time to know more about the daily news of Israel through such sources as *Haaretz*,¹⁰ *The Jerusalem Post*¹¹ and *The Jerusalem Report*.¹²

- The World Zionist Congress, for bet-

ter and for worse, provides the opportunity for every Jew around the world to be represented in decisions about Israel and the Zionist movement. It is very simple to register to vote in the World Zionist Congress elections.¹³

- Study abroad is an important pedagogic feature of our children's college years. Many are pulled to study in Europe and other continents. There is no reason why a student can't study a semester in one of those places, as well as a semester in Israel. It is a model that we should encourage.

- Israel faces many challenges, and many organizations have been established to help Israel deal with those challenges. For Jews in the Diaspora, these organizations provide opportunities to be involved in building the kind of Israel we envision.

- While *aliya* may not be for everyone, its serious consideration should be a part of the process of how each of us defines and builds our Jewish lives. If *aliya* is not an option, the energies that would have gone into building the Zionist state should be used to create a meaningful Jewish life in the Diaspora.

"The Silver Platter," a poem by Israeli poet Nathan Alterman, is a moving and powerful testament about the establishment of the modern State of Israel. It was based on a quotation from the first Israeli president Chaim Weizman: "A state is not handed to a people on a silver platter." The story of Zionism and Israel is moving and powerful, while at the same time it can be difficult and troubling; in short, it is a complex story. The relationship of Diaspora Jews

to Israel can often be complicated by that reality. The truth is that for 2,000 years, generations of Jews prayed for the reestablishment of the Jewish state in the Land of Israel. Unlike them, we are not only able to pray, we are able to work to turn those prayers, hopes and visions into a reality. That reality includes shaping the society and culture of the modern State of Israel defining the relationship between Israel and Diaspora Judaism, and recognizing the role that Israel can play in helping the Diaspora meet the challenge of creating meaningful and vibrant communities. The Reconstructionist voice has been and should continue to be an important voice in that unfolding story.

1. Rebecca T. Alpert and Jacob J. Staub, *Exploring Judaism: A Reconstructionist Approach* (Elkins Park, P.A.: The Reconstructionist Press, 2000), 65

2. Ira Eisenstein in *Great Jewish Thinkers of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Simon Noveck (Washington, D.C.: Bnai Brith Press, 1985), 274

3. www.jrf.org

4. Martin Buber in *The Zionist Idea*, ed. Arthur Hertzberg (New York: Atheneum Press, 1979), 459-460.

5. Eisenstein, *op.cit.* 268

6. See also Leviticus 19:34 and Deuteronomy 17-19.

7. www.greenzionism.org

8. www.ketura.org.il

9. www.arava.org

10. www.haaretz.com

11. www.jpost.com

12. www.jrep.com

13. See www.azm.org

Kohut Meets Kaplan: The Paradox of Relating Personally to a Nonpersonal God

BY ANN EISENSTEIN

In the late 1970s, a new school of psychoanalytic thought called Self Psychology, based on the work of Heinz Kohut, was emerging. I found myself pulled to this new approach, one that was quite heretical in its reformulation of classical Freudian psychoanalytic theory. Together with many of my colleagues, I felt that my secret and inchoate sense of what “really worked” with my patients, in my own analyses and in life in general, was being articulated and legitimized by this new thinker.

A few years later I had an insight about another reason Self Psychology stirred in me such a profound feeling of “coming home.” As the granddaughter of Mordecai M. Kaplan and the daughter of Ira Eisenstein, his disciple and the founder of Reconstructionist institutions, I discovered, on an almost visceral level, some striking parallels between Reconstructionism and Self Psychology, both in their theories and in their relationships to traditional theories and institutions. I began to think of Kohut as the Kaplan of psychoanalysis.

Persistence of Personification

In this essay, I will spell out a number of common characteristics of the two men and their thinking. I will then explore a synthesis of their theories that attempts to address the tenacious human attachment to the personification of God. This personal — and, yes, intrinsically supernatural — image of God is paradoxically clung to by many who hold more abstract and sophisticated beliefs in general. They are not troubled by this split consciousness, finding the community feeling, music and familiarity of traditional religious services satisfying enough, even if the representations of God are inconsistent with their way of looking at the world.

However, there are those (like me) who experience a conflict between the pull to the familiar, personal God imagery and rational beliefs. It is this group to whom I will attempt to offer a perspective that is based on Kohut’s concept of “selfobject experience.” Such a perspective might provide some

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understanding of our attachment to the personification of God and ultimately some reduction of the dissonance that results from its persistence alongside a belief in a non-personal God.

Common Characteristics

Kohut and Kaplan were both immigrants from Europe who adopted as their own the American version of orthodox tradition from which they respectively emerged. In Kohut's case, that American school of thought was known as Ego Psychology, derived from classical (orthodox) Freudian psychoanalysis. Kohut was president of the American Psychoanalytic Association and remained on the faculty of the Chicago Institute of Psychoanalysis his whole life. His hope was to change the American psychoanalytic establishment, both its theory and its institutions, from within. That establishment was ultimately influenced by certain of Kohut's ideas about specific diagnostic categories of patients, most notably those with Narcissistic Personality Disorders. However, it rejected Kohut's overarching theory of the psychology of the self which was spelled out in his seminal book, *The Restoration of the Self*, published in 1977. At the urging of a few of his disciples, Kohut (reluctantly) agreed to "go institutional," creating a separate school of psychoanalytic thought known as Self Psychology.

To those who have some knowledge of Kaplan's biography, Kohut's story will sound very familiar. Kaplan's relationship with the (Conservative) Jewish Theological Seminary was ambivalent,

but undeniably profound. After decades of urging by a few of his disciples, Kaplan was ultimately convinced of the need for Reconstructionism to become a separate movement. He finally agreed to the creation in 1968 of a new seminary for the training of Reconstructionist rabbis.

Both Kohut and Kaplan saw themselves as promoting ideas that evolved organically from, respectively, their theoretical and professional/religious forebears. In this sense, each was conservative (with a small "c"). However, because of their methodologies, which were remarkably similar, each arrived at conclusions that were regarded as radical, challenging basic dogma of the institutional and professional establishments to which each belonged. Thus, both systems of thought, Self Psychology and Reconstructionism, emerged out of an ambivalent straddling of past and present outlooks, and a continuous dynamic tension between continuity and change. It was for the next generation to extend the implications of these methodologies.

Grounded in Experience

In 1959, Kohut published an article entitled "Introspection, Empathy, and Psychoanalysis: An Examination of the Relationship between Mode of Observation and Theory."¹ He posited that empathy, or vicarious introspection, is the mode of observation of psychic life. That is, a person's subjective (though not necessarily conscious) self experience provides the only relevant data for psychoanalytic theory-building and

clinical application, thereby excluding observations made from an external vantage point.

By making this claim, Kohut departed radically from Freud's zealous application of 19th-century scientific standards of objectivity and neutrality, replacing it with what he called an "experience-near" approach, one that underscored subjectivity and process. For example, Kohut took Freud's reified concept of sexual and aggressive "instinctual drives" and reframed them as the experiences of sexual or aggressive "drivenness."

Out of his work with severely narcissistic patients, using empathy as his observational tool, Kohut became sensitized to the ways we experience our interactions with others on whom we depend for our emotional well-being. In particular, he focused on how these interactions function to promote our feelings of cohesiveness, vitality and self esteem. Kohut called the interactions with others that have these positive effects "selfobject experiences," as they are constructed jointly by the self (person) and the object (other).² When an experience that occurs between the self and another person has the opposite effect — fragmentation, depression, injured self esteem — Kohut called it an experience of "selfobject failure." Sometimes the "selfobject"³ is a fantasy based purely in imagination, or a mental construct based on perceived potential in, or memory of, another person.

Contextual and Pragmatic

Kaplan's approach is similarly con-

textual and pragmatic. In *Judaism as a Civilization*⁴ he introduced the radical idea that Jewish religion is grounded in the experience of the Jewish people, as opposed to being a set of religious beliefs and practices revealed at Sinai by a supernatural God. Judaism is co-created by Jews and their environment — *i.e.*, their particular social, political and cultural circumstances. Judaism, a religious civilization, includes within it a concept of God, modes of worship, understanding of sacred text, all of which evolve along with changes in the environment.

Like Kohut, Kaplan invoked the principle of subjectivity, stressing ". . . what God *means* to mankind."⁵ The pragmatic perspective, focused on function, was central for Kaplan. Thus, a major function of religion is "to fortify the yearning for spiritual self-regeneration . . . and to press it into the service of human progress."⁶ In terms of Self Psychology, the function of Jewish religion is the survival, cohesion, vitality and moral fortitude of the Jewish people.

Evolving Judaism and the Evolving Self

Another hallmark of Kohut's theoretical perspective was his contention that people never outgrow their need for others to perform selfobject functions, unlike the prevailing Freudian view known as Ego Psychology which characterizes human development as moving us further and further away from dependency on others. Sensitive to the judgmental implications of a

model that emphasizes the desirability of the child's increasing autonomy, Kohut referred to this as "maturational morality." However, he did believe that the particular nature of (implicitly dependent) selfobject needs changes as a person matures. It evolves from the more concrete, bodily communication (holding, feeding, rough-housing, etc.) to the more symbolic, including subtle gestures and verbal modes such as praising, encouraging, supporting and inquiring.

Early types of selfobject experience are internalized, a dynamic process that Kohut often concretized as the building of psychic or self "structure" (a holdover from the Freudians' reification of "the ego"). Subsequent selfobject experiences function as "booster shots," activating and amplifying existing "structure" (e.g., self-sustaining and self-soothing capacities). Thus, the earlier version of a selfobject experience involving a baby being picked up when she cries has its functional equivalent later in life when the upset adult is shored up and comforted by significant people in her life. The selfobject function remains constant.

Selfobject Need for God

The same holds true for the Jewish people: Because Judaism is a religious civilization, Jews never outgrow, so to speak, their selfobject need for God. The conception of God continues to evolve, from the concrete and literal towards the symbolic and metaphorical. Thus, the God of the patriarchs and of Moses is depicted as having a "face" and

as speaking directly to humans. He (the personification of God in biblical texts is almost exclusively male) is hailed as a "man of war" (Exodus 15:3) The God of the book of Job, however, is more mysterious and remote, albeit very much there, and in the book of Esther, God is never even mentioned.

According to talmudic traditions, prophecy was understood to have ended in the biblical period, and subsequently God could be experienced only through the interpretation of sacred ("revealed") text and through prayer. By the 20th century, Kaplan abandoned supernaturalism altogether, and defined God as the natural power in the universe, including in humankind, that "makes for salvation." Thus, the function of the "God-concept" remains consistent throughout history. "God" continues "to fortify the yearning for spiritual self-regeneration . . . and [continues] to press it into the service of human progress" throughout history.

Radicals in a Conservative Framework

Kaplan and Kohut both saw themselves as essentially following in the traditions of their respective disciplines. Reinterpretation of a fundamental and classical concept was not a rejection, but an "updating" of the concept's essential meaning. There were some exceptions for each. Kaplan's rejection of supernaturalism and of the idea of "the chosen people" departed radically from Jewish tradition. In similar fashion, Kohut reinterpreted some basic psychoanalytic concepts, such as

transference and the Oedipus Complex. His radical departure from the classical psychoanalytic tradition included rejection of sex and aggression as the fundamental motivational forces in human life. For Kohut, people are first and foremost motivated by their needs to develop, restore and maintain their sense of self. The most dysfunctional and bizarre behavior can be ultimately understood as maladaptive attempts to achieve these goals.

By taking this stand with regard to basic human motivation, Kohut reworked the place of aggression in his theory of the psychology of the self. Aggression was no longer understood as an autonomous drive with a need for periodic discharge. Rather, aggression takes two forms, each one a response to a different type of perceived threat. One is a threat to physical survival, and the other to the integrity and esteem of one's (sense of) self—an "anti-selfobject experience," if you will. Kohut refers to the second form of aggression as "narcissistic rage."⁷ He does not underestimate the ubiquity of both types of aggression in human life. But understanding both as essentially reactive rather than "primary" behavior has very different clinical implications. It reflects an emphasis on human potential, a basic trust in people's persistent desire and capacity to grow, however derailed or perverted the manifestations may be.

Facing Evil with Potentiality

If we postulate the "problem of evil" as the theological equivalent of the psychological category of aggres-

sion, another similarity in approach (or perhaps temperament) reveals itself between Kaplan and Kohut, at least as reflected in their theories. For Kaplan, the problem of evil is not really a "problem," at least not a problem of theology. Far from denying the ubiquity of evil, Kaplan does not expect religion or a God-concept to account for it. There is no theological explanation for evil. With continuity of function in mind, Kaplan redefines God as the force or power that counteracts evil and enables us to deal with it. It is axiomatic that such a force exists; that is, the potential to counteract evil and suffering does exist in the world and in human nature, and it is powerful potential.

This is an idea most easily embraced by people with at least a modicum of optimism in their character.⁸ Kaplan's theology, reflecting such optimism, is beautifully revealed in this excerpt from a poem he wrote entitled "God the Life of Nature," which appeared in the 1945 Reconstructionist *Sabbath Prayer Book*:

God is in the faith
By which we overcome
The fear of loneliness, of
helplessness
Of failure, and of death.

God is in the hope
Which, like a shaft of light,
Cleaves the dark abysses
Of sin, of suffering, and
of despair.

God is in the love
Which creates, protects,
forgives . . .⁹

The Experience of God's Presence

Along with much rumination with my father, this poem planted itself in my gut during my high school years at the Society for the Advancement of Judaism. The poem complemented the personal God-imagery of the traditional prayers with its translation of "God" into human experiential terms; thus, God is in the love, rather than "God loves," or "we are protected by God's love." This kind of syntax reversal, reflecting Kaplan's understand of God as an evolving, functional concept, has gone a long way in helping me to think about traditional texts and, more personally, to mitigate the shame that comes in moments of fear, loneliness and despair with my impulse to appeal to a "God-who-listens." While the conflict persists, I do find in Kohut's selfobject concept a connecting bridge between the God of this poem and personifications of God as "someone-you-can-relate-to personally."

It is a bridge that does not always feel so steady under my feet.

The bridge is built on the notion that God and selfobject experience are both manifestations of transference, with God understood as the collective transference-creation of the Jewish people. In this way, God is "created in man's image." Consistent with Kaplan's emphasis on what God means to people (rather than on what people mean to God), Kohut's "selfobject transferences" reflect the need for something /someone "out there" that is experienced as "other-than-self." In analytic treatment,

that "someone" is generally the analyst, whom the patient experiences in fantasy as personifying the needed, longed-for "other" (usually a parental image). If the patient's transference illusion functions well enough, it is experienced as psychologically "real," rather than as an idealized construction.

This potential for self-cure with the help of others is manifested in life by very resourceful, imaginative children who are able to survive extraordinary hardships, abuse and loss, especially with the presence of supportive others (e.g., teachers, siblings, grandparents) – in other words, with the help of what today we call "community." For example, to supplement or to substitute for external support, children may spontaneously create fantasy selfobjects,¹⁰ like imaginary friends, from fragments of fictional or public figures

"God" as Fantasy Selfobject

Perhaps "God" is just such a life-enhancing creation of human imagination. The genius of the Jewish people is its seemingly indestructible capacity to adapt to circumstances that severely tested its will to survive as a people. These adaptations may involve rationalizations that get God off the hook, so to speak. Thus, when our experience as Jews (e.g., exile) conflicts with our beliefs about ourselves (e.g., we have a covenant, we are God's chosen), we may think "God is punishing us," or "His ways are unfathomable," or we may reinvent or reinterpret our conceptions of God, so needed is "He." There are many variations of God-images that

historically have reflected the differences among groups of Jews, and among individual Jews within each group.

However, some image of God is an intrinsic part of the Jewish psychic landscape, present even in absentia as the “God in whom I don’t believe.” Each generation (and individual) brings a particular set of needs and circumstances, and adapts (or rejects, or struggles with) the versions of God that it inherits. Regardless of those particular versions, the concept of God is eternal and omnipresent, always (potentially) available.

The conception of God that one takes on corresponds to the person’s particular internal world and level of psychic development, a form that also corresponds to the range of norms available within the person’s social/historical context. Over time, the experience of the parent/God as reliably “out there,” gradually evolves into (and is the functional equivalent of) the belief that “I can rely on my inner resources.” In addition — and this is crucial — I can trust that the support I need is available (at least potentially) in the world, and that I have the ability to find and/or create that support. What is “out there,” then, is this inner and outer potential. When I am in touch with that confidence in myself and in the environment, “God is present,” or, in classical biblical language, “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want” (Psalm 23).

Needless to say, that confidence is not always accessible. It is elusive; sometimes, it feels too heady and abstract. At such moments, the words of the 23d Psalm may take on a more

literal meaning, a kind of suspension-of-disbelief. It is a momentary embrace of creative transference illusion, or fantasy, reflecting a temporary regression to an earlier (collective and individual) understanding of God, for the purpose of self-soothing.

Three Varieties of “God’s Presence”

Kohut elaborated three types of selfobject needs and corresponding selfobject transferences: idealizing, mirroring, and twinship.¹¹ I will briefly review them and address the “experience of God’s presence” associated with each one.

In my earlier discussion of developmentally evolving versions of selfobject experience, I cited the example of a baby being picked up and comforted when she cries as well as some functionally equivalent experiences in adulthood. In optimal development, the parent continues to be experienced as strong and trustworthy, someone the child can look up to and admire. This experience gradually becomes an internal image, or *imago*, through a process Kohut called “transmuting internalization.” This internal image is the source of the child’s ability to self-regulate, to self-soothe and (eventually) to hold a system of values and ideals. As discussed earlier, the adult continues to need selfobject bolstering from something/someone outside herself.

The Personified Parent

In traditional Judaism, God is per-

sonified as just such a figure: the parent experienced (and/or longed-for) in childhood. Thus, God is powerful, compassionate, just, merciful, etc. Kaplan's poetic choice of "God is in the love," rather than attributing loving-kindness to God, reflects the idea that the qualities attributed to God represent ideals of human behavior — ideals longed for in others and aspired toward in oneself. "God is present" when we feel "held" and secure, or when we feel the courage of our convictions, or when we are confident about the potential in the world for furthering our values, as when we are moved by evidence of justice sought and justice done. The experience of God's presence also includes that of awe in the face of "miracles," like that of childbirth, or in the presence of natural beauty, like that of the Andean mountain-top Machu Pichu or the Grand Canyon.

The experience of being mirrored, according to Kohut, involves perceiving and feeling the delighted and admiring responses of others to us, first from the caretakers we experience in infancy and childhood, later from others as well. The internalization of these experiences forms the basis of healthy self-esteem. In Judaism, God is often personified as a loving, mirroring parent. He loves every one of His "children" (humanity) and, in traditional Judaism, has a special love for the Jewish people. God sees our collective and individual uniqueness and expects that we can fully actualize the best in ourselves. He sees us as objects of His delight, even desire.¹² It is out of this love and trust that "He has given the gift of Torah"

— His moral law — to us. "God is present," then, when we feel especially loved and valued; especially worthy of trust and high expectations; and especially confident in our capacity to live according to our talents, skills and values.

Twinship Transference

Kohut's twinship transference derives from people's need to feel a sense of "essential likeness" with others. Developmentally, this experience has its roots in early childhood, such as when the child experiences himself (especially when mirrored as) a "chip off the old block." This deep sense of connection through identification with the significant people in one's life evolves over time to include an abiding sense of belonging in the world of human beings. Therapists sometimes hear people say that they feel like aliens, visitors from another planet. They have no internal precedent for feeling connected by commonality with others.

In Genesis, it is written that God made humanity in God's image. The deep psychological truth in this metaphor lies in its reverse: God was created by humanity in humanity's image. In addition to seeking an idealized and loving parent in the figure of God, we need to "find ourselves in the deity."¹³ In Jewish texts, most strikingly in the Bible and in Midrash, God is often rendered as remarkably human. Not only does He have the ideal qualities already mentioned, He is also rageful, jealous, manipulative and capricious. Like us, God has vulnerabilities. Like ours, His

character evolves and matures.¹⁴

“God’s Presence”

An experience of “God’s presence” associated with twinship needs might be a heightened awareness of our humanity — *i.e.*, our imperfect natures — alongside a feeling of self-compassion and self-acceptance. God is “present” when we can experience our strengths and abilities, tempered by humility, and when we feel at peace with our limitations and imperfections. God may also be “present” when we are particularly moved by the belief that we are all created in the image of God, that we are all equal. And God is “present” when we feel a sense of connection and belonging in the world,¹⁵ and the conviction that loneliness, with its terrible sense of isolation from others, can be overcome.

I have been experimenting with the idea of God as collective selfobject in an effort to mitigate, if not resolve, a conflict that I may share with others, particularly with other Reconstructionists. It is the conflict between an attachment to personal God imagery on the one hand, and disbelief in a personal, supernatural God on the other. The idea of God as collective selfobject combines aspects of Kohut’s Self Psychology and Kaplan’s Reconstructionist philosophy. As someone deeply affected by both theories, I have found that the works of Kohut and Kaplan complement, and can even illuminate, each other. For me, the bridge that connects my grandfather’s God with traditional, personified images of God

still stands, wobbly as it is. Perhaps the best I, and others like me, can do is to live with the paradox of relating personally to a nonsupernatural God. This involves unashamedly allowing ourselves moments of surrender to a fantasy of a personal God, a fantasy that has its precedent in our earliest and deepest selfobject experiences. The crucial distinction — and one clearly representative of a Reconstructionist perspective — is recognizing that this is a fantasy, one from which we can return strengthened and supported as we go about the work of creating the healthy, mature and confident selves we have the potential to become.

1. Kohut, H. “Introspection, Empathy, and Psychoanalysis,” in *The Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 7:459-483, 1959.

2. The aspect of joint construction, a concept that allows for greater attention to the participation of the analyst’s subjectivity in the process, and for the element of mutuality involved, is one of those implications elaborated further by subsequent theorists (see work of R.D. Stolorow, et al, early 1980s onward.)

3. This is shorthand for “selfobject-functioning other.” Selfobject experience, a dynamic process, often gets reified in informal psychoanalytic parlance; thus, anyone performing a selfobject function is referred to as a “selfobject.” Once again, the tenacious human inclination to reify! (see R.D. Stolorow and G.E. Atwood, *Contexts of Being* (Hillsdale: The Analytic Press, 1992).

4. Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Judaism as a*

Civilization (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1934).

5. Emanuel S. Goldsmith and Mel Scult, eds., "Introduction," *Dynamic Judaism: The Essential Writings of Mordecai M. Kaplan* (New York: Fordham University Press, The Reconstructionist Press, 1985), p.21 (italics in original).

6. Mordecai M. Kaplan, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* (New York: The Reconstructionist Press, 1962) 62-63.

7. H. Kohut, "Thoughts on Narcissism and Narcissistic Rage," in *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, Vol. 27 (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1972), 360-400.

8. My father had more than a modicum of optimism in his character. Just by being my father, and by being the primary conduit of my grandfather's ideas to me (as he was to many others), he undoubtedly was a major influence on my choice of profession and on my way of thinking about it. See Ira Eisenstein, *Reconstructing Judaism: An Autobiography* (New York: The Reconstructionist Press, 1986), 241- 242.

9. Mordecai M. Kaplan, in *Sabbath Prayer Book* (New York: The Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation 1945), 391.

10. H. Bacal, "Notes on some therapeutic challenges in the analysis of severely regressed patients," in *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, Vol. 1 (Hillsdale: The Analytic Press, 1981),

29-56.

11. It is important to keep in mind that, in keeping with his methodology, Kohut did not necessarily consider this an exhaustive or permanent list. He expected that others would continuously refine and add selfobject phenomena as they were discovered empathically. (See Kohut, H., *How Does Analysis Cure* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984], 194.) This has certainly been the case, and corresponding variations of experiences of God's presence are too numerous to elaborate in this paper.

12. Compare this with traditional Jewish interpretations of the biblical Song of Songs, which interprets the erotic relationship alluded to as being between God and Israel."

13. Aviva Zornberg, presentation at William Allenson White Institute Conference on "Desire," 2004.

14. See Jack Miles, *God: A Biography* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

15. For Kaplan, "community is [in fact] the agent through which God... actually manifests Himself." (*Dynamic Judaism*, *op.cit.*, 223; italics added), rendering the collective nature of God (as selfobject) crucial: God symbolizes shared ideals, collective love and mutual responsibility, and a feeling of belonging to something larger than oneself, an entity that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Science and Spirit: Reconstructionist Theology for the 21st Century

BY NANCY FUCHS-KREIMER

“In order order to really understand Kaplan we need to imagine him as a young person today.” —Mel Scult¹

In one of the early Reconstructionist pamphlets, Mordecai Kaplan proudly proclaimed: “Reconstructionism is habituating Jewish life to the scientific climate of opinion of our day.”² And indeed it was. Of all the contemporary movements in Jewish life, none has been so identified with science as Reconstructionism.³ Science was a critical challenge, Kaplan believed; if met, it would “be to our advantage spiritually.”⁴

Who would have imagined that the opening years of the 21st century in America would see a newly revived discussion, often acrimonious, about the relationship between religion and science? The battles being fought over the teaching of Darwin’s theory of evolution in public schools are part of a larger conversation in what has been called the “culture wars.” The science classroom is clearly not the place to pursue that debate. That said, the conversation about science and religion is

well worth having.⁵

That conversation involves what some believe to be the over-reaching “scientism” that claims to account for aspects of life traditionally ceded to religion. Some people of faith believe that there are implications of scientific theory, particularly when it makes inroads into areas beyond the natural sciences, which may challenge the very core of their faith. They are not wrong to think so. This does not mean the challenges can not be met. The deeper questions raised by materialist, naturalist social science ought to be studied in courses on comparative religion, and Reconstructionists ought to have something to contribute.

A Course for Rabbinical Students

With that in mind, in the spring of 2004 I created a course at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC) on “Science and Religion.” I chose to focus on what I considered to be an area that might pose the greatest challenge to Reconstructionist thought: the growing

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impact of biology on social science.⁶

Picture a group of native tribesmen discovering an automobile and trying to discover how it works without lifting the hood.⁷ When Mordecai Kaplan was developing his theology, no one had ever seen a living brain, let alone a gene. Now, advances in technology have made it possible for scientists to “lift the hood.” Many scientists believe we are at the beginning of an incredible new era in our knowledge of our physical selves. Increasingly, social scientists are taking note, so that few today doubt the increasing importance of biology in an understanding of human nature, thought and behavior.⁸ If biology is indeed at the cutting edge of the human sciences, if a new generation of thinkers — ethnologists, psychobiologists, behavioral geneticists, cognitive neuroscientists and more — are creating new challenges, ought not Reconstructionists to be grappling with them? In 1970 the Society for Neuroscience had 500 members; in 1998 it had 25,000.⁹ At last report, the number was more than 37,000. Isn't it time for us to listen in on what is being discussed?

It was clear to me that future rabbis should learn about current paradigms in the life sciences in order to be literate in two civilizations. The growing body of literature on these subjects includes many widely read titles.¹⁰ My guess is that more American Jews read the “Science” section of the *New York Times* each week than pick up a text of Jewish theology. One need not be a reader to be caught up in new cultural paradigms. In the days when psychoanalysis was in ascendancy, people who

never read Freud would talk about their “Oedipal Complex.” Today, we are more likely to hear “that person must have a high serotonin level” or “she’s a very right-brain person.”

In our course we grappled with the implications of these new views of the sciences for our understanding of human nature and of the role of religion in culture. We also probed their implications for religious ideas such as the unique sacredness of human life, free will, moral values, human rights, mystical experience and the healing power of prayer.

The Challenge for Kaplan

Kaplan naturalized the traditional ideas of Torah (seeing it as a historically conditioned human text) and of Israel (denying the Jewish people special metaphysical status at the heart of the universe). He left standing, however, a transnatural God. I suggest that he found the “rumors”¹¹ of this God in three interrelated themes: in the uniquely human soul or spirit, in universal ethics and in hope. These concepts map the traditional ideas of creation, revelation and redemption. In the class, we studied each one in dialogue with a particular area of science: the idea of the “soul” with cognitive neuroscience; the claim for a universal ethics with evolutionary psychology; and the concept of hope with developments in medicine. In particular, we focused on the increased importance of psychopharmacology in mental health and of complementary and alternative methods in treating physical illness.

In order to give an idea of the work of the course, I will briefly share one of the areas we examined: cognitive neuroscience and the soul.

Neuroscience and the Soul

What happens if we begin to understand human beings as more deeply embedded in nature? As biology becomes more important in understanding human behavior, is Kaplan's transnatural language supported or subverted? As new technology allows a far deeper understanding of our brains, how do we want to talk about our "souls"?

In the 1960s a Soviet cosmonaut came back from outer space and reported that he definitely did not see any God up there. A similar report regarding the soul is coming from some neuroscientists exploring inner space. The soul is typically thought of as the non-material or spiritual aspect of the human being, what Jewish tradition has referred to as "the image of God." Western religions rest on the assumption that some kind of spirit exists that embodies the essence of a human being, what the philosopher Gilbert Ryle called "the ghost in the machine." This spirit is believed to be in humans but not in animals. This is the traditional basis of our religious sense of human life as sacred and inviolable.

In 1996 Pope John Paul II reaffirmed the Catholic Church's century-old acceptance of the doctrine of Darwinian evolution by explaining that our bodies may have evolved but our souls are provided by God. But what is a soul? In a famous passage in the Hebrew

Bible, the prophet Elijah calls out for God and discovers that "God was not in the fire" but rather "in the still small voice" (I Kings 19:12). Kaplan often spoke about that still small voice, but used different language:

The spiritual insights of men are not fortuitous, but are clues to the ultimate nature of mankind and the world, a manifestation or revelation of a universal Spirit, of which the human soul is a part.¹²

Thinking of God as a process rather than entity in no way tends to make Him less real . . . the soul-process too is superfactual, superexperiential and transnatural.¹³

Kaplan also believed that it was meaningful to speak of a qualitative distinction between animals and human beings. In fact, one of the ways he revalued the "chosen people" concept was to say that while Jews are not lifted up above other peoples, humans themselves are elevated above other species by virtue of their unique ability to hear the "call of God," by virtue of their spirits:

Man alone, of all creatures, hears not only nature calling him but also God. As such, he is exempt from the law of natural selection and becomes subject to the law of spiritual selection.¹⁴

This was the still, small voice.

Materialist Science

The reigning perspective of main-

stream cognitive neuroscience is that there is only the brain in all its wondrous complexity; what we have called the “mind” can finally be reduced to this material reality. All the more so, then, do these scientists dismiss the idea of soul or spirit. Mainstream cognitive neuroscience has faith that whatever we do not yet understand about the brain we someday will.

One of the most enthusiastic advocates of this extreme materialist position was Francis Crick, the winner of the Nobel Prize for co-discovery of the double helix, who worked in neuroscience until his recent death in his eighties. One of Crick’s colleagues, describing the possibility of someday being able to create a physiological measure for a “piety index,” jokingly suggested that they could set the absolute zero on the scale by testing Francis Crick.¹⁵

Crick wrote in *The Astonishing Hypothesis*:

“You,” your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules . . .¹⁶

Or as one scientist put it, “there are a billion cells in there and not one of them knows or cares about you.”

Beyond Dualism

Many neuroscientists believe that dualistic thinking, the distinction between the material and the spiritual, is simply a habit of mind. So where is

the soul? There does seem to be a self-awareness and a drive to transcendence that is unique to humans. Dr. John Allman’s research suggests that perhaps some of our cells are simply more “soulful” matters than others. He has found something called spindle cells which are found in the fronto-insular cortex of the brain.¹⁷ They light up when people have moral quandaries, experience guilt or perceive injustice. These spindle cells may in fact be what make us human. The only other species that has them is African apes, and they have many fewer. Spindle cells are not present at birth; they appear at four months and multiply rapidly in the first few years of life. Are spindle cells the image of God in us?

Whether or not we will ever find the locus of our souls, people continue to experience themselves as having a mind that is distinct from the brain.¹⁸ They feel themselves to be one person who persists over time; moreover, a person who makes decisions and has free will. There may be an unruly “convention” going on in our brains, with millions of neurons chatting with each other day and night, but it feels like there is also a “little man” or “little woman” running things. That decision-maker is us. Out of this perception has arisen the chaotic field of “consciousness studies,” in which whole arrays of different arguments are made for the proposition that indeed there is a mind that is more than the brain.

So now for the Kaplan question: How will social science prove to be to our spiritual advantage, helping us find a reconstructed language to talk about

our created selves that is both moving and scientifically sophisticated? If we are not sure what consciousness is, then what is the soul? Do we want to find new language in which to talk about the image of God in us? If the soul is indeed identified as the part of our material brain that is most sensitive, deep and inner, do we then increase the sense of awe and mystery in our lives?

The Biology of Mystical Experience

If we can't locate a soul in the brain circuitry, perhaps we can locate where the brain has religious experiences. The May 7, 2001 cover story of *Newsweek* was entitled "God and the Brain." We may not have a soul, or even a "self," but it now appears that some scientists claim to have a photograph of the "God spot" in the brain. The good news (or bad news, depending upon how you interpret it) is that these scientists believe they are finding the place or places where people experience what for centuries has been called "God." What they seem to be identifying is the experience of "oneness" reported by mystics of many traditions, the feeling that Freud (while acknowledging that he had never had one) called the "oceanic experience."

The development of minimally invasive high resolution tools such as Single Photon Emission Computer Tomography (SPECT) has allowed researchers actually to watch different parts of the brain at work. There are implications for our understanding of language, vision and many other areas

of human behavior. It was inevitable that researchers would eventually want to "see" for themselves.

Andrew Newberg and Eugene d'Aquili of the University of Pennsylvania gained wide attention for their work on charting spiritual experience in the brain. Scanning the brains of selected nuns and Buddhists engaged in deep prayer and meditation, they suggested that the unitive mystical experience can be described biologically as radically reduced neuronal activity in the posterior superior parietal lobe, a region of the brain associated with proprioception and our ability to "locate" ourselves in space. The authors conclude that "Mystical experience is biologically, observably and scientifically real."¹⁹ They believe they have found material traces of a divine presence — in their words, a "photograph of God."²⁰

Implications

Research in this field is interpreted in wildly different ways.²¹ There are those who would use it to reduce all claims of transcendence to illusion, exulting in the claim that what we call spiritual/religious experiences are now (allegedly) shown to be strictly physiological in nature. At the same time, others would use these new studies to "prove" that God exists, and that God created our brains the better to know "Him."²²

The next time I experience a sense of oneness with the universe after chanting or drumming, will I know in my heart that a bundle of neurons in the superior parietal lobe toward the top

and back of my brain has gone dark, and that that is the reason I am not processing information about space and time as usual? What will that do to the experience? Can I still use that experience to find life more worthwhile? Newberg would be the first to admit that none of his research speaks to the question of theological truth, despite what those with opposing agendas want to make of it.²³

In our RRC course, we pondered the meaning of a more biological understanding of transcendent experience, along with the import of the various other fields we explored at the intersection of science and religion. We tried to understand what guidance Kaplan's writings might give us in sorting it all out.

Kaplan's Two Voices

It seemed to me that Kaplan spoke in two somewhat different voices. I call these "the metaphysician despite himself"²⁴ and "the spiritual pragmatist."²⁵ The former voice is the one that made claims about the world, claims about the "transnatural" reality Kaplan called a "power" or a "process" or less frequently, a "force" or an "energy." In Kaplan's grander moments, he saw this power as not only persuasive but ultimately in control.

Consider Kaplan's claim that "life is not aimless and futile, not a mere play of blind and meaningless forces, but the manifestation of spiritual purpose, the unfolding of a plan for human cooperation and brotherhood."²⁶ It is this kind of assertion that appeared most

vulnerable to the challenge of science, particularly the cutting-edge life science we studied. Perhaps, these scientists suggest, there is no cosmic purpose or plan, let alone a spirit or a soul.

One option would be to take metaphysics seriously, and try to redo Kaplan's efforts using more sophisticated versions of process theology that have been developed in better dialogue with emerging science.²⁷ Until recently that option has not attracted people working under the auspices of the Reconstructionist movement, for reasons that I explore elsewhere.²⁸

Kaplan as Pragmatist

A different path is to highlight Kaplan's other voice, that of the "spiritual pragmatist." Jeffrey Stout defined philosophical pragmatism as "never having to say you are certain."²⁹ William James (1842-1910), a great psychologist turned philosopher, was one of several important influences on Kaplan.³⁰ Using William James, we can acknowledge some of Kaplan's metaphysical claims as significant "overbeliefs," while at the same time discovering a way to speak plausibly and powerfully about faith.

James explained the difference between the metaphysician and the pragmatist this way.

[To the metaphysician] the universe [appears] . . . as a kind of enigma, of which the key must be sought in the shape of some illuminating or power-bringing word or name. That word names the universe's principle, and to possess it after a

fashion is to possess the universe itself. “God,” “Matter,” “Reason,” “the Absolute,” “Energy” are so many solving names. You can rest when you have them. You are at the end of your metaphysical quest.

If you are a pragmatist, however,

you cannot look on any such word as closing your quest. You must bring out of each word its practical cash-value, set it at work within the stream of your experience. It appears less as a solution, then, than as a program for more work, and more particularly as an indication of the ways in which existing realities may be changed.³¹

Reading Kaplan through the lens of James, we can focus more clearly on the moments in Kaplan’s work where he abandoned his claim to tell us truths about a “transnatural” reality and adopted a more consistent pragmatic tone. Pragmatism teaches that the decision about the ultimate nature of things leaves one poised on the edge of a knife. Faith is a choice. No research will prove or disprove God. As James put it,

If you have a God already whom you believe in, these arguments will confirm you. If you are an atheist, they will fail to set you right.³²

Kaplan and Religious Experience

Kaplan ultimately based his ideas of soul (and of morals and hope) not on assertions but on experience, experience

that he chose to interpret in a certain way and toward a particular goal. In Kaplan’s diary, he described a visit from four of his rabbinical students who came to air their inner conflicts. They could not accept the traditional idea of God, nor did they find Kaplan’s alternative convincing:

They admit the existence of a will to salvation, but they see no need for positing a transcendent correlative of that will. Of course my contention is not that I intellectually posit it, but that I experience it with the same immediacy as I do my own self.³³

In each of his three major books, Kaplan clearly stated that he did not really expect his metaphysical claims to be accepted as claims about the way things are:

The God idea is not the reasoned allocation of chaos, cruelty, pain and death in some neat logical scheme. It is the passionate refusal of every atom in the human being to be terrified by these ogres.³⁴

God, if not assumed, is the most impossible of conclusions.³⁵

Men must acquire a religious faith, not by being reasoned to about God, but by experiencing God’s power in making life worthwhile.³⁶

Where to Look for God

Kaplan was not, in fact, interested in dissolving the idea of God into high-

sounding ethics and spiritual values. In a diary entry he wrote:

God as the Power that makes for salvation is not intended to be a “rational” explanation of what we mean by “God.” It is meant to be a rational method of indicating where to look for that . . . incomprehensible mystery we name God.³⁷

Kaplan revalued traditional God-language in an effort to assist people in recognizing the experiences in their own lives that would point them towards what their ancestors called God.

It is precisely here where the field of “neurotheology” is weakest. Most of the research is being done with a very narrow view of “religious experience.” The scientists focus on the mystical experience of unity, or loss of a sense of boundaries. Yet that is only one of many experiences in life that we might want to call “religious.” We all know times when we have moved beyond the surface of life and felt access to the “more” or “plus” of existence. Such times may be those that involve connections with people; moments of profound solitude; moments of birth, or of death; moments of communion with nature, or moments of experiencing art. They may involve the “melting feeling” of a summer afternoon or, in James’ memorable one word description, “Help!”³⁸ These experiences leave us shaken, moved, drawn to a mystery beyond ourselves.

Perhaps religious experiences provide no new information about the universe.

Rather, they give us the emotional impetus to tell certain kinds of stories. We may indeed be nothing but a pack of neurons and our religious experiences may be neurological phenomena; nevertheless, the stories we tell ourselves about those experiences come from our higher cognitive functions. When we choose to link ourselves to a religious civilization, we opt for a narrative tradition that will shape raw experience in particular ways.

The Value of a Religious Civilization

If there is nothing but matter, all the more do we need stories to make meaning! If there is actually no core self, all the more do we need tradition to tell us stories about who we are or might be! Here is where Kaplan would point out the value of being part of a religious civilization — the ethically rich treasure house of stories that constitutes our legacy as Jews. By naming certain experiences “God,” in continuity with our ancestors, we also shape those experiences using the extensive baggage of Jewish tradition.

Kaplan suggested that the sacred story of the Jewish people be seen as a mode of salvation:

A people does not offer itself to an individual as an instrument of salvation in the same way as a system of philosophy usually does, by appealing to his reason to accept certain general principles or abstract truths. It always comes to him with a story about itself which

he is made to feel is in a deeper and truer sense his story than the experiences which are confined to his person.³⁹

What we do with our experiences depends upon the language our culture provides to shape them. The deep metaphors of the language of science are cold and uninspired. At the end of almost five hundred pages of writing about the influence the study of biology ought to have on social science, the anthropologist Melvin Konner came to a surprising conclusion:

We must once again experience the human soul as soul, and not just as a buzz of bioelectricity; the human will as will, not just a surge of hormones . . . We need not believe in them as metaphysical entities — they are as real as the flesh and blood they are made of. But we must believe in them . . . (they) are made real by our contemplation of them, by the words we use to talk about them . . . We must stand in awe of them as unassailable, even though they are dissected before our eyes.⁴⁰

While Konner tells us we must re-imagine a soul, psychologist Jerome Bruner suggests that even the self must be constructed:

There is no such thing as an intuitively obvious and essential self to know . . . Rather, we constantly construct and reconstruct our selves to meet the needs of the situations we encounter . . . Self-

making is a narrative art . . . guided by unspoken, implicit cultural models of what selfhood should be, might be.⁴¹

Conservation of Spiritual Energy

Returning to tradition offers us something not to be found elsewhere: the accumulated momentum of the spiritual quest of the past. Kaplan called this “the conservation of spiritual energy.”⁴² And we need not rely only on our own experiences to accomplish the willful creating of soul that Bruner and Konner tell us is so essential. Even if we do not have those experiences ourselves (or do not have them at a given stage of life) we may look for God in the experiences of others, in the stories of those who came before us.

Furthermore, we need a tradition of ethical discernment to help us judge our experiences, for not everything that feels spiritual is morally helpful. It is in relating experience to the traditions of what is right and good that Kaplan discovered the criterion for religious life.

If any experience . . . of our inner life is thought [to be] the Divine Presence . . . it must lead . . . to the exercise of justice and love. If it fails to do that, we merely delude ourselves in believing that it is God we are aware of.⁴³

Concluding Thoughts

In a spiritual and pragmatic view, religious belief is not some kind of cheap

intellectual short cut. Notwithstanding the most recent scientific challenges, religious faith remains a compelling option for intelligent post-moderns. The practices of Jewish life can offer experiences that can provide the motivation to tell certain kinds of stories. The stories offer us a sensibility that helps us to notice dimensions of depth in experiences we might otherwise have missed, for as James pointed out, our experience is what we agree to attend to. Connection with the Jewish people offers yet another boon: the richness of a narrative past to fill in the gaps in our own lives. Experiences of Jews in the past and of the Jewish people as a whole can become part of our “salvation.”

As human beings we are embedded in nature, far more than we might have thought a generation ago. As we learn more, we discover how much we share with the animal world. Even spiritual experience may not be unique to humans.⁴⁴ But what surely is ours alone is the idea of taking those experiences and elaborating them with stories about loving the stranger, pursuing justice and keeping an eye out for the Messiah. There is a good deal of faith involved in opting for those stories over others, but it is faith that, as James put it “is set to work.”

Kaplan made the distinction this way. When we seek intellectually satisfying answers to theological quandaries we are “philosophers or metaphysicians.” In contrast, he says, those on a religious quest “have always been satisfied with the modest fare of faith.”⁴⁵ Satisfying, or, (as is more often the case), deeply challenging, that faith

makes sense alongside whatever science may discover. It is faith premised on experience, but experience augmented by the tradition whose stories we will ourselves to make our own.

1. Private correspondence to author, 2004.

2. Mel Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai Kaplan* (Detroit: Wayne State, 1993) 79.

3. Robert M. Seltzer, “Which Wissenschaft? Reconstructionism’s Theological Appropriation of Sociology and Religious Naturalism,” in Andreas Gotzmann and Christian Wiese (eds.) *Modern Judaism and Historical Consciousness — Identities — Encounters — Perspectives* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2006).

4. Mordecai Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization* (New York: Macmillan, 1934), 307.

5. The field of Jewish religious thought has remained remarkably untouched by new developments in science, with the exception of physics. The challenging philosophical issues emerging from the life sciences seem to be largely ignored in Jewish theological writing. One counter example is Norbert Samuelson. See, “The Death and Revival of Jewish Philosophy,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, March, 2002, 117-134, 123.

6. I am indebted to Dr. Noah Efron, a philosopher of science at Bar-Ilan University who guided me in my choice of topics for the course.

7. Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002) 42.

8. Melvin Konner, *The Tangled Web: Biological Constraints on the Human Spirit* (New York: Holt, 2002), 11.

9. <http://apu.sfn.org>.
10. See, for example, the bestseller by Stephen Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (New York: Penguin, 2002).
11. See Peter Berger, *A Rumor of Angels* (New York: Anchor, 1970).
12. Mordecai Kaplan, *The Future of the American Jew* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), 538.
13. *Ibid.*, 183.
14. *Ibid.*, 247.
15. V.S. Ramachandran, *Phantoms in the Brain* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), 186.
16. Francis Crick, *The Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for the Soul* (New York: Scribners, 1994) 3-4.
17. Sandra Blakeslee, "Humanity? Maybe It's in the Wiring," *The New York Times*, December 9, 2003.
18. See Paul Bloom, *Descartes' Baby: How the Science of Child Development Explains what Makes us Human* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).
19. Andrew Newberg and Eugene D'Aquili, *Why God Won't Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief* (New York: Ballantine, 2001).
20. *Ibid.*
21. A good overview by a journalist is John Hogan, *Rational Mysticism: Spirituality Meets Science in the Search for Enlightenment* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003).
22. Carol Albright and James Ashbrook, *The Humanizing Brain: Where Religion and Neuroscience Meet* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1997).
23. Personal conversation with author, June, 2004.
24. While Kaplan repeatedly eschewed metaphysics, Jacob Staub, Harold Schulweis and William Kaufman have all pointed out that many of his claims are in fact metaphysical ones. See their essays in Goldsmith, Seltzer and Scult (eds.), *The American Judaism of Mordecai Kaplan* (New York: NYU, 1991).
25. In using the phrase "spiritual pragmatism" I am signaling an affinity for the kind of pragmatism that James championed, one that held the door open for religious belief. I acknowledge that today's post-modern pragmatism can be hostile to transcendence.
26. Mordecai Kaplan, *The Future of the American Jew*, 538.
27. Lubarsky and Griffin (eds.), *Jewish Theology and Process Thought* (Albany: SUNY, 1996).
28. Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer, "70 Years after Judaism as a Civilization: Kaplan's Theology and the Reconstructionist Movement," *Journal of Jewish Social Studies*, forthcoming.
29. Jeffrey Stout, *After Babel* (Boston: Beacon, 1988) 297.
30. See Mel Scult, "The Sociologist as Theologian: The Fundamental Assumptions of Mordecai Kaplan's Thought," *Judaism* 25 (Summer, 1976) 345-352. Scult points out that Kaplan held a discussion group for rabbinical students devoted to James' work.
31. William James, "What is Pragmatism? A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking." The text of this 1904 lecture can be found at www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/us/james.htm-44k.
32. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 345.
33. March 19, 1943 (unpublished diary entry, courtesy of Mel Scult).
34. Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization* (New York: Macmillan, 1934), 330.
35. Mordecai M. Kaplan, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* (Detroit: Wayne State, 1994), 27.
36. Mordecai M. Kaplan, *The Future of the*

American Jew, 260.

37. Kaplan Diary, April 28, 1956 (unpublished diary entry, courtesy of Mel Scult).

38. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 159.

39. Mordecai Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, 519.

40. Melvin Konner, *The Tangled Web: Biological Constraints on the Human Spirit* (New York: Henry Holt, 2002), 488.

41. Jerome Bruner, *Making Stories* (New

York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 64-65.

42. Mordecai Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, 388.

43. Mel Scult (ed.), *Communings of the Spirit: The Journals of Mordecai M. Kaplan, Volume I 1913-1934* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press), 65.

44. Mel Konner, *The Tangled Web*, 485.

45. Mordecai Kaplan, *The Future of the American Jew*, 243.

The Blessing of Uncertainty: Kaplan, God and Process

BY TOBA SPITZER

For a religious person, these are perhaps the best of times as well as the worst of times. Spirituality is “in” as people seek deeper meaning in a world overwhelmed by materialism and crass consumerism. Religion has re-entered the public sphere with a vengeance. Indeed, we are hearing a lot about God these days, and about God’s truth. Unfortunately, much of what we are hearing tends toward the intolerant, the repressive and even toward violence. Those who seem most certain about God’s truth seem equally committed to a social vision that is reactionary. At a time in which liberal, open-minded religiosity seems to be on the wane, while a variety of fundamentalisms gain strength, what is a religious progressive to do?

How do we foster ways of thinking and talking about God that better match our vision of the way we would like reality to be? Can we find God language that will help people think and act in ways that are wholesome, tolerant, life-affirming and non-oppressive? How do we articulate an understanding of God that not only does justice to our relationship with the Creative Power of the universe, but that also asks something of us and calls us to service?

From Experience to Belief

In trying to answer some of these questions, I begin with Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan and his attempts to articulate an understanding of God that was both comprehensible and compelling. Kaplan based his discussion of God on two suppositions: that our belief in God stems not from logical inference or divine revelation, but from lived human experience; and, that we can come to some understanding of the true meaning of what we call “God” through an exploration of how belief in God is manifest in human life. In addition, he argued that our conception of God — the way we articulate our understanding of the divine — must adapt and change as human consciousness and awareness develop over time.

Kaplan begins with the experience of a force or Power in the universe that supports and propels what he termed the human drive for “salvation,” defined as “the maximum harmonious functioning of a person’s physical, mental, social, moral, and spiritual powers.”¹ Kaplan understood this drive towards salvation as a universal human experience, which, he argued,

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... implies the existence of conditions that are propitious to life. The will to live abundantly and to achieve one's destiny likewise implies the existence of conditions that favor abundant life, or salvation. The taking for granted that such conditions exist is the basis of the religious conception of God . . . [as] a Power predisposing man to his ultimate good, salvation, or self-fulfillment.²

On the one hand, the very fact (as Kaplan understood it) of a human "will" to salvation implies the existence of a cosmic force that supports such a drive — a force for good that we call "God." And functionally, it is through a belief in such a God that one "activates" Godly power in one's own life: "Thus in the very process of human self-fulfillment, in the very striving after the achievement of salvation, we identify ourselves with God, and God functions in us."³

Kaplan professed to be suspicious of metaphysical pronouncements about God's essence, and he was uninterested in theological arguments about God's existence, but he did not refrain from making claims about the reality of God. He affirmed the existence of a Godly Power in the universe that was active in the lives of human beings (as well as in the natural laws of the cosmos).⁴ Yet even as he posited a God that was "a cosmic reality independent of man,"⁵ Kaplan was ambiguous and inconsistent in defining the nature of God. So while I begin with Kaplan, it is necessary to go beyond what he was willing or able to say.

Reconstructing the Meaning of "God"

Based on my understanding of Kaplan's methodology and theological assumptions, I suggest these criteria for a "reconstructed" Jewish theology (in no particular order):

- Our conception of God should accord with our best understandings of physical truths about the cosmos. While I would not suggest that scientific inquiry must be privileged over all other forms of knowledge, we do need to take seriously the premises of evolution in the realm of biology, and of quantum mechanics and other foundational laws in the realm of physics. If the known universe is a positive expression of Godly creativity, and if divinity is to be found within creation (both of which are fundamental Jewish ideas), then divinity must share the basic attributes of the created world.

- Our ideas about God should resonate with foundational Jewish teachings. Any Jewish theology will, of necessity, highlight certain trends and teachings from the tradition over others. But it would seem essential for any contemporary Jewish theology to be rooted in significant core Jewish teachings about God and the human relationship to God, even while it may deny or diminish other aspects of the tradition. Given the Bible's primacy in Judaism and Western civilization in general, as well as its continued (mis)use by fundamentalists, I take especially seriously the mythic and metaphoric depictions of God in the Torah as primary texts for a Jewish theology.

- Our conception of God must have functional value, in the way that Kaplan conceived of function. That is, we must examine carefully the implications of a belief in God and see if it fulfills the moral imperatives that we deem essential to a meaningful and effective Judaism. How does a particular belief motivate or obligate me to act in the world? What are its ethical implications?

God as Process

In his challenge to supernatural conceptions of God, Kaplan wrote:

Does the awareness of God depend upon our conceiving God as a personal being, or may God be conceived in other ways and yet be the subject of our awareness, or the object of our worship? . . . Nothing would be lost if we substituted [for the notion of a personal being] the one of “process,” which, at least with the aid of science, most of us find quite understandable. Why, then, not conceive God as process rather than as some kind of identifiable entity?⁶

While Kaplan does not make clear here which realm of science he is referring to, his writing about God took shape as a new model of physical reality was taking hold in the scientific community. With Einstein’s insight that $E=mc^2$, physical reality could no longer be thought of as static. Energy could become matter, and vice versa; the most elemental building blocks of the universe could act as particles or as

waves. At its most basic level, physical reality is flux, change, flow. Similarly, Kaplan argued that thinking about God as a kind of static, identifiable Supreme Person or Being no longer made sense, and that instead we needed to think about God as a Process or a Power.

Kaplan did not explore the full ramifications of this notion of God as Process. For a more fully realized understanding of what such a God concept might mean, we need to turn to the insights of Process Theology, which has grown out of the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead and the theological teachings of Charles Hartshorne. Without attempting an overview of this entire school of thought, I would like to sketch here a few key ideas and the challenges raised by them.

God and Change

The idea of God as Process is counter to a dominant strain of classical Jewish as well as Christian theism, both of which maintain that God’s perfection implies that God is unchanging (because any change in God would imply some prior deficiency). In accord with our contemporary understanding of physical reality, process theology claims that “process is fundamental . . . to be actual is to be a process. Anything which is not a process is an abstraction from a process, not a full-fledged actuality.”⁷ In this understanding, reality is made up of a succession of discrete yet related “actualities” or “events,” each of which incorporates and synthesizes elements of the past with that which is novel and new. The source of that

newness, of creativity, is what we call “God.” Not only is God not static, God is in fact the ultimate Source of potentiality and change in the universe. God’s perfection is not found in the quality of being unchanging, but rather as “a maximum of potentiality, of unactualized power to be.”⁸ God as the Creative Power of the universe is intimately involved in the ongoing process of reality.

A correlative notion in traditional Judaism is the rabbinic claim that God actively sustains the created world and brings it into being anew every moment and every day. This belief is codified in the morning liturgy, when we bless *hamehadash b’khol yom tamid maasei bereshit* — the One who makes new every day the work of Creation. In contrast to the unchanging God of the medieval philosophers, this Creator is the cosmic Source of newness in the world. Where process theology takes this claim one step further is in the assertion that not only is Creation new each day, but so is God. God as the ultimate “actuality” is continually achieving new states of being, is Itself ever-creative.

Biblical affirmation of this Godly quality of potentiality and change is found in the third chapter of the book of Exodus, in Moses’ dramatic encounter with God at the burning bush. Addressed by a divine being who tells him to go back to Egypt and liberate the Israelites from slavery, Moses asks: “who should I say sent me? What is your name?”

The answer comes in three words: *ehyeh asher ehyeh*: “I will be that I will

be.” I can think of no less static or unchanging a name for God than this. The God that redeems and liberates the Jews from Egypt is all about potential and the promise of transformation. This Godly appellation is related to the other divine name revealed at the bush: YHVH, “an impossible construction of the verb ‘to be.’”⁹ This name incorporates the sense of God being in all moments, past, present and future, while also capturing the sense of God as Becoming, as the ultimate creative power that urges us toward ever-more complex and integrated levels of existence, toward freedom and “salvation.”

What is the functional implication of such a conception of God? If God changes, if God is the ultimate potentiality of all potentialities, then change is Godly. Perfection does not lie in some fantasy version of the past. Nor does it lie in achieving some final state of completeness. In fact, we could argue that such a state is impossible. Change, development and evolution are not just natural aspects of material reality — they are its most Godly aspects. As Kaplan argued,

creativity, or the continuous emergence of aspects of life not prepared for or determined by the past, constitutes the most divine phase of reality . . . For God is the Creator, and that which seems impossible today [God] may bring to birth tomorrow.¹⁰

A key aspect of religious faith is the belief that the universe is constructed in such a way as to support our efforts towards change and growth, and part

of our Godly task here on earth is to be partners in the process of becoming.

The “All-Knowing” and “All-Powerful” God

The classical idea that God’s perfection means that God is unchanging is generally accompanied by two associated notions: that God is omniscient, or all-knowing, and so does not learn anything not already known to God (for such learning would imply some deficiency in God’s knowledge); and that God is omnipotent, or all-powerful, meaning that (theoretically) God can do whatever God wants in relation to the created universe. If God did not exert total control, then that would imply a deficiency in God’s power.

These conceptions of God’s omnipotence and omniscience are highly problematic in numerous ways. Neither accords with how God is depicted in the Torah. Beginning with the earliest chapters of Genesis, God appears to be on a continual learning curve. What will happen when human beings eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden? In the Garden, God learns about human free will. God then learns about the human capacity for murder when Cain and Abel get into humanity’s first deadly fight. When human violence and wrongdoing get totally out of hand, God changes God’s mind, and decides to bring a flood to wipe out nearly all of Creation. If we take seriously the questions God asks and the challenges God faces in these stories, it is hard not to conclude that the God of Genesis is a Being or Power

for whom the act of creation brings with it an ongoing process of learning, adaptation and change.

When it comes to the issue of free will, and the relation of human power to God’s power, the Torah takes very seriously the notion that power is not the monopoly of the Holy One. From the very beginning of the book of Genesis, God does not, cannot, control what human beings do. Human power and human choice are real. The Torah begins with a choice: Adam and Eve’s choice to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. And the Torah ends with a choice: Moses’ challenge to the Israelites to choose life and the path of good. For the Torah, choice is real, human freedom is real, and throughout most of the Five Books of Moses God must deal with the messy reality of humans having the power to choose and to act.

Coercive vs. Persuasive Power

What I have learned from my reading of process theology is that accepting the reality of human freedom does not mean that we need to think of God as somehow powerless or irrelevant in the realm of human action. Rather, religious thinkers have made the mistake of attributing to God only one kind of power — coercive power, which is complete power over someone or something. God has all the power, and nothing and no one else, in either the natural or human realms, can exert meaningful power, because an omnipotent God can nullify any human action.

But in the view of process theology,

as in Kaplan's writings, reality is fundamentally relational. Nothing exists in isolation. God's power is inherently relational, in that it must reckon with and relate to the freedom and the power to act of others. Divine power exists along with the real power exerted by created beings whose freedom is real.

The Torah's most direct critique of coercive tyrannical power is the story of the confrontation between YHVH and Pharaoh in Egypt. Pharaoh is the archetype of the kind of power that admits of no mistake and that refuses to change, to grow and to adapt to new circumstances. Each time that Pharaoh temporarily relents and agrees to let the Israelites go, his stubborn nature reasserts itself, his "heart hardens," and he and his people suffer under a new plague. Opposed to this tyrannical power is the vastly superior power of *ehyeh asher ehyeh*. And that power cannot act alone; it needs Moses, and it needs the Israelites, to take some role in enacting their own freedom.

YHVH does not miraculously airlift the Israelites out of Egypt; YHVH does not allow Moses to wiggle out of his responsibility to do his part in bringing the people out. As Hartshorne puts it, "Supreme creativity permits and demands a division of creative power . . . The ideal form of power does not monopolize power, but allots to all their due measure of creative opportunity."¹¹ Indeed, every time that God thinks it possible to destroy the insolent Israelites and start over, Moses reminds God that God would not be the Ultimate Power without this partnership, without being in mutual relation with a human

community that must ultimately have the ability to act for itself.

Persuasion and Salvation

In the terminology of process theology, God's power is indeed ultimate, but it is primarily persuasive, not coercive. This notion of persuasive power is related to Kaplan's idea of salvation, here extended beyond the human realm. Every created being has an aim or ideal toward which it tends, seeking its own ultimate fulfillment. God is the Creative Power that establishes this aim, and then sustains and urges beings towards that fulfillment. But God does not control the particulars of the process, and in the unfolding of creation there is room for chance and for choice — and for the attendant risk and suffering that they may bring.¹²

At the burning bush, Moses learns two things about God: God is *ehyeh asher ehyeh*, the transformative process of Becoming; and YHVH is a power that responds to suffering and calls for human action. In response to the cries of the Israelites, YHVH urges Moses to become God's partner in the task of redeeming this slave people. Moses resists mightily God's demands, but in the end he returns to Egypt and begins the long process of liberating the Israelites.

This Torah story is a metaphor for God exercising persuasive, not coercive, power. In this understanding, God offers an ideal toward which we strive, and God is the Power that urges us to respond to suffering, to seek our own fulfillment and to help others toward their fulfillment. This manifestation of

Godly power encourages us to do the good, and offers direction if we learn how to follow it. It cannot make us act for the good; as we know all too well, people can always choose to do evil. But our tradition teaches that there will be consequences for defying the Godly path, and blessings reaped for following it.

Reconstructing *Mitzva*

It is in the context of this understanding of Godly persuasive power that I would suggest a Reconstructionist understanding of the traditional notion of *mitzva*, of holy obligation. With a process understanding of God, we do not have to choose between a fundamentalist understanding of Godly commands on the one hand, and a moral relativism on the other. But how can we preserve a sense of obligation, of something being demanded of us as Jews, as human beings, once we reject the idea of the all-powerful and commanding God?

The traditional understanding of *mitzva* flows from a traditional understanding of revelation: Torah, with its multiple instructions and demands, was revealed by God at Sinai. In Kaplan's formulation, God does not reveal Godself to us, rather we discover God. We discover how God works and what God wants of us in our exploration of the laws of the natural universe, and in the development of our moral and spiritual sensibility.

Furthermore, according to Kaplan, belief in God entails "the faith that reality, the cosmos . . . is so constituted

that it both urges us on and helps us to achieve our salvation, provided, of course, we learn to know and understand enough about that reality to be able to conform to its demands."¹³ We are not handed our salvation on a plate. Rather, our spiritual and ethical goal is "to know and understand enough" about the reality of the cosmos "to be able to conform to its demands." The process of discovery correlates to the traditional notion of revelation as an experienced awareness not just of God's existence, but of a relationship with the divine, and of a response to the demands of divinity.

Finding Deeper Truth

There will always be debate as to the nature of the reality of "the cosmos" and what it demands of us. Is complete randomness and chance the underpinning of reality? Does a narrowly defined "survival of the fittest" exemplify natural law? Which is the deeper truth of our human existence: the adamant *ki tov* ("declared good") of the Creation story, or the tenacious *yetzer ra* (urge to evil) that God accepts as inherent in humanity after the Flood?

Without presuming to answer definitively any of those questions, I believe it is possible to make some affirmations about the nature of humanity and of the cosmos to help us in this process of discovery. Evolutionary processes leading to increasingly complex forms of life and levels of consciousness are one fundamental aspect of reality.

Another important aspect is discussed by Kaplan in his article, "When

Is a Religion Authentic?” Here, he argues for the centrality of a process he calls “ontological polarity.”

This is the process which underlies all other cosmic polarities, present in nature and identified in physics, chemistry, biology, psychology, and sociology. That is the process whereby everything in the universe possesses an individuality of its own and at the same time interacts with whatever is in its field.¹⁴

Kaplan’s claim here is akin to the process theologians’ claim that physical reality — from the level of the atom to the level of human beings — is inherently relational, and that God’s nature reflects this reality.¹⁵ Kaplan suggests that a basic feature of created reality is the unfolding of each individual’s salvation in the context of its relationships to other individuals, and that this is the foundation of moral responsibility: “When this cosmic synthesis of individuation and interaction functions in the individual, or in society, as independence and interdependence, it is experienced as a sense of responsibility, or as conscience.” The goal of religious belief and practice, then, is the fostering of moral responsibility in human beings, which is “the human manifestation of the overall creative process in nature.”¹⁶

The Covenantal Project

The traditional Jewish correlative of this notion is the Torah’s radical claim that human beings can — indeed, must enter into mutual relationship with

the Source of Creation, a relationship which necessitates sharing a holy way of life together as a community. This is the essential meaning of *brit* (covenant), and it is the foundation for our entire system of ritual and ethical obligation and practice. Within the conceptual framework of *brit*, the teachings of process theology take a particular shape. The Creative Power of the cosmos calls to an oppressed people to enter into relationship with Itself and with one another. The freedom inherent in this relationship, the *herut* inscribed on the tablets of the covenant, is the reality of human choice framed by God’s persuasive power. In the Torah’s words, to enter into covenant is to be called to “choose life.” This persuasive power is not just a demand but an aspect of reality — it is that which gives shape to our salvation and which urges us on towards it.

Because the world and universe in which we live share a basic quality of interrelatedness and interdependence, the covenantal project is relational and social in nature. The Torah frames its blessings and curses in terms of communal and environmental salvation and destruction: the entire people will be dispersed and suffer, the earth itself will be affected, if God’s *hesed* and *tzedek* are trampled.

Salvation in the Torah’s conception is based on an ecology of good and bad, in which individual actions have effects beyond the individual. *Mitzva* is the obligation of the individual to a spiritual and ethical path that makes possible the salvation not just of that individual, but of the community as

whole. *Tzedek* and *hesed* — distributive justice and covenantal loving care and support — are the duty of the community to each member. Holiness is achieved when both parties to the relationship, human beings and God, are able to fulfill their commitments to one another, and in so doing to come into the fullness of the “cosmic synthesis of individuation and interaction.”

Some Next Steps

A reconstructed understanding of God, informed by the insights of process theology, has serious implications for socio-political discourse as well as for our lives as individuals. If we accept the notion of God as a Power that embodies change and transformation, then it is wrong, perhaps even blasphemous, for any religious community to claim to know “God’s word,” or to claim that “God’s word” is set and unchanging for all time. This human arrogance of presuming to know absolute truth is the kind of certainty that motivates those who oppress in the name of God. And it is no coincidence that those who are most certain — whether they are Jewish or Christian or Muslim — also tend to be the most authoritarian, those most liable to impose a coercive power that they associate with their understanding of God.

The process critique of coercive power and of unchanging perfection as anything but Godly is an important corrective to the tendency to see a refusal to admit mistakes and arrogant over-reaching as signs of strong leadership. There are clear political implica-

tions for affirming the idea of shared creative power as the most Godly form of power. In addition, the affirmation of the inherently creative, changing nature of reality and of the divine is a significant rejection of the religious idolatry of a patriarchal, oppressive past.

On the level of our daily lives, if we come to an understanding of God as the Power that embodies and exemplifies creativity, change and ongoing transformation, then we can embrace as Godly the reality of uncertainty, risk and chance in our own spiritual journeys. We can take seriously the deepest teaching of the story of the Exodus: that real freedom is like a journey into the wilderness, a journey that promises encounter with the divine and new teachings about how to live a full human life — but one that also brings an inherent risk of conflict and of suffering.

We often do our utmost to exert control. But the reality is that our desire for control more often increases our suffering, because we find ourselves fighting the reality of our lives. We become unable to live within that reality, when we really do not have any other choice. On some level, our desire for control is the root of idolatry, because what are idols, if not humanly made artifacts that can be manipulated by their creators? To allow for glimpses of Godliness in our lives, to open ourselves to an ongoing awareness of God’s presence in this world, we need to learn to live with the blessing of uncertainty.

To bless uncertainty is to understand and accept the limits of our own human power in the face of the awesome mysteries of Creation. It is to accept the

fragility and temporary nature of our own lives as a part of God's creation. It is to accept the very real risks of our human freedom, and to acknowledge the reality of suffering, our own and that of others. Out of that experience comes compassion, and an understanding of God's nature as *El ḥanun v'raḥum*, the gracious and compassionate One.

To bless uncertainty is, in the prophet Micah's words, to "walk modestly with God," as we seek to do justice and to love goodness. We may feel very deeply our commitments to creating holy community, to building a just society — but how do we act on those commitments with the right mix of conviction and humility? How do we maintain an attitude of willingness to learn, an openness to an ongoing unfolding of truth, when we are trying to act on deeply held values and ideals? To "walk modestly with God" means that we are always learning how to bring justice and love into our lives, into our communities and into our societies. To embrace uncertainty does not mean to make all truth relative, to throw morality out the window, to say that anything goes. It is, rather, to bring a very traditional sort of humility to the project of discovering what is asked of us by the universe.

When we finish a simple meal, it is traditional to recite a *brakha aḥrona*, a "final blessing." This blessing contains these wise words: "Blessed are you, Adonai, who creates many and various living beings with their *hisronot*, their deficiencies." In this project of understanding what God is and what God demands of us, let us acknowledge and

bless our *hisronot*, those places where we are still in process, those empty spaces that are not yet filled. Let us bless our uncertainties.

1. Mordecai M. Kaplan "When Is a Religion Authentic?" *The Reconstructionist* Vol. 30 No. 11, 15.

2. Mordecai M. Kaplan, *The Future of the American Jew* (New York: The Reconstructionist Press, 1981), 172.

3. Mordecai M. Kaplan, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* (New York: The Reconstructionist Press, 1962), 26.

4. "If human beings are frustrated, it is not because there is no God, but because they do not deal with reality as it is actually and potentially constituted." Kaplan, *Meaning of God op.cit.* 26-27

5. William E. Kaufman, "Kaplan's Approach to Metaphysics," in *The American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan*, eds. Emanuel S. Goldsmith, Mel Scult, and Robert M. Seltzer (New York: New York University Press, 1990), 277. Kaufman argues that Kaplan did indeed make metaphysical claims, but that "the metaphysical status of God in Kaplan's thought remains problematic" (278).

6. Kaplan, *The Future of the American Jew, op. cit.* 182-83.

7. John B. Cobb, Jr. and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press 1976), 14.

8. Charles Hartshorne, cited in Santiago Sia, *God in Process Thought* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1985), 39.

9. Arthur Green, *Seek My Face, Speak My Name: A Contemporary Jewish Theology* (Northvale NJ: J.Aronson, 1992), 19.

10. Kaplan, *Meaning of God, op.cit.* 62, 67.

11. Sia, *God in Process Thought*, *op.cit.* 78, 80.

12. There are parallels between the role of chance and freedom in process theology and the “space” described in Lurianic Kabbalah as being created through God’s act of *tzimtzum* (“contraction”). It is this “space” in which contingency arises, real change as well as human choice, and thus is the place where evil and suffering can arise. It is not unrelated to God yet is not entirely controlled by God. In the words of William E. Kaufman, Creation represents “the one coercive divine act, a tragic act in which God necessarily and inherently relinquishes His absolute power for the chance and risk and endless variety of natural and human becoming.” *The Evolving God in*

Jewish Process Theology (Jewish Studies, Vol. 17; New York: Edwin Mellen Press 1997) 176-177.

13. Kaplan, *The Future of the American Jew*, *op.cit.* 182 (emphasis added).

14. Kaplan, “When is a Religion Authentic?” *op.cit.* 15

15. Cobb and Griffin explore the idea of interrelatedness in Whitehead’s thought in *Process Theology*, 18-24. Kaufman discusses both Hartshorne’s and Whitehead’s approaches to God’s engagement with (including being affected by) the world and human beings in *The Evolving God in Jewish Process Theology*, 41-46, 60-71.

16. Kaplan, “When Is a Religion Authentic?” *op.cit.* 15

Toward a Redefinition of Reconstructionism

BY DANIEL GOLDMAN CEDARBAUM

“. . . at seventy to ripe old age, at eighty to remarkable strength. . .”

—*Pirke Avot* 5:21

The celebration of the 70th birthday of this great journal that so long served as the primary vehicle for the dissemination of Reconstructionism seems an appropriate moment to reflect on the current state and the future of our movement. On an institutional level, the central organizations of the movement — the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association and the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College — are all stronger than at any time in their respective histories. Precisely because of this institutional stability, we now have the luxury of looking seriously at what Reconstructionism, as a philosophical approach to Judaism, should mean as we begin our next 70 years.

Retaining Our Roots

All discussions of Reconstructionism should still begin with its founder, Mordecai M. Kaplan and his 1934 *magnum opus*, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward A Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life*.

Kaplan's program for a radically new approach to American Jewish life, as refined (and to some extent modified) in *The Future of The American Jew* (1948) and subsequent works over his long career, must remain the foundation of any edifice that can properly be called Reconstructionism. But the discussions certainly should not end with Kaplan.

Speaking as a “classical Kaplanian Reconstructionist,” I reject the charge leveled by some critics in the movement that people like me a) insist on treating all of Kaplan's ideas as sacrosanct, and b) refuse to allow for evolutionary change within the very school of thought that believes all healthy religious movements are marked by evolutionary change. Reconstructionism has evolved over the past seventy years, both within and beyond Kaplan's writings, and it should continue to evolve. But in this context I like to keep in mind Rabbi Emanuel Goldsmith's caveat that not all change is evolutionary; indeed, some change is devolutionary. Evolution implies progress, however unfashionable and indefinite the concept currently may be. Excluding women when determining the presence of a *minyan*, to cite one provocative hypothetical, would be a change, but it would certainly not be

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evolutionary.

Moreover, “change for change’s sake,” which seems to be the battle cry of many contemporary Reconstructionists, strikes me as a poor basis on which to make ideological decisions. Those who regard making changes to Kaplanian precepts as self-evidently beneficial remind me of the well-known talmudic story in which the majority of the rabbis present adhere to a particular halakhic conclusion even after they learn that God would have made the opposite decision. Some of our contemporary “change fanatics” seem to be recasting Kaplan in the role of God, and attributing to him what the Talmud purports to be God’s famous observation: “My children have defeated me, My children have defeated me.” That Kaplan may, through his own principles, have conferred on subsequent generations the right to change Reconstructionism tells us nothing about whether making any particular change is a wise thing to do.

Salvation as Central

How then should we decide which parts of Kaplan’s Reconstructionism to preserve, and which to change? Kaplan himself gives us a powerful answer: We should preserve those aspects of classical Reconstructionism that function effectively in promoting “salvation,” in Kaplan’s sense of the term: for the individual, fulfillment through the discovery of ultimate meaning in life; for the community, fulfillment through the realization of its highest ideals. If, after careful consideration, aspects of

classical Reconstructionism are found no longer to support “salvation,” they should be discarded.

Thus far my discussion of evolution within Reconstructionism has been abstract. Turning now to a consideration of paradoxes pertaining to Kaplan’s work and thought will provide a useful framework within which to make my arguments concrete and specific.

The Paradox of Kaplan’s Influence

In his essay, “Kaplan’s Judaism At Sixty: A Reappraisal,” Arnold Eisen provides the following pithy summary of Kaplan’s impact:

Kaplan’s successes were notable. Definition of Judaism as a “civilization” rather than a “religion” quickly became routine. Synagogues by the hundreds turned into community centers. Educators carried Kaplan’s method and his message to Jewish schools across America. And most important of all, perhaps, thousands of Jews who previously had no use for God or synagogues could now feel themselves good Jews, take part in the life of their people and attach themselves to Jewish tradition, thanks to Kaplan’s redefining Judaism in a way that included them.

In other respects Kaplan’s crusade failed dramatically to persuade. Closest to home, the Conservative leadership at the Seminary refused to go along with his reduction of God to an impersonal force and of

halakha (Jewish law) to “folkways.” In the sixties, Kaplan’s followers finally got the master’s blessing for secession from Conservatism and founded a fourth movement, Reconstructionism. It, too, failed to convert the vast majority of American Jews to Kaplan’s banner. Increasingly, it seems, those discontented with existing Jewish patterns have simply abandoned the community and its institutions altogether, while the affiliated have found satisfaction inside existing movements, even when their own personal beliefs and behavior resemble Kaplan’s.

The paradox is striking. Reconstructionism never won mass support and today attracts only about one percent of American Jewry — yet Kaplan’s achievement over the past fifty years has been immense. To a remarkable extent, the analysis and the program set forth in *Judaism as a Civilization* guided and even dominated the whole of American Jewish debate for the rest of its author’s long and active life.¹

Another way to frame Eisen’s paradox is to note that today a significant number of North American Jews outside of the Reconstructionist movement identify themselves as “Kaplanians” but not as “Reconstructionists.” (This group consists disproportionately of Jewish communal leaders, particularly Conservative and Reform rabbis.) Moreover, a significant number of North American Jews within the Reconstructionist move-

ment today claim that they are “Reconstructionists” but not “Kaplanians.” (This group seems to consist disproportionately of Jews under the age of 55.) These paradoxes can be resolved if we can come to understandings of the terms “Kaplanian” and “Reconstructionist” that turn the expressions “non-Kaplanian Reconstructionist” and “non-Reconstructionist Kaplanian” into oxymorons. Doing so is important for the health of the Reconstructionist movement.

In approaching these definitional problems, we should always be asking the question: What justifies our existence as a separate movement, when Kaplan’s commitment to *klal Yisrael* suggested the breaking down of boundaries between Jewish groups? If we cannot identify unique and important contributions that the Reconstructionist movement is making or can make to Jewish life, if all we are or were to become is a smaller version of the Conservative or the Reform movement, then I would want to begin merger discussions with one of those movements. Put bluntly, if Reconstructionism does not and cannot be made to have a unique function in promoting the salvation of the Jewish people, then it should cease to exist as a separate movement.

What is Unique to Reconstructionism?

Returning to foundational principles, we could claim that all Reconstructionists, and all Kaplanians, define Judaism as the evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people. This is true, but it does not help us in identifying the

distinctive features of Reconstructionism. The problem, as Eisen points out, is that Kaplan's definition of Judaism has been so pervasive, reaching even into the realm of modern orthodoxy, that what was once viewed as a daring and even heretical innovation is now espoused by almost all Jews who think about such matters.

We could try again by claiming that all Reconstructionists, and all Kaplanians, view the creation and nurturing of "caring, participatory, inclusive, egalitarian religious communities committed to exploring Jewish life with dedication, warmth and enthusiasm" as fundamentally important tasks. The problem again is not with the validity of the proposition but with the fact that almost all non-orthodox Jews outside of the Reconstructionist movement embrace it as well.

Reaffirming the Importance of Reason

Is the Reconstructionist movement, then, left with any basic attributes or principles that are truly distinctive? Absolutely. First, we should proudly point to our passion for reason. This may at first sound almost trivial, but it is vitally important, particularly at this moment when the forces of religious irrationality both inside and outside of the United States are a serious and growing threat to many of the values that we cherish. Perhaps no teaching of Kaplan's is more important at this moment than his insistence that we not leave our minds at the door when we enter the synagogue. Kaplan's legacy of an unbending com-

mitment to intellectual honesty, a refusal to bring different standards of intellectual integrity to matters of religion than to other matters of human concern, is arguably the single fundamental defining attribute of Reconstructionism.

I recognize, of course, the central place that various forms of rationalism have had in Jewish intellectual history over the past two millennia. I do not mean to suggest that an awareness of the importance of reason is absent in the Reform, Conservative and modern Orthodox movements. But, at the risk of sounding chauvinistic, I have been in many non-Reconstructionist synagogues where, if minds were not exactly checked at the door, neither were they invited in to analyze what was being studied and prayed in the sanctuary. When rabbis in non-Reconstructionist synagogues do encourage critical analysis of central tenets of Judaism, they often encounter strong resistance. Not long ago, to cite one well-publicized example, a prominent Conservative rabbi shocked and angered much of his congregation by questioning in a sermon the historicity of the Exodus story.

Intellectual Scrutiny

At our best, Reconstructionists demand that all religious issues, extending even to the core categories of God, Torah and Israel, be subjected to rigorous rational scrutiny; the intensity of our rationalism is a unique characteristic of our movement. We refuse to exempt any religious practice from the test of pragmatism, in the philosophical sense of the term: if the practice does

not and cannot be reinterpreted so as to function effectively, then it should cease to be a communal norm (although wisely, a heavy burden of proof should be placed on those challenging a long-established practice).

Our profound commitment to rational analysis should entail a sharp distaste for irrational practices (as distinguished from non-rational practices). For example, although nothing is inherently objectionable about services for the healing of the sick that have become so popular in liberal Jewish circles, some Reconstructionists are concerned about claims that such prayers have actual theurgic power, claims made in the face of multiple scientific studies to the contrary. (The repeated chanting of a verse from a psalm, on the other hand, may produce a powerful emotional effect that, although non-rational, is entirely positive.)

Democratic Decision Making

Another powerfully distinctive characteristic of Kaplanians and Reconstructionists is a devotion to democratic decision making, even in matters of ritual practice. This broadly participatory approach to congregational and movement-wide governance, explicitly adapted from the American system of government, rests on a uniquely Reconstructionist understanding of the relationship between rabbis and congregants as a partnership. Although the conception of that partnership has evolved in recent years away from a strictly egalitarian model toward one of the rabbi as “managing partner,”

the Reconstructionist model remains strikingly different from the “governor/governed” conception of the rabbi/congregant relationship that prevails in other movements.

The most striking example of this partnership was the Reconstructionist prayer book commission that was composed almost equally of rabbis and lay people, the first time in modern Jewish history that lay people have played such a role. I argued in this journal several years ago that a commitment to community in a strong sense of the term requires a commitment to interpersonal obligation (*mitzva*) in a strong sense of the term.² By applying a democratic decision-making process to the creation of a social contract that would serve as the foundation for a reconstruction of Jewish law, the Reconstructionist movement could make another important contribution to the evolution of Jewish civilization. I continue to hope that the movement will move in that direction.

Two other fundamental principles, one theological and the other liturgical, should unite Kaplanians and Reconstructionists and in so doing help better to define our movement and its unique role in Jewish life. Those two principles, I believe, follow from the resolution of two other Kaplanian paradoxes.

The Paradox of Kaplan’s Theology

Kaplan was not a good theologian, but he was a brilliant theologian. Kaplan could not accept the traditional supernatural conception of God as an external being outside of, and radically

separate from, the natural world. In its place, Kaplan offered what he came to call a “transnatural” conception of God. For Kaplan, God is a force, as opposed to a being, and a force that is neither purely natural (in the sense that gravitation and magnetism are natural forces) nor above the natural world.

For many Reconstructionists, Kaplan’s central theological formula that “God is the [transnatural] Power that makes for salvation” has become both a mantra and a cliché. But Kaplan’s purported distinction between the supernatural and the transnatural cannot survive close philosophical scrutiny, as Eliezer Berkovits argued in his 1959 essay, “Reconstructionist Theology: A Critical Evaluation.”³

Furthermore, as noted by Rabbi Alan W. Miller, Kaplan’s vacillation between “pure naturalism” and “transnaturalism” left Reconstructionism with a consensus on what it rejected but not on what it proposed in its place.⁴ The more one analyzes Kaplan’s “the power that . . .” formula, the less meaningful and the less compelling it appears to be.

Kaplan as Anti-Theologian

I want to suggest that Kaplan might better be viewed as an anti-theologian than as a theologian. One reading of Kaplan is that early in his adult life, in the midst of a personal crisis of faith, he developed a theology that allowed him to rationalize his passionate commitment to Judaism. He then proceeded to get on with his life, both professional and personal, without having to deal much with theology, at

least on a personal level. Kaplan “saved” many of us by teaching that we could do the same, regardless of whether we continue to find his version of theology compelling.

Based on the foregoing, I would certainly not argue that the Reconstructionist movement should attempt to make adherence to a Kaplanian theology a requirement for membership. Indeed, Kaplan himself never proposed such a requirement. But Rabbi Richard Hirsh has correctly observed that, for some significant number of Jews, a traditional conception of God is not the entry point into, but the exit point out of Judaism. And I am continually surprised by the amount of traditional God-talk that I hear coming from the pulpits of otherwise very progressive Reform and Conservative pulpits.

What I am advocating is that we continue to be the movement that provides a uniquely comfortable home for those thinking Jews who cannot espouse any sort of traditional God-belief and who are repelled by theological hypocrisy. That alone might justify our being a separate movement.

The Paradox of Kaplan’s Approach to Liturgy

The third paradox of Kaplan’s thought deals with liturgy. A knowledgeable Conservative Jew once chided me in a way that has troubled me ever since. “You Reconstructionists,” he said, “believe that you can distinguish a denomination on the basis of liturgical changes like substituting *mevi ge’ula* (bringing redemption) for *mevi go’el*

(bringing a redeemer/Messiah). Do you really think that more than a handful of people even notice these changes, much less think that they are important?" Allowing rhetorical license for hyperbole (as I have been arguing, our claims to denominational distinctiveness go far beyond these liturgical changes), he was making an important point.

Kaplan believed that his commitment to intellectual honesty required the reconstruction of Jewish liturgy, including Hebrew liturgy. He was famous at the Jewish Theological Seminary for telling his students, "If you don't believe it, don't say it." For Kaplan, this certainly meant rejecting the concept of the "chosenness" of the Jewish people, on both logical and ethical grounds: If God is a non-supernatural force, then God can hardly have chosen Israel from among the nations as a people with a unique status and mission; for that matter, such a God is not in the business of any sort of "choosing" at all. And even if one believes in a God who could have chosen Israel, the chauvinism entailed is ethically indefensible.

Intellectual honesty for Kaplan also meant not affirming, among other things, the concept of a personal Messiah, the notion of physical resurrection of the dead or the desirability of restoring the sacrificial service in the Temple. All of these redactions were made under Kaplan's aegis in the first series of Reconstructionist prayer books, published in the 1940s and 1950s, and almost all of them were incorporated into the current *Kol Haneshamah* series as well. (To give credit where it is due, many of the changes made by Kaplan were ad-

opted or adapted from the earlier work of liturgists of the Reform movement.) But almost from the beginning, a very different approach to liturgy has played an important part in Reconstructionist thinking.

Prayer, Action and Values

Seventy years ago, in the very first volume of this journal, an editorial appeared called "Praying for Peace." Signed on to if not written by Kaplan, that editorial contained the following provocative observation in response to a call to prayer "issued by the Pope and taken up by other religious denominations" in response to the German government's declaration that it would no longer be bound by the armaments clause of the Treaty of Versailles:

We should like . . . to submit that this emphasis laid upon prayer is an unfortunate one. Prayer, by itself, may do more harm than good, for the one who prays for a worthwhile ideal somehow gets the impression that he has done something positive to achieve that ideal. The psychological effect is a curious one; praying becomes a substitute for action. Religious leaders who have been interested in the whole problem of prayer have always maintained that people are reluctant to pray because the traditional prayers are couched in archaic language and express irrelevant aspirations. Modernize prayers, they said, make them relevant, and people will once again

take to praying. The fact is that the more relevant the prayer, the more likely is the worshipper to feel he has worked for the realization of those values which he affirms.⁵

Quotation, Not Affirmation

This language prefigures what would become a familiar Reconstructionist aphorism about prayer, that most or all of our praying (or davenning), at least of Hebrew liturgy, is (or should be) “quotation rather than affirmation.” This aphorism apparently first appeared in Rabbi Alan W. Miller’s excellent book, *God of Daniel S.: In Search Of The American Jew*. There Miller writes as follows:

A prime element in the act of worship is davenning, or the rote repetition of traditional prayers from the past. When these traditional prayers were first written they were meaningful affirmations for their authors. The author of the twenty-third Psalm, for example, if not a shepherd himself, lived in a culture where shepherds and sheep were as common a sight as cabs on Fifth Avenue are in New York today. In a prevailing idiom and metaphor culled from everyday life, he expressed his faith in God and the cosmos, in God conceived of as a Supreme Father. “He restoreth my soul.”

When the modern Jew recites the twenty-third Psalm, or any other Psalm or combination of verses

from the Psalms or from the Bible, he does not affirm at firsthand, but rather quotes at secondhand. All the Hebrew davenned, or prayed, in the modern synagogue, save in those rare instances where modern Hebrew prayers have been introduced into the act of worship, is quotation, not affirmation. The traditional Hebrew sections of the synagogue service are all in quotation marks, whether the praying Jew is aware of this or not.

Davenning is a basic element in Jewish worship because only by identifying with his past can the Jew gain strength in the present to strive toward the future. An awareness that countless generations expressed a basic faith in the cosmos, and strove to overcome the defects in themselves and in their society through an ongoing relationship with their ethnic group, is a source of strength in present trouble. The traditional prayer book reflects the three stages through which Jewish civilization has already passed, the biblical, the ecclesiastical and the rabbinic. Strength in an age of radical and often disturbing transition is gained from an awareness that the Jewish people has undergone metamorphosis in the past but still maintained its identity in change by reconstructing its sancta. Davenning is a prime sanctum of Jewish life.⁶

What seems to have gone largely unnoticed in the Reconstructionist ap-

proach to liturgy is the tension between “don’t say it if you don’t believe it” and “quotation rather than affirmation.” If we are (or should be) silently prefacing each traditional Hebrew prayer with words like “Our ancestors prayed as follows” and then placing quotation marks around the prayer text, then for us the truth, validity or believability of the words of that prayer text become essentially irrelevant.

Hebrew Literacy Lacking

Two generational changes have made grappling with this tension more pressing, and both changes seriously weaken the arguments of the “don’t say it if you don’t believe it” school.

First, almost all of Kaplan’s teachings, including those about liturgy, grew out of his experience with, and were originally directed to, immigrant and immediate post-immigrant generations of American Jews of Eastern European origin. Almost all of them were, if not Hebraically literate in an academic sense, extremely familiar with traditional Hebrew liturgy.

Those for whom the changes reflected in Reconstructionist liturgy were vitally important could still enter a traditional synagogue and participate easily (if not always emotionally comfortably) in the prayer service. Today, neither childhood immersion nor adult study has provided the great majority of Reconstructionists with the knowledge of traditional liturgy that the previous generations of Reconstructionists possessed. The level of Hebrew literacy among non-Orthodox Jews is probably at an all-time low.

Comfortable with Myth

The second generational change that has been noted and discussed far more than the first concerns our level of comfort with certain kinds of myths and metaphors. For Kaplan and his contemporaries, the term “myth” was essentially equivalent to “falsehood,” with a connotation as negative as “superstition” or “lie.” As we have moved from the modern into the post-modern age, our understanding of the meaning of “truth” has become different from, and frankly more subtle than, that of our Reconstructionist forebears.

For contemporary Reconstructionists, particularly the best educated and most knowledgeable, myths – particularly the foundational myths of a people – operate on an entirely different level than do, for example, the propositions of natural science. This opens up the possibility of finding a myth to be “truthful” in a powerful, if non-literal, sense. For example, the story of the Exodus from Egypt can be judged to be mythically “true” precisely because it has for thousands of years functioned effectively in providing the Jewish people with its sense of identity, regardless of the story’s historical veracity.⁷ As has been observed by many scholars, myths are neither true nor false; myths are either effective or ineffective.

Moreover, Reconstructionists today can (or should be able to) appreciate the metaphorical power of sympathetic invocations in the liturgy of such national archetypes as the Davidic monarchy or the Temple cult, despite the serious problems posed by those institutions

as historical realities, and having nothing to do with an actual desire for the restoration of those institutions. A Reconstructionist who is convinced that the Torah was written and edited by human beings several centuries after Moses lived (if in fact Moses is a historical figure), today can (or should be able to) recite, “This is the Torah that Moses placed before the Israelites, according to the command of Adonai, through the agency of Moses,” without feeling hypocritical or uncomfortable: The words are being quoted rather than affirmed. To the extent that the content of the quotation is still of concern, those words can be understood as mythic imagery rather than as the assertion of historical facts.⁸

In short, a fervent commitment to intellectual honesty demands far less of us today with regard to liturgy than it did of Kaplan. To say that Kaplan had an insufficient appreciation of the power of myth and metaphor, however, would be unfair. Although many of his ideas were remarkably ahead of his time, Kaplan’s fundamental intellectual framework could not transcend the socio-historical context of his formative years, which in his case might best be characterized as Victorian.

Why Reconstruct Liturgy ?

Taken together, these two generational changes give rise to a fundamental paradox of Hebrew liturgy for the Reconstructionist movement today. Most Reconstructionists do not know the differences between the Reconstructionist and traditional versions of

almost any of the modified prayer texts. Those Reconstructionists who do understand what changes have been made to the traditional liturgy and why are often precisely the ones who are most comfortable preserving the traditional versions for their poetic and mythic resonance as outlined above. For whom and for what purpose then is the liturgy being reconstructed?

I am not advocating for a wholesale undoing of Reconstructionist liturgical emendations. A compelling case can be made for continuing our practice of removing from the liturgy the most blatant public declarations of the chosenness of the Jewish people — in the first paragraph of *Aleynu*, in the blessing before the Torah reading and in the *kiddush* for Shabbat and holidays. I would not want to restore the traditional language in these instances. I am comfortable maintaining idiosyncratic Reconstructionist language in these three prayer texts because we can and should expect all Reconstructionists to be familiar with in the traditional versions of those prayers as well.

Additionally, most of the arguments for reversing previous deletions or rearrangements of traditional liturgical language have little or no applicability in the case of additions to traditional prayer texts. The most important are the inclusion of the biblical matriarchs in places where only the biblical patriarchs were traditionally mentioned, and the inclusion of “*kol yoshvei tevel* (all of the inhabitants of the earth),” together with the Jewish people specifically, as the desired beneficiaries of prayers for peace.

If I am correct that for the reasons suggested above we cannot expect Reconstructionists today to be familiar or comfortable with more than one form of Hebrew liturgy, that is another reason to make as few changes to traditional prayer texts as reasonably possible. Preserving the sense of unity of the Jewish people to the greatest extent possible is a central value of Reconstructionism. Having a common liturgical language is a powerful unifying force for Jews across both denominational and national boundaries, as well as throughout time.

Anyone who has had the uplifting experience of going to synagogue in a foreign country and being able to participate actively and comfortably in the service understands the importance of shared prayer texts in making one feel a part of *klal Yisrael*. Anyone who has had the depressing experience of being in such a synagogue with a child who is bewildered by the service because s/he is only familiar with Reconstructionist liturgy has learned the same lesson about shared language. (These experiences, both positive and negative, can, of course, take place much closer to home, such as at a friend's non-Reconstructionist *bat* or *bar mitzva* service.)

Emendations Not Enough

With regard to liturgy I have an important ally: My position is similar to the one advanced toward the end of his life by no less a figure than Rabbi Ira Eisenstein, z"l, the founder of the institutional Reconstructionist movement. Rarely does one encounter a

statement as startling and as powerful as this observation by Eric Caplan:

It is interesting to note that in later life, Ira Eisenstein no longer endorsed the concept of changing the traditional Hebrew text of prayers to reflect modern belief. [Caplan quotes Eisenstein as saying:] "I've become . . . less concerned with the actual language of prayer . . . For example, instead of saying 'Who has chosen us from among all of the nations,' you say 'Who has drawn us near . . . ' But in the meantime you say 'Blessed are You,' and you ask yourself who is the 'You'?

Well, it's really a metaphor. Well, if one's a metaphor, the other is a metaphor. Leave it alone . . . I would treat the traditional prayerbook as an exercise in reminiscence. We come together and for a few minutes we put ourselves into the world of our ancestors, the world of our fathers, and see how it feels, how it sounds, that's all. And now if you want to pray — there's a difference between davenning and praying, I make that distinction — pray from our own inside, how we feel, what we'd like to say. If we can use some traditional language, fine, otherwise make up your own prayers and they can be gender-free, and not supernatural and all the rest of it. But you can't make over a text like that. It was an awful decision that I came to after all these years."⁹

The Reconstructionist treatment of

traditional liturgy is a good example of a feature of Reconstructionism that, although certainly distinctive, may no longer serve the best interests of Reconstructionists. Eisenstein and I are both arguing that Kaplanian Hebrew liturgy may, to a greater or lesser extent, fail the fundamental Kaplanian test for determining whether a ritual practice should be maintained; that is, it may no longer function effectively in creating a meaningful Jewish life for the individual Reconstructionist or in helping the Reconstructionist community to realize its highest ideals. If such a determination were made (and I am intentionally sliding over the questions of who gets to decide that and how), then the next series of Reconstructionist prayer books not only could, but should, look very different from either of its predecessors.

Bedrock Principles

The Reconstructionist movement should continue to exist if and only if it has useful features that clearly distinguish it from all of the other streams of Judaism. A conservative emphasis on restoring the core Reconstructionist values of the past can in fact unleash remarkable progressive energy for the future. What I have tried to show throughout this essay is that a return to the strict application of Kaplan's bedrock principles, far from leading to the creation of a fossilized version of Reconstructionism, will in fact promote evolutionary change within Reconstructionism and help to ensure its future vitality. Those bedrock princi-

ples: eschewing supernatural God-talk; rejecting those religious practices that make no sense without a supernatural theology; an unbending commitment to shining the light of reason on religious questions; and a bold willingness to set aside those religious practices that do not pass Kaplan's pragmatic test, should never change. Almost every other aspect of Reconstructionism will evolve over time.

This article is dedicated, with much love, to the author's first teachers, his parents, Bernard Cedarbaum and Miriam Goldman Cedarbaum.

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1. Arnold Eisen, "Kaplan's *Judaism* at Sixty: A Reappraisal," in Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1994), xiii.
 2. Daniel Goldman Cedarbaum, "The Role of *Halakha* in Reconstructionist Decision Making," *The Reconstructionist*, 65:2, Spring 2001.
 3. "Reconstructionist Theology: A Critical Evaluation," in Eliezer Berkovits, *Major Themes in Modern Philosophies of Judaism* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1974; reprinted from *Tradition*, Fall 1959).
 4. Alan W. Miller, "Reconstructionism and the Reconstructionist Rabbi," *The Reconstructionist*, September 1977.
 5. *The Reconstructionist*, 1:9, 5.
 6. Alan W. Miller, *The God Of Daniel S.: In Search of The American Jew* (London: Collier-Macmillan Ltd. 1969), 120-121.
 7. See Richard Hirsh, "Four Questions to Ask Before the Seder Starts," in J. Levitt and M. Strassfeld, editors, *A Night of Questions* (Elkins Park, Pennsylvania: The Reconstructionist Press, 2002), 21-23.

8. Rabbi David Teutsch makes this point in his “Commentary” on this verse found on page 406 of *Kol Haneshamah: Shabbat Vehagim*, but he does not acknowledge its applicability to other liturgical formulas.

9. June 25, 1993 interview of Ira Eisenstein, quoted in Eric Caplan, *From Ideology To*

Liturgy: Reconstructionist Worship And American Liberal Judaism (Cincinnati, Ohio: The Hebrew Union College Press 2002), 120-121. Eisenstein made similar comments in the Winter, 1994/95 issue of *Reconstructionism Today*, 9-10.

Managing Dualities: A View of Reconstructionism from the Radical Center

BY CARL A. SHEINGOLD

There are many potential markers of the beginning of the Reconstructionist movement. The publication of the first issue of *The Reconstructionist* seventy years ago occurred when Reconstructionism was a school of thought within *klal Yisrael* and intentionally not a denominational movement. If Mordecai Kaplan saw the creation of a movement as a goal, it could easily have occurred in the 1920s.

Whenever one marks the beginning, we can still ask: what is at the core of this movement? What is the heart of its ideology and purpose? What are the markers of change that could be viewed either as challenges to the movement's integrity or as signs of its health (depending on one's view of the change and of the core principles of the movement)? Such questions are particularly important for a movement whose intellectual scaffolding is built on understanding Judaism as an "evolving religious civilization."

Identifying Core Principles

It is tempting to begin a discussion of core principles with the classic

formulations typically associated with Reconstructionism. But insofar as evolution is a key internal principle, such a focus can easily lead to a discussion in which key questions are begged precisely because the meanings of the classic formulations are historically bounded.

For example, consider one of the most commonly cited principles of Kaplan's thought: the rejection of supernaturalism, combined with an effort to articulate a conception of God that can provide sustainable meaning in the modern American context. The rejection of supernaturalism is easy to express. But the proposed alternatives are harder to articulate. Even more challenging is bringing the two together into a comprehensive and coherent statement.

More importantly, there are differences that are in part generational, and that create the potential for any formulation to be misunderstood. Kaplan and the first generation of his followers emphasized that they did not believe in a supernatural God because at that time it would have been assumed that they did. What for classical Reconstructionists may appear to be a dangerous

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flirting with supernaturalism may, for those so engaged, be an effort to put in positive terms what for their predecessors needed to be expressed negatively. It may also be seen as reflecting an acknowledgement of the limits of science, and an openness to the non-rational (sometimes the non-verbal) aspects of thought and spiritual experience. Unafraid of being viewed as irrational or childish, this openness reflects a different generation's experience.

This is not to deny that there is a boundary surrounding Reconstructionism on issues of supernaturalism. But it is easy for discussions or debates about key concepts to beg the question; such discussions can establish and illustrate the fact of change and diversity within the movement without resolving their implications for its identity and boundaries.

I prefer here to anchor my discussion in more abstract categories of religious thought and experience. I will express this in terms that are relevant to my relationship to religion and to my personal connection to Reconstructionism. Hopefully, while personal, these perspectives are not idiosyncratic.

Singular and Dualistic Perspectives

My thinking about religion is shaped by a distinction between what I will call "singular" and "dualistic" perspectives. I am not using the term "dualistic" in the sense of some theological traditions of contrasting good and evil, but rather precisely as a perspective that seeks to encompass multiple goods, some of

which are in tension with each other. From a singular perspective, religion is the source of answers — deep and often binding answers — to core questions of life relating to meaning, to morality, to ethics and to proper behavior, among others. It assumes, in other words, that in relationship to a series of singular questions there are clear and singular answers.

A dualistic perspective seeks in religion a way of understanding and relating to the complex, multilayered aspects of life, to generic tensions and dilemmas. It seeks some sense of transcendence of such tensions, sometimes intellectually and sometimes in the emotional realm (*e.g.*, in the spiritual power of music).

I do not see either approach as intrinsically superior. It could be said that in most situations, some aspects of both approaches are needed and they often depend on each other, intellectually and personally. Singular approaches run the risk of oversimplifying complex issues by ignoring values, goals or realities in tension with the singular focus. This can lead to behavior that may seem right in the short run, but because of indirect effects or long term consequences will not stand up over time. It can lead to reductionist approaches that are rigid and, in the political realm, even murderous. But it can also provide clarity that can be uplifting and answers that enable one to function with integrity in life. Singular perspectives tend to be oriented to the present. They respond to questions seeking answers at the moment, to problems seeking immediate solutions.

A dualistic perspective can do greater justice to complexity and, in the long run, contains the promise of progress on complex issues, personal and communal. It can also be a source of paralysis, confusion and inappropriate rationalizing. Singular perspectives have a present tense quality, while dualistic perspectives tend to be historical, and to encourage thinking about how tensions and issues play out over time.

Views of Religion

I view religion as the source of intellectual and ritual tools that connect us, in space and in time, to that which is larger than ourselves and our community. I mean here that which is larger than the discrete, isolated one-sided understandings we often have of that which is complex. These are the terms that reflect my idea of striving to get beyond what is partial, and my unwillingness to accept the inevitably of experience that is divided, in which many of the things we value seem irreconcilable. Indeed, my experiences of holiness as well as of wholeness typically involve transcending tensions, and feeling that the whole is somehow greater than the sum of its parts.

To be sure, there are aspects of life that are singular and undivided or, at any rate, adequately and sometimes preferably understood and experienced as such. Religious traditions are often a source of insight about such things. My religious tradition has been such a source for me. But my ongoing, dynamic relationship to religion — the relationship of religion to what I have

to figure out as compared to what I know or what I know to do — is not about the singular.

I think of this as analogous to deciding what legal issues should go to the Supreme Court (as compared to the lower courts) or what issues go to an executive or a board (as compared to other levels of an organization.) That which is complicated, that to which we cannot respond based on a singular value or goal, or that which specifically involves tensions between desirable values and goals is most often that which benefits from a dualistic perspective.

A Generic View of Reconstructionism

For me, the appeal and power of Judaism is in the dualistic quality of its style of reasoning and in its values, combined with its sense of realism and pragmatism. Judaism seeks to transcend contradictions. But it does so in the concrete living of life in community, not in pure theory, or in clever verbal formulations that mask complex practical realities, or in a self-deceiving messianism. Judaism is intrinsically historical, understanding itself over time and in relationship to time. How does Reconstructionism relate to these core aspects of Judaism, and how can answering that question lead to identifying core elements, as well as to providing some guideposts to its necessary evolution?

Reconstructionists view Judaism as an “evolving religious civilization.” That suggests not just the relevance of time, but its centrality. It also means

that history is central. We give tradition “a vote, but not a veto.” This conveys that the Reconstructionist view of the present is rooted in a historical perspective: the present is a link both to the past and to the future. “Evolving” suggests why process — the way we reach decisions, as distinct from the decisions themselves — is so central in Reconstructionism. That is not to undervalue the importance of making decisions or their subjects, but to suggest that decisions are also understood as being historically bounded.

If “evolving” is a clue to the Reconstructionist sense of time, “civilization” is the clue to our expansive sense of what is potentially relevant to Jewish life at any particular moment. It provides the sense that whatever particular Jewish activity I am engaged with or care about — ritual, culture or politics, as examples — is part of a larger whole. Kaplan’s emphasis on Jewish peoplehood and devotion to Zionism provide a parallel, expansive sense of Jewish space. Whatever group or community I am engaged with, it is also part of a larger whole. This obviously provides a sense of richness, but, if taken seriously, also of complexity in regard to how individual pieces relate to each other and fit in with the larger whole.

Let us think of these core ideas not only as conveying elements of a particular ideology or “school of thought,” but as capturing something about the Reconstructionist stance on some of the generic aspects of religion. They provide a baseline for discussion of what is at the core of Reconstructionism.

Openings from Kaplan

These core ideas obviously derive from Kaplan. But how do we relate Kaplan to the singular/dualistic distinction? In many obvious ways Kaplan was a radical. He took things to their logical conclusion, advocating in some cases for things to be given up, and in others for new things to be created. Much of what he proposed was, at the time, radical by any definition.

In other ways Kaplan was a centrist. Surely a significant factor in Kaplan’s refusal to make Reconstructionism into a movement was his commitment to the broad center of Jewish peoplehood, and an aversion to dividing further an already divided community. A thoroughgoing radical would not have resisted for so long the forming of a new movement. A thoroughgoing radical who wished to abandon the concept of a supernatural God would not have struggled to hold onto the idea of Godliness.

A Radical Centrist

I regard Kaplan as a radical centrist, one who also sought creatively to transcend the tensions he was determined to confront head on. He was a centrist, but not a compromiser. Kaplan was clearly a dualistic rather than a singular thinker, and his writings are filled with intellectual richness and complexity.

But there was a side to Kaplan’s personality and to his intellectual stances that was more singular. This is particularly seen in his faith in scientific truth. A similar quality pertains to some of his

views on ethics and morality: he was a rather rigid man, with clear notions of right and wrong. Kaplan's achievements are inconceivable without these qualities, which could also be labeled as reflecting intense determination. It is easy to lose sight of how radical, decisive and courageous a thinker Kaplan was.

This suggests to me some directions, not for leaving Kaplan behind, but for evolving from and building on what he began. Is it possible for us to approach dualistic realities from a more dialectical stance than Kaplan could manage, without falling into the trap of relativism? Is there a way to maintain a more dialectical stance toward what we can know, and toward what standards to apply to the present, without losing the centrality of ethics or the ideal of progress?

Using Time

To me, the key lies in an aspect of the singular/dualistic distinction mentioned above: the respective approaches to time and history. Singular approaches are oriented toward the present, but they are also associated with a linear sense of progress in history. If there is a straight line between a question and an answer, then it is natural to view progress over time as possible and potentially, or at least ideally, as linear — as moving on a straight path. And where progress is not being made, it is natural to think in linear terms, seeing the absence of progress as regression, a straight line of return to a prior, less advanced state.

In contrast, to talk in terms of dual-

istic realities and to think in dialectical terms also suggests two very different images of historical processes. The negative version is captured by the phrase “going in circles.” If this suggests the experience of continually revisiting certain core issues or themes, it is an accurate reflection of the dualistic perspective on history. Most deep dilemmas or polarities are not subject to definitive resolution.

In healthy evolving systems, however, the rotation of values does not necessarily mean going in circles in the sense of never making progress. Imagine a graph in which the line goes up and down, but over time spirals upward. Or imagine a football moving through space, going in circles but in a spiral moving forward. This is another way of understanding how the rotation of values does not necessarily imply regression.

Between Freedom and Equality

To use a political example, American history can be understood in relationship to the tension between the value of individual freedom (and the related value placed on the marketplace) and the value of equality (with a corresponding emphasis on governmental interventions). During different periods, one or the other may be more stressed, but the tension between these values — or perhaps, more accurately, between the policies adopted or defended on their behalf — is never fully resolved. And each side of the equation will, indeed, always be revisited in ways that may

suggest going in circles.

If American politics will never fully solve the tension between freedom and equality, we have made progress on both fronts over time. Each generation can be seen as developing a paradigm that often involves stressing a value that was previously subordinated. A period follows in which the new paradigm is implemented, but then at some point its usefulness is exhausted, often when the subordinated value resurfaces.

Another example comes from patterns of leadership succession. Successful organizational executives often run into difficulty precisely when the style, talents or insights they brought to the job have accomplished what was needed; the creating of a new vision needs to be followed by a focus on implementation. Getting in touch with the grass roots or the market may require consolidating what has been learned through strategic leadership. Such transitions are not signs of failure. A return to aspects of the earlier paradigm that are being supplanted (e.g. a refocusing on vision after the implementation of a prior vision has been effected) is not a form of “going in circles.” Long-term progress depends on such transitions. Staying too long with one approach, or resisting a reengagement with successful prior policies or practices, is precisely what can lead to failure.

Correcting Balances

Note: this view is not to suggest answers to particular questions or the total abandonment of any values. It is about transitions in the balance between

values and the maintenance of respect for multiple values. Organizations that shift so thoroughly from vision to implementation that they ignore vision and goals will not succeed. A good society cannot abandon the role of government or some of the enduring accomplishments of government, even as it gives new priority to market solutions and recognizes some of the limits of what government can accomplish and some of the long-term, negative side effects of some government solutions. The same is true in reverse.

Whether in societies, organizations, communities or other groups, no generation “solves” the problems and challenges that arise from dualistic tensions. But each generation can play a needed role in correcting balances in the short run, then acting on a new paradigm and playing its role in moving the spiral in the long run. This is the way I envision a dialectical process that involves progress but avoids the temptation of a kind of temporal messianism. It is a way to avoid the pitfalls of dialectical paralysis or relativism without falling into the temptation of oversimplification and self-delusion.

Healthy Openness to the Spiritual

This is also the way I would approach the core tensions that stand at the heart of Reconstructionist thinking. How does our search for godliness and spirituality avoid falling into the trap of the irrational or of supernaturalism? How do we manage the balancing act of giving the tradition a vote but not a

veto? How do we manage the balancing act of living in two civilizations?

I am far from seeking to offer definitive answers. Indeed, I am suggesting that seeking definitive answers is to miss the point. I am also suggesting that part of managing such tensions is precisely to pay attention to issues of balance and rebalancing within a historical perspective — to see current efforts as building on the past, in some ways returning to the past, but in a new and rejuvenated way, while preparing the ground for future transitions. And that involves resisting the temptation to see efforts to rebalance as signs of regression.

For example, it is a sign of health that there has been openness within the movement in recent years to spiritual meaning and experience, with more of an emotional than an intellectual emphasis. Some experiments in this direction are appropriately subject to critique. But to put this in personal terms, I know that part of my Jewish quest has been to reclaim some of the emotional connection to and sustenance from Judaism that my grandparents had, without imagining that I want to (or could if I wanted to) return to their form of Jewish experience. I have reclaimed some aspects that my parents rejected, but I know that I have not regressed. There may be moments when I wished I could have a relationship to Judaism that was largely devoid of both Jewish learning and self-consciousness, but that is not an option. I know that I am part of the evolution of Judaism as a civilization in America.

To put this in more general terms, dualities such as we have been discuss-

ing do not get solved. There is no magic formula for making tensions disappear, but they can be managed if viewed as a part of an historical process. The insight of “vote/veto” is not just pointing to the wisdom to be found in the past. Such a respect for the past is also the key to making progress. The meaning of a radical centrist stance is precisely a willingness to defend an existing paradigm before it has been exhausted, and at the same time to have the ability to recognize when the paradigm has exhausted itself and that something profoundly different is needed.

This is not the place to go into all of the details of how this perspective can translate into the contemporary, practical work of movement and community building. A few illustrative themes will suffice.

Diversity and Inclusion

Any list of contemporary Reconstructionist values would include diversity and inclusion. There have been important manifestations of this value in the policies of the movement in regard to gay men, lesbians and non-Jews. The themes of this essay suggest the importance of another aspect of this issue: the extent to which we not only value diversity and promote inclusiveness in a social and ritual sense, but in relationship to diverse points of view and maintaining intellectual inclusiveness regarding minority points of view.

It is also central to the challenge of building real communities, as compared to finding ways to symbolize adherence to community values. There

is a natural tension between the ideal of community as a group of like-minded people, or of community as a truly diverse group in which the whole is greater and even wiser than the sum of its parts. There is a difference between welcoming individuals who are different in some way, and engaging in true dialogue in regard to the ways in which the differences goes deep.

A testing ground for the above is politics. Are our communities diverse and inclusive in regard to political points of view — or are our communities places in which singular approaches to politics are the expectation? Reconstructionists value intellectual honesty, and Reconstructionist communities as places where those holding minority views in the society as a whole do not have to hide those viewpoints. Do those with minority points of view within the Reconstructionist community feel free to be intellectually honest?

This is an issue with obvious implications in regard to the values of diversity and inclusiveness. But it also raises the question of whether political discourse within Reconstructionist communities does justice to the complexity of most political issues and therefore has the potential to make a genuine contribution to political discourse in the many civilizations of which we are a part. Are our political statements meant to identify with a particular point of view in a symbolic sense — which inevitability has a singular quality — or are they attempts to make a contribution to what is always the dialectical-historical working out of complex political issues, issues that are complex precisely

because of their dualistic nature?

A Cross-Cultural Relationship to Israel

The Reconstructionist movement is in the beginning stages of reengaging its relationship with Israel. One key theme emerges from the perspective advanced here: Will it be a real or symbolic relationship? Will we connect to Israel as a symbol (negative or positive), or to Israel as a Jewish society similar to while also profoundly different from our own? Will it be a partnership of two key parts of the larger Jewish people, united in that sense, but also different from each other in ways that can be the basis of important creativity? Can we benefit from the insights to be gained from seeing ourselves through the eyes of others who are similar and different? This relationship has the potential to be a key to our generation's creative contribution to the Jewish future, particularly as so many secular Israelis are currently engaged in a creative reconnecting to Jewish text and tradition.

This would be in dramatic contrast to what characterized prior American Jewish relationships to Israel, seeing Israel in mythic terms or as a source of vicarious Jewish identification. It would also be in dramatic contrast to North American Jews primarily focusing on the degree to which Israel — its government, its society, culture — conform to our values. In a real relationship we will not abandon those values nor be indifferent to the ways in which Israel's policies affect our lives. But we will also understand that some

tensions, as well as opportunities for creativity, reflect the profound differences between a sovereign state whose citizens are primarily first or second generation and a voluntary community most of whose members are third or fourth generation.

A Contemporary Challenge to Denominations

Much attention is being paid today to a trend in Jewish life variously referred to as non-, post- or trans-denominationalism. Such labels refer to many different groups and trends. Among them are: 1) individuals who are Jewishly indifferent; 2) individuals who resist what they perceive to be the rigidity of ideological labeling, whose Jewish identity is highly fluid and subjective; 3) young, intensely involved Jews in search of participatory experience who are forming independent *havurot* and *minyanim*; 4) individuals who value pluralism and see denominational movements as closed to real diversity; and 5) individuals who see their Jewish preoccupations as universal and presumably cross-denominational. Change “individuals” to “groups” and some of these trends apply to non-affiliated synagogues.

These trends have different implications for different denominational movements and the timing of the establishment of Reconstructionism as a distinct movement has important implications. The creation of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College marked the unambiguous shift to a denomination. This was after the his-

toric movement of American Jews to the suburbs in the 1950s and 1960s. In other words, Reconstructionism was not in the game when many new congregations were being formed and seeking affiliation.

This was also in the midst of what is referred to as “the 60s” — a distinctive period in all respects that began in the late 1960s and peaked in the early 1970s. The *havura* movement — particularly the emergence of independent *havurot* and the eclectic Jewish culture associated with the *Jewish Catalogs* — is a prime and related example. It can be seen as among the first manifestations of the trends described earlier.

Combine this with Kaplan’s own form of non-denominationalism, and it is no accident that many aspects of Reconstructionism are similar to, or at least highly compatible with, these trends — most obviously the desire for openness, the resistance to rigidity, decentralized, non-authoritarian norms and the value placed on diversity. It is no accident that the first groups during the 1960s to call themselves *havurot* were Reconstructionist, and that what is today the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation was then called the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Havurot.

An area of seemingly profound and also ironical difference connects to Jewish peoplehood. Kaplan’s commitment to peoplehood and his loyalty to the Jewish Theological Seminary were key sources of his reticence about creating another denomination. Kaplan saw the creation of a new movement as divisive. I do not wish to make a caricature

of post-denominationalism as being simply about selfish Jewish concerns. Nor am I suggesting that Kaplan was indifferent to individualism. His emphasis on the importance of intellectual honesty made that clear. But the difference between contemporary post-denominationalism and Kaplan's earlier stance reflects a very different balance in reconciling the tension between the individual and the communal, including the weighting of the communal value of Jewish peoplehood. That difference reflects historical and generational experiences far beyond any individual's personality or thought.

What Is a Movement?

Of course all of these trends, characteristics or ideological labels are subject to many qualifiers if used to characterize any diverse group. Even the criteria for what defines a denominational movement and how its distinctive role is identified have changed. If in the late 1960s the creating of a seminary marked the emergence of a movement, what is the meaning today of the recent establishment of a trans-denominational seminary? Non-denominational national organizations now provide services to synagogues, affiliated and not affiliated. The difference between Reconstructionism and post-denominationalism is that a movement affiliates congregations. To imagine the demise of a movement is to imagine the end of such affiliations.

This understanding may seem self-evident and insignificant, but it contains a profoundly important implica-

tion. If we think of Jewish peoplehood as expressing a fact of connection, not just a point of view or value, then to be an affiliated congregation is to be connected to other congregations. In this highly individualistic age and particularly in a movement that emphasizes democracy and decentralization of authority, this collection of groups is likely to be diverse.

Put differently, to be part of a movement is to be involved in a microcosm of the Jewish people, however limited or partial. To be a member of even a moderately sized congregation is to be part of a relatively diverse group, certainly in contrast to the typical independent *havura* or *minyan*. To pay your dues to a movement is to contribute to the Jewish lives of others who are not part of you family or your congregation. In contrast, a primary motivation of many for being in a small, independent minyan is precisely to be in a group of like-minded people and, in some cases, to be part of an elite group (in terms of Jewish knowledge, skills and motivation) rather than one to which the word *amkha* could be applied.

In this sense, denominational movements are, by their nature, aspects of Jewish peoplehood — tools for experiencing peoplehood and contributing, in some form, to the Jewish people. This is ironic given the peoplehood basis for Kaplan's resistance to creating a movement. But of course in those days being part of the Jewish people was hardly a choice most Jews had to make consciously or that institutions had to foster.

An Opportunity

These markers of and roles for movements today are not unique to Reconstructionism. What may be unique is the opportunity facing the Reconstructionist movement which, as noted above, was formally birthed in an era marked by cultural trends that have given rise to post-denominationalism. It needs to be emphasized that those trends are part of a larger, deeper trend of American/modern individualism and its problematic relationship to the deeply Jewish value of community. This story is about more than the fate of movements or of any particular movement.

Reconstructionism has the opportunity to see itself as a laboratory for the Jewish people. Such a laboratory needs to be more than a “school of thought.” It needs to be a place where things are learned, not just a place where assertions are made. Such a laboratory needs to be a setting in which experiments are undertaken not just to be original and new, but in order to learn and systematize knowledge. Such a laboratory needs to be a place where we face the sobering lessons learned both from the experience of acting on our values and of reconciling conflicting values, not just admiring their attractiveness.

To say that we can be a laboratory for the Jewish people is not to say we should cease to be a denominational movement. Our potential to contribute to Jewish life is based precisely on the fact that we are a collection of communities seeking to act on ideas and to face the consequences of those

actions in the lives of individuals and communities. Our communities seek to live the tension between individual and community and, it is hoped, live the genuine challenge of acting and benefiting from a deep commitment to diversity. Reconstructionist communities see themselves as part of an evolving religious civilization and, in that sense, as part of a natural experiment in Jewish living, not as participants in an opinion or behavioral survey.

A Learning Movement

In the field of organizational development, the “learning organization” has become an important idea and ideal. The internal logic of the Reconstructionist movement is that it is supposed to contribute to the evolution of Jewish civilization, not just experience it. This calls for us to become a “learning movement.” We should seek to learn about the most important challenges, but surely the most important challenges in Jewish life today are not distinctive to one movement or one continent. Just as surely, those challenges cannot be understood in a singular way.

In this sense, I conclude with a rephrasing and expansion of the title of this essay. Can we in the Reconstructionist movement learn to approach and manage polarities by positioning ourselves as radical Jewish centrists? If we can, and if we can learn from doing so, then there is a contribution we can make to Jewish life that will be worthy of Kaplan and, ironically, transcend the tensions that prompted him to be the ambivalent parent of our movement.

Reconstructionist Judaism, Past, Present and Future: A Symposium

On the occasion of the 70th anniversary of *The Reconstructionist*, we invited a number of leaders in the movement to reflect on the past, present and future of Reconstructionist Judaism. Each was offered five questions:

1. What distinguishes Reconstructionist Judaism from other approaches to Jewish life today?
2. What are the key contributions Reconstructionist Judaism has made to North American Jewish life?
3. What remains relevant from the legacy of Mordecai Kaplan?
4. What in the Kaplanian legacy no longer seems relevant, necessary or helpful?
5. What are the key questions of Jewish life now, and what does Reconstructionist Judaism have to offer in response?

Some of the participants chose to address the questions in order; others chose to respond to some but not all. Other participants chose to respond to the questions in a single statement.

We welcome the thoughts of our readers on any or all of these questions.

David Teutsch

1. Reconstructionist thought regard-

ing civilization and community has had a broad impact upon North American Jewry. Our commitment to facing ethical issues squarely and to intellectual consistency and honesty has made an even larger contribution. Largest of all, perhaps, are our pathbreaking contributions to North American Jewish life, illustrated by, among others: the creation of the first *havurot* (1962); female-initiated *gittin* (divorce ceremonies) (1979); the recognition of ambilineal descent (incorrectly called patrilineal descent) (1968); and the policy of equal admission of gay and lesbian students to rabbinical studies at RRC (1984).

The liturgical innovations of the original Reconstructionist prayer books and of the *Kol Haneshamah* series are widely emulated. The encouragement of personal spiritual engagement in *Kol Haneshamah* has helped to change the culture of Reconstructionist congregations by supporting the growing spiritual interests of contemporary Jews.

We remain the only movement dedicated to democratic communitarianism. This provides a challenge to those who struggle with the rigidities of *halakha* (Jewish law). But it is also a challenge to those who have been influenced by the American ideology of individual autonomy to such an

extent that they have lost track of the legitimate demands and the rewards of community.

The commitment to including the broadest possible spectrum of people in our communities grows out of our communitarian approach.

2. Kaplan's foundational insights remain indispensable, including his commitment to Jewish peoplehood and to building community, to a this-worldly and functional approach to religion, to ethical nationhood, and to a Zionism that involves a dynamic relationship between the State of Israel and world Jewry. His concern that theology not contradict reason, and lead us to lives of integrity and commitment, remain criteria by which we can judge our thinking. The acceptance of the evolution of Judaism challenges us to reshape Judaism for our time.

Kaplan was committed to preserving Jewish tradition wherever it does not conflict with our best understanding of ethics. This appreciation for Jewish tradition and the need to explore it continues to be critical to the capacity of the Reconstructionist movement to renew itself.

3. Kaplan's thought was formed more than three generations ago. The changes in Jewish life since that time have been profound. For example, Kaplan's writing about intermarriage could not have anticipated the current situation. In his time, intermarrying often involved a conscious and intentional break with the Jewish people; today, that is rarely a motivation for intermarriage.

Central to Kaplan's thinking was the

belief that right ideas will be accepted simply because they are right, and that right thinking will transform the world. A quick glance at the political situation in the world demonstrates the inadequacy of that belief. Kaplan's faith in the power of ideas led him to believe that the whole Jewish community would eventually be "reconstructed." As a result, Kaplan was never fully committed to building an independent movement based on his ideas.

While embracing Kaplan's commitment to building Jewish peoplehood, Reconstructionists have discovered that a movement can help us accomplish together what none of us could have accomplished individually. Today, a new generation often talks about post-denominationalism. This may give rise to yet another new movement. But for the most part, the self-identified post-denominationalists draw heavily on the resources and ideologies of the existing movements. The religious and intellectual vitality of American Jewry is primarily sustained by movement-trained and identified leaders.

4. At its best, Reconstructionist Judaism recognizes that Jewish peoplehood is central, that peoplehood requires community, and that community is not just about "warm fuzzies" but about covenantal commitment. Community citizenship has transformative power in a world that too often emphasizes the materialistic and ignores what gives life enduring value. The voluntary, egalitarian, inclusive communities that Reconstructionism envisions are effective bases for personal spiritual and moral development, for social justice

work, for struggling with the issues of our time, for building relationships and for finding personal support.

Reconstructionist ideology is committed to giving the past “a vote but not a veto,” which means seeking Jewish knowledge and taking on Jewish practice except where there are compelling moral reasons to change it — and that often means creating a new practice. This is an implicit critique of halakhic methods on one side and of unbridled individualism on the other. Roots in Jewish tradition should help us resist fads, while a commitment to openness and dialogue should support our continual evolution.

5. The market-driven Western cultures inculcate a worldview that is in many ways inimical to Jewish living. Judaism places a high value on community, and Western culture emphasizes autonomy. Judaism advocates the importance of internal goods like virtues, spirituality and interpersonal relationships. Western culture primarily emphasizes consumption and external goods. One consequence of this difference is that the Jewish emphasis on social justice and repair of the world is at odds with the increasing gap between rich and poor in both the United States and in Israel. It is difficult to maintain the kind of dynamic, liberal, committed, pluralistic and democratic community that Reconstructionists believe in within a larger cultural context that is premised on the individual. The current pursuit of meaning reflected in the wide interest in “spirituality” must be understood in terms of the struggle for integrity, spiritual depth and im-

provement of our world, lest it reduce the pursuit of meaning to yet another interesting hobby.

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Jane Susswein

What remains relevant from the legacy of Mordecai Kaplan? The intellectual integrity and demand for honesty that shines through Kaplan’s writings, and is one of the reasons I am so attracted to Reconstructionism. To be able to engage in synagogue life and in religious discussions without feeling forced to accept things that I don’t believe to be true means everything to me. The idea that the wisdom of both the physical and social sciences can enrich our understanding of ourselves as Jews, rather than threaten it, is very empowering.

The Reconstructionist mandate to be educated participants in the evolution of Judaism has enabled us to use the touchstone of modern moral sensibilities to take radical stands: granting women equal ritual rights, including the right to divorce in a religious setting; accepting children of Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers as Jews (if they are raised as Jews); and fully welcoming members of the GLBT community as rabbis and congregants. Less radical, maybe, but equally empowering, has been the creation of liturgy to mark

events hitherto unrecognized in Jewish life — the naming of a baby girl, the weaning of a child, or sending a child to college, to cite three examples.

What of the Kaplanian legacy no longer seems relevant, necessary or helpful? I'm not sure that the "Power that makes for Salvation" has as much resonance as it may have had when Kaplan was making a radical break from the supernatural God-concept of orthodoxy. Modern science has enabled us to reframe the concept of God in a way that is more integrated with our understanding of biology. Works like Edward Wilson's *Sociobiology* and movies like *March of the Penguins* make clear that behaviors we might call "moral," like altruism and loving care for an offspring, even an egg, are not the sole province of human beings.

In a September 29, 2005 interview on National Public Radio, Sherwin Nuland, author of *Wisdom of the Body*, talked about spirit as an "evolutionary accomplishment of the human cortex," something much more than consciousness. He posited that the human brain is predisposed to choose healthy ways of being — physically and emotionally. He said, "The moral sense provides people with more pleasure than anything . . . the sense of oneself as a good person whose life isn't sacrificed for others but is based around community and love gives one the greatest pleasure that anybody can have." Whether the universe is perfectible may be debatable, but that there is something hard-wired in our constitution that causes us to behave as if it were may be less so.

What are the key questions of Jewish

life now, and what does Reconstructionist Judaism have to offer in response? Lack of identification with Israel and the problematic sense of *klal Yisrael* are two issues facing Jews, the former for Diaspora Jews, and the latter for Jews in Israel and those outside. For those who did not live through the creation of the State of Israel, the gut feeling that Israel must be supported at all costs is not a given. Liberal Jews, who tend to side with the poor and the oppressed, can see Israel as the oppressor, a powerful country unjust in the treatment of its Arab citizens, and provocative in its encroaching settlements. While not alone in the Jewish community, the Reconstructionist position advocated in the report of the JRF Israel Task Force, which urged the sharing of Jerusalem and the withdrawal from the outlying settlements, is one which does not force us to take positions contrary to our inclinations.

More challenging than Israel may be repairing the schism among our own people. Adoption of patrilineal descent by the Reconstructionists in 1968 (followed by the Reform movement 15 years later) has enabled many families to become involved in our congregations who might not have done so. But the result is a "Who is a Jew?" question that seems unbridgeable at this point in time, not only with the Orthodox, but with the Conservative movement as well. In the United States, with separation of church and state, the stance is more "live and let live." In Israel, however, the implications for marriage and divorce among all non-Orthodox or mixed-married Jews are

more challenging.

There is the additional irony that many self-declared “secular” Israelis, although Jewish in many of the ways we would define — speaking Hebrew, living by the Jewish calendar, etc. — want nothing to do with Judaism, thinking anything religious is, by definition, Orthodox. Reconstructionism is the perfect answer for those who want to reclaim their tradition, but in a non-Orthodox frame.

As a member of a United Jewish Communities committee that funds programs promoting religious pluralism in Israel, I sense the need expressed by many to reconnect with Judaism, but in a non-synagogue-related form. I see many programs whose approach to tradition and learning could well be called Reconstructionist. Our clear-eyed, undogmatic approach to the classical texts can be a real contribution to enabling more Israelis to become Jewish.

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Amy Klein

In recent years, religiously and/or politically progressive Jews in and outside of Israel have been threatened with being held responsible for the imminent tearing apart of the Jewish people. The threat is made whenever the issue of legitimating non-orthodox conversions is raised in Israel. It was also

raised during the months leading up to the Israeli disengagement from the Gaza Strip. Both times the tactic nearly worked to disrupt processes that the progressive community hoped would lead to a more just Israeli society and healthy Jewish people.

When accused of creating divisions, progressive Jews are too easily cowed into abdicating the values of democracy, equality, human rights and diversity that are the very foundations of our Jewishness and of our humanity. I would rather live in a world where boundaries are obscured than in a world without fundamental, democratic values. The overarching legacy of Mordecai Kaplan and contribution of Reconstructionism to Jewish life is the adherence to intellectual and moral integrity. Today, more than ever, we must hold fast to that legacy.

Reconstructionist Judaism is distinguished from other approaches to Jewish life by an ideology that dissolves the contradiction between the right and left sides of our brain. It affirms a theology that is transnatural rather than supernatural, at the same time encouraging use of the power and richness of our traditional myths to open up spiritual and emotional insights. Today, this ideology is still not obvious. When I explain it to people, particularly to Israelis struggling with traditional conceptions of God, and with the seeming contradiction between progressive theologies and religious observance, they are attracted by the possibilities.

The Reconstructionist approach to Judaism is also distinguished by its insistence on democratic decision mak-

ing and the use of non-halakhic process to build communities of commitment. The uniqueness of the Reconstructionist approach is that it has found a way to achieve a level of communal practice and caring as valued by our tradition without resorting to non-democratic and non-egalitarian leadership mechanisms.

For those less familiar with the process, the Reconstructionist movement and its communities often employ the technique of values-based decision making, promulgated by David Teutsch, to reach ethical, meaningful outcomes for dilemmas of Jewish life. Communities that engage in a serious process to implement a social justice program, create guidelines for community support of families fighting serious illness or going through divorce, or to determine the level of Shabbat observance, become communities with clear norms that raise the level of Jewish learning, mutual commitment and ethical action of its members. As a process located in time and place, the potential always exists that communities will decide differently and that outcomes will change. Both results must remain acceptable if Judaism is to be relevant for future generations. Our elevation of process over product makes us unique, and we must work hard not to give in to requests for easy, clear answers. Democracy is the difficult path; there are always those willing to abdicate responsibility and those willing to increase their power and authority.

While key contributions of Reconstructionist Judaism to North American

Jewish life include building communities with a participatory and inclusive culture, and the creation of ritual and liturgy that responds to the spiritual needs of Jews today, we are in danger of over-emphasizing *tikkun atzmi* (self-realization) at the expense of *tikkun olam*. Kaplan wrote: "The type of religion which we Jews as a people, and which mankind as a whole, urgently needs as a means to survival has to consist, or take the form, of moral responsibility in action." (M. Kaplan, *The Purpose and Meaning of Jewish Existence*, 294.) There are many among us working for social change but not enough.

Finally, in Israel, there are people leading their lives in accordance with the Reconstructionist values, including democratic process, promoting justice and taking responsibility for the creation of dynamic Jewish ritual and cultural practices that remain grounded in the tradition — only they do so without defining themselves as Reconstructionists. This is a testimony to Kaplan's foresight, that for Judaism to survive it would need to be reconstructed in organically created communities.

These individuals and groups are potentially our partners. However, Reconstructionists, who coined the language of peoplehood, have done little to build connections with Jewish communities in Israel, in the former Soviet Union, in Europe, in South America and elsewhere. Maintaining a Jewish peoplehood with a common language and identity depends upon bridging world Jewish communities and supporting those communities struggling in their quest for Jewish revitalization.

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Brant Rosen

Reconstructionist Judaism's most important legacy is its vision of religion without triumphalism. Among Kaplan's many courageous assertions was his insistence that no one religious faith has a monopoly on divine truth:

The claim of any religion . . . to be the exclusive custodian of the opportunities of human salvation, to deny validity to the claims of other religions to the experience of the reality of God, or to assume that only through its doctrines and rites can men experience that reality, is vicious and is a sin against the ideal of equality (M. Kaplan, *The Future of the American Jew*, 326).

Rather than identify God with one specific religion, Reconstructionism affirms that God is greater than religion itself. Kaplan famously taught that religions represent culturally conditioned systems developed by religious civilizations in their ongoing search for the divine. Reconstructionists thus understand Jewish tradition not as the exclusive manifestation of God's word, but rather as the means by which we express our sacred sense of belonging to Jewish civilization. Again, in Kaplan's own words:

. . . religious differences do not imply religious inequality, and the

assumption that our own religion is superior to all others is no more legitimate than to pretend that we ourselves as individuals are superior to other individuals, or have a superior claim to God's grace (M. Kaplan, *The Future of the American Jew*, 151).

Though Kaplan wrote these words in the early 20th century, they are arguably even more critical for us today. Tragically, at the dawn of the 21st century, religion has become the primary lightning rod for conflict, division and hatred. In our own country, we find faith cynically invoked in a deeply polarized "culture war." Around the world, terror, violence and bloodshed are increasingly perpetrated in God's name. Perhaps it was ever thus. But in our increasingly complex post-modern world, it may well be that the stakes are now higher than ever before.

As the overwhelming majority of the citizens of our nation and of the world still consider themselves to be people of faith, religion still has the ability to influence our collective destiny in powerful ways. If this is so, then all who claim to act in the name of religion must ask themselves: which vision do I stand for, the religion of inclusion or exclusion? In the end, there can be no middle ground on this question.

Thus, the most important contribution the Reconstructionist movement can offer in an era of religious fear and mistrust is a deeper recommitment to Kaplan's religious vision of tolerance, equality and progress. We must advocate unabashedly for these values

in our congregations and communities as well as in the greater marketplace of religious ideas. Moreover, we must also be willing to condemn those in the Jewish community who preach religious hatred, and we must be ready to reach out and create lasting relationships with those from other religious traditions who share our vision.

Ironically, Kaplan's faith in religion as a force for universal salvation represents Reconstructionist Judaism's most important and most unfulfilled aspiration. Ever the rationalist, Kaplan did not fully foresee the tenacity of religious fundamentalism. And ever the optimist, he could never have fathomed the growth of murderous religious extremism that has become so tragically commonplace today. It now falls to a new generation of Reconstructionists to promote his religious vision of tolerance and inclusion in a world that needs it more than ever. Among the myriad of needs to which Reconstructionist Judaism might respond, none is more crucial to our collective future.

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Isaac Saposnik

"Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed" (Genesis 32:29).

We are a movement of strugglers

— individuals and communities (or, perhaps more appropriately, individuals in communities) who struggle with each other and with God to receive and explore the blessings of our heritage. We do this self-consciously and publicly, realizing that we are *beyt Ya'akov, b'nai Yisrael* (the household of Jacob, the descendents of Israel) not because we have a common ancestry, but rather because we have a common willingness to grapple with those beings, divine and human, whom we encounter on our everyday journeys through life.

At times, this willingness undoubtedly seems overzealous. Our constant striving for new questions, new answers and new understandings must appear to the outside world as though we are looking for trouble. And perhaps we are. (Didn't Jacob do the same thing?) We are movers and changers — trying, as did our ancestors, to construct a Judaism that is relevant and meaningful, personal and communal. Others begin this process by placing the cornerstones upon which they will build the future of Judaism. We begin by exploring whether such fixed cornerstones will indeed be the best support for our future.

For generation upon generation, the key questions of Jewish life were answered only by the most learned members of the community. For us, it is not about the most learned but rather the most learning. We focus not on the answer but on the process. We answer questions with questions and process with process. By doing so, we have begun to change the method of discourse in (at least) the liberal Jewish community. Others ask us what it means to be

Reconstructionist and we, in return, encourage them to continue asking questions. We thus open ourselves and others to explore similarities where seemingly insurmountable distinctions once lay between movements.

As we push others to question, and as we attempt to close the gaps between the movements (processes Kaplan would no doubt have supported), let us be willing to heed our own advice. At the same time as we struggle with those around us, we must also look to our inner struggles. In a movement that prides itself on its ability to advocate for change in the world, we must be willing to change ourselves as well. We must be willing to reconstruct Reconstructionism.

Those values we hold most dear — egalitarianism, inclusive communities, open doors for mixed married families — were unthinkable a century ago. As we move through this century, it seems evident that such important value shifts will continue to occur. It seems equally evident that these shifts will not always meld with our personal and communal sensibilities and norms. The challenge for us will lie in whether we are willing and able to struggle honestly with the issues that shake the foundations we have built. Will we continue to be willing to make the changes that are hardest to fathom?

This is not a new question. And it is not, of course, only our question. The future of the Jewish people has always depended on the ability to change, and now is no different. Just as Kaplan did more than seventy years ago, we continue to search for meaningful ways to live as Jews in the modern world.

Kaplan's suggestion that this is an ongoing process — moving from belonging to behaving to believing — still holds true. The Jewish community's focus on engagement and empowerment, on community building and social action, and on civic involvement and adult education attests to the ways in which this three-tiered conception has become part of mainstream Judaism.

To be true disciples of Kaplan, however, would require at least some understanding that simple compliance with such a set system can be dangerous. Only if we allow ourselves to look at the cornerstones of community set forth after much deliberation and are able — after much further deliberation — to move them to meet new needs and values (no matter how difficult) will we truly live up to the name of "Reconstructionists."

Perhaps we can begin this process by adding a fourth stage to Kaplan's alliterative view of Judaism — that of becoming. As we continue to work to reconstruct who we are, how we behave and what we believe, let us challenge ourselves also to reconstruct who we want to become. Firmly rooted in our connection to the past and wholly willing to accept the struggles of the present, let us aim to enter a constant state of becoming our best selves — individually and communally — as we reach to the future and strive to wrestle with the divine.

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Dan Ehrenkrantz

Religion used to provide a coherent system of meaning and value for individual adherents. Today, with many competing visions of what is valuable and meaningful, such as the culture of materialism that promises happiness through consumption, religion struggles to play this important role.

Religion has also been a primary motivator — both in the past and in the present — for violence, by asserting claims of superiority supported by the false logic of racism and bigotry. Today, the violence that religion motivates becomes an even greater danger due to the increasing ability of small groups of people, or even a single person, to gain access to highly destructive weapons.

The task of Reconstructionist Judaism is to show the way towards a value-driven, meaningful Jewish life that is devoid of chauvinism, one that effectively contributes to the improvement of life. Instead of devaluing others, such a Judaism will raise the level of respect and obligation we feel toward all people. By setting this example, we will provide those who come into contact with us a path towards righteous living, and we will encourage others, Jews and non-Jews, to follow our lead.

We are well situated to play this role. We are the only branch of Judaism that has fully accepted the challenge of confronting the parts of our tradition that are spiritually chauvinistic. To be associated with Reconstructionist Judaism means that even if you do not accept Kaplan's solution to the difficult legacy of the Jews as "the chosen people," you

must still confront the challenge of our historical prejudices toward non-Jews.

We are also the only Jewish movement that has recognized, based on a study of the Jewish past, how much of what we call Judaism is derivative of other cultures and peoples. The conclusion we have drawn is that we should continue to allow ourselves to be inspired and challenged by the wisdom of other traditions, carefully incorporating new ideas (*e.g.* democracy) and behaviors (*e.g.* social action beyond the Jewish community) when and where appropriate.

We also are positioned to respond to the challenge posed by society's competing visions through our pioneering approach to communal life that has the potential to yield the rich meaning that Judaism offers. Ownership of communal norms belongs to the members of the community. Community members are responsible for creation of norms and for how well they are followed. This yields a sense of responsibility and mutual obligation that forms the basis for lives of meaning, purpose and value.

Key challenges remain because we are part of a shrinking minority. In Jewish life, a popular argument is that we need to strengthen the core group, and ignore those who may be on the periphery of Jewish life. This tendency to turn inwards must be resisted. When we turn inward we attend only to caring for those who are like-minded and similarly committed, creating a breeding ground for prejudice.

But we must not ignore the challenges of our shrinking numbers. New approaches must be brought to bear

to communicate within and beyond our devoted core. The Internet is an important area for development. RRC's pioneering efforts through Kolot's *ritualwell.org* and Hiddur's *sacredseasons.org* are two good examples of how the Internet can play a new and important role in connecting Jews to Jewish life while addressing issues of critical importance to the Jewish community.

Synagogues have been asked to carry too much of the burden for creating meaningful Jewish life, and without adequate support. We must create new professional positions for rabbis who can support the work of synagogues while reaching out to those who are not synagogue members. Synagogues cannot be all things to all people, and their efforts to play this role have hurt their effectiveness. We are capable of positively transforming Jewish communal life, one community at a time, but we need to develop the will to bring about this transformation.

Our success will yield a strong Jewish community that brings its vitality to its internal communal life and to the world at large. We can help Judaism and other religions purge themselves of their historic bigotries and become the forces for goodness, peace, wholeness and love that we so desperately need. Our very best efforts are necessary if we are to play the important role that is ours to play.

Rabbi Dan Ehrenkrantz is President of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College.

Amy Goldsmith

There is something truly awesome about having pride for a religion that you can feel but cannot explain. For many Reconstructionist teens, children and adults, finding a way to describe Mordecai Kaplan's philosophies on Judaism and how they are practiced today is mind-boggling. Launching into a twenty-minute conversation about values can be difficult and confusing; however, only highlighting key words such as "community" or "inclusivity" does little justice to such a vibrant branch of Judaism.

Over these past few years, I have been fortunate enough to find such a warm and welcoming community in No'ar Hadash, JRF's youth network. Through weekend regional kallah and summers spent at Camp JRF, I have marveled at finding people to connect with, without having to explain myself. Coming from a cross-denominational Hebrew High School program, I was instantly relieved that everyone I met just "got" Reconstructionism.

In the larger Jewish community, Reconstructionism is widely misunderstood. I have often been asked questions such as "Do you guys believe in God?" and "Aren't you all just hippies?" I have always explained that, yes, some of us don't believe in the "traditional" idea of God, and some of us do self-identify as hippies, but when asked to explain what the movement believes in, I cannot put it into words.

About a month ago, I was fortunate enough to be part of a delegation of Reconstructionist teens that attended

a Panim leadership summit in Washington, D.C. The goal of the summit was to connect different Jewish youth movement leaders, for them to share ideas, and to gain a better understanding of different Jewish lifestyles. In contrast to real-life demographics, No'ar Hadash boasted the largest delegation of all the movements attending the conference. Despite our majority, we were all still nervous about fully representing our movement. Five minutes before the summit began, we held a quick meeting on how to go about answering the inevitable questions about Reconstructionism. We turned to Kaplan for a sentence-long definition that we would be able to rattle off even if we didn't fully understand it ourselves: "Reconstructionism views Judaism as the evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people." We quickly learned that it did little to answer any questions.

The first day at the summit was emotionally draining. I found myself searching for different ways to describe No'ar Hadash and Reconstructionism. Most of my explanations began with Mordecai Kaplan and ended with community but the middles were always a little different depending on which words came to me. I suppose that even my approach to my explanations was Reconstructionist. I devoted energy to making sure that the words I chose were appropriate for, and engaged each, of my listeners — just as Reconstructionism aims to bring meaningful Jewish life to a larger spectrum of people. Even if I couldn't explain it right then and there, I was living Reconstructionism.

The biggest "aha" moment of that

weekend happened while we were at the Jefferson memorial. We wandered around, taking in the beauty of the monument and reading the words of such an important figure. One inscription in particular discussed the role of government in a changing society, and noted that institutions need to keep up with progress in order for the society to advance:

. . . laws and institutions must go hand in hand with the progress of the human mind. As that becomes more developed, more enlightened, as new discoveries are made, new truths discovered and manners and opinions change, with the change of circumstances, institutions must advance also to keep pace with the times. — Thomas Jefferson

It was while reading this quotation that one of our delegates finally understood Reconstructionism. Reconstructionism is about keeping Judaism alive, reaching the larger Jewish society and progressing with the times while still maintaining tradition.

It was right then and there that I realized it doesn't matter whether or not we can explain Reconstructionism. If we can understand what it is when we see it and know how to live it, then that is all we need to be able to do. Reconstructionism is not something you can say, but rather something you can show and do. It provides us with a roadmap of how to live with Jewish values such as *tikkun olam*, inclusivity, community and involvement in an ever-changing secular world. Reconstructionism struggles right along with us to provide

answers to questions about maintaining tradition and keeping Judaism alive. It teaches us to engage our youth, because they are the Jewish future; but also to learn from our past, because it is the tradition that has sustained us thus far.

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Shawn Zevit

While traveling through Canada and the United States over the past several years I have participated in numerous conversations about our mission and goals as a movement. I have heard many interpretations of Reconstructionist theology, philosophy and practice, from self-described “classical Kaplanians” to “neo-Hasidic” Reconstructionists.

Some classical voices decry the new spiritual explorations occurring in some corners of the movement and claim that Kaplan, were he to reappear, would bemoan how far afield our individualistic spiritual journeying and experimentation have taken us.

On the other hand, I have heard a newer generation of Reconstructionists criticize what they perceive as nostalgia for an intellectual approach to Jewish life that leaves the body and spirit at the door and ignores the needs of spiritual seekers.

The recently published excerpts from Kaplan's early diaries (*Communings of*

the Spirit, edited by Mel Scult) show a man concerned not only with the clear, accessible articulation of his key ideas, but with a commitment to what today is called “God-wrestling,” and to a striving for authenticity and meaning. Such a soul, it seems to me, would be disappointed by a static replication of his formulae, and would feel that he had failed to transmit his ideas about reconstructing Jewish life to subsequent generations.

Our movement has a whole new generation of members who are not well-versed in Kaplanian thought or in Reconstructionist principles, even as they are proud and active participants in the movement. We need more than just replications of Reconstructionism's past formulations. As an example: Many newer Reconstructionists are attracted to the idea of “democracy” as applied to Judaism. But using the term “Reconstructionist” to support what amounts to a personal preference, without Jewish study, values clarification and a willingness to see the needs of the community as on a par with our individual needs, is not the type of democracy Kaplan had in mind.

Yet for all of the diversity of personality and practice within the movement, Kaplan's core ideas of religious naturalism, egalitarianism and democratic decision-making have produced dynamic, creative communities. They share a generally cohesive and familiar set of norms and policies. These communities share many important characteristics: gender equality, shared leadership, a welcoming atmosphere, lifelong educational practices, liturgical and ritual

creativity, a serious embrace of tradition, a commitment to *tikkun olam* and to mutual support, and a conscious search for meaningful, sustainable lives as Jews and as human beings. Our point has not been to build a Judaism where “anything goes,” but one in which much is possible.

Kaplan spoke of God as the Process that makes for the fulfillment of our human potential. We have moved beyond the discussion about theism and atheism to a discussion about how to live more Godly and religiously authentic lives in a culture that champions individualism and personal happiness over communal commitment and peoplehood. When we enter into discussion of an important issue we are entering The Process — we are on sacred ground. Godliness can be manifest through the approach and content of our decision-making. This Process makes for “salvation,” in Kaplan’s terms, as we move towards an agreed-upon outcome that ideally brings each of us and our communities into greater self-realization. We are, in short, striving for a Process that contains Godly values, and yields an outcome that fulfills the mission of our community and the spiritual growth of the participants.

Of course, we can misuse the idea of democratic participatory process to block needed action and consign decision-making to an endless “process of processing.” We may overuse Jewish values-based decision making by applying it to every issue instead of saving it for key issues of community identity and policy. We can also hide behind anti-authoritarian tendencies to

undermine rabbis and leaders by insisting that everyone needs to approve every decision, or that consensus is required at every turn. The disempowering of leadership simply allows for influence to be exerted more subtly and often less visibly, without evaluation and discussion.

In the world of 21st century Reconstructionism, “truth” is certainly in flux. For example, as the new edition of *Exploring Judaism: A Reconstructionist Approach* suggests, we are more questioning of the authority of the sciences than Kaplan was, even as we contend with staggering new scientific and technological advances. We are more questioning than was Kaplan of some of the values of American society, and we feel ourselves being shaped by a multiplicity of identities and civilizations beyond the concept of “living in two civilizations.” In light of the Holocaust and the never-ending eruption of brutal wars around the world, we question more vigorously than did Kaplan the human capability of achieving peace and “salvation” through politics, education and technology.

As we enter “the second century of Mordecai Kaplan,” intellectual rigor, emotional honesty and spiritual creativity will enable us to continue to evolve in deep relationship to our Jewish tradition, to our movement’s foundational ideas and to global issues of environmental, political, economic and spiritual sustainability.

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Values-Based Decision Making: Some Second Thoughts

BY BARBARA HIRSH

In his helpful and thoughtful article “Reinvigorating the Practice of Contemporary Jewish Ethics: A Justification For Values-Based Decision Making” (Spring 2005), David Teutsch outlines the assumptions underlying values-based decision making. An open discussion of this much-used concept within Reconstructionism is overdue. Teutsch has been nearly a lone voice in articulating the meaning of this concept, and we are in his debt for undertaking the effort to state clearly what is meant when Reconstructionists attempt to employ VBDM.

I would like to continue that discussion by mentioning a few important but under-explored areas that touch on some of Teutsch’s themes.

Need for Leadership Training

1. Leadership Development. Teutsch emphasizes the need for a significant Jewish knowledge base and group management skills among lay leaders as prerequisites to undertaking a VBDM process. I hope his words are taken as a challenge to the movement. If leadership development is a prerequisite for VBDM, then we, like most of the

Jewish community, have a long road to travel, according to Hal Lewis’ recent indictment “Making Leaders: How the American Jewish Community Prepares Its Lay Leaders.”¹

While not directed specifically to the Reconstructionist movement (although Reconstructionism is included in his research), Lewis observes an overall lack of consensus in the American Jewish community about what constitutes “leadership” or “training.” He writes: “many Jewish groups . . . equate leadership with a willingness to serve.” In many cases, “training” consists only of a desire to participate. Lewis concludes, that these programs, whatever their inherent worth, do not to any significant degree constitute leadership training and development.

He describes the predominant models in this area, including approaches common in the Reconstructionist movement. He asserts that neither the incorporation of “selected sacred texts” into decision-making, nor the teaching of narrow skills such as marketing and fund-raising, in and of themselves constitute “leadership training,” irrespective of what Jewish groups suggest or assume. We may conclude that in

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spite of activity that purports to be training leaders, there is actually little credible work in this area. We should be concerned about the implications of this vacuum far beyond our ability to engage in VBDM.

Outcomes Assessment

2. Empirical Research. I was especially interested to note Teutsch's reference to outcomes in his article. As a movement, it is time for us to evaluate empirically the use of VBDM and the outcomes it generates. A systematic attempt to study the application of this process within the Reconstructionist movement would help us address inconsistencies in, and untested assumptions about, its use.

I frequently hear the term VBDM used, but without consistency. Teutsch refers to his understanding of the appropriate use of the term (p. 11). But I am not sure that we have consensus on exactly when VBDM is an appropriate process, who determines when it is fitting, who is entitled to take part in such a process, and who is responsible for ensuring the implementation of the conclusions reached as a result.

Additionally, it may be helpful to our constituents to know how often this process (however defined) is used, by whom, under what circumstances and with what results. It is especially important for us to become more aware of when the process might be unhelpful, and when another form of decision-making or moral discourse might be preferable.

I confess to some disappointing

experiences as a participant in exercises identified as VBDM in the Reconstructionist movement. I am concerned that groups sometimes move through the motions of such process only to arrive at predetermined conclusions that are unaffected by the process itself, much as Teutsch predicts. In these instances VBDM functions less as an intervention and more as a justification for positions that could have been predicted in advance.

Selective Choice of Values

The phenomenon of gravitating to values that we already hold, or deeming some values as authentically Jewish while eschewing others, or of choosing among Jewish values, is a serious problem for a process through which we want to engage fundamental principles honestly. For those of us who are not satisfied simply to declare "the past has a vote but not a veto," on what basis do we determine which aspects of Jewish tradition are to be disregarded? On what basis do we assert that a particular "value" (often a contemporary concept, such as "inclusivity") is "Jewish?" On what basis do we discard values that are inconsistent with our thinking but which have a long association with Jewish life?

I refer readers to Judith Plaskow's insightful critique into the selective embrace of values as an essential part of this discussion.² Plaskow notes that denominations engaging in values-based decision making invariably articulate and affirm positive values, and demonstrate an "unwillingness to

grapple with . . . negative values within Jewish tradition.”³ She argues that this focus on values avoids the more difficult challenge of addressing resulting norms and contradictions that do not become obvious until we apply those values to lived experience. If we are attentive, we may notice differing implications of the same values depending upon gender, sexual identity or social class. By directing attention to consensus around values, we may unintentionally be obscuring other aspects of reality. Plaskow places the process we refer to as VBDM in the larger context of the negotiation between Jewish tradition and contemporary culture and challenges us to take this engagement to a more self-critical and transparent level.

Basis for Behavior

3. Social science insights. There is an unspoken set of assumptions in our use of VBDM: that behavior is determined by values, and that an exploration of values can lead to a change in behavior.

Teutsch notes this problem in passing when referring to critiques of Kohlberg’s linking of moral reasoning with conduct. As a religious movement with a history of utilizing social scientific insight in developing its core concepts, Reconstructionism should explore and take advantage of current thinking that relates to decision making. Space limits a full discussion, but I will simply note that, from a social scientific viewpoint, one might make a case that behavior precedes and helps to determine our values, the very opposite of the VBDM

presumption. A review of the literature in this area as it applies to VBDM could help bring Reconstructionist practice into alignment with current social scientific knowledge.

Additionally, a social scientific perspective will properly complicate our work by pushing us to distinguish between values and other related concepts. How do we, for instance, distinguish values from norms, meanings, practices or ethics? How are these concepts interrelated, and are all served appropriately by our current VBDM model?

Imposition of Religious Values

4. Political context. Those of us who live in the United States are experiencing a time in which “values” have become political instruments and values-based decision making has a frightening underside. We have pharmacists insisting that it is a violation of their values to fill prescriptions for contraceptives;⁴ circuit court judges refusing, on the basis of their own values, to hear cases in which pregnant teenagers are seeking permission for abortions;⁵ and school districts determining whether equal time should be given to “intelligent design” alongside Darwinian evolution in science classes.⁶

The people just referenced would likely agree that their “decision-making” was “values-based.” In effect, these are instances of VBDM. But here, the results include, for example, limiting women’s health choices and undermining science education. I would encourage more conversation

within our movement as to whether promoting VBDM unwittingly lends legitimacy to parallel processes occurring in American society that have serious negative implications.

We want to influence people and communities to live examined lives informed by the wisdom our tradition offers. Teutsch's article is a reminder of how seriously our movement takes the challenge of helping Jews know and understand Jewish life and heritage. He also reminds us of the importance of bringing an awareness of moral values into our lives, both for our own edification and in order to enhance and improve the world around us.

I hope that Teutsch's discussion, and this response, help to promote further serious and sustained discussion that will move us closer to the ideal of thoughtful and informed Jews working together to explore the place of values in our lives, communities and decision making.

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1. Hal M. Lewis, "Making Leaders: How the American Jewish Community Prepares Its Lay Leaders," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, volume 80:2-3, Summer/Fall 2004.
 2. Judith Plaskow, "Speaking of Sex: Authority and the Denominational Documents," in *The Coming of Lilith: Essays on Feminism, Judaism, and Sexual Ethics, 1972-2003* (New York: Beacon Press, 2005), 213
 3. *Ibid.*, 214.
 4. Florence A Ruderman, "Prescription for Injustice," *The New York Times*, September 1, 2005, A23.
 5. Adam Liptak, "On Moral Grounds, Some Judges Are Opting Out of Abortion Cases," *The New York Times*, September 4, 2005, A21.
 6. Daniel Dennett, "Show Me the Science," *The New York Times*, August 28, 2005, A11.

A Reply to Barbara Hirsh

BY DAVID A. TEUTSCH

Barbara Hirsh has written a perceptive response to my article; we should all be so fortunate as to have critics whose observations enhance our work! I am happy to say that I agree with most of what she has to say. I will focus below on some aspects of the important issues she raises.

Centrality of Knowledge

Among Jews for whom a rabbi is not the final authority in Jewish matters, having competence as Jewish decision makers is critically important. Of course that competence rests upon their Jewish educations and experience.

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That is why adult Jewish education is so important. It is a painful fact that most liberal, adult Jews have neither the level of Jewish education or of Jewish experience to make well-grounded decisions. What is more, some of those Jews are proud to make their decisions without such grounding.

As important as that grounding is for individuals, it is yet more important for Jewish communal leaders. Without it, they either must lean heavily on Jewish experts (which they rarely do well) or make decisions that are not Jewishly anchored. Having Jewishly knowledgeable leaders is particularly important for Jewish congregations, which serve as the Jewish communities and Jewish acculturating organizations for their members. For legitimate ideological reasons liberal congregations do not give their rabbis the authority to unilaterally decide Jewish congregational policy, so their officers, board members and in some cases committee members must take responsibility for those decisions and their grounding in Judaism.

VBDM is not a substitute for leaders with appropriate Jewish knowledge and motivation. It may help to provide guidance for them so that they use their knowledge and experience well. And it may provide a basis for providing some of the Jewish education that they need. But it cannot substitute for those prerequisites to competent Jewish leadership.

Leadership Skills

Most Jewish communities do not have a sufficient supply of such leaders,

and young congregations must sometimes start without any at all. Given that situation, educating leaders is a matter of considerable urgency. It should be an important aspect of every congregation's programming. Some of that training, such as teaching basic Jewish vocabulary, values and practice, should be open to the whole congregation, while other parts that deal specifically with leadership skills might best be restricted to those willing to make a commitment to congregational leadership roles.

These leadership skills should include the obvious, like how to manage projects, do supervision and mentor, create decision-making processes, and deal with conflict. But they also need to include learning about such issues as how to manage and develop an organizational culture, the theory of not-for-profit organizations, and mission-driven planning.

If the two kinds of training — Jewish education and leadership skills — are both present but are not integrated, the leaders will still not be prepared for the challenges they face. Jewish communal leadership requires the integration of leadership skills with Jewish knowledge and attitudes, and that does not happen naturally. I recently designed a program called “*Acharai*” [“Follow Me”] for the Baltimore Jewish community that uniquely integrates the two kinds of learning over the course of its sixty hours of study. While sixty hours represents a major commitment — two full days plus twelve four-hour sessions — it seems to me to be barely enough to cover the basics, yet most congregations have no formal leadership training pro-

grams beyond brief orientation sessions. Absent training, we are overly dependent on the luck of who is present when it is time to make decisions.

Mixed Results

Values-based decision making requires training to do it well. Ms. Hirsh suggests that we need to do empirical research to find out how it is actually functioning. As the primary proponent of VBDM, I can say based on extensive anecdotal evidence that the results are very mixed. Not surprisingly, given what I have said above, those who need to lead VBDM often do not have sufficient training. Several lay leaders who have called me for help were not even aware that VBDM is a carefully designed multi-step process that requires input other than the opinions of decision makers. Without training that explores how to get input from Jewish tradition and from social science as a part of the process, the results will not be better than voting in what amounts to a popularity contest among conflicting views.

Once we have good basic training in place in Reconstructionist congregations, we will be ready for empirical research that shows how we are doing, and points the way to improvement. As yet we are far from that point.

Source of Values

Hirsh raises the issue of where our values come from, and how we decide which values to affirm. This is a complicated question, and it deserves careful thought. For the most part our values

come out of Jewish tradition, and that is as it should be. Some values, such as democracy, pluralism, inclusion and egalitarianism, have been added to Reconstructionist Judaism after careful thought. But the conflicts among values, and the grounds on which we de-emphasize certain inherited values with which we are not comfortable, deserves careful consideration. That should entail open discussion among movement-wide leaders, as well as within Reconstructionist congregations — and there is far too little of that. VBDM is not a substitute for serious thinking; it is meant to be a vehicle that helps to promote it.

One of the dangers is that we will manipulate VBDM processes to reinforce our current behaviors and attitudes. It is true, as Hirsh points out, that belief and practice are highly interactive, with each reinforcing the other. If that occurs in a thoughtless way, VBDM becomes a sham. The point of VBDM, which is designed to pull in facts and insights that have the capacity to change both beliefs and practices, is to open the individual and group to considering deeply how it ought to proceed, making changes where appropriate. When that deep consideration does not occur, then VBDM fails.

VBDM is not appropriate for making decisions that do not have a substantial moral component. VBDM will not help in making purely tactical decisions, and it cannot help with purely aesthetic ones. Nor is it useful without sufficient time and energy being given to the process. It will not work in such situations, and communal leaders need

other methods for such occasions. But I remain optimistic that when it is used appropriately in matters deserving of substantial and careful exploration, VBDM can be a highly valuable tool.

The Public Square

One concern that Hirsh raises is about the public American dialogue regarding values. In truth such a dialogue has gone on throughout the entire history of this country, although it has been called by different names at different times. Religious groups have always attempted to influence public policy not only in the United States

but everywhere that their leaders have seen a reason and a method for doing so. The advantage of VBDM is that it allows us to explicate more adequately the nature of our conflicts. When there are clear choices between religious orientations — rather than, for example, one religious group claiming that it has exclusive claim to “family values” — we will all be better off. Choosing not to enter the values debate simply means abandoning the field to those with whom we have conflicts.

Hirsh suggests that we need sustained discussion of all these issues. I heartily agree.

Going for Broke

The Jewish 1960s, An American Sourcebook
edited by Michael E. Staub
(Brandeis University, 2004), 371 + xxviii pages

REVIEWED BY LAWRENCE BUSH

“In the 1960s, apartheid was driven out of America. Legal segregation — Jim Crow — ended. . . . We ended the idea that you can send a million soldiers ten thousand miles away to fight in a war that people do not support. We ended the idea that women are second-class citizens. . . . The big battles that were won in that period of civil war and strife you cannot reverse.

“We were young, we were reckless, arrogant, silly, headstrong — and we were right. I regret nothing.”

—Abbie Hoffman, April, 1989
Vanderbilt University

Whenever I see the poster with these words on the living room wall in the home of my dear friend, Teddy — a middle-aged ex-hippie, like most of my dear friends — I feel both richly affirmed and deeply saddened. The affirmation comes from the rallying spirit of Abbie Hoffman’s words: The 1960s did bring enormous, liberatory changes to America, and I have thanked my *mazel* ever since that I came of age as a

member of the “Woodstock Nation.”

My sadness wells up from the fact of his suicide within days of that Vanderbilt University speech — by which time, the conservative “counterrevolution” was well on its way to reversing “the big battles that were won” in the sixties. The U.S. invasions of Grenada (1983) and Panama (1989) had begun to restore the U.S. military’s sense of impunity. Yuppies had replaced Yippies as a generational symbol. Fundamentalist Christian ministers were leading a far-reaching backlash against women’s liberation and the legitimization of non-heterosexual orientation. White flight from public schools — including a major exodus by Jews — was resegregating a barely desegregated educational system. The War on Drugs was throwing billions of dollars into ineffectual policies and thousands of people into prison — and was frightening the baby-boom generation into silence about their own drug experiences.

The counterrevolution of the 1980s was a lot less successful within the American Jewish community, however

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— and remains so, despite the hot-and-heavy courtship of Jewish voters and intellectuals by the neoconservative movement. Yes, several Jewish organizations fell under the spell of neoconservatism and often treated affirmative action as an offense against the Jews. Yes, Israel's dependence on American military and political support led to splits or incoherence among Jewish organizations on such issues as South African apartheid, the Nicaraguan *contra* war, nuclear power and more. Yes, it took until 1985 for the Conservative movement to ordain a woman as a rabbi, and until the 1990s for the Reform movement to ordain openly gay men and lesbians. Still, despite a hot-and-heavy courtship by the conservative movement, American Jews and most of their organizations remain tenaciously left-of-center on many of the pressing issues of our day.

Michael E. Staub's well-stocked anthology, *The Jewish 1960s*, indicates why.

Activism as a Jewish Calling

Staub's book reprints seventy-three brief essays that range across the civil rights struggle, the Vietnam peace movement, the campaign for Soviet Jewish rights, the feminist explosion in Jewish life, the sexual revolution and more. While the right-wing Meir Kahane and latter-day conservatives such as Lucy Dawidowicz and Marie Syrkin are included, most of the voices here are left or leftist, as befits "the '60s."

Consistently, we see how the well-entrenched liberalism of the Jewish

community of that time — rooted in the prophetic exhortations of Judaism, the pro-socialist history of the immigrant generation, and the perception of American conservatism as "crackpot" (and anti-Semitic) before the Goldwater presidential campaign of 1964 — empowered its young activists to follow the path of conscience without fear of being ostracized. This was especially so when it came to civil rights activism, which was a catalyst in the awakening of Jewish identity and Jewish radicalism for the rest of the decade. Reform Judaism's veteran social-action leader, Albert Vorspan — represented here by three essays — noted in a 1962 piece from the *Jewish Frontier* that

the Freedom Rides touched the Jewish community in a deep and special way . . . By and large, Northern Jews responded with high enthusiasm to the Freedom Rides and to Jewish participation in them. Some of the congregations lavished honors and tributes upon the rabbis who took the Freedom Rides. . . . Some of the congregations raised funds to cover bail and bond. . . . Many Jewish groups invited Freedom Riders to address them; a few Freedom Riders spoke in Northern synagogues from the pulpit (19).

In a 1963 article in *The Reconstructionist*, Holocaust theologian Rabbi Richard L. Rubenstein wrote about a contingent of nineteen rabbis who left a Rabbinical Assembly convention to meet the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. in Birmingham, Alabama and felt

entitled to stress “in all our contacts . . . that we came as representatives of almost 800 Conservative rabbis who serve over 1,500,000 congregants” (23). Also writing in *The Reconstructionist* (1962), Betty Altschuler thought about “the women of Israel who left Egypt and went into the desert, trusting their men, but still fearful for the safety of their children” as she rides with her daughter from Chicago to Albany, Georgia on a civil rights “prayer pilgrimage” (14).

Leadership Role of Rabbis

A second impediment to the counterrevolution that shines through *The Jewish 1960s* is the leadership role of progressive rabbis, and rabbis-to-be, in stirring Jews to engage with Jewishness as an insurgent identity. Speaking for the American Jewish Congress at the 1963 March on Washington, Rabbi Joachim Prinz evoked Judaism and the Jewish experience as wellsprings of conscience:

Our ancient history began with slavery and the yearning for freedom. During the Middle Ages my people lived for a thousand years in the ghettos of Europe. Our modern history begins with a proclamation of emancipation. It is for these reasons that it is not merely sympathy and compassion for the black people of America that motivates us. It is . . . a sense of complete identification and solidarity . . . (90)

In a 1970 *Christian Century* article,

Rabbi Balfour Brickner responded to President Richard Nixon’s attempt to neutralize Jewish opposition to the Vietnam War by “subtly suggesting that [American support for Israel] might erode if American Jews continue vigorously to oppose the war.” Brickner declared that

the American Jewish community . . . will end up in a bind . . . if it gives up its right to be independent — to be critical, if need be, of its own government, of Israel, of itself. It will find itself discredited by the other American communities with which it must work and unheeded by its government, which will look on it as merely a group of special pleaders whose loyalties if not allegiances are subject to question (162-163).

Rabbi Arthur Lelyveld, a bloodied veteran of the civil rights struggles, wrote in a 1966 *Congress Bi-Weekly* article of “the imperatives of the Jewish heritage . . . in relation to Vietnam,” which he named as “fairness,” “truth,” “freedom to dissent,” and “the continuing search for peace” (146). And the ever-independent Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg, in a 1964 *Jewish Frontier* article, argued that “the Jew cannot settle down in freedom to be himself, ‘just like everybody else.’ When in his own inner consciousness he begins to approach a real feeling of at-homeness within the larger society, what remains of his Jewish identity is too little and to personalized to sustain a community” (44).

Positive Impact of Feminism

The third stumbling block to the conservative counterrevolution was the change-making role of women within Jewish life, beginning in the 1960s. In his introduction to the chapter, “Jewish Women and Feminism,” Staub notes that despite the hypothetical arguments made during that time against Jewish feminism — that it might reduce the Jewish fertility rate, drive men away from synagogue involvement and weaken the Jewish family — the “widespread revitalization of Judaism that did take place after the 1960s was due in no small part to the success of — not the resistance to — a Jewish women’s movement” (318).

Thus the “Brooklyn Bridge Collective,” in a 1971 article in their “underground” journal, identified Jewish women’s oppression with the oppression of the Jews: “What has gone down and continues to come down on Jewish men on the outside has affected us on the inside” (326). After excoriating sexism and urging Jewish women to “let Jewish men fall on their own asses,” they promised that Jewish women’s self-definition will positively “change life for all Jews” (327). Similarly, Paula Hyman, in a 1972 piece in *Conservative Judaism*, assured readers that “the challenge of feminism, if answered and not dismissed as the whining of a few misguided malcontents, can only strengthen Judaism” (336), while Rachel Adler, in a 1971 article in *Davka*, expressed concern that while women’s oppression “can quickly be rectified if one steps outside of Jewish tradition

and *Halacha* . . . the problem is how to attain some justice and some growing room for the Jewish woman if one is committed to remaining within *Halacha*” (331).

In many of the book’s essays, we recognize the self-correcting or moderating influence of Judaism and Jewish identity upon the radicals of the community — an influence that kept the “Jewish 1960s” from getting out of control and imploding the way the “American 1960s” did. The hard-to-define terms of Jewish identity (religion, philosophy, ethnic group, civilization?), along with its many internal contradictions (Zionist or internationalist? *Hutspedike* radical or vulnerable minority member?), seemed to protect Jewishly-identified Jews of the 1960s from some of the sectarian excesses of the day.

Nuanced Political Stands

Bill Novak, for example, in a 1970 article in the *CCAR Journal*, described how the “New Left, at one point the only hope for a political morality in this country, sold [Jews] out by its pointless acceptance of the ‘good-guy-bad-guy’ dualism in the Middle East” (283). Brickner, writing in *Shma* in 1970, agreed with “those radical Jewish youths who talk about the necessity of Israel’s recognizing the Palestinians,” but emphasizes that “they are wrong when they identify the militant Palestinians as true revolutionaries and thus much to be admired” (187). In her *Reconstructionist* civil rights memoir, Betty Alschuler admitted to “bringing with me my own fear of the dark,

the unconscious melancholy shadows which attach themselves to dark people whether we will it or not. . . . I go to a Holy War to fight my segregated self” (12-13). These complex reflections suggest nuanced political stands, which are less vulnerable than doctrinaire self-righteousness to being libeled and caricatured by the political right.

The Jewish 1960s nevertheless has its share of outrage and outrageousness. A brief transcript from the 1969 “Chicago Seven” conspiracy Trial shows the amazing irreverence with which Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin and their attorneys and co-conspirators disrupted Judge Julius Hoffman’s courtroom. Aviva Cantor Zuckoff’s 1971 article from *Rat* magazine is a rant full of generalizations about Jewish oppression in “Amerika” that both thrill and chill the heart. Martha Shelley in *Brooklyn Bridge* (1971) says that “the function of a homosexual is to make you uneasy . . . We will never go straight until you go gay” (308). She wonders whether love is “possible between heterosexuals; or is it all a case of women posing as nymphs, earthmothers, sex-objects, what have-you; and men writing the poetry of romantic illusions to these walking stereotypes . . .” (308).

But where is the rock and roll soundtrack of the 1960s? Staub does not include a single piece about Bobby Zimmerman, Simon and Garfunkel, Lou Reed or influential Jewish songwriters like Lieber and Stoller or Carol King. It is also curious that the pervasive drug culture of the 1960s is missing. I have suggested that psychedelic drugs played a catalytic role in awakening or

shaping the spirituality of numerous Jews who have played a creative role in shaping contemporary American Jewish religious culture.² I was surprised by Michael Staub’s omission of such classic pieces as Rabbi Arthur Green’s pseudonymous article about LSD and Jewish mysticism in *Response* (Winter, 1968) or Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi’s August, 1996 meditation on LSD in a *Commentary* symposium on the state of American Jewry.

Going for Broke

Among the book’s most paradigmatic representations of the spirit of the 1960s are several excerpts from the first *Jewish Catalog* (1973), including Arthur Waskow’s “How to Bring Mashiah.” Waskow suggested a series of outlandish yet practical actions — all rooted in Jewish texts — to speed our redemption. These include bringing a minyan to West Point, along with ten swords and “a small forge.”

Put the small forge in the main entrance, start it glowing, and beat the swords into something like a digging tool. Dig holes for ten trees, and plant the trees in the roadway. Meanwhile, sing “*Lo yisah goy* . . .”

Waskow also aims at the reinvigoration of Judaism:

. . . Forget about all the things you mustn’t do on Shabbat, and instead think of all the things you would most like to do on Shabbat (and forever). Do them. Read

Torah with some friends and talk about it; walk on grass barefoot; look very carefully at a flower without picking it; give somebody something precious and beautiful without asking him to pay you; give love. Since it's not enough to do this alone . . . pick out a few Jews on the street, tell them it's Shabbat, and dance a horah with them (or the kazatsky, if you're into Yiddish).

In its fervent and crude blending of 1960s flower power and ancient Jewish text, Waskow's piece captures the essential feelings of the '60s — a time when naïve idealism became a source of inspired possibility, and people became crazy and committed enough, in Abbie

Hoffman's words, to “go for broke”:

Jews . . . have to make a big choice very quickly in life whether to go for the money or to go for broke. Wiseguys who go around saying things like ‘Workers of the world unite’ or . . . ‘E=mc2’ obviously choose to go for broke. It's the greatest Jewish tradition.”³

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1. Poster published by the Abbie Hoffman Foundation.
 2. See my “Drugs and Jewish Spirituality: That Was Then, This Is Now” in *Best Jewish Writing 2003* (San Francisco: Josey-Bass, 2003).
 3. Abbie Hoffman, *Soon To Be a Major Motion Picture* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1980).

Time for a Paradigm Shift in Jewish Thought

*Judaism, Physics and God:
Searching for Sacred Metaphors in a Post-Einstein World*
by Rabbi David W. Nelson
(Vermont, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2005), 300 pages

REVIEWED BY GEORGE DRIESEN

Five years ago in this journal, I urged Reconstructionists to take the lead in integrating science into our religious life and thought.¹ The challenge largely fell on deaf ears. Although the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College offered an elective course in the spring of 2004 entitled, “Between Religion and Social Science,” and Congregation Adat Shalom in Bethesda, Maryland has established an Institute on Science and Judaism, Reconstructionists are not in the forefront of this emerging and important field of religious studies.

Now comes Reform Rabbi David W. Nelson, in a thoroughly readable and immensely thoughtful book, laying out the field of science and religion, and boldly confronting the formidable challenge it presents. Nelson undertakes three seemingly daunting tasks. First, he provides the reader with a basic introduction to key discoveries and theories that have revolutionized physics and cosmology: the beginnings of the universe, quantum mechan-

ics, chaos theory, relativity and string theory. Second, he introduces and explains his views of the role of metaphor in both science and Judaism. Finally, he suggests how and why new scientific metaphors could be integrated into traditional Jewish life.

Clear Explanations

It takes a writer of considerable skill and knowledge to succeed in any one of these efforts. Nelson’s avoidance of technical jargon, plus his direct, conversational tone and remarkable gift for explaining difficult concepts clearly, enable him to accomplish all three of them, all the while interspersing his narrative with apt gems from rabbinic literature. The book is so engaging that I found myself reading it the way I would a good adventure story, only reluctantly breaking for meals, so eager was I to see what Nelson would pull out of his creative hat next.

Nelson starts with us, what he calls “[the] normal people,” who “are Juda-

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ism,” and insists that we must be served by our religious life — a perspective that sounds quite Reconstructionist. He then explains that we need religion in order to see the grand patterns that give meaning to life. And that, Nelson insists, is not possible without introducing the exciting discoveries of contemporary science because, truth to tell, most of us accept scientific discoveries as the most reliable guides to reality that we have. A religious perspective and a religious life that pretend otherwise will be neither convincing nor compelling for us or our descendants.

Weaving Science and Religion

Surely the challenge of weaving the world of science into our religious life is one of the most daunting and important facing the Jewish people today. We Jews held onto the worldview and the theology that we inherited from the rabbinic and medieval periods for a very long time, partly because we were insulated by outside oppression and inner cohesion from the larger, now global, revolution in thought. But now in Israel, Europe and the Americas, most Jews, including religiously affiliated Jews, gladly accept the dominant thinking of the empirically based sciences. Sure, many of us pray for health, but our first line of defense when we are sick or badly injured is scientifically based medicine. People do not turn to rabbis for cure, and no rabbi or other healer who is not altogether foolish would suggest that a patient not take her medicine.

Equally important, in most syna-

gogues, the explicit and implicit world view of every prayer in the regular liturgy ignores where it does not contradict our understanding of the universe and of God’s role in it. As a result, as we struggle to teach our congregants, our youngsters and those seeking to return to Judaism the structure, music, and text of the prayer service, even the most gifted teachers breathe a sigh of relief if no one challenges them about its content. Learning enough Hebrew and melodies to participate is such a formidable obstacle for many that there is little opportunity to wrestle with the words. If we do face the music, we often end up admitting that our liturgical texts are not to be taken literally; they are metaphors.² But that’s not a very satisfactory solution. As Shakespeare put it, “words without thoughts do not to heaven go.” The dissonance between what we believe and what we pray is so great that at times it makes our eyes roll, and probably contributes to the absence of so many Jews (including synagogue members) when the remnant gathers to pray. The imagery of God in Jewish liturgy often seems at odds with the way we view the rest of the world.

Use of Metaphor

Nelson suggests that the use of metaphor is a major tool in reducing this dissonance. He points out that we cannot capture God’s essence in words or in images (which is in some respects prohibited anyway), so that however we describe, allude to, or philosophize about God, we are forced to use metaphors that convey only a part of the whole.

Our ancestors' metaphors don't serve us well because they are drawn from a thought world we no longer inhabit. Nelson suggests that by understanding ancient texts as reflecting the intuitions of our ancestors in the context of their time, we may find that many of their felt responses to the cosmos and human life are similar to ours.

Nelson takes the metaphor idea one step further by insisting that, inevitably, the non-scientist's understanding of the universe that scientists encounter is itself metaphorical. He's right, of course. Harvard astronomer George Field used to shock his listeners by insisting that he really could not explain astronomy and astrophysics because the audience did not understand mathematics, which is the language of those fields. Rather, he would try to convey an understanding of the cosmos by proposing analogies, many of them graphic, others verbal. The audience would not really understand what he was talking about, but would get some glimmer.

In my experience, that is what happens when good science writers try to explain scientific discoveries and theories to lay people. Often, these writers reach a consensus about what image to use to describe the significance of a mathematical formula that fits the phenomena. The most familiar is the expanding balloon with galaxies on its surface that is used to convey what Einstein meant when he said that space is expanding, carrying the whole universe with it, hence the ever-widening distances among galaxies. Nelson goes further. He posits that even the mathematical theories that scientists develop

and that integrate their amazingly precise observations are metaphors, because they capture only what experiments have shown, and that necessarily is a part, not the whole of reality.

Triumph of Science

Metaphors or not, for most well-educated Jews, the images and relationships that modern science produces are as close as humans can come to truth. Before the dawn of empirical science, people speculated, and their speculations were rarely connected to careful observation. No longer; we pasteurize milk, rather than attempting to exorcise the demons that produce cowpox; we administer antibiotics, rather than offering incantations. A religious life that is molded in the form of that "other world" either leads people astray (witness the stem cell flap) or, though quaint, seems irrelevant. Immersing oneself in antiquated ideas is fine for antiquarians, but not for busy, savvy people trying to integrate their lives and their understanding of reality — which is what religion is all about.

Nelson's book is a treasure trove. He has mined key scientific theories for metaphors and the feelings they evoke, and then related them to classical Jewish sources. For example, he lists the characteristics of the "Big Bang" (uniqueness, immense power and tremendous creativity) and notes that these are among the associations that "[his] Jewish mind" makes to God. The "Big Bang" is thus "a valuable, if incomplete and imperfect metaphor for God."

In his final chapter, Nelson confronts frankly the problem we face in understanding God in biblical terms, because we can no longer believe that the universe, including our own destinies within it, is manipulated by a personal God who acts in some respects as would a super-empowered human. Everything we observe — from quantum weirdness and evolution to the limbic system, the relativity of time and the finite limit of velocities in our universe — points in a different direction. Nelson ends up rejecting the idea that we can explain what we mean by God, and says we must be content with accepting our capacity to intuit some Presence beyond ourselves. He finds support for his ultimate musings in the mystical traditions that recent decades have revived.

Transforming Religion

Finally, Nelson is something of a prophet. He predicts that over the next several hundred years, we Jews will adopt scientific metaphors and that as we do, Jewish religious life will undergo a transformation as radical as the one that followed the inevitable demise of animal sacrifice after the destruction of the second Temple. Nelson believes we will do that because we must, lest we fade away into irrelevance.

All this is heady stuff, and should be required reading, certainly for Reconstructionist Jews. Happily, not only has Nelson discussed science and philosophy in understandable terms, but he has brought a wealth of classical Jewish learning into the discussion. What he has not done, and therefore what is open to us, is to confront the nuts and bolts, write the prayers and poetry and create the rituals that will effect the integration he has urged and prophesied.

That's no criticism; Nelson has taken a first giant step. He has thereby made a profound contribution to the future of progressive Judaism by grasping the nettle of the scientific/empirical revolution and bending its numerous revelations into a form that, though it will reshape Judaism, will enable it to make us feel at home once again in the "newly visioned firmament."³

1. George B. Driesen, "Embracing Science: A Reconstructionist Vision for the Twenty-First Century," *The Reconstructionist* 64:2, 67-76

2. See George B. Driesen, "How God Gets in the Way of Praying," *Moment*, October, 1990.

3. Mordecai M. Kaplan, "God the Life of Nature," *Sabbath Prayer Book* (New York: Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation, 1945) 383-391.

Jewish Roots of the American Soul

Jews and the American Soul: Human Nature in the Twentieth Century

by Andrew R. Heinze

(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 438 pages

REVIEWED BY REBECCA T. ALPERT

Andrew Heinze has written a thoughtful, provocative and expansive work about the Jewish contribution to the American understanding of human nature in the 20th century. Heinze, professor of American History and director of the Swig Judaic Studies Program at the University of San Francisco, sets out to marshal evidence that Jewish as well as Protestant traditions are sources of American concepts of the soul. By drawing attention to the many Jewish academicians, psychiatrists, philosophers and rabbis who have made rich contributions to the development of the therapeutic culture in America, Heinze adds a new dimension to our understanding of this aspect of American intellectual history.

Jews and Jewishness

Heinze achieves his goal by illustrating the role individual Jews played in the process, although many critics have not been persuaded that he has demonstrated the “Jewishness” of all the Jews he focuses on in this study. Many of his main protagonists — in-

cluding Sigmund Freud, Alfred Adler, Hugo Munsterberg, Joseph Jastrow, Franz Boas, Kurt Lewin, Viktor Frankl, Erik Erikson, Abraham Maslow, Joyce Brothers and Ann Landers — were Jewish by heritage, but were not writing on standard Jewish themes, or from what is traditionally understood as a Jewish perspective.

Others Heinze includes, such as Joshua Loth Liebman, Martin Buber, Elie Wiesel, Harold Kushner, Mordecai Kaplan, Abraham Joshua Heschel and Abraham Twerski certainly were. But Heinze makes it clear that a Jewish perspective “will be found not only among those who are immersed in Judaism or Yiddishkeit” (3) but also “comes out of a clearly identifiable Jewish context” (4). By broadening the concept of what constitutes a Jewish perspective, Heinze has given us the opportunity to reflect on how individuals who identify culturally but not religiously as Jews have nonetheless made vital contributions to American Jewish life and thought.

Influence of Mussar

Heinze shows how these individuals,

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while not identified with Judaism, were developing themes and concepts that were based on Jewish roots. He locates the source of the Jewish contribution of these figures to American thought predominantly in the tradition of mussar literature, the rational-ethical writings of medieval and modern European Jewry, and in the mussar movement that encouraged pietistic ethical practice and reflection on human nature. The role of mussar in Jewish life is often overlooked, but Heinze suggests that it provided the philosophical basis for making connections among ethical behavior, understandings of human nature and psychological insight that are central both to American and Jewish attitudes towards the soul.

Perhaps the most illuminating chapter is the one in which Heinze discusses a little known and early connection between mussar and American thought: a translation of Benjamin Franklin's practical ethics into Yiddish so that it could become part of mussar literature. The particular American strand of ethical self-reflection and self-improvement to which Franklin was a leading contributor mirrored American concerns with "the pursuit of happiness," and was a key factor in how Jewish philosophical ideas could be translated into the American context.

Translating, Adapting and Popularizing

Although Heinze never refers to the many Jewish thinkers he writes about as a translator, that was the role that most of them in fact played. Heinze shows

how the mussar-based ethical reflection became an important part of the way in which the psychological perspectives of Freud and Adler could be adapted and popularized for American use.

Of all the American Jewish thinkers and practitioners who were translating these insights, Rabbi Joshua Loth Liebman, author of the best selling book *Peace of Mind*, stands out. Heinze rescues Liebman's work from the genre of self-help literature and restores him to his rightful place as a sophisticated thinker. Liebman's message of comfort in post-World War II America was not based on the shallow idea of positive thinking, but rather on a combination of Kaplanian theology, Freudian psychology and the mussar-based notion that happiness is predicated on the hard work of deep psychological and ethical reflection. Heinze achieves similar goals in analyzing Abraham Twerski's writings on addiction and Harold Kushner's writings on theodicy, showing how each also translated sophisticated concepts and ideas into accessible and popular formats.

Absence of Women

The only group to whom Heinze fails to do justice is the women. He includes one chapter about Joyce Brothers, Gertrude Berg, Ayn Rand and Betty Friedan. While they were contemporaries in the 1950s, it makes no sense to group them together, as they have little in common intellectually. And with the exception of Berg (who is a great example of popularizing Jewish insights about human behavior) none

of them fit into the overall argument Heinze is making. Rand and Friedan are writing about other subjects. While *Brothers* fits into the genre, her ideas on marriage and adultery, as Heinze points out, are decidedly “unJewish,” even according to his broad working definition. I would have liked to have seen other women religious thinkers included, such as Tehilla Lichtenstein

and Judith Plaskow, and not only in a separate chapter on women but throughout the book.

Despite that objection, Heinze has made an important contribution to broadening our perspective on what counts as Jewish thought, and has helped to clarify the significant role that Jews and Jewish ideas have played in American intellectual history.

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