
Belonging, Behaving, Believing: Exploring Reconstructionist Process

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Not every question has a simple answer, nor does every situation have an easy resolution. Life does not always fit neatly into one specific format. Many of us understand this, because, as Jewish Americans, we sometimes find it difficult to live simultaneously in both Jewish and American culture. Reconstructionism seeks to address this diversity, and to help us make room for it in our Jewish lives.

Today's Orthodox Judaism is a wonderfully orderly form of Judaism in which everything is laid out. This orderliness can be incredibly comforting. It allows people to feel as if there is, indeed, an answer to every question. Congregants can go to their rabbis with any question or situation, and their rabbis will provide an answer. An Orthodox Jew knows exactly when to *daven* the three daily prayer services and exactly what words and prayers to pray. An Orthodox Jew knows exactly what foods are acceptable and what can and cannot be eaten in combination. An Orthodox Jew knows the rules of Shabbat and observes them diligently. In many cases, Orthodox Jews in the United States live a Jewish life that takes precedence over their lives as Americans.

Reconstructionism, on the other hand, is not at all tidy. It is a process of constant readdressing and reevaluating. The way a Reconstructionist community answered a particular question yesterday may differ from the way in which that very same community will answer that very same question tomorrow. If the same set of circumstances were to be presented to two different Reconstructionist communities, it is almost certain that their responses to those circumstances would

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differ. This is because the geography of where the Reconstructionist community is located plays a part in its nature. A congregation in the rural Midwest has different influences than a congregation in Boston.

An Evolving Civilization

Reconstructionism defines Judaism as an evolving civilization, whereas the traditional Jewish belief is that there has been little alteration in Jewish practice since the rabbis of the Talmud wrote down the oral Torah. The Reconstructionist perspective is that there is, and always has been, constant change, a constant ebb and flow and constant influence from other cultures. For example, Mordecai Kaplan, who was the founder of Reconstructionism and a teacher at the Conservative movement's Jewish Theological Seminary of America, struggled with the issue of *kashrut* and with its implications and value in modern culture. In 1922, he spoke with a congregant about the meaning of keeping kosher in the 20th century. He told her that *kashrut* "was obviously a defense against assimilation, but if in some way it proved 'socially harmful,' it is [our] duty...to insist on its elimination" (Sculd, p. 297). Since Kaplan made this statement, Reconstructionism has developed creative and meaningful ways for observing *kashrut* — a subject for another discussion.

Reconstructionism even regards Shabbat observance from the perspective of what will nourish us spiritually in the ongoing process of balancing the six days of creation with the weekly day of rest in our lives. So, instead of following Shabbat to the letter of the law, a Reconstructionist Jew might choose to observe some laws and disregard others. If a person finds it nourishing to attend services at a synagogue that is beyond walking distance, then driving might be acceptable in that person's thinking. If Shabbat is the only day of the week when a person has the opportunity to listen to or to play cherished music while devoting his or her full attention to it, enjoying music might become that person's regular Shabbat practice.

Three important words describe Reconstructionist process: belonging, behaving, believing. The biblical story of Sarah illustrates this progression from belonging to behaving to believing, and it is illuminating to consider a contemporary *midrash* (commentary) on it.

Sarah's Crisis of Faith

Consider Sarah, whose husband does something absolutely unthinkable — the binding of their son, Isaac. The situation is resolved, and her son and her husband

are physically unharmed, but she has suffered such pain that she has taken to her bed, is hardly eating, and can no longer make sense of the world. She won't even let Abraham in to see her. How can she face a husband who would blindly follow God to the point of coming only inches away from sacrificing their only son? Isaac is the son of their old age, the son promised to them by God. And then God waited years, while Abraham and Sarah raised him and loved him, before demanding that they return him. No, Sarah could not take this in, could not look into Abraham's eye.

A chaplain approaches Sarah's tent, knocks on a post, and listens. Sarah calls out, "Yes?" For a few moments, they talk in niceties and generalities. Her rage has cooled off a bit; the sand storms have subsided. Then, there is silence. Sarah lifts her eyes longingly and the chaplain asks, "What is it, Sarah?" Sarah's eyes settle on her hands fidgeting in her lap. She sighs. "I loved God so, and Abraham, too. How could they do this to me?"

The chaplain looks caringly at her and responds, "Sarah, let's ask God that question. What do you want to say to God or to ask God?"

"I am so furious, I want God to know how furious I am! Why? Why has God done this to me? How can I go on?"

The chaplain fashions Sarah's words into a prayer. At the end, the chaplain adds a comment about how precious Sarah is. Sarah listens silently. She begins to weep.

Now, a conversation can begin. Together, the chaplain and Sarah delve into what Sarah needs and wants, now and for the rest of her life. Gently, the chaplain asks about her past, her history with God, with Abraham and with Isaac. Does the past make a difference? Does Sarah want to take the past into consideration now, as she thinks about her present pain and her possibilities? Does she have a secular life that informs her Jewish life? Is community important for her? Is there anyone other than Abraham and Isaac whom she has felt supported by and whom she wants to reconnect with now? What about ritual? In the past, has she connected with God through certain rituals? If so, would those same rituals bring her peace or be meaningful for her now? Or would new rituals be more likely to repair her spirit from this sense of being torn apart, not only from God, but also from her family? Is repair of her relationship with Abraham possible?

No Right or Wrong Answers

There are no right or wrong answers to these questions; there is only process. Sarah's chaplain opens a door to belonging and Sarah walks through. On the other

side, a new door faces her, one labeled “behaving.” As Sarah and her chaplain talk and address each of these issues, Sarah will feel her way and settle on the direction that she feels most comfortable with in that moment. Tomorrow, she may see things differently. Perhaps she will go on to explore some of her questions within her community, asking for personal support, as well as the support of tradition, the Bible and other texts. Sarah’s feeling of belonging has led her to behaving. She begins to pray, this time not to a God who will hear her prayer and answer her, but to a God who exists in the universe as a power through which she can find the release and comfort she seeks — a power through which she can find herself. She is beginning to believe.

Sarah’s sense of belonging has been challenged, but she begins through that challenge to explore what belonging means for her. With the chaplain’s help, she begins the conversation that opens her up to behaving in a new way. This, in turn, leads her to question and consider the past, as well as where she is in that moment and where she wants to be. Sarah, who once believed so strongly in God, is now on a path that may bring her back to that belief, and beyond.

According to this story, Sarah would have made a great Reconstructionist. She came to a point where she was able to consider the untidiness of her life, her situation with Abraham and her relationship with God. She learned to allow other individuals, secular and religious alike, and her community as well, to join her. She learned to join them. She explored tradition with a discerning eye — all the while keeping in mind that she lived at a particular time and in a particular circumstance and that her individual and community decisions could and should reflect that. Sarah lived a full and satisfying life of belonging, behaving and believing. This is the Reconstructionist hope for all Jews.

Works Cited

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