

Asking Reconstructionist Questions About Non-Reconstructionist Material

by Julie Greenberg

Being the smallest and youngest denomination on the North American Jewish scene, Reconstructionism by necessity flourishes in a non-Reconstructionist context. The textbooks and audio-visual material we use, and sometimes even the congregations in which we teach, belong to other movements. We are fortunate to have the opportunity to benefit from all the good thinking and years of effort that have gone into producing educational material for these other movements. Even as we appreciate the value of these materials, we should be aware that we have a unique contribution to make in the classroom as Reconstructionists.

Reconstructionist educators offer a perspective on Jewish life that emphasizes the four concerns stated in our model: the relevance of Judaism to the student's life, the evolving nature of Judaism, the diverse expression of Judaism, and the importance of building knowledgeably and creatively on our past to create a Jewish future. How do we convey these concerns to students when we are using materials produced by other movements?

We have to learn to ask Reconstructionist questions about non-Reconstructionist classroom material. Reconstructionist questions focus children's attention on two tasks that are required by the model. The first is to personalize the material (stages one and four). The second task is to understand the creative problem-solving displayed in Jewish history across time and across cultures (stages two and three). There are also key Reconstructionist ideas that can be taught through appropriately posed questions even without our own textbooks. These ideas include the Reconstructionist views of God, of gender equality, of peoplehood, and of Judaism as the evolving wisdom and practice of this people.

At every juncture the alert teacher will provide a Reconstructionist framework for the material available. To illustrate how this can be done, let's take a sampling of typical classroom topics that can benefit from explicitly Reconstructionist treatment.

God

Many Bible stories for young children present God uncritically as a character in the story. God speaks to heroes and performs miracles, responds to prayers and urges fidelity, protects the good guys and punishes the bad. All this occurs even in liberal educational material. As Reconstructionists we'd like to develop a more sophisticated approach to God even in the early years. The teacher therefore has to ask Reconstructionist questions about non-Reconstructionist material.

This Reconstructionist questioning can address two levels in the stories. The first level is that of interpreting the Bible stories in terms of the understanding of ancient Jews. Students need to understand how and why our ancestors developed the traditional fatherly idea of God that is expressed in these stories. What circumstances led people to conceptualize that kind of superman God?

- When something very unusual, different or amazing happens (escaping from bondage, reaching a Promised Land, surviving Crusades or pogroms);
- When you feel protected and victorious but you don't understand why— it doesn't seem that your own power accomplished the situation;
- When you are trying to understand tragedy it can help to have an explanation of God's punishment so that at least the world still seems to make sense;

The teacher can take each main character in the Biblical story and ask how s/he understood God and why. "Why did Hannah believe that God made her pregnant?" (She wanted something very much and she felt that her prayers were answered.) "Why were the Israelites so sure God had promised them Canaan?" (They had worked so hard to get it they felt justified and it was easy to believe God was on their side.) There is no one

right answer to this kind of question. The purpose of these questions is to welcome thoughtful hypotheses and considerations.

The second level of Reconstructionist interpretation is that of finding what was God's work in the story. That is, not to identify a character named God who effected events but to find the Godly forces that affected events: to find inspiration, good leadership, people working together, people understanding the natural world, people trying to live in a holy way. God is surely present in these Bible stories and we want children to see that. What we don't want is to reinforce an inadequate magical view of a God-person, one that would only set students up to reject the entire religion once they become more critical thinkers. These are difficult distinctions. If we begin building the Reconstructionist framework in the third grade, we hope to end up with capable Reconstructionist thinkers by the end of highschool.

Here are some activities related to the God issue that I have used in my classrooms to accomplish the personalizing and problem-solving tasks:

When teaching a prayer, I ask the class, "Do you think it is important to learn this prayer? Why or why not?" Discussion is lively with answers ranging from pious yeses "because God wants us to," to adamant, "No I don't believe in God and I think it's stupid." I then give a homework assignment for each student to write a paragraph explaining why they think it is important to study this prayer. This puts each student in the position of identifying with a strong Jewish leader and of having to do some creative thinking on behalf of our tradition.

At the next class we share the paragraphs and I lead a discussion based on the question, "Let's pretend none of us believes in God at all. If God wasn't part of the picture, why would it still be important to study this prayer?" They come up with comments about the importance of tradition, of community, of a holy language.

I say, "To me, that is God. What you're all talking about now (being able to go into a synagogue and join in, being connected to our great-great-great-

grandparents), all those connections are God. God isn't a man in the sky. God is when we feel a common purpose."

(I've done this with fourth through seventh graders.)

One day I was teaching a standard Hebrew lesson on masculine and feminine verb forms. The text book used the Hebrew word "to learn," so I was drilling the fourth graders on *lomed* and *lomedet*.

"Is David learning? Yes he is learning. Is Sarah learning? Yes she is learning."

Nine year old Ari raised his hand and asked, "How would you ask God if 'It' is learning?" In other words, would you use the feminine or masculine verb to speak to God? Great question! Great way for kids to think through a challenging issue even as they learn the material in my lesson plan. I took out a large sheet of poster board and wrote down Ari's question. Then we went around the classroom giving each student a chance to have an answer recorded. Their answers were brilliant and the discussion in this fourth grade classroom re-capitulated much current theological debate about God's "personhood."

Abby said, "Say both *lomed* and *lomedet* talking to God."

Gabe said, "Check the gender of *Adonay* and be consistent with that." Julie said, "Males should say *lomed* and females *lomedet*." Jeremy said, "Each person should choose which way to do it." Jordan said, "God is air so you can't ask anyway."

The poster went up on the wall and every student in the class learned how to recognize male and female noun forms. Moreover their hunger for meaningful theology in the classroom was satisfied even though our subject had been the Hebrew language.

Sinai

Each Jewish movement's understanding of what happened at Sinai is fundamental to its

world-view. Reconstructionists probably will not be teaching from texts that present the events at Sinai as God's gift to the Chosen People. We are more likely to be using materials that discuss the beginnings of ethical monotheism (Reform) or that assume some "modest" degree of supernatural revelation (Conservative.) What messages do we want our students to learn about this formative experience in our past?

I think we want to focus on how we became a People. We want to ask Reconstructionist questions such as, "How did a bunch of slaves in Egypt turn into our Jewish ancestors? What were the events along the way, including the Mt. Sinai experience, that changed the way the Hebrew people worked together and thought about each other? How was the period of wandering in the wilderness different for them than the period of slavery? What things did the Hebrews need to learn before they were ready to settle a new land and create a religion? Was it easier or harder to live together once there was Torah?" In answering these questions students should be helped to evaluate all the data. Certain facts would suggest that at an early stage it there was already a great deal group consciousness: the midwives saved a people; Moses, Miriam and Aaron had a real vision of the future; the whole people mobilized and escaped together. Other facts — the Golden Calf, the whining in the wilderness — suggest wasn't until long after Sinai that the Hebrews came together as a people. Still more facts such as the setting up of courts and judges and the development of Torah need to be taken into account. The answer might be that a series of events from the Exodus all the way to Yavneh, shaped a new People and that Sinai was not such a critical junction. Whatever the answers, these are the issues with which we want our students to struggle. In summary, let's review some characteristics of Reconstructionist questions:

1. Reconstructionist questions personalize content by starting with the child's own life. "Has anyone here ever dressed up in a disguise?" might open a lesson on Marranos.

2. Reconstructionist questions help children discover change across time and our ability to problem solve in new situations. "Let's say your friend goes into MacDonalds and orders a cheeseburger. What are all the things about this activity that would have been absolutely, totally and completely impossible for your great-great-great-great grandmother to do?"

3. Reconstructionist questions help children discover different Jewish ways of living. "Let's interview each other and see if we can come up with a list of at least fifteen different family customs for Passover." "When you finish reading the chapter on this holiday, write one sentence about how the Sephardim do it and one sentence about the Ashkenazim," or "Write down two ways Israelis celebrate Rosh HaShana differently from some American Jews." (It's a national holiday there; only one day is observed) "If you were trying to pray without using sexist language, how would you re-write this prayer?"

4. Reconstructionist questions point to the future. "If you were a politician negotiating for a fair and workable peace in the Mid-East, what would you propose?" "Now that you've studied the different kinds of Judaism, present a Judaism for the future that includes the best of each version." "Now that the world has been through the Holocaust, what have we learned so that it will never happen again?"

By asking questions that point children towards a Reconstructionist framework, we are free to use a wider range of materials from all movements. We need not worry that we will deprive our students of the Reconstructionist perspective which we value so highly, because that perspective sharing can be achieved by the way we use the materials we have.

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Questions for Reflection
(Greenberg)

1. Take a text that many of you in the faculty have used. What assumptions about God, Torah, and Israel seem "simple-minded," and perhaps do not account for the richness and diversity of Judaism as an evolving religious civilization?
2. Focus on the most and least appropriate text you have ever been given as a teacher. Turn someone else in your group into the publisher. Make a few notes and then role-play a conversation between you and the publisher exploring what you found so wonderful or awful about the given text.
3. Brainstorm as a group a list of principles of what would make for a good Reconstructionist text.