

Exploring Judaism

Adult Education Study Guide

*for the 2000 edition of Exploring Judaism
by Rebecca T. Alpert and Jacob J. Staub*



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Rabbi Nina Mandel

*Made possible by a grant from the
Yad Mordecai Keren Torah Fund
Established by Sidney (z"l) and Dorothy Becker (z"l)*

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Acknowledgement from Yad Mordecai Adult Education Project Director Jeffrey Schein and JRF Director of Education Shai Gluskin: *We are indebted to the vision, commitment and hard work of the members of the JRF Adult Education Sub-Committee and its co-chairs, Alan Friedlander and Rabbi Ilyse Kramer, and to the past co-chair Rabbi Marc Margolius.*

SERIES INTRODUCTION: THE PLACE OF ADULT LEARNING IN THE RECONSTRUCTIONIST JEWISH COMMUNITY

by Dr. Jeffrey Schein, Yad Mordecai Adult Education Curriculum Project Director

Adult Jewish learning is bred in the bone of Reconstructionists. Perhaps its in the born (Jews by birth) and acquired (Jews by choice) DNA. At least that is what Rabbi Rebecca Alpert and I concluded in 1990 after profiling several Reconstructionist congregations and Havurot for a book we subsequently published (*Life-Long Jewish Learning, FRCH, 1992*). The commitment to adult Jewish learning was not an afterthought for these communities. In fact, adult Jewish learning had constituted them as communities.

Though our demography is changing as the movement grows, it still seems singularly unnecessary to mount soap boxes in order to rail against pediatric Judaism or otherwise complain about shortchanging the needs of adult Jewish learners in Reconstructionist contexts. In my own work these past twenty years with both non-Reconstructionist and Reconstructionist communities I've noted that my advocacy has often taken the form of "don't juvenilize Jewish education" with the non-Reconstructionist groups. By contrast, I've found myself reminding Reconstructionist groups that there are sometimes good reasons for privileging the education we provide our children.

We face new and different challenges in our Reconstructionist communities in regard to adult Jewish learning. The list below of such challenges is hardly exhaustive but is suggestive of some of the concerns that have permeated the Yad Mordecai curriculum project. They include

1. Creating concrete, facilitator-friendly materials that reflect Reconstructionist sensitivities.
2. Paying attention to the sometimes distinctive, sometimes overlapping role of lay and rabbinic leader in facilitating adult Jewish learning.
3. Enhancing adult Jewish learning by integrating it into the larger learning life of the congregation. Could/should the teens and children in the congregation/havurah be studying these materials as well? What integrated themes might cut across the venues of learning in a community?
4. Utilizing the dynamic of *lilmod ullamed* (to learn and to teach) in our congregations to have our adult learners become adult facilitators. How can we encourage and train adult learners to leverage their growing knowledge by taking on new roles as teachers of and advocates for Jewish learning? How might they draw upon new Jewish insights as they engage in the holy work of *tikkun olam*?
5. Engaging in Jewish text study as an expressive mode of Jewish spirituality and literacy. What influence will the fruits of that study have in shaping Reconstructionist priorities?

The Yad Mordecai curriculum builds on these general North American developments as well as resources developed internally within the Reconstructionist movement.. The challenge of all those involved in adult Jewish learning throughout our movement will be to integrate these new resources with existing resources. Knowing which resource truly meets individual and communal needs will require new self-awareness of the cultural and educational contexts that shape the lives of adult Jewish learners.

Importantly, we note here that the ultimate goal of the Yad Mordecai project points beyond the project itself. The "prize" of Adult Jewish learning in a Reconstructionist context is a deep, functional literacy that enables contemporary Jews to understand, embrace, and renew Judaism. We imagine emerging a Reconstructionist program not dissimilar in form (but significantly different in substance and methodology in ways reflecting Reconstructionism) to those of the Florence Melton Adult mini-school

and the Boston-based Me'ah project. These two-year intensive programs of Jewish learning have had a significant impact on Jews across North America as documented by Schuster, Grant, Woocher, et. al in *Journey of Heart and Mind*. If we add to this orientation intensive work in Hebrew language and the concerted attempt to bridge the gap between study and action as described in David Teutsch's recently completed evaluation of the *Bridges* program of Congregation Chizuk Emuno in Baltimore, we can see something of the shape of the Reconstructionist future in adult Jewish learning.

Between here (the present moment in adult Jewish learning for the Reconstructionist movement) and there (the prize of an intensive literacy project) lies much middle ground. Thus, we imagine and suggest next steps for three different kinds of JRF congregations .

RANGE OF NEW RESOURCES FROM THE YAD MORDECAI PROJECT

Initiated by a gift from Dorothy (z"l) and Sidney (z"l) Becker to the Yad Mordecai Keren Torah project, the project has enriched and expanded our range of adult learning resources.

JRF (and non-Reconstruction congregations sharing similar educational and Jewish values) now will have a much wider range of adult learning materials to trigger new learning. These new resources can be grouped into categories laid out below. Several of the curricula are listed in two categories. Generally, these curricula are based on modules of 4-8 weeks of Jewish learning with enough inherent curricular flexibility to make for shorter or longer units of study.

THE TITLES

(Titles of curricula in **bold** are currently in print as of November, 2004. Curricula designated as "R/AJL" require a rabbi or an advanced Jewish learner to facilitate the class. To view a draft form of one of the yet-to-be published curricula, please right to JRF Director of Education Rabbi Shai Gluskin at sgluskin@jrf.org)

RECONSTRUCTIONISM AND RECONSTRUCTIONIST JEWISH LIVING

- **Study Guide to Exploring Judaism (Nina Mandel and Marjie Jacobs)**
- Israel and Zionism (Fred Dobb and Cyd Wiseman) (R/AJL)
- A Study of Jewish Symbols and Traditions (Kashrut, tefillin, and prayer; Maurice Harris)
- **Kol Ha'neshamah Mahzor (Sherry Linkon and Steve Segar)**

MODERN/CONTEMPORARY JEWISH LIFE

- Israel and Zionism (Fred Dobb and Cyd Weitzman) (R/AJL)
- **Modern Jewish Thinkers (Barbara Penzner)**
- Swimming in the Sea of Torah (Rabbi Sheryl Lewart) (R/AJL)
- Judaism and Economic Justice (Rabbi Toba Spitzer)

JEWISH TEXT STUDY

- **Aytz Hayim We: Study The Hamesh Megillot: Esther, Ruth, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs and Lamentations; Rabbi Erin Hirsh**
- Mishnah, (*Moadim Le'limud-Seasons for Learning: Mishnah and the Holidays of the Year*, Rabbi Gail Diamond (R,AJL)
- Talmud: Sacred Argument (Ilyse Kramer) (R/AJL)
- Judaism in Translation: Kissing Through a Veil (David Siff) (R/AJL)

ADAPTING THE YAD MORDECAI CURRICULA

Just as learners have their unique adult/Jewish developmental needs so too congregations/havurot also have their own histories, needs, and capacities. The former sensitivity is encapsulated nicely in the curriculum on Exploring Judaism where Rabbis Nina Mandel and Margie Jacobs provide three different tiers of activities for people new to Reconstructionism, a second group of learners with some prior Reconstructionist learning, and a third set of activities geared to veteran Reconstructionist learners.

Realizing that congregations will also need multiple points of entry as they intensify their adult Jewish learning, we borrow a construct from Cyril Houle, a distinguished thinker in the field of general adult learning. Houle suggested that we ought to distinguish between at least three different kinds of adult learning needs: social, practical, and intellectual/spiritual. We might transpose these terms slightly into a Jewish context as those learning congregations most interested in

1. Reconstructionist guidance in terms of issues of Jewish living (“Congregation Mekor Hayim”);
2. Tikkun olam oriented learning (“Congregation Ohavei Tzedek”);
3. Striving towards more complete Jewish knowledge/literacy (“Congregation Dorshei Da’at”).

Below is an outline of suggested pattern of study for each of these three congregations each built on a three-year transition period that might set the stage for a later, more intensive and comprehensive, program in adult learning. Rather than work against the grain of their natural learning orientation, we have followed Cyril Houle in trying to align our program with their most natural spiritual/Jewish magnetic field.

“Congregation Mekor Hayim” (Practical Jewish Living)

Year One Offerings: Jewish Alive and American (Lewart). (This course is published by the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. It is a 30-week broad course that can serve as an introduction or re-introduction to Jewish life.) **Study Guide to Exploring Judaism (Jacobs/Mandell)**

Year Two Offerings: Study Guide to the Mahzor (Linkon/Segar), Mishnah on Holidays (Dia,pmd), Prayer (Harris)

Year Three Offerings: Tefillin or Kashrut as Models of Reconstructionist Approach to Jewish Symbols (Harris), Sacred Community/Kehilla Builders (JRF; Shawn Zevit), Israel and Zionism (Dobb/Weismann)

“Congregation Ohavei Tzedek” (Tikkun Olam)

Year One Offerings: **Sacred Community/Kehilla Builders (JRF; Shawn Zevit)**, Judaism and Economic Justice (JRF; Toba Spitzer)

Year Two Offerings: **Kohelet/Ecclesiastes and Eicha/Lamentations from Eytz Hayim We (Erin Hirsh), B'horef Hayamim, Ethics Center RRC**

Year Three Offerings: Israel and Zionism (Dobb/Weissman), **Reconstructionist Journal Issues devoted to Tikkun Olam**

Congregation Dorshei Tzedek (Jewish Literacy)

Year One Offerings: **Eytz Hayim We series on Jewish Texts**, Swimming in the Sea of Torah (Lewart)

Year Two Offerings: The Talmud and Sacred Argument (Kramer), Kissing Through a Veil: Judaism in Translation (Siff), Mishnah and Jewish Holidays (Diamond)

Year Three Offerings: Israel and Zionism (Dobb/Weissman), **Modern Jewish Thinkers (Penzner)**

CONCLUSION

The raw energy for all the above forms of intensified adult education comes from a common commitment to life-long Jewish learning. However different in form, the substance of each congregation's new work is captured by the Talmudic adage “*hashmeya aznecha l'mah motzi mipecha*”, let your ear listen to what your mouth has said. Put more colloquially it emphasizes how critical it is to critical to “walk the walk” as well as “talk the talk.”

The historic commitment of Reconstructionism to adult learning needs constant renewal in form and substance. It is *avodat kodesh*, holy work for each Reconstructionist community. We hope that your engagement with this curriculum will be a vessel for that holy work.

INTRODUCTION

Beruhim HaBa'im, welcome, and thank you for furthering your studies with the *Exploring Judaism Study Guide*, newly revised for the 2000 edition of *Exploring Judaism* (EJ). Every student should have a copy of *Exploring Judaism*, available from the Reconstructionist Press (www.jrf.org) This Guide is meant to help all levels of learners to further their learning about Reconstructionist thought and practice, and to learn about the movement's development. We hope you'll find the Guide easy to navigate and useful in your studies. The following is a description of what you'll find in the Guide as well as some suggestions for its use.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

The Guide offers exercises, discussion topics, and suggestions for further study for each of the chapters of the expanded and updated version of EJ. There are many significant changes from the earlier version of both EJ and the earlier study guide, so even if you have read EJ in the past, you should find this current Guide helpful. For each chapter of EJ, we have created exercises around several of the major themes found in that section. For each chapter there are three levels of study and inquiry:

ALEPH– This level is recommended to those for whom Reconstructionism is a new topic. It is designed to reinforce the basic concepts and lessons in EJ.

BET– This level is designed to review the concepts of EJ and then take the learner through the experience of using Reconstructionist thought and practice to examine Jewish events in her/his life.

GIMMEL– This level is recommended for groups that have a strong, comfortable familiarity with Reconstructionism and want to delve deeper into the philosophical underpinnings of Reconstructionism and issues for contemporary Reconstructionist practice.

GETTING STARTED

Before you begin your study, your group should consider the following planning questions.

1. DO WE NEED SOMEONE TO TEACH THIS CLASS?

While having a designated facilitator is desirable, you do not necessarily need an “expert” on Reconstructionism to use this guide. If you choose to have one facilitator, that person should be very familiar with the entire EJ book, as well as comfortable with the exercises presented in the Guide. If you choose to have alternating facilitators from your group, then each person should be responsible for preparing his or her chapter or section thoroughly.

2. WHICH LEVEL IS RIGHT FOR OUR GROUP?

You can assess your group's level by using the descriptions above. Do not worry if you have different levels of learners in a group; this will give you an opportunity to share knowledge.

However, the class should not be geared to a level higher than is comfortable for most participants.

3. WHERE DO WE START?

You can certainly work through the Guide chapter by chapter. If you are learning at level Aleph, this is the preferred strategy. The first six chapters of EJ and the Guide are focused on the philosophical and theological bases of Reconstructionism. Chapters Seven through Eleven explore Reconstructionist practice more fully. Groups working at the Bet and Gimmel levels may choose to focus closely on one half of the book and simply review the other chapters without going into depth.

4. HOW LONG SHOULD THIS TAKE?

Ideally, you will want to spend one class session on each chapter, though in some cases you might combine two chapters on a similar theme.

5. HOW CAN WE LEARN MORE?

Depending on the level on which you start, this Guide can be used several times by the same group. Chapter Twelve of EJ also has an annotated bibliography for each chapter of the book.

A word about Jewish study:

A traditional method for study in a Jewish context is in *hevruta*, or pairs. You may find it helpful to incorporate *hevruta* study into your plan. This might involve two people committing to one another as study partners for the duration of the class, meeting outside of class time, and preparing for each class session by studying the EJ chapters in depth together. Then, each *hevruta* can bring questions and insights to be discussed by the class all together.

Good luck, and enjoy your studies,

Rabbi Margie Jacobs and Rabbi Nina Mandel

GUIDE FOR FACILITATORS

The following are some suggestions to help facilitators plan for teaching the EJ. The first thing the facilitator should do, however, is read EJ in its entirety before the class begins. Familiarity with the text and with the group you are leading are your greatest keys to success.

1. THE STRUCTURE OF THE LESSONS

Generally, each chapter is a single lesson in this U.S. guide (note that Chapters I and II are combined into a single lesson). We have divided each chapter of EJ into themes and levels within each theme. In addition, at the beginning of each chapter of this guide, you will find a list of Key Concepts to help guide your discussions. You will also find a list of any special materials needed for specific exercises and supplemental readings when appropriate.

Typically, each section is introduced by a “text” quotation from EJ or a related source, followed by a set of questions appropriate to the learning level. The exercises are designed to facilitate a deeper engagement with the text of EJ and the principles of Reconstructionism taught therein.

It is expected that each participant will prepare for class by reading the appropriate chapter of EJ. The text selections in the lessons should be read aloud by the facilitator or a member of the class at the start of the lesson to help review and to prepare for the exercises that follow.

For some exercises, we have included additional readings from other Reconstructionist sources, all of which are appended in this Guide. Ideally, a copy of the additional reading would be distributed for the participants to read before class. When this is not possible, the facilitator should prepare the reading in advance and be ready to provide guidance to the class as necessary to complete the assignments.

2. OUTCOMES

The goal of the *Exploring Judaism Study Guide* is to help groups navigate EJ more easily and to delve more deeply into the philosophical, theoretical, and practical bases of Reconstructionist Judaism. It is not a guide for deciding congregational policy or process. However, it is realistic to expect that issues will be raised during the course of using the Guide that may be provocative enough to stimulate some discussion about policy or process issues.

Please note that the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation has a several guides for policy and decision-making on many issues, including “The Role of Non-Jews in the Synagogue,” “Homosexuality and Judaism,” and “Becoming an Inclusive Community.” Chapter Twelve of EJ has an extensive list of suggestions for further study.

3. FACILITATOR EXPECTATIONS

It is appropriate for the facilitator of these sessions to be either a lay or a rabbinic leader in the community, well familiar with the issues of the group. The primary role of the facilitator for this Guide will be to help the class make decisions about what and how much to undertake in each session and to lead group discussions. For each chapter, there are a number of topics and exercises for the different learning levels. Because of time and other factors, it may not be

realistic to try to do each exercise. The facilitator should use her prior knowledge of the community to decide where to focus each discussion.

As noted above, some of the exercises may be provocative in certain situations. Where possible, the facilitator should assess in advance if a specific topic is best left for another time or venue, as well as when it might be advisable to bring in a different facilitator, such as the rabbi, to help with the discussion.

4. TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

It is recommended that the facilitator begin each class session with a brief review of the topics raised in the previous session. This can be done either through notes taken during the class or by reviewing the list of Key Concepts from the previous session.

Following this review, the facilitator or a member of the class should read the text selection for the session out loud.

Depending on the size of the class, the exercises can be done in several different ways: by breaking into *hevruta* pairs, in small groups, or the whole group together. It may also be possible to have small groups each tackle a different aspect or question of the exercise. If you have broken into smaller groups, it is important to come back together before the end of the class to share what each group has been discussing. One way to do this is to have one person from each group act as a “reporter” who gives a brief presentation to the whole class.

Many of the exercises encourage participants to make or brainstorm a list. When brainstorming, it is important to get all ideas and suggestions on the table, preferably writing down each one. The facilitator will need to remind participants that the brainstorming period is not the time to discuss or debate ideas. There is time for discussion and debate later in each lesson.

At the end of each session, the facilitator should announce which chapter should be prepared for the following session and make supplemental readings available if appropriate.

Finally, be flexible and creative with this Guide. An important part of learning about Reconstructionism is to participate in the kind of thoughtful, values-based discussions that are the hallmark of the movement. We have not provided a “script” for the lessons; rather, input can be elicited from all of the participants based on their interests. This may mean skipping some of the exercises or returning to a specific topic. Only the facilitator and the group will know which lessons will be most meaningful for them.

CHAPTER 1: THE CREATION OF AN AMERICAN JUDAISM

CHAPTER 2: AN EVOLVING RELIGIOUS CIVILIZATION

NOTES FOR THE FACILITATOR

KEY CONCEPTS AND DISCUSSION POINTS:

- **Peoplehood and Belonging**
 - The power of Jewish identification is the sense of peoplehood and affiliation with the world Jewish community and history.
 - We recognize that our lives are made up of group affiliations and we are often negotiating relationships among these groups.
- **The Evolution of Jewish Civilization**
 - Jewish thought and practice change with each generation.
 - The ability to change is the key to constancy and relevancy in Judaism.
- **The Influences on Kaplan's Thinking**
 - Mordecai Kaplan's revolution was interpreting Judaism through the lenses of the social sciences and psychology.
 - Changes in religious thought are often rooted in changes in the intellectual and political climate.

SPECIAL MATERIALS NEEDED

Copies of the handout on "Judaism in our Generations"

PEOPLEHOOD/BELONGING

ALEPH, BET, AND GIMMEL TEXT:

“Individuals may choose diverse ways to link themselves to the Jewish people, but it is *belonging* to that people that makes us all Jews. This definition of Jews as a people does not only link us to our ancestors. It also illustrates that we are but one among the many peoples of the world, an integral part of the human family. While other interpretations of Judaism have sought to describe us as a people *apart*, Kaplan's definition suggests that we should see ourselves as related to other peoples and similar to them.” (EJ, p.13)

ALEPH AND BET EXERCISE:

1. We all belong to many different groups. What are the different groups to which you belong?
2. What does it mean to you to belong to each of these groups?
3. When does your membership in different groups lead to conflict for you?
4. How do you resolve these conflicts?
5. Are there ways in which being Jewish either helps or hinders you in any of these groups?

BET AND GIMMEL EXERCISE:

1. Write down the story of how you became involved with Reconstructionism or with your synagogue. Use the following format:

At first...

And then...

And then...

And then...

2. Share with the group. How did your experiences foster a sense of belonging to the Reconstructionist movement? To the Jewish people?

THE EVOLUTION OF JEWISH CIVILIZATION

ALEPH TEXT:

"For us, Judaism has been created by Jews over the course of our history. Judaism necessarily has evolved because all of human culture evolves and adapts to changing historical circumstances. It is inaccurate to claim that the rituals and beliefs of contemporary Orthodox Jews date back to Sinai. In every era, our ancestors interacted with neighboring cultures and reinterpreted laws in accordance with the needs and values of the times." (EJ, pp.20-21)

ALEPH EXERCISE:

1. In *hevruta* pairs, fill in the following chart, "Judaism in our Generations", by drawing from personal impressions and recollections of parents' and grandparents' accounts of Jewish life.
2. Come back to the group to share information from the chart. Where was the most distinct continuity? Discontinuity?

HANDOUT: JUDAISM IN OUR GENERATIONS

	GRANDPARENT'S GENERATION	PARENTS' GENERATION	PRESENT/CHILDREN'S GENERATION
JUDAISM IN THE HOME			
JUDAISM IN THE COMMUNITY			
JEWISH/NON-JEWISH RELATIONS			
INTERMARRIAGE			
INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS VS. COMMUNITY PRESSURES			
PASSOVER			
CONFIDENCE IN THE JEWISH FUTURE			
CONCEPT OF SPIRITUALITY			

BET AND GIMMEL TEXT:

“Once we recognize the evolution that Jewish civilization has undergone over three thousand years, we can begin to sense its power and resiliency. Jews have been able to live among so many different peoples with different cultures because of the ability of the Jewish people to take elements from the outside culture and adapt them for our purposes, making them Jewish.”

“The development of the holiday of Hanukkah illustrates this idea. Originally a commemoration of a historical event (probably a victory in a Jewish civil war), Hanukkah took on different meanings in different eras. It attached itself to the time of the winter solstice where, like Christmas, it replaced a pagan festival that brought light to the dark winter. Its original significance was de-emphasized by later tradition, which did not glorify human victory in war, and its celebration was commemorated by a special *haftarah* (prophetic reading) from the Book of Zechariah which states, ‘not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of Hosts.’ In modern times, Hanukkah was revived both by Zionists, who wanted to glorify Jewish efforts in military endeavors, and by Jews integrated into Christian society, who needed a counterpart to Christmas.” (EJ pp.22)

1. What does Hanukkah mean to you now? What did it mean to you as a child? What did it mean to your parents? Your grandparents?
2. Trace the evolution of another holiday (i.e., Passover). List all of the associations that you have with that holiday.
3. Try to determine in what context each association might have originated.

THE INFLUENCES ON KAPLAN'S THINKING

ALEPH, BET, AND GIMMEL TEXT:

"Kaplan's life was very much influenced by the burgeoning wisdom available from the social sciences. Those new understandings of human life, which Kaplan unreservedly accepted, led him to various conclusions about what it might mean to be Jewish. Today, we draw on a much wider range of academic disciplines. Indeed, even the discipline of sociology, on which he relied, has developed in unanticipated ways. At the same time, we are more willing to question the authority and objectivity of social scientific research."

"Kaplan's thinking assumed that the values embodied in American society – values like liberty and democracy – are the culmination of the progress of human civilization. Today, we tend to be less certain that all aspects of American society are the ideals toward which every civilization ought to aspire, and we tend to put increased emphasis on non-American aspects of the Jewish tradition. Thus, our sense of the proper balance between the two is different from his. In Kaplan's day, the predominant worldview exalted the impersonal approach of the scientist and assumed that rational beings would use their minds together to create a better world. Today, living after Auschwitz and faced with the continuing danger of nuclear and ecological disasters, some of us question more vigorously the extent of our capabilities to bring about a better world by using politics and technology to achieve the good and the true. We no longer view science and technology uncritically; we use them while recognizing them as tools to be regarded cautiously."

"Kaplan lived in an era when nationalism was perceived to be a force for good. Today, some of us question the power of nation-states to do more than war against one another."

"In Kaplan's generation, intellectuals were involved in a debate about theism and atheism. Today, post-modernism has replaced empiricism as the frame of reference, so that most thoughtful Jews do not struggle with the question, 'Does God exist?' but rather with the question, 'How can we be certain about values like truth, goodness, or beauty in a fragmented world?'"

"Finally, we live today in a global village in which East and West are no longer so separate. Whereas Kaplan was working in Western categories, Jews today also must respond creatively to the challenge of Eastern religions. There is a new focus on the cultivation of inwardness and spirituality." (EJ, pp.9-10)

ALEPH, BET, AND GIMMEL EXERCISE:

1. Based on the quote above, list on a board the approach to basic intellectual assumptions in Kaplan's time (column A) and in our own (column B).
2. Do you agree with this characterization of our worldview today? What would you add/change?

BET AND GIMMEL EXERCISE:

1. How does contemporary Judaism/your community's practice reflect the values listed in column A? In column B?
2. If Kaplan were writing today, influenced by the world-view reflected in column B, how might his thinking and the Judaism that he envisioned be different?

CHAPTER 3: GOD

NOTES FOR THE FACILITATOR

KEY CONCEPTS AND DISCUSSION POINTS:

- **Theology**
 - There is no one definition of God, only descriptions of God working in our lives
 - Each of us experiences God in different ways at different stages of our lives.
 - It is normal to have both negative and positive feelings about images of God, especially as we try to work out personal theologies.
- **The Nature of God**
 - Reconstructionism focuses on the religious civilization and practice of the Jewish people, more so than on a precise definition of God.
 - Kaplan proposes a vision of God that relates to immanent presence and action rather than supernatural protection and intervention.
- **Choseness, Vocation, and Commandedness**
 - How do we deal with issues that fall outside of normative scientific understanding, such as spiritual and mystical practices?
 - How is this done in a religious setting with intellectual integrity?
 - Is it possible to have a sense of voluntary commandedness?

SPECIAL MATERIALS NEEDED

3"x5" index cards for the Theology exercise

Copies of the handout on Supernaturalism, Naturalism and Transnaturalism

The morning blessings found in the *siddur* (on pages 152-161 of the *Kol Haneshamah Shabbat ve Hagim* prayer book or on pages 14-19 of the *Kol Haneshamah* daily prayer book. Using the other prayer books is also fine.)

READINGS

- Eugene Borowitz, excerpt from *Understanding Judaism* pp 79-85.

THEOLOGY

ALEPH, BET, AND GIMMEL TEXT:

“Although religion is paramount in the Reconstructionist definition of Jewish civilization, conspicuously absent from our definition of Judaism is any mention of God. This is no accident. Reconstructionists believe that *the Jewish people* is the constant that runs through all the various stages in the evolution of Jewish civilization. Though precise definitions of God are not Jewish touchstones, it is nevertheless the case that Jewish people have always believed in God and that this belief has been central to living a meaningful Jewish life. Today, developing a vocabulary of faith is an important part of our self-understanding as Jews.” (EJ, pp.25)

ALEPH, BET, AND GIMMEL EXERCISE:

1. Ask participants to use two separate 3”x5” cards to complete the following statements:

“I believe God is...” and “I believe God is not...”

2. Before participants begin writing, explain that the statements will be read anonymously in the following way: Put all the cards together in two piles (keep positive and negative statements separate) and redistribute them so that everyone has two cards that were written by someone else in the group. Go around the circle twice, reading first the positive and then the negative statements. Record the statements on a board or butcher paper. Ask the group whether they are struck by the diversity or uniformity of their beliefs.

THE NATURE OF GOD

ALEPH AND BET TEXT:

“Kaplan believed that the divine works through nature and human beings. He neither identified God with things in the world (natural) nor did he consider God to be beyond or detached from the world (supernatural). Therefore, Kaplan’s theology came to be called “transnatural.”

“In this view, there is more to the universe than the sum of its parts. In the organic interrelationship of all of its processes, there are divine powers that truly exist apart from the empirically verifiable phenomena of nature. They are manifest, for example, in human self-consciousness. It takes faith in God to believe that the world is structured in a way that gives significance to the human quest for salvation. A transnaturalist; however, believes that God works *through* us rather than *upon* us. Thus, our sense of responsibility to bring divinity into the world is sustained by the faith that there is a power at the source of human endeavors.” (EJ, pp. 28-29)

ALEPH EXERCISE:

1. Study carefully the quote above, and its continuation on page 29 of EJ. Ask the group to clearly define for themselves the following three religious perspectives: supernaturalism, naturalism, and transnaturalism.
2. Develop the chart below with the group. The chart asks for a religious symbol that describes the particular religious perspective in a visual way. Also, it asks for an appropriate role for God and human beings within supernaturalism, naturalism, and transnaturalism. Choose these symbols and roles from the list below and add your own.

SUPERNATURALISM, NATURALISM, AND TRANSNATURALISM

	SYMBOL	ROLE OF GOD	ROLE OF PERSON
SUPERNATURALISM			
NATURALISM			
TRANSNATURALISM			

SYMBOL

Star of David

Rainbow

Peace Sign/Dove

Torah

God's Name

Sky and Earth Touching

Sunrise/Sunset

ROLE OF GOD

All-powerful

Compassionate

Wise

Co-partner with Humanity

Person

Force

In People

ROLE OF PERSON

Passive

Creates own Values

Receptacle of Divine

Self-actualized

Questioning

Disciplined

Co-Partner with God

ADDITIONAL BET TEXT:

“All Reconstructionists would agree... that though we refer to God as the Healer of the sick, we should not accept our ancestors’ conception of God as supernaturally intervening to perform miraculous cures.” (EJ, p.35)

BET EXERCISE:

1. Ask the group to read the morning blessings (found on pages 14-19 of the *Kol Haneshamah* daily prayer book or on pages 152-161 of the *Kol Haneshamah Shabbat ve Hagim* prayer book).

Share with the group the following passage in which God is seen as a divine role model for our own behavior: As God “frees the captives” and “heals the sick,” so should we. This is the way we actualize the divine image within us.

“R. Hama, son of R. Hanina said: ‘Follow the Lord your God’ (Deuteronomy 13:5). What does this mean? Is it possible for a human to follow the Shechinah? Rather it means to follow the attributes of the Holy One, Blessed be He. As He clothes the naked, you should clothe the naked. The Holy One, Blessed be He, visited the sick, so you should visit the sick. The Holy One, Blessed be He, comforted mourners, so you should comfort mourners. The Holy One, Blessed be He, buried the dead, so you should bury the dead.” (*Babylonian Talmud, Sotah, 14a*)

2. Ask the group whether the rabbis who interpreted prayers in this fashion were acting on Reconstructionist principles. Challenge the group to develop other Reconstructionist interpretations of these prayers.

GIMMEL TEXT:

“Kaplan...was raised to be a believing Jew. In the world in which he lived, God’s presence gave meaning to the Jew’s life. God was perceived as Creator of the universe, Revealer of the Torah, and Arbiter of the destiny of the Jewish people. God commanded Jews to behave in certain ways; without God’s command, those rituals and behaviors would have been meaningless to them. God set the destiny of the Jewish people; without that role in the world, being Jewish would have lost its meaning. In ways that are incomprehensible to many of us today, God’s assistance was sought at every turn, and changes of fortune were attributed to God’s will. One spent hours of one’s day in prayerful conversation with God and in the study of texts believed to be of divine authorship. Truly, Jews could thereby perceive the whole world as divinely inhabited.”

“Yet, as a young man, Kaplan began to doubt the efficacy of this traditional worldview for his life.” (EJ, p.26)

GIMMEL EXERCISE:

1. Read the continuation of this quote on pages 26-27. Now read the following *midrash* about Abraham’s spiritual awakening:

“And Haran died in the presence of his father, Terach Rav Hiyya said, ‘Terach was a manufacturer of idols.’ He once went away somewhere and left Abraham to sell them in his place. A man came and wished to buy one. ‘How old are you?’, Abraham asked him. ‘Fifty years,’ was the reply. ‘Woe to such a man,’ he exclaimed. ‘You are fifty years old and would worship a day old object. At this, he became ashamed and departed.’”

“On another occasion, a woman came with a plate full of flour and requested him, ‘Take this and offer it to them.’ So he took a stick, broke them, and put the stick in the hand of the largest. When his father returned, he demanded, ‘What have you done to them?’ ‘I cannot conceal it from you,’ he rejoined, ‘A woman came with a plate full of fine meal and requested me to offer it to them.’ One claimed, ‘I must eat first,’ while another claimed, ‘I must eat first.’ Thereupon the largest arose, took the stick, and broke them. ‘Why do you make sport of me?’ he cried out, ‘Have they then any knowledge?’ ‘Should not your ears listen to what your mouth is saying?’, he retorted.” (Bereshit Rabbah 38: 13)

2. Challenge each participant to write a *midrash* that imagines the moment of Kaplan’s move away from traditional theology. It may be a discussion with one of his teachers, or a moment alone, in which he challenges the “idols” of his own time.
3. Give participants the opportunity, if they choose, to share their *midrash* with the group or in *hevruta* pairs.
4. Now, read the section on Questioning Transnaturalism, pp.30-32. Write another *midrash* that reflects a critique of Kaplan’s view (or just discuss if time is short). What are the “idols to be smashed” in Kaplan’s theology?

CHOSENNESS, VOCATION, COMMANDEDNESS

ALEPH, BET, AND GIMMEL TEXT:

“Kaplan and earlier generations of his disciples cared most of all about intellectual integrity, and they fought the battle on the issue of the words of our prayers: We should not, they argued, ever say what we do not mean. A new generation shares that commitment, but is often more inclined to use traditional formulations because of their mythic and poetic power to move us – even though we don’t understand those phrases in terms of the supernatural idiom of our ancestors. The natural world, after all, includes not only those phenomena that scientists can measure, but also the often, complex workings of the human psyche. It is therefore possible for a naturalistic Jew to affirm the value and centrality of mystical consciousness, and the power and importance of prayerful intentionality.” (EJ, pp.35)

ALEPH AND BET EXERCISE:

1. Read the section on Chosenness and Vocation, pages 35-38 in EJ, and Eugene Borowitz’s discussion of chosenness from *Understanding Judaism* pp. 79-85.
2. Based on the Borowitz reading and the passages from EJ above, discuss your reactions to the change in the *aliyah* blessing discussed on page 36. List on the board the traditional blessing, “*asher bachar banu mikol ha’amim*” – “who has chosen us from among all peoples”, “*asher kervanu la’avodato*” – “who has called us to do God’s work”.
3. Talk about the differences between these two prayers. What are your reactions to changing the traditional prayer? For those who are comfortable with the traditional prayer, what do you mean when you say it?

GIMMEL EXERCISE:

1. Read the section in EJ on Uncommanded Mitzvot, pages 32-33.
2. Do you find the Reconstructionist notion of commandedness compelling?
3. What role does this concept have in your synagogue community? In your life?
4. If there are rituals that you perform on a regular basis, what is it that gives you the sense of obligation and motivation to do them?
5. Are there aspects of Jewish practice that you would like to take on, but for which you have not found sufficient motivation? How might you find such motivation?

CHAPTER 4: THE PAST HAS A VOTE, NOT A VETO

NOTES FOR THE FACILITATORS

KEY CONCEPTS AND DISCUSSION POINTS:

- **Revaluation – Reconstructing Jewish Life**
 - How do we preserve tradition, while at the same time finding contemporary meanings for our practice?
 - Reconstructing is not the same as reinventing – it relies on lessons from past sources.

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Several books with information about the customs associated with Jewish holidays such as *The Jewish Holidays* by Michael Strassfeld, *Seasons of our Joy*, by Arthur Waskow, or *The Encyclopedia Judaica*.

REVALUATION – RECONSTRUCTING JEWISH LIFE

ALEPH, BET, AND GIMMEL TEXT:

“The process of revaluation is no simple task. For all the brilliance and depth of insight of our ancestors, their values are often not applicable today in a straightforward way. They are occasionally even repugnant from our perspective. Kaplan insisted that we preserve and observe Jewish customs and values as long as they continue to serve as vehicles toward salvation – the enhancement of the meaning and purposefulness of our existence.”

“When a particular Jewish value or custom is found wanting in this respect, it is our obligation as Jews to find a means to reconstruct it – to adopt innovative practices or find new meanings in old ones. That the past has a vote means that we must struggle to hear the voices of our ancestors. What did this custom or that idea mean to them? How did they see the presence of God in it? How can we retain or regain its importance in our own lives? That the past does not have a veto means that we must work to hear our own voices as distinct from theirs. What might this custom or that idea mean to us today? As participants in secular civilization, how can we incorporate our values into our lives as Jews?”

“It is clear that our ties to our Jewish past and our sense of the secular present often pull us in opposite directions. Reconstructionists seek to find ways to merge those two sensibilities while remaining faithful to both of them. Kaplan’s statement that the past does not have a veto implies that tradition is susceptible to adaptation. Innovation need not entail the destruction of tradition; on the contrary, change is an important part of keeping tradition alive, as it has been throughout Jewish history. As the world changes faster, Judaism must be reconstructed ever more quickly if its wisdom is to continue to guide us.” (EJ, pp.41-42)

ALEPH, BET, AND GIMMEL EXERCISE:

1. Have the group generate a list of Jewish rituals (the list might include: lighting Shabbat candles, hosting a Passover Seder, fasting on Yom Kippur, keeping *kashrut*, observing Rosh Hodesh, visiting the *mikvah*, searching for *hametz*, attending a Tu B'shvat seder, building a *sukkah*, posting a *mezuzah*.)
2. Have each *hevruta* pair choose one item on the list. Then invite each *hevruta*, with the help of articles on the topics found in books such as *The Jewish Holidays* by Michael Strassfeld, *Seasons of our Joy*, by Arthur Waskow, or *The Encyclopedia Judaica*, to answer the following questions:

REVALUING RITUAL: *HEVRUTA* QUESTIONS

- List all of the values and associations that this ritual has.
 - Which of these are compelling for you?
 - Is the way that you and/or your community practice this ritual different from the way it was practiced in the past? Are its meanings different? How has this ritual been revalued and why?
 - As it is currently practiced, does this ritual conflict with values that are important to you?
 - How would you revalue this ritual in order to mitigate this conflict? Would you change aspects of its practice? Is it possible to retain the practice as is, but to infuse it with new meaning?
3. Share findings with the larger group.

CHAPTER 5: LIVING IN TWO CIVILIZATIONS

NOTES FOR THE FACILITATOR

KEY CONCEPTS AND DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Being Jewish and American**
 - In what ways do Jewish values and American democratic ideals intersect?
 - What are the benefits and the challenges of living fully in both a Jewish and American life?

READINGS

- Mordecai Kaplan, Chapter 5, “Living in Two Civilizations” from *The Future of the American Jew*. For those following the Gimmel exercises, you may wish to assign this reading for homework prior to this session.

ALEPH, BET, AND GIMMEL TEXT:

“Kaplan called upon Jews to embrace the open society – not only because its structural pluralism does not require the abandonment of Judaism, but also because American ideals at their best coincide with Jewish ideals as they ought to be developed and reconstructed... Thus in the Reconstructionist framework, it is not necessary to choose between one’s Jewish and American identities. One can – indeed, one must – live in two civilizations...”

“More challenging are the situations in which living in two civilizations brings about conflict.

Committed Jews in North America are faced with choices at every turn. Little League games conflict with religious school classes, golf tournaments with Shabbat services, and opera performances with Jewish lecture series. Parents must choose between paying Jewish day school tuition or saving for college tuition. With a limited amount of time and energy, membership on the Jewish community center board and participation in a political campaign may be mutually exclusive commitments.” (EJ, pp.55-57)

ALEPH AND BET EXERCISE:

1. On a board, list the terms “Jewish” and “American.” Have the group generate values that are central to each. Compare and contrast.
2. When have American and Jewish values conflicted in your life? How did you deal with it? (This discussion can be in *hevruta*, small group, or large group.)

GIMMEL EXERCISE:

1. Read *Living in Two Civilizations*, pages 94-105. Compare what the author perceives as the needs of the Jewish community with what we perceive as the needs of today's community.

2. Read the section on Education in EJ, pages 58-59. Do you agree with the statement, "Day schools also do not accomplish our goal of living in two civilizations"? Have a panel on which each of the following is presented as the primary model of education for the community:

- Day school
- Traditional Hebrew school
- Family/intergenerational education
- Adult education that equips parents to educate their children in the home

Panelists should discuss ways in which their model promotes and challenges the goal of living in two civilizations.

CHAPTER 6: ZION AS SPIRITUAL CENTER

NOTES FOR THE FACILITATOR

KEY CONCEPTS AND DISCUSSION POINTS:

- **Personal Relationships with Israel**
- **Influence of Israel on America and vice versa**

READINGS

- Mordecai Kaplan, excerpts from *Dynamic Judaism*. For those following the Bet and Gimmel exercises, you may wish to assign this reading for homework prior to this session.

ALEPH TEXT:

“Reconstructionists...believe that the reestablishment of the State of Israel resulted not from the supernatural intervention of God into history, but rather from the tireless and idealistic efforts of Zionist pioneers. We remain committed to a vision of an Israeli society that, applying ancient Jewish values to new circumstances, treats all of its citizens justly and seeks peace with its neighbors whenever possible...”

“Most Reconstructionists take their stand with the vision of the Israeli founders and with the signers of the Oslo Accords and proponents of peace. The long-term viability of the Jewish state depends, we believe, on its loyalty to traditional ethical principles. The lesson of the Holocaust is not only that we must be vigilant in our own defense, but also that we must oppose injustice and cruelty no matter who is the victim. It is through a religion of ethical nationhood that the State of Israel and Jewish civilization as a whole will weather the challenges ahead. Judaism must stand for an enriching and ennobling way of life if it is to be worth defending indefinitely. A program advocating survival for its own sake preserves the shell while allowing our precious core to slip away.” (EJ, pp.69-70)

ALEPH, BET, AND GIMMEL EXERCISE:

1. Describe how the existence of Israel has impacted your Jewish life, if at all.
2. Reread the sections on Judaism as a Civilization and A Religious Civilization in EJ, pages 15-
3. Think about your experience(s) with or in Israel through the lens of this Reconstructionist paradigm.

BET AND GIMMEL TEXT:

“For many years, awestruck by the monumental achievement of the builders of the Jewish state, diaspora Jews idealized the state and believed it could do no wrong. As the new state struggled to build a viable economy and to overcome international hostility, Jews around the world believed that their role was to serve as Israel’s unconditional defenders. No one could understand the meaning of Israel as well as Jews; only we understood that the existence of the State of Israel needed no justification.”

“Since the 1967 war; however, Jewish communities have debated the appropriateness of Jewish criticism of Israeli policies, especially when that criticism intensified after the 1982 war in Lebanon and the outbreak of the *intifada*. Jewish critics may have noble intentions but should be wary lest loving criticisms become ammunition in the hands of those who wish to delegitimize the State of Israel.”

“Reconstructionist Jews are sensitive to these concerns; those Jews who issue public statements must weigh their positive effects against their potential dangers. We do not believe, however, especially after an elected Israeli government signed the Oslo Accords and committed itself to peace, that the solidarity of the Jewish people requires that we mute our criticisms in fear of what non-Jews will say.” (EJ, pp.73-74)

BET AND GIMMEL EXERCISE:

Read the following in *Dynamic Judaism*:

- “The Implications of Jewish Peoplehood,” p.56
- “Jewish Peoplehood and Modern Nationalism,” p.57
- “Zionism: Jewish Peoplehood Reborn,” p.58

Would Kaplan still consider Israel a spiritual center today?

How would his writings be different today?

How do you think Kaplan would relate to the concerns that we neither idealize nor be overly critical of the Jewish state, expressed in the quote from EJ above?

CHAPTER 7: LIVING AS A RECONSTRUCTIONIST

NOTES FOR THE FACILITATORS:

KEY CONCEPTS AND DISCUSSION POINTS:

- **The Practice of Judaism**
 - Spiritual “types” provide a way to talk about different approaches to spiritual practice.
 - Our practice of Judaism is informed by the different ways we make meaning in our lives.
 - Learning Torah is both the study of traditional texts and bringing a Jewish approach to the everyday acts of our lives.
- **Prayer**
 - Prayer is a central part of the Jewish experience, but may not always feel accessible as traditionally presented.
 - Reconstructionism applies the same values-based process to prayer and Jewish practice as it does to Jewish civilization.
- **Ethics**
 - Jewish communities can be places of support and community both for life passages and for guidance with personal challenges.
 - We match Jewish ethics and practice to instill meaning and connection in our lives.
 - It is the task of Reconstructionists to instill traditional ethical precepts with modern values.

SPECIAL MATERIALS NEEDED

For the Bet exercise in the “Practice of Judaism” section, you will need: a Torah text, several current newspapers and magazines, scissors, blank sheets of 11x17 paper, tape or glue stick, and writing utensils.

READINGS

Richard Hirsh, “A Reconstructionist Exploration of Dietary Law” from
Reconstructionism Today, Summer 1998

THE PRACTICE OF JUDAISM

ALEPH TEXT:

“Not everyone is religious in the same way. Some people find prayer and ritual to be natural avenues of spiritual connection. Some people find holiness in analysis and study. Some experience God most readily in social action or in interpersonal relationships. Others find transcendence in observing the natural world or experiencing the creative process. There is even a spiritual type who best connects to God and religious life through iconoclasm – remaining true to God by smashing the idols of religious hypocrisy. It is therefore wrongheaded to expect everyone to be Jewish in the same way. No individual is purely one of these “types,” but each of us has greater propensities in some directions than in others. Viewing Judaism as a religious civilization that encompasses all of these paths, Reconstructionists affirm the validity of each of them and seek to encourage one another as we each find our own way.” (EJ, p.79)

ALEPH EXERCISE:

1. Using the descriptions above, which religious type(s) best describes you? Which describes you the least?
2. Are there times when you are more one way or another?
3. Give at least three examples of how your religious practice reflects one or more of these attributes.

BET AND GIMMEL TEXT:

“The Torah we study includes not only ancient texts but contemporary ones as well. And we struggle with Torah together, in groups in which the value of a person’s opinions is not determined only by his or her Jewish erudition. We learn Torah from one another, from the various areas of expertise that each of us brings to the discussion, and from our life experiences.” (EJ, p.80)

BET AND GIMMEL EXERCISE:

The following project is designed to help you make connections between the Torah text and the torah of your everyday life and community. In it, we get to study ancient and contemporary Torah with the same tools.

You will need the following supplies for this project: a Torah text, several current newspapers and magazines, scissors, blank sheets of 11x17 paper, tape or glue stick, and writing utensils.

1. Read Genesis 18:17-19:26 in the Torah together (you can work on this individually or in pairs).
2. Using the newspapers and magazines, retell the story of Sodom and Gomorrah using pictures, headlines, and other clippings (for instance, if you were using the Book of Esther, you might

include pictures of brides, or headlines about corrupt politicians). Tape or glue the clippings to as many sheets of 11x17 paper as necessary.

3. You can also write a narrative that goes along with the clippings right on the same piece of paper.

4. Come together as a group to share the collages you have made. Compare how the torah of each of your lives has led to both similarities and differences in how you have interpreted the story.

PRAYER

ALEPH TEXT:

On pages 81 through 83 in EJ, the authors list some reasons why Reconstructionists pray. Please read through this passage together in class and complete the following exercise.

ALEPH EXERCISE:

1. From what you have already learned about Reconstructionism, what are the challenges to praying as a Reconstructionist?
2. Are there any reasons for praying listed here that particularly resonate with you? Are there any that seem far from your experience/motivations for prayer?
3. Can you think of times during prayer that are, or have been, especially meaningful to you? What makes them so?

BET AND GIMMEL TEXT:

“Reconstructionists address [Shabbat observance] as an incremental challenge. Observing *part* of Shabbat is worthwhile in itself. There are many points of entry. Resting on Shabbat is *not* doing nothing. In the silence, as we cover our eyes to bless the Shabbat candles, there is a window of connection – with our loved ones (whether they are still with us or not), with the Source of Creation. Or sharing a cup of *kiddush* wine around the table, we are reminded of what is most important in our lives. In lingering after the meal to sing, the stress of the week’s work abates, and we remember why life is worth living. When joining in community to sing and chant the Shabbat *tefillot* (prayers) and discuss the Torah portion, we find ourselves transported to a sacred realm. We do not frown upon such nontraditional modes of Shabbat rest as gardening or going to a museum. We do not demand of ourselves and one another that Shabbat observance be all or nothing. But as we deepen our experience of rest and renewal, each in our own way and at our own pace, the *Havdalah* ceremony on Saturday evening becomes a powerful punctuation of our week, serving to distinguish between sacred and profane time.” (EJ, pp.92-93)

BET AND GIMMEL EXERCISE:

1. What do you think of when you imagine traditional Shabbat observance?
2. Are there parts of this that you already do? That you wish you could do? That you are happy you do not do (or wish you could give up)?
3. List the values about Shabbat that are being communicated through the passage above.
4. How do you/might you incorporate these values into your current practice?
5. Based on your study of Chapter 4, how do you respond to the idea of revaluing permitted and not-permitted Shabbat activities as expressed in the sentence above, "We do not frown upon such nontraditional modes of Shabbat rest as gardening or going to a museum."?

ETHICS

ALEPH TEXT:

"Reconstructionists believe that the very future of Jewish communities depends on our members' belief that our traditions can offer serious guidance for our ethical dilemmas. If the Jewish community is *only* an institution where I can belong, celebrate, and worship, but it is *not* the place to which I turn when I have excruciating choices to make, then it is really a leisure-time social club that I choose to attend when it is convenient. Jewish civilization will flourish if and only if Jewish people find it an invaluable and essential source of wisdom and direction." (EJ, p.98)

ALEPH EXERCISE:

1. Using the chart below, list circumstances, dilemmas, life events, or issues that you would currently consider seeking help for or raising in a Jewish context (either at your synagogue or *havurah*, with a rabbi or Jewish leader, etc.) You might include in this list issues such as money problems, divorce, substance abuse, infertility, parenting, partnering, or any others.
2. After everyone has filled out the chart, discuss the circumstances under which you might change the category of any item and/or why you would not raise particular issues in a Jewish context.

WOULD RAISE IN A JEWISH CONTEXT

WOULD NOT RAISE IN A JEWISH CONTEXT

BET TEXT:

"Eating is a religious act, and it is also a political act, especially in today's consumer economy. We seek to take responsibility to distinguish between our wants and needs, to care about what is healthful for us as individuals and for the world as a whole. As we do so, *kashrut* links us with our ancestors' transformation of the table into a sacred altar. Their blessings infuse our consciousness. As we adopt their customs, we are linked to them, reminded of their values. And to their concerns, we add our own." (EJ, p.101)

BET EXERCISE:

1. Read the article from *Reconstructionism Today* (Summer, 1998) "A Reconstructionist Exploration of Dietary Law."
2. How does Hirsh incorporate his personal ethics into decision-making around his *kashrut* practice?
3. Do you agree with the principle of adopting and adapting the customs of our ancestors, even in circumstances where our generations' ethics differ dramatically? (See, as an example, Hirsh's discussion of *shehitah*, kosher slaughtering).
4. Are there ways that your community is putting ethical values into action?

GIMMEL TEXT:

"The connection between theology and ethics also figures in the Reconstructionist equation. If God is portrayed exclusively with masculine imagery, for example, it is inevitable that this will affect the different ways that the believer values, and therefore treats, men and women. If God is believed to be dictatorial, or quick to anger, then that will have implications for those who believe that we are created in God's image. Every aspect of a Reconstructionist community – its liturgy, its school curricula, its by-laws and operating procedures – is subject to Rabbi Kaplan's pragmatic touchstone: How does it promote ethical values?" (EJ, p.99)

GIMMEL EXERCISE:

1. Brainstorm two lists as a group. Remember, in brainstorming, all contributions are considered. The first is a list of the ethical values held by your community. The second list is of the communal practices of your group (worship, adult education, child education, liturgy, social events...).
2. Now, keeping in mind your list of ethical values, apply Kaplan's formula to your communal practices: How does each promote ethical values?
3. Are the community's values acted out in practice? Are the practices of the community consonant with its ethical values?

CHAPTER 8: MARKING THE STAGES OF OUR LIVES

NOTES FOR THE FACILITATOR

KEY CONCEPTS AND DISCUSSION POINTS:

- **Power of Ritual**
 - Rituals enable us to introduce meaning, familiarity, and shared communal values into times in life that are outside of the normal course of events.
 - Jewish rituals are designed to mark meaningful passages in our lives.
 - At the same time, the range of traditional rituals reflects those moments on which the writers of text and religious functionaries chose to focus.
- **Reclaiming Rituals**
 - In our modern lives, we are conscious of how our values are in some cases different from those of our ancestors.
 - Not all significant moments have been appropriately ritualized, and many existing rituals no longer feel appropriately comprehensive in a time of greater gender equality.
 - Though we inherit a rich ritual heritage, there is still opportunity to create and introduce new, meaningful rituals.
- **Embracing Tradition**
 - There is an important value in revisiting traditional rituals that have become obsolete in many settings.
 - When we study traditional ritual practices, we do so with a critical eye to the values imparted by them. In this way we are able to discern which still hold meaning for us.

READINGS

- “B’nai Mitzvah in Reconstructionist Communities” from *Reconstructionism Today*.

POWER OF RITUAL

ALEPH AND BET TEXT:

“We experience transitions – the birth of a child, the entry to adolescence, the sanctification of a relationship, death and mourning, and many others – as moments of heightened awareness in which we are most open to the mystery and sanctity of life, most in need of Jewish spiritual techniques and traditional practices to help us express our awe and fear, our joy and terror. And it is also at these times that we need and appreciate the support of our communities.” (EJ, p.103)

ALEPH AND BET EXERCISE:

1. What was the most recent Jewish ritual event you attended?
2. What were the most compelling components? Why were they powerful?
3. What were the least powerful components? Why?
4. In what ways were the community members active participants in the ritual (eg., acting as witnesses, singing, reciting prayers, etc.)?
5. Are there ways in which the community could have been more involved?

GIMMEL TEXT:

“Had traditional Jewish society been interested in valuing or publicly celebrating the woman’s role, a ceremony might have been developed around a girl’s transition to puberty. Without this interest, it is not surprising that no such public celebration developed. And if women, acting outside the public domain, developed private celebrations, that too is lost to us – the activities of women were not of interest to the men who kept public records for posterity. For these reasons, Reconstructionists first instituted the now widely accepted ceremony of bat mitzvah.” (EJ, pp.104-105)

GIMMEL EXERCISE:

1. For what lifecycle event do you wish there were a ritual, but one does not exist?
2. Why do you think a ritual does not exist in the Jewish tradition for this event?
3. What values would you like the ritual to communicate?
4. Can you think of a story or section from Torah that could be used as a basis for or as a piece of this ritual (e.g., leaving your home: Sarai and Avram, Genesis, Chapter 12)?

RECLAIMING RITUALS

ALEPH TEXT:

“Had traditional Jewish society been interested in valuing or publicly celebrating the woman’s role, a ceremony might have been developed around a girl’s transition to puberty. Without this interest, it is not surprising that no such public celebration developed. And if women, acting outside the public domain, developed private celebrations, that too is lost to us – the activities of women were not of interest to the men who kept public records for posterity. For these reasons,

Reconstructionists first instituted the now widely accepted ceremony of bat mitzvah.” (EJ, pp.104-105)

ALEPH EXERCISE:

1. Read the article from *Reconstructionism Today* (Vol. 4 No. 3, Spring 1997) “B’nai Mitzvah in Reconstructionist Communities.”
2. In what ways did these communities modify b’nai mitzvah to meet their needs?
3. What have been the benefits and drawbacks of these modifications?
4. If you had a bar or bat mitzvah, in what ways do the programs reported here differ from your experience?

EMBRACING TRADITION

BET AND GIMMEL TEXT:

“Innovation is not evidence that we are less sensitive to the need for unity; rather, it is evidence of our commitment to meeting the needs of contemporary Jews. This in turn makes us more passionate about the need for pluralism on the part of all Jews to be a cardinal principle of Jewish unity.” (EJ, p.114)

BET AND GIMMEL EXERCISE:

1. Consider the following two scenarios:
 - a. Your congregation is committed to building relationships with other Jewish groups in your town. Your (male) board president has been asked to speak on Shabbat at an Orthodox synagogue. Everyone from the congregation is invited to attend, yet you know that this synagogue has a separate section for men and women, and your (female) rabbi is not invited to sit on the *bimah*.
 - b. Your congregation is committed to building relationships with other Jewish groups in your town. There is a Conservative synagogue within walking distance of yours and you want to plan a potluck Shabbat picnic lunch, and invite them to participate. The *kashrut* policy at your synagogue is that food brought in must be vegetarian and/or dairy. The *kashrut* policy at the Conservative synagogue is that all food must have a *heksheh* or be provided by a kosher caterer.
2. In each of these scenarios, what are the Reconstructionist values at issue? What are the traditional values at issue?

3. What could be done in either scenario to accommodate the traditional practice?
4. Why might your community choose to or choose not to provide that accommodation?

CHAPTER 9: BECOMING AN INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY

NOTES FOR THE FACILITATOR

KEY CONCEPTS AND DISCUSSION POINTS:

- **What does it mean to be inclusive?**
 - Being an inclusive community does not mean simply accepting difference, it also means accommodating it.
 - Recognizing the need for inclusivity is an ongoing task for increasingly diverse Jewish communities.
 - The process of becoming an inclusive community may involve education and a shift in values for some members of the community.
 - To the degree that a community is not inclusive, current or potential members of the community may feel consistently overlooked or invisible in communal ritual and religious life.
- **Who is a Jew?**
 - Individuals and families with histories of intermarriage, divorce, and spiritual-seeking challenge us to broaden the traditional definitions of what it means to define someone as Jewish.
 - The Reconstructionist movement recognizes the Jewishness of a child of a Jewish father and non-Jewish mother when that child is raised and educated as a Jew (patrilineal descent).
- **Intermarriage**
 - The thinking around intermarriage has gone from seeing it as a threat to Jewish existence to seeking an understanding of how best to help intermarried families find meaningful roles in Jewish life.
 - To live in two civilizations means extensive exposure and interaction with people from all different walks of life. At times, this may prove to be a catalyst for change in the dynamics of Jewish communities.

READINGS

- “Becoming a Kehillah Mekabelet” from *Reconstructionism Today*, Summer 1998. You may wish to assign this reading for homework prior to the class.

“Adoption and Conversion” from *Reconstructionism Today*, Spring 2000

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE INCLUSIVE?

ALEPH, BET, AND GIMMEL TEXT:

“...the Reconstructionist commitment to inclusivity is not only based on a desire to be warm and welcoming. It is deeply rooted in a commitment to democratic values and an understanding of the evolving nature of Jewish civilization. Rabbinic authorities, in the past and in our own day, have made different judgments, acting out of views formed in their particular social contexts. They were human judgments, not divine decrees. They were not made by people who cherished such values as gender equality, democratic decision making, or respect for those who were different from themselves, or who were aware of the complex nature of human sexuality. The community that Reconstructionists seek to create in our age is open, diverse, and welcoming.” (EJ, pp.119-120)

“All of the groups we are committed to including have experienced invisibility in Jewish life. Our main goal as Reconstructionists is to educate ourselves about the specific differences of others and about the need to remain vigilant to include the formerly disenfranchised. We do this primarily through education about the issues involved. But our efforts only succeed when people with disabilities, gay men and lesbians, feminists, patrilineal Jews, Jews by choice, and the intermarried themselves become involved and feel comfortable enough to take leadership roles within our movement. This is the ultimate goal of inclusion.” (EJ, p.141)

ALEPH, BET, AND GIMMEL EXERCISE:

1. Read the article from *Reconstructionism Today* (Vol. 5 No. 4, Summer 1998) “Becoming a Kehillah Mekabelet.”
2. Based on the reactions Israeloff reported, how would you characterize the difference between saying that you are a community that welcomes a minority community, and enacting bylaws to that effect?
3. How might some of the stumbling blocks that the community encountered have been avoided?
4. Can you think of ways in which your congregation is committed to being inclusive? Can you think of aspects of your congregation that might not be inclusive of various groups (e.g., do you have specific programming geared toward gay, lesbian, and bisexual members? What about single members or single parents? Is your *bimah* wheelchair accessible?)?
5. The Reconstructionist movement has historically been committed to affirming the rights of gays and lesbians and working toward their full inclusion in our Jewish communities. Based on your study of EJ to this point, and the Reconstructionist approach to tradition and decision-making, on which values might this decision be built?

WHO IS A JEW?

ALEPH, BET, AND GIMMEL TEXT:

"...we believe that Jewish identity is cultivated by living a Jewish life, and is not something that is automatically inherited. At a time when having *two* Jewish parents is no guarantee that a child will be raised as a Jew, it is counterproductive to insist that a person raised as a Jew and identifying as a Jew is not a Jew because his or her mother did not convert before birth. We understand rituals as deriving their power and efficacy from the way they symbolize real transformation. Thus conversion rituals 'work' when they express an actual entry of a non-Jew into our community. When they are imposed arbitrarily, however, in the belief that the edicts of generations long gone must be obeyed, the very meaning of ritual conversion is undermined." (EJ p.125)

ALEPH AND BET EXERCISE:

1. Review background and the reasons why Reconstructionists accept patrilineal descent, found on pages 123-126 of EJ. Which of these reasons do you find compelling and why? Discuss your answers in a group or in pairs.
2. Working with a partner, role-play a parent discussing patrilineal descent with his/her 11 year-old child. The child has been raised Jewish, his/her father is Jewish but his/her mother is not Jewish. He/she has heard from a friend that only a person whose mother is Jewish is considered Jewish. How would you explain patrilineal descent to your child? What would you say to him/her about the fact that he/she is accepted as a Jew in your synagogue but not in Conservative or Orthodox congregations?
3. Now, choose another partner and role-play a discussion between a member of your synagogue's youth committee and the youth adviser at the local, more traditional synagogue. You wish to invite their youth group to participate in a teen event with your synagogue. They say that they cannot allow their group to participate in a social event with a group that accepts teens who are Jewish by virtue of patrilineal descent. They would be happy to plan an activity for "Jewish" teens only. How would you handle this discussion? What issues would you raise? What questions would the discussion raise for you about patrilineal descent?
4. Come back together as a group and discuss the role-plays. What issues were raised? Did the role-plays or the reading change your perspective on patrilineal descent?

GIMMEL EXERCISE:

1. Read the article from *Reconstructionism Today* (Spring, 2000) "Adoption and Conversion."
2. Identify the key issues being debated about converting a child born from a non-Jewish mother.
3. With which opinions do you most clearly agree? Disagree?

INTERMARRIAGE

ALEPH TEXT:

“North American Jews today live in an open society. We share much in common with our non-Jewish neighbors, including the assumption that individuals should have the liberty to choose the course of their lives and that marriage partners should be selected based on loving relationships. Yet we want our children to marry Jews, to have partners with whom they can fully share the cycle of Jewish living, and to pass on their Jewish heritage to yet another generation. Often, these values are in conflict.” (EJ, p.126)

ALEPH EXERCISE:

1. In what other situations are Jewish and secular values in conflict?
2. Is there anything that can be done by individuals, families, or communities to ease this conflict?
3. Is there a time when it is not desirable to eliminate the tension between Jewish and secular values? Why?

BET AND GIMMEL TEXT:

“We adopt this spirit of welcome in our conviction that we have no basis to stand in judgment. Those who condemn intermarriage as if it were sinful really are condemning the fruits of the open society to which they are otherwise dedicated. It is not necessarily true that intermarried couples have a higher rate of divorce or that it is always the case that a Jew would be better off marrying a Jew than a non-Jew. Until we face those facts, we are likely to miss the opportunity to help alienated Jews return to the community and tradition. Our task is thus not to condemn the intermarried, but rather to make Judaism compelling. (EJ, pp.128-129)

BET AND GIMMEL EXERCISE:

1. Do you agree or disagree with the statement above?
2. In what ways do you think Judaism could be made more compelling?
3. In what ways does your congregation carry out the Reconstructionist mandate to be welcoming to intermarried couples and their families?

CHAPTER 10: THE RECONSTRUCTIONIST MOVEMENT

NOTES FOR THE FACILITATOR

KEY CONCEPTS AND DISCUSSION POINTS:

- **Reconstructionist Attributes**
 - In seeking to articulate what distinguishes a Reconstructionist community, we try to identify the core, shared values of the movement.
- **New Models for Leadership**
 - One of the distinctive aspects of Reconstructionist communities is the role of the rabbi as facilitator and spiritual leader as opposed to the traditional role of arbiter of Jewish life.
 - A new role for the rabbi requires a new role and different involvement from the religious community.

ALEPH TEXT:

On pages 148-149 of EJ, the authors suggest a list of attributes shared by Reconstructionist congregations. Please review this list. Then, ask each person in the group to rate the attributes in order of importance.

Reconstructionist Attributes:

- ___ Gender Equality
- ___ Participatory Decision Making
- ___ Institutional Values
- ___ Shared Leadership
- ___ Welcoming Atmosphere
- ___ Ongoing Education
- ___ Liturgical and Ritual Creativity
- ___ Serious Embrace of Tradition
- ___ Social Action
- ___ Mutual Support

ALEPH EXERCISE:

1. When you are done, compare and discuss your ratings with the group.
2. Which of these attributes seems to you to be uniquely Reconstructionist? Which do you find in other Jewish settings?

BET AND GIMMEL TEXT:

“In addition to their roles as teachers of Torah, rabbis are professionals who also play pivotal roles in bringing Jewish values to their communities. It is not sufficient to *talk* about the importance of justice and caring, respectful listening and welcoming, honesty and openness. Jewish communities must embody the values they espouse if they are to be taken seriously and if they are to serve as places where Jews can sanctify their lives. In the course of their training, Reconstructionist rabbis are therefore taught the skills that enable them to inspire and strengthen such caring communities.” (EJ, p.154)

The January 2001 report of the Reconstructionist Commission on the Role of the Rabbi, *The Rabbi-Congregation Relationship: A Vision for the 21st Century* (available through the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association, www.therra.org) begins:

“The relationship between rabbi and congregation is ideally understood as a sacred covenant in which the partners share in the nurturance, guidance, planning and programming of the synagogue. As in any relationship; however, the best intentions, strongest commitments and agreement on shared values do not guarantee that the relationship will always run smoothly. As in any relationship, differences must be negotiated, compromises reached, and decisions made with which each partner may not always be in full agreement.” (vi)

BET AND GIMMEL EXERCISE:

1. How would you characterize the difference between how rabbis are portrayed in the two statements above?
2. Does the passage from “The Rabbi-Congregation Relationship” report reflect any changes in the Reconstructionist movement?
3. In your opinion, are there any distinctive characteristics of Reconstructionist rabbis?
4. How do you view your role as a member of a Reconstructionist congregation? Do you think it differs from what your involvement might be/ has been in another congregation?

CHAPTER 11: ENVISIONING THE FUTURE

NOTES FOR THE FACILITATOR

KEY CONCEPTS AND DISCUSSION POINTS:

- **Where do we go from here?**
 - This final chapter is an opportunity to review materials from the course and a chance for the participants to evaluate the class.

ALEPH, BET, AND GIMMEL TEXT:

“Nevertheless, our position as outsiders to the tradition also has its advantages. We are not Jews by inevitable momentum; for the most part, we do not practice Judaism because of an unarticulated nostalgia. Our commitments are made against the natural flow. They are self-motivated and authentic, filled with an energy and creativity that impel us to reconstruct the tradition to speak in the contemporary idiom.” (EJ, p.159)

“Our commitment to balancing individual autonomy with communal commitment is at odds with the commanded, authoritarian nature of inherited traditions, but we are convinced that Jewish civilization is sufficiently resilient to be transformed successfully yet again, as it has evolved time and time again in our past. It is that faith that enables us to continue our struggle to reconstruct Judaism. That reconstructed Judaism is the necessary condition for Jewish vitality in our time.” (EJ, p.162)

“It may be easier either to accept the tradition without question or to reject it entirely as outmoded, easier to accept an authority – whether the Torah or the *New York Times* – than to reach independent conclusions. But as Reconstructionist Jews, we are comfortable with our questions and doubts. The process of admitting and confronting our uncertainty has itself become part of our norm. Our study of traditional texts is undertaken not so that we can accept them uncritically, but so that we can confront their meanings and wrest from them the part of their message that speaks to us.” (EJ, p.161)

ALEPH, BET, AND GIMMEL EXERCISE:

1. Read each of the passages above. Based on the work you have done up to this point in the curriculum, which one would you say sums up the Reconstructionist movement best? Why?
2. Answer the following questions individually and then compare your answers as a group:

In five years, I would like to walk into my congregation and see:

- b. In five years, I would like to learn _____ at my synagogue or *havurah*.

If I had the opportunity to introduce a group to Reconstructionism, I would tell them:

- d. In the future, I would like to see the following in ALL Reconstructionist communities:

CLOSING EXERCISE

Now that you have completed your course of study, each person in your group should answer the following questions:

1. Having studied more about Reconstructionism, I am most pleased that _____.
2. I am most intrigued that _____.
3. I was most surprised by _____.
4. A topic I would like to explore further is _____.
5. _____ changed or influenced the way I think about my Reconstructionist community.

READINGS INCLUDED IN COURSE CURRICULUM

- “Are We a Chosen People?” *Understanding Judaism*. pp. 79-84 and Appendix. Borowitz, Eugene
- “A Reconstructionist Exploration of Dietary Law.” Hirsh, Richard. *Reconstructionism Today*, Volume 5 Number 4 Summer 1998
- “B’nai Mitzvah in Reconstructionist Communities.” Mundell, Leah. *Reconstructionism Today*, Volume 4, Number 3 Spring 1997
- “The Implications of Jewish Peoplehood”. *Dynamic Judaism*, pp. 56-57. Kaplan, Mordecai.
- “Jewish Peoplehood and Modern Nationalism.” *Dynamic Judaism*, pp. 57-58. Kaplan, Mordecai.
- “Zionism: Jewish Peoplehood Reborn.” *Dynamic Judaism*, pp. 58-59. Kaplan, Mordecai.
- “Living in Two Civilizations.” *Future of the American Jew*. Kaplan, Mordecai.
- “Becoming a Kehillah Mekabelet.” Israeloff, Roberta. *Reconstructionism Today*, Volume 5 Number 4, Summer 1998
- “Adoption and Conversion.” *Reconstructionism Today*, Volume 7, Number 3 Spring 2000



3 Are We a Chosen People?

SUPPOSE you are honored with an *aliyah*. You go up (the meaning of *aliyah*) to the *bimah*, the raised platform from which the Torah scroll is read. Then you say the same blessing that's been said for 2,000 years, "Blessed are You, Lord, our God, Ruler of the universe, who chose us from among all peoples and gave us the Torah. Blessed are You, Lord, who gives Torah."

Read with the wrong intonation, that could sound as if Jews thought everyone else was inferior: "Chose US from among all peoples." But if read rather humbly, the blessing could mean: How wonderful that of all the peoples in the

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world ours created the Bible. Which of those two moods is right is the problem for the Jewish ideas of "the chosen people."

Being chosen generally means getting a prize. What the Jews got, as the blessing makes clear, is the Torah. That's not very much like being picked to be Miss America or winning a lottery. Instead of receiving something enjoyable, the Jews received a book of laws and advice. It wasn't for their pleasure. It gave them new responsibilities. So the Torah is hardly the kind of gift that most people really want. In an imaginative story in the Talmud, the rabbis tell how God couldn't find anyone to take the Torah. Nobody wanted to follow its rules. The story is somewhat prejudiced against the Romans and other nations but it certainly shows what the rabbis thought the Jews were chosen for: to do commandments.

Our tradition taught God's love for everyone

God's "choosing" the Jews to get the Torah doesn't mean God is not interested in other people. The Bible and Talmud are clear: you don't have to be a Jew in order to know God. (That's why sending out missionaries has never been important to Judaism, even though we accept people who want to become Jews.) The key here is the "agreement" God made with Noah after the flood. Chapters 8 and 9 of Genesis put it this way: God "promised" that there would be no more floods to destroy the earth, that after it rained there would be a rainbow in the sky as a reminder the promise was being kept, and God gave Noah permission to stop being a vegetarian (like Adam) and to eat meat. God also gave Noah some commands, one of which is connected with his meat-eating. Noah shouldn't eat "meat with its life in it, which is the blood in it." (See Part Three, Chapter 4, where I discuss how "true" such stories are.)

80 THE JEWS AND THEIR DREAMS This might be pretty dull except that Noah, like Adam, stands for all humanity. The Bible is saying that all human beings, not just the Jews, have a kind of "Torah." They have their own connection with God. One rabbinic statement makes the idea perfectly plain: "Righteous people among the

Gentiles have a full share in the life of the world-to-come." That is still Jewish teaching today.

The rabbis of the Talmud had a sort of mathematical way of describing the religious difference between non-Jews and Jews. They figured the children of Noah (humanity) had seven commandments as part of God's agreement or covenant with Noah. How they found them in the Genesis story isn't clear but they generally agreed on these: (1) respect for God, (2) no idol-worship, (3) no murder, (4) no stealing, (5) no sexual sins, (6) setting up good courts, and (7) not eating meat cut from a living animal. But the rabbis said the Torah gave Jews 613 basic commandments. (Rabbi Simlai used this number and, although we don't know where he got it from, it's been used ever since.) So being chosen meant that the Jews had 606 more rules to follow—and, of course, all the hundreds of laws that grew out of the basic ones.

Being chosen doesn't mean superiority or suffering

Two more points are important. One is that being "chosen" didn't make the Jews feel they were superior to other peoples. That would be a sin at any time, since God "made" and "loves" everyone. It's especially horrible today because the Nazis said the Germans were a superior race and used that as an excuse to kill Jews and other groups. Nothing in the Jewish religion should ever sound like something Hitler said. The second point is that being chosen gave the Jews more duties. When they didn't perform their duties they would be punished. That's one of the chief lessons of the prophets. Being "chosen" by God doesn't mean freedom to do evil. Amos, the first prophet to write a book said, "Hear this word which the Lord spoke against you, O Children of Israel. . . . You only have I known of all the families of the earth. Therefore I will punish you for your sins" (Amos 3:2).

That leads us to the other problem: Jewish suffering. The Jews have had more trouble than most other peoples in history. It almost seems as if we were chosen to suffer. A Yiddish saying makes a bitter joke about it: "You chose us from among all peoples? So why did you have to pick on us?" The real problem here is the difference between the Jewish

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and the Christian attitudes toward suffering. In classic Christianity Jesus shows his obedience to God and his love for humanity by letting himself be crucified. Jesus, hanging on the cross (the crucifix), becomes a major symbol for such Christians. Suffering becomes an important way of serving God. Jews don't see suffering as an especially good way to serve God. Judaism doesn't encourage people to be hermits or not to marry or to beat themselves in order to be more holy. Besides, there's enough pain in most people's lives—they don't have to go looking for more. Of course, when suffering cannot be avoided, we bear it as bravely as we can and try to learn from it. Often we can see God "teaching" us something. (Sometimes, as in the case of the Holocaust, we can't come up with much of an answer. See Part Four, Chapter 5.) Mostly, though, our suffering has taught us how important it is for people to do good and to see how often they do evil. One other thing we know. We Jews weren't chosen to give other people an excuse to abuse us. We are Jews to remind them and everyone that there is a God and we should all be doing good.

**With today's respect for all people,
chosenness is a difficult idea**

Modern Jews often are troubled by the idea of the chosen people. They think it says too much about God and has too little respect for non-Jews.

"Choosing" seems to make God "do" more than we can easily understand. Usually when we say God "does" something we are talking about what we feel inside ourselves. That's how we explain God "speaking" to us or "forgiving" us. God's "choosing" seems to point, not to our feeling for God, but to an act God did. That's difficult for many people to believe. God's "choosing the Jews" is even more disturbing. It says that God set up the difference between Jews and other people by giving us the Torah. It wasn't because of anything special about the Jews or what we did. (Remember, the story about Abraham breaking the idols is from the rabbis. Some of them also seem to have thought that choosing makes God appear to be unfair.) God should love everyone and not have a

particular people as His favorite. This is one reason some modern Jews want to have a new idea of chosenness.

When the Bible and the Talmud were written, if you weren't a Jew you were an idol-worshiper. The Jews were the only people around who believed in God and, of course, they felt different from their neighbors. That is certainly not true today. In the United States and Canada, most Jews find themselves very much like their non-Jewish neighbors. And despite strange languages and customs in other parts of the world, we now know that people everywhere are basically alike. This makes it even more difficult for us to say that God made us different from all other people by choosing us to get the Torah.

Five modern ways of looking at the Jews being chosen

With such strong arguments against the Jews being the chosen people, it won't surprise you to hear that we have several different modern ways of thinking about our people and God. Here are five viewpoints about chosenness our thinkers suggested:

Some people say we must *give up the idea* because it's too undemocratic. As long as people say God set them aside from others, there will be religious hatred. Instead, we should accept today's moral ideal that all people are equal. Besides, Jews don't need to say God "chose us" in order to say how good it is to be a Jew. We can love our people and enjoy its special ways without having to say God commanded them. We can say our people "chooses" to live by the highest standards, for every people ought to do that.

Some say that *all peoples are "chosen"* and make some contribution to humankind. If we knew more about peoples other than those of Europe we'd soon see how special they all are. Even in the history we know, the Greeks teach beauty, the Romans teach government, and the Hebrews teach religion. Why some peoples should make more important contributions than others we don't know. But that's natural and one can see it in every field of activity, just as one person can make a more important contribution than another.

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CHOSEN PEOPLE?**

Some people with this view want to make certain we don't forget how extraordinary the record of the Jews is. We've survived despite great persecution. We've gone on making major contributions to civilization. Given freedom and opportunity, we've greatly enriched modern culture . . . just think of all our writers, painters, musicians, and professors. And no group in the world comes close to our record of producing Nobel Prize winners. We are certainly an exceptional and extraordinary people.

Some feel the previous views leave God out of human experience altogether. If God is real we should consider how people came to find God, or, more precisely, *how they came to "choose" to accept and follow God*. As life moved from the animal to the truly human, creatures appeared that became capable of personal, conscious feeling for God. Mostly that feeling was expressed by idolatry or in nature worship. On rare occasions it became a major religion with a well-developed sense of God. But only in one case did a whole people choose to base its *ethnic* life on its consciousness of the one, commanding God. The people of Israel was this "choosing people." To the extent that God is "behind" what happens in history, we may also say that God "chose" the Jews. Since the Jews and God have been linked so closely for centuries, even though other peoples have come to know God, the Jews will always be special in human history.

Some Jews feel that God sometimes is especially close

Some take that a step further and try to say something about what God "did." Compare it to your experience with those you love. When you feel especially close to people it's probably half because you know that they feel good being with you. They don't even have to talk. There's something about taking a walk together, or going to a ball game, or working on a project, that gives you the sense they feel that way. But you can't force that feeling to come just because you want to feel loved. Even with a best friend or a parent, you can't make every time special. Sometimes that great sense of being together is there, but both of you have to be ready for it. Something like that happens with God. People not only have

to be there for God but God has to "be there" for them. In that sense, God "does" something and that's what God "chooses" means. At Sinai and again and again in Bible and later times, *God has "been there,"* not always, but often, *when our people searched for God.*

And some say we just ought to admit that we *can't understand everything God does.* We just have to accept some things. People are important, but God is "in charge" of history. Other peoples today may be beginning to know and serve God but that does not change the 4,000 years in which the Jews, alone, had the Torah and were loyal to God through the Torah. And, until the Messiah comes, God needs a people dedicated to God—above all and for all times. That is what we mean when we say we are God's "chosen" people.

Now you have learned about five ways we modern Jews use to talk about our "chosenness." I hope they will help you think about what it will mean to you when next you say, "Who chose us from among all peoples and gave us the Torah."

A Reconstructionist Exploration of Dietary Law

"KOSHER CONSCIOUSNESS" AND JEWISH IDENTITY

RICHARD HIRSH

WHEN I WAS GROWING UP, Sunday morning breakfast at our home always included bacon. Seders routinely featured sliced bread alongside the matzah. As we lived just down the block from a Chinese restaurant, pork and shellfish (however diced and disguised) frequently found their way to our table. It is fair to say that my family of origin was lacking in kosher consciousness!

As is true of many Jews who did not grow up to the rhythms of ritual observance, I eventually made my way into the realm of *kashrut* as an adult. *Kashrut* came along with the discovery of *shabbat*, prayer, *tallit*, *tefillin*, *lulav*, *sukkah*, and a host of other *mitzvot* that were not a part of my early years.

The encounter with *kashrut* in college was complex. I was able to master the fundamentals fairly quickly. Pork and shellfish were out. The blending of meat and milk was no longer an option. I was able to grasp the implications of this regarding cheeseburgers, but it took a while longer to decipher the nuances of dairy derivatives in food that had the appearance of neutrality (*parve*).

But "kosher meat" — that took a long time to figure out! The market near my home clearly stated: "Kosher and Non-Kosher foods served." With a combination of sincerity, naïveté and ignorance, I asked the man at the meat counter for the "kosher meat." With a combination of entrepreneurial ease and a salesman's eye for opportunity, he promptly served up two pounds of steak that in retrospect I am certain never saw salt nor water nor *shohet* (ritual slaughterer) before appearing in the refrigerated case.

Eventually, thanks to *The Jewish Catalogue*, a group of friendly Hillel students, and a tolerant if somewhat perplexed Orthodox Hillel rabbi, I was able to embrace the details and dynamics of *kashrut* in their entirety.

As a communal and personal discipline, *kashrut* became an opportunity to invest the daily activity of eating with a dimension of holiness. Whether accomplished through words of blessing, the style of preparation of the food, the types of cookery used, or the kinds of foods served, *kashrut* became an important daily affirmation of identity and values. Far from being the "pot-and-pan-theism" with which it is often regarded by critics, *kashrut* emerged in my life as a vehicle for spiritual and bodily renewal.

I was enticed by the meaning inherent in the surrender of former favorite foods. A verse from *The God of Daniel S.*, an introduction to Reconstructionism written by Rabbi Alan Miller, resonated strongly: "... He had simply woken up one day to find that he could no longer eat with impunity an animal whose flesh his ancestors had resisted eating to the point of death."

The separation of meat and dairy foods, the disturbing proximity between symbols of life and death, carried a similarly powerful association. Though I did not choose to observe all the stringencies associated with the absolute separation of these products, the avoidance of serving food that was obviously meat with food that was obviously dairy became an opportunity for honoring the boundaries of life and death.

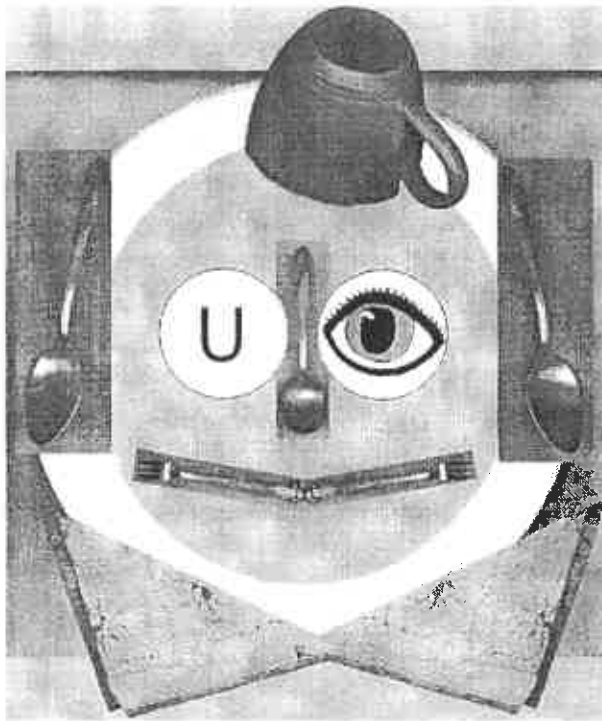
Upon entering marriage, we established a home in which, for the first time for generations in our families, two sets of cookery were kept, one for dairy and one for meat. So stringent were we in those days that we did not use the dishwasher in our apartment because it had only one set of racks!

Upon entering the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in 1976, I was faced with the conundrum of where to eat lunch. The old RRC building resided on a desolate stretch

AT WHAT POINT DOES THE OBSERVANCE

BECOME MEANINGFUL, AND WHERE DOES IT BECOME A BURDEN, AND WHY?

Reconsecrating



Collage/Lawrence Bush

of Broad Street in a formerly upscale area of Philadelphia. The nearest eatery, a lone business on an otherwise boarded-up street, was hardly kosher! We students would meander up, ask for tuna or cheese, pick off the scraps of meat left over from the slicing machine, and do the best we could. (We did delight in telling people that it was the only restaurant in the area under "rabbinical supervision.") Similarly, debates attended on the "fish filler" at the nearby McDonald's, which occupied the space where a prestigious Conservative synagogue had once resided, giving the restaurant a residual aura of acceptance.

One evening, during a discussion at my student congregation regarding *kashrut*, someone asked me the following question: If it could be proved that other methods of slaughtering meat are less painful than the kosher

requirements of *shehita* (ritual slaughter), would I refuse kosher meat and buy the other meat instead?

I was caught short by this question, because it represented the age-old debate regarding the

mitzvot: does one comply because "God commands," or does one search for the "*taamei hamitzvot*," the "reasons for the commandments," in order to decide what benefit derives from observance?

As I had always argued that *tzaar baalei hayyim*, the traditional Jewish concern not to cause pain to living beings, was an essential reason for keeping kosher, I had to begin to struggle with where the "break-point" is for *kashrut*. Where does the observance become meaningful, and where does it become a burden, and why. I was also forced to wrestle with the obligations I had to other Jews to support institutions — in this case, the kosher butcher — upon which they relied for their observance, even if I was uncertain as to my endorsement of the process.

In sorting out a respectful but voluntary commitment to *kashrut*, Reconstructionism was an enormous asset. Because it does not represent an "either-or" approach, but allows for and encourages people to find a place on the spectrum of observance, it was possible to begin to sort out where *kashrut* worked and where it did not.

Mordecai Kaplan's teaching that the ritual commandments are folkways designed to effect identification with the Jewish people led to an understanding that *kashrut* can be observed in some areas but not others, without inconsistency. As long as the level of observance supports and strengthens identification with the Jewish people, it is a functionally appropriate level of observance.

Thus, after several years of strict cookware separation, our family decided that keeping two sets of dishes diminished rather than enhanced our commitment to *kashrut*. With the arrival of our first child, and the concomitant pervasiveness of things dairy, the benefits of this choice became, for us, self-evident.

We have in our family therefore established an adaptation of kashrut which seems to me an acceptable Reconstructionist principle: We are concerned and cautious about what we eat but not the dishes on which we eat it or the pots in which it is cooked. This guideline enables us to eat comfortably in any restaurant or home.

Over the years, we have truncated the time one customarily waits after a meat meal before having dairy. Most Ashkenazim wait

**IN SORTING OUT
A RESPECTFUL BUT VOLUNTARY
COMMITMENT TO KASHRUT,
RECONSTRUCTIONISM WAS AN
ENORMOUS ASSET.**

between three and six hours. While we cannot claim Dutch ancestry, we figure if Dutch Jews can settle for 30 minutes, so can we.

Eating outside our home, we find we are more lenient these days about the degree of *kashrut* we require, although I prefer that meat and poultry brought into the home be from a kosher market. The prohibition on pork and shellfish, and the overt mingling of dairy and meat (what many call "Biblical *kashrut*") remain fundamental categories to which we are committed. From a Reconstructionist perspective, these areas seem so essential to our identification with our history and our people as to be "commanded."

As the years move on, so have our patterns of observance. My daughter demonstrates a preference for vegetarianism, which I share, and consequently our consumption of meat has declined. I find the Jewish Edenic-Messianic vision of vegetarianism compelling. Although legend teaches that we will all feast on Leviathan meat in the world to come, I expect I'll just ask for fruit instead.

In recent years, three aspects of kashrut have become particularly engaging.

The first is "eco-kashrut", in which the fitness of food is measured not only by compliance with biblical regulations but by consideration of ethical-ecological-economic issues. Food which is grown under conditions of oppression is ripe for rejection; overly-packaged and environmentally insensitive products seem indulgent; foods full of empty calories, cholesterol, fats and sugars do nothing to promote health and eviscerate the image of the Divine in which we are created.

The second area of interest is the cycle of blessings which accompany eating in Judaism. I collect these under the heading of "*kashrut*" although halabically they come under the category of blessings and prayer. The point here is that our attitude towards eating itself should be a dimension of *kashrut*. For several years I have not begun a meal or snack without the appropriate blessing, and the customary sprinkling of salt on bread. The rigorous and lengthy *Birkat Hamazon* (grace after meals), enjoyable at the *shabbat* table, is a burden during the week; an abbreviated prayer of gratitude, or a moment of silent appreciation before leaving the table, seems more effective.


The third area of contemporary *kashrut*

which engages me is how, and how much, we eat. The accelerated pace of life has obliterated the time set aside for meals. "Grazing," a contemporary sociological term for how people eat "on the street" from carts and takeout fast food shops, seems to me antithetical to the dignity Judaism confers on human beings. We wash hands, bless, sit and eat and bless again precisely because we are not animals who simply eat out of hunger. As Kaplan said, we should eat to live, not live to eat.

A corollary concern is how much we eat. Americans lead the world in the undistinguished category of being overweight, with the attendant effect on our health (and health-care systems). Jewish events, including *seudot shel mitzvah* (meals following a celebration) should exemplify modesty: portions should be kept in proportion!

In the recent survey of members of Reconstructionist communities, many were surprised to discover that 34 percent reported that they observed *kashrut*. Of course, since the question was not specific, a wide range of patterns is represented in the affirmative response. (Some joke that for some Reconstructionists, "keeping kosher" means not using styrofoam!)

I assess the information differently. What the statistic says to me is that 34 percent of Reconstructionists identify *kashrut*, however defined, as a category of meaning for their Jewish lives. This testifies to the validity of Kaplan's insight that ritual binds us to our people and supports identity. It also suggests that the daily disciplines relating to food remain opportunities for Jews of all backgrounds to establish some level of *kashrut*.

Kashrut is a traditional category of meaning whose details often obscure the spiritual power which inheres in observance. Whether beginning with the simple act of saying a blessing over food, or restricting Biblically prohibited foods, or avoiding meat and milk, or setting up a fully kosher kitchen, Reconstructionist Jews should be able to find a level where comfort and meaning intersect to further the growth of our Jewish spirits and of our Jewish bodies. 

Beginning in September, Rabbi Richard Hirsh will be the Executive Director of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association. He is also the editor of The Reconstructionist journal.



RECONSTRUCTIONISM TODAY

VOLUME 4

NUMBER 3

SPRING 1997

B'nai Mitzvah in Reconstructionist Communities

LEAH MUNDELL

FOR BETTER OR WORSE, B'NAI MITZVAH rituals have become the focal point of Jewish affiliation for many North American Jewish families. Preparing a child to become a bar or bat mitzvah is often the reason why families join congregations — and completion of the ceremony is too often the signal to leave. The ritual has come to embody people's sense of connection to the Jewish past, their hope for a Jewish future, their tie to family, their link with a new-found community. The child studying to become a bar or bat mitzvah carries a heavy weight of emotion, memory and expectation for years before the actual event.

Reconstructionist congregations are dealing with the bar and bat mitzvah process in a variety of creative ways. Some have focused on the preparation process, encouraging students to view their arrival as a bar or bat mitzvah as the culmination of years of serious study. Others have focused on the family as a whole by ensuring that parents and siblings play a primary role in both preparations and the ceremony itself. Others have honed in on the importance of community by creating b'nai mitzvah *havurot*, in which families meet to learn and celebrate together and to support one another in their individual ceremonies. This article explores



Lara Mones, bat mitzvah, with her parents Leslie and Art, Reconstructionist Synagogue of the North Shore, Plandome, NY

in some detail the many ways that Reconstructionist families and congregations are attempting to bring personal meaning to this centuries-old ritual of passage into Jewish responsibility.

A Family Affair In many Reconstructionist congregations that offer a b'nai mitzvah preparation class, students enter as seventh graders. Families, however, get a head start at **Congregation Ramat Shalom** in Plantation, Florida: One morning a month, beginning when students are in sixth grade, parents and kids are required to participate in a "b'nai mitzvah family workshop." Here they gain familiarity with the service and learn to "talk Torah." A typical family workshop starts with a learner's service, led by one of the students. The class then breaks into family groupings to read and discuss a specific Torah portion. "The key question after they've explained the portion," says Rabbi Jeffrey Eisenstat, "is how it fits into life and the life of your family."

The concept sounds simple, (-> page 4)

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(→ from cover) but Ramat Shalom's program has had wide-reaching and unexpected results. As they become more comfortable with the service by participating in their children's bat or bar mitzvah preparations, many parents are moved to learn to chant Torah themselves. On the day of the service, they then share the Torah reading with their child. The family workshops have piqued parents' interest in other study opportunities as well, leading to high participation in Ramat Shalom's adult education classes.

When parents take an active part in b'nai mitzvah preparation and model ongoing adult learning, they demonstrate to their children the value Judaism has within their family life. "Parents teach kids how to kick a soccer ball," observes Rabbi Eisenstat. "They also need to be willing to model prayer and Jewish study."

Emphasizing the Mitzvah Ramat Shalom's b'nai mitzvah program, along with those of many other Reconstructionist con-

gregations, also includes an "action" component, in which students follow up on their text studies with *mitzvot* that better the lives of others in their community. In this way, Eisenstat says, they learn that deeds are as important as the study of Torah.

Project ideas have included an exploration of *kashrut* (dietary law), an investigation of propaganda techniques during the Holocaust, and the development of "prejudice awareness" workshops for local schools. Many of these projects build on long-term interests of students and have extended long beyond their day of becoming bar or bat mitzvah. Adam Immerwahr, for example, hopes that the play he wrote, based on his Torah portion, will be used by other religious schools when they study *Shelah Leha* (Numbers 13–15). Jonah Adels is screening his video about Holocaust propaganda at the synagogue. Gabrielle Murphy-Kendall is trying to start her prejudice-awareness workshop at her own high school.

Looking back on their experiences, these and other members of the Mishkan Shalom teen group say that the research and *mitzvah* projects helped them connect more seriously with the Torah portion they read and the service they led, and helped to make them feel more a part of the congregation. "Mishkan Shalom," explains Frances Kreimer, "is very committed to social action. The project meant that as we were coming into the community, we were also coming into that social action commitment."

Creating a Hevra The fact that so many b'nai mitzvah students at Mishkan Shalom return to participate in the teen group is a testament to the power of their bat and bar mitzvah experiences. As they sit discussing their projects, they both listen and speak with a level of comfort and mutual support that is rare among young teens. Clearly, their experience has bonded them as a community.

This is exactly the type of atmosphere Rabbi Ron Aigen tries to foster in his pre-b'nai mitzvah group at **Congregation Dorshei Emet** in Hampstead, Quebec. Over the past several years, he has switched from an after-school format to evening



Women of Ramat Shalom becoming b'not mitzvah together

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Experiential learning is at the heart of the b'nai mitzvah program at **Mishkan Shalom** in Philadelphia, where students are required to devise a bar or bat mitzvah project. This must include research on a particular aspect of Judaism, participation in a project of

meetings, conducted over pizza and structured more like a club than a class. With a group of about 20 students, his goal has been "to create a *hevra*, the sense of a group."

Community-building begins with the first meeting, a *shabbat* dinner with families. During the course of the semester, students focus on learning the *nusah* (service) of *shabbat* morning and understanding the concepts of *tzedakah* and *gemilut hasadim* (deeds of kindness). As a class, the group takes food and furniture to the Jewish immigrant aid society in nearby Montreal and packs Hanukah baskets for families who don't have the money for a celebration.

The group is also introduced to the ways that *gemilut hasadim* are performed on a much broader level in the Jewish community. Together, kids and parents take a trip to the local Jewish Federation, where they participate in a scaled-down version of the budget allocation process. After representatives from various Federated agencies present their budget needs, families are charged with allocating Federation funds in a just and equitable way. The experience makes clear the tremendous needs of the community and the difficulty of prioritizing them.

Finally, each student at Congregation Dorshei Emet must choose a *gemilut hasadim* project similar to those undertaken by students at Mishkan Shalom. At the end of the school year, for the monthly family *shabbat* dinner, students prepare short presentations on these projects, including explanations of related Jewish concepts (e.g., *bikur holim*, visiting the sick, *bal tashchit*, taking care of the earth).

Florida's Congregation Ramat Shalom also tries to build community among b'nai mitzvah families. To help facilitate these connections, each family is matched with a partner family that takes responsibility for the details of the bar or bat mitzvah day: preparation of the sanctuary, setting up the *kiddush* (after-service blessings), clean-up, and other menial or anxiety-producing tasks. This builds strong bridges between families, Rabbi Eisenstat says, and encourages them to attend one another's celebrations.

Intergenerational and Family Connections JRF Education Director Dr. Jeffrey

Schein argues that the most effective b'nai mitzvah programs are intergenerational. "I believe that the reality of being a 'young adult' in the Jewish community will only make sense to the early adolescent if he or she has significant contact with those who are 'young' and those who are 'adult,'" Rabbi Schein writes. At the **Reconstructionist Synagogue of the North Shore** in Plandome, New York, this emphasis on intergenerational learning has been at the core of the b'nai mitzvah preparation process. Each family is offered the opportunity to prepare a family *d'var Torah* (talk based on the Torah portion), to be presented on the day of the bar or bat mitzvah service. As Rabbis Joy Levitt and Lee Friedlander explained in a workshop at the 1995 JRF convention, this *d'var Torah* preparation is catalytic, shifting the family's focus from party planning to Torah study. The process provides kids with a chance to see their parents dedicating time and energy to the study of Torah. It allows for extended interaction between the family and their rabbi, who comes to the home for study sessions. Most importantly, the endeavor allows a family to have a successful experience of studying and relating to Torah together and of sharing that discovery with the community.

That process does not come easily to families, even to those used to doing lots of thinking and talking among themselves. The Monis family, who celebrated their daughter, Lara, becoming a bat mitzvah in 1994, were the first in the congregation to take on the assignment. At first, says Lara's mother, Leslie, it was hard for Lara to know how to contribute, and her parents had difficulty helping her to voice her opinions and her reactions to the *parashah* (Torah portion). Individual contact with Rabbi Levitt became essential for Lara, and through that contact, she

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Gabrielle Murphy-Kendall and her parents, Arnold and Vicki, one day after she became a bat mitzvah at Mishkan Shalom, Philadelphia

was able to express her reactions to the *parashah* and learn how to work with her parents until, her mother says, "Lara felt her voice was heard."

Counting in the Community While Reconstructionist congregations are firmly committed to the egalitarian *minyan* (prayer quorum), we have not changed the requirement that a *minyan* should consist of 10 adults. This fact helps to raise the profile of the *b'nai mitzvah* student, especially in small congregations.

At Bet Haverim in Atlanta, Georgia, for example, the congregation often barely numbers 10 on a *shabbat* morning. When Nathan Segal, who will become a bar mitzvah in April, arrives at services with his mother, Ellen Mazer, he immediately sees how important her presence is — and anticipates the day that he will be a full-fledged member of the community.

Bet Haverim encourages community-building by matching *b'nai mitzvah* students with adult members of the congregation who "sponsor" the students by helping them prepare for the service. Nathan is the first to participate in this matching program, but Mazer believes it will become the standard as more Bet Haverim students reach bar- or bat-mitzvah age. This is particularly important at Bet Haverim, which serves Atlanta's "gay, lesbian, bisexual and progressive Jewish community." Many members do not have children, and the *b'nai mitzvah* program provides a wonderful opportunity for them to interact with young people of the congregation.

Reviving Deborah? The Value of Bat Mitzvah In a recent editorial in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Jane R. Eisner quotes from Mary Pipher's bestselling *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Our Adolescent Girls*:

"America is a girl-destroying

place. Adolescent girls are saplings in a hurricane. They are young and vulnerable trees that the winds blow with gale strength."

"What Pipher and other say is true," Eisner continues. "But it's not the complete story. For my daughter stood last week not as the vulnerable sapling, but as a strong tree, branches extended proudly, roots firmly in place. It was the day she became a bat mitzvah. It was an antidote to everything negative and frightening about modern girls her age."

The bat mitzvah ritual might be especially important for girls entering adolescence amid the tumult of media messages downplaying intelligence and competence and portraying girls too often as, in Eisner's words, "the objects of male desire or rage." In fact, the tendency for young adolescent girls to become shy and nervous sometimes reveals itself in *b'nai mitzvah* preparation classes. Some educators have noticed that girls are much more reticent than boys about participating in class discussions and sharing their experiences. In the *b'nai mitzvah* group at the Ottawa Reconstructionist Havurah in Ontario, according to educator Hope Harris, the "boys are better able to express themselves, while the girls are consistently shy and quiet." Coed classes, she feels, may not always provide the best forum for girls to gain positive recognition for their achievement and learning. "Our movement has been so much about equality," Harris says, "but we also need to honor the differences, honor girls for becoming women and boys for becoming men."

One way to achieve this might be for boys and girls to study separately at times, and even to celebrate separately with special rituals and discussion about the physical and emotional changes they are experiencing. Just as some parents opt to send their daughters to single-sex private schools, congregations may want to offer single-sex educational opportunities in preparation for becoming bar and bat mitzvah.

Blending B'nai Mitzvah Rituals with Congregational Life In small congregations such as the Ottawa Reconstructionist Havurah, *b'nai mitzvah* ceremonies tend to be modest occasions. At larger congregations,



Nathan Segal, soon-to-be member of the minyan at Bet Haverim, Atlanta



Leah Mundell, writer of this article, today and as a bat mitzvah in 1986

especially within Jewish population centers, the challenge is to maintain a perspective on the occasion as a community event as well as a personal *simha* (celebration). The family *d'var Torah* project of the Reconstructionist Synagogue of the North Shore, for example, has successfully shifted attention from the party to the service itself. Yet even this has its dangers, as Leslie Monis points out: "Rabbis Joy and Lee have been able to elevate the family's importance in the ceremony. But sometimes it can go off the deep end, and the kid is almost elevated into a prophet! You can forget that this is just a *shabbos* service."

At the **Reconstructionist Congregation** in Evanston, Illinois, Rabbi Richard Hirsh has noticed a similar problem. Families are very involved in the planning of the service, choosing special blessings and readings and assigning family members and friends various roles in the service. But with an average of 40-45 b'nai mitzvah in the congregation each year, nearly every *shabbat* service — as well as *Rosh Hodesh* (new moon) and certain holiday services — includes a bar or bat mitzvah. Services have become so personalized, with so many guests present, that members of the congregation who want to *davven* on *shabbat* morning hold their own separate service, leaving the bar or bat mitzvah (and rabbi and cantor) with no community indigenous to the congregation. "This is the down side," says Rabbi Hirsh, "of the highly personalized style of b'nai mitzvah services."

His solution has been to propose an alternating schedule for Saturday mornings. The morning would begin with adult Torah study class at 9:00, followed by the service, with the bar or bat mitzvah ritual, at 10:30. Congregants would thus be able to have their own, more intimate *shabbat* experience before joining guests for services. Rabbi Hirsh's compromise will not meet the needs of everyone, but it does provide a reasonable solution to a growing congregation that wants to honor its young people and their families while encouraging a strong sense of community.

Today I Am a Mentsh No matter what type of b'nai mitzvah program they participate in, or how large or small the congrega-

tion, it is this sense of membership in community that emerges as the most powerful message for kids who are "coming of age." Students in Reconstructionist congregations are, of course, excited by the celebration, gifts and special recognition — but they commonly perceive the real meaning of the event to be about personal connection to family, community and the Jewish people. Ethan Saidman of B'nai Havurah in Denver, Colorado, sees becoming bar mitzvah as a wonderful chance for a family reunion. For Ethan's classmate, Ben Curtiss-Lusher, the excitement comes in being able to "have the pleasure of being an adult in the Jewish community." For Adam Immerwahr of Mishkan Shalom, reading the Torah on his bar mitzvah day "connected me to ancestors for generations and generations, and to the Jewish people."

By becoming a bat or bar mitzvah, Reconstructionist young adults experience a tradition that has been upheld for centuries. Yet the unusual types of research and mitzvah projects, family *d'vei Torah* and community activities in which these teenagers have engaged also sets them apart from that history in a very special way. "My bar mitzvah project was something very different, which hadn't really been done in previous generations," recalls Lee Tusman of Mishkan Shalom. "My parents were telling me that they don't remember much about becoming a bar and bat mitzvah. I was preparing for something different; Other than just learning the Torah portion, I was learning about having a role in community." ■

Leah Mundell, JRF Education Coordinator, is a teacher at the religious school of Mishkan Shalom in Philadelphia. She has helped students prepare for becoming bar or bat mitzvah for the past eight years.



Bat Mitzvah Rachel Moss with her parents, Lani and Hal, at Or Madash, Philadelphia. Lani is JRF Director of Administration. Inset shows Lani on her bat mitzvah day in 1968.



Hal Aqua, B'nai Havurah, Denver, today and as a bar mitzvah in 1964. Aqua Design is responsible for the new look of this magazine.



Alan Friedlander of Niles Township Congregation, Illinois, as a bar mitzvah in 1949. The inset shows him becoming a bar mitzvah for a second time, in 1986, with his wife, Carol, and daughter, Susan, becoming b'not mitzvah. Alan is JRF Midwest Regional Vice-President.

4. The Implications of Jewish Peoplehood

What are the implications, social, political, cultural, and religious, of the status of the Jews as an international people with Israel as its cultural center?

The social implications of that status for Jews in their relation to one another are the sense of oneness and the mutual responsibility of Jews for their material and spiritual well-being. Its social implications for the relation of Jews to non-Jews are the affirmation of the right to group survival and the maintenance of group individuality, combined with the readiness to cooperate as Jews in all endeavors for the establishment of a free society based on justice and peace.

The political implication of Jewish peoplehood is the concern of Jews everywhere with the freedom, stability, and security of the State of Israel. For, only Eretz Yisrael, where Judaism is the civilization of the majority of its people, can serve as the cultural center of Jewry. That is entirely compatible with the recognition that the sole political allegiance of Jews in the Diaspora is to the state or nation in which they individually are citizens.

Culturally, Jewish peoplehood means the fostering of the Hebrew language and culture by Jews in the Diaspora and their interest in cultural developments in Israel; also, the interest of Israeli Jewry in the life experience of Jews in all lands. In relation to the non-Jewish world, it means the appropriation and integration into Jewish culture of values found in other cultures that are compatible with Judaism, and the translation and interpretation of Jewish cultural creations as a contribution to other cultures.

Religiously, Jewish peoplehood implies a change in the conception of the destiny of the Jewish people. The traditional Messianic ideal involved the return of all Jews to the Promised Land. That ideal implied that only in that land could Jews live in accord with the will of God. The status of the Jews as an international people with its cultural center in Eretz Yisrael, however, constitutes a departure from the traditional doctrine. It renders legitimate the Jews' remaining in the Diaspora, even when they have the opportunity to live in the homeland of Jewish civilization.

This conception of the Jewish future is not a retreat. It marks a higher stage in the development of Jewish religion. It places the basis of Jewish unity not in an authoritative traditional creed or code but in the common purpose of Jews to raise the moral and spiritual level of their group life. Within that purpose, different interpretations of the significance of Jewish experience must be regarded as legitimate. Thus, for the first time, freedom of conscience is fully accepted as a component of Jewish religion.

In relation to the non-Jewish world, the status of the Jews as a people sets an example to all other historic and religious bodies to affirm their right to make the most of their traditions in the face of trends to totalitarian cultural regimentation by the state, based on an idolatrous conception of the doctrine of national sovereignty.

Questions Jews Ask, pp. 33-35.

5. Jewish Peoplehood and Modern Nationalism

Four elements—homeland, self-government, culture, and mission—both are basic to the normal functioning of national life and must function in a mutually organic relationship: that is the sum and substance of modern nationalism. At first thought it might seem strange to think of the Jewish people, which has been without a land and a government of its own for almost nineteen hundred years, as having anything in common with modern nationalism. On second thought, however, we discover that actually both homeland and self-government played a greater role in the life of the Jewish people during those centuries of exile than the same elements did in the life of any other people in the world. . . .

So long as modern nationalism was confined to its promulgation by its first apostles, the possibility that it might clash with the nationalist character of historical Judaism was unthought of. When, however, modern nationalism began to be translated into practical politics in parliamentary debate and governmental policy, it became clear that, if Jews were consistently to adhere to traditional Judaism, its nationalist character would make them ineligible for citizenship. In the National Assembly of France the Girondist Clermont-Tonnerre drew a clear and sharp distinction between equality of rights for Jews as individuals and rights for them as part of a Jewish nation.

What alternatives had the Jews under those circumstances other than frankly and sincerely to renounce their historically national character or retain their solidarity under the guise of religion? That meant either abandoning the hope of renewing national life in Eretz Yisrael or stressing the supramundane character of that hope as part of an order of reality which was irrelevant to the practical issue of Jewish emancipation. Reform cut the Gordian knot by declaring that Jews in their dispersion had nothing in common but ethical monotheism. Orthodoxy was content to treat the prayers for return to Eretz Yisrael as awaiting God's answer in God's own time. And Conservatism, insofar as it had a chance to flourish in the Old World, was equally averse to viewing those prayers as an incentive to human initiative. What the synagogue movements propose in place of the traditional hope for a return to Zion is like amputating a broken leg and giving the patient a matchstick to hobble on.

Those synagogue movements did more than deactivate the hope for return to Eretz Yisrael. They surrendered the age-old group autonomy of the Jewish people and the authority of Jewish code law in all matters arising out of economic and social conflicts. Evidently they had no alternative, if they were to avert additional repressive measures against the Jews in the countries which harbored them. That, however, does not excuse the failure of the leaders of the Orthodox and Conservative movements to give formal notice to the world that the elimination from Jewish life of group autonomy and national code law was carried out under duress. They should have declared openly that, while emancipation from the medieval disabilities was a welcome relief, it was being carried out at the expense of the very substance of Judaism—its civilizational content—leaving only the shell. That no such declaration was issued was probably due in part to the fear of encouraging the opponents of Jewish emancipation. More largely, however, it proceeded from the assumption that Judaism was essentially a religion concerned with beliefs about God and salvation and with ritual practices as a means of keeping those beliefs alive.

The Greater Judaism in the Making, pp. 384, 386-87.

6. Zionism: Jewish Peoplehood Reborn

Zionism has been vindicated as the only movement capable of saving the historic nationhood of the Jewish people from the danger of being lost in modern nationalism's melting pot. Zionism is far from having arrived at a way of life whereby Jews who remain in the Diaspora might retain more than a nominal vestige of their historic nationhood. So far it has not contributed to the continuance and enhancement of Jewish life in the Diaspora. But there can be no question that the establishment of the State of Israel has given Jewish nationhood a new lease on life. That is an epoch-making achievement, the full significance of which will become apparent in time. . . .

The main weakness of the Zionist ideologies is that they fail to reckon with the future of the Jewish people as a whole. They do not take into account the consequences of the fact that a complete ingathering of world Jewry in Eretz Yisrael is inconceivable. Zionism has been narrowly pragmatic, without paying adequate regard to all its involvements in the contemporary world. It has succeeded in providing a precarious measure of physical security for about two million Jews, but it has augmented the spiritual insecurity of all Jews.

Zionism as a yearning for the return of the Jewish people to Eretz Yisrael and of Eretz Yisrael to the Jewish people was until a century ago an integral part of Judaism. But when the time came for that yearning to be translated into action it had to separate itself from Judaism with all its controversial issues and to concentrate on the achievement of its primary purpose: that of establishing a free and independent state. With the achievement of that purpose, the élan has gone out of Zionism. At the same time, insofar as the existing synagogue movements have become accustomed to treat the restoration of the Land of Israel as outside the purview of their religious activities, Judaism has been deprived of the main source of its vitality and viability, namely the generative and self-renewing potency of Jewish peoplehood.

The Greater Judaism in the Making,
pp. 394, 448-49.

LIVING IN TWO CIVILIZATIONS

1

WHY THE JEW CANNOT DO WITHOUT JUDAISM

As a matter of principle, we may be convinced of the legitimacy of Jewish peoplehood in a democratic society. Nevertheless, we may find it difficult to fit such a status into the actual frame of American life and democracy. Jewish peoplehood finds expression in a tradition, in a way of life, in milieu and in specific sights and sounds. If Judaism is to be more than a memory of ancient glory, or more than a way of speaking, it must consist of things that are visible, audible and tangible. The sum of all that is recognizable as belonging to Judaism makes of it a civilization.

A civilization, as modern nationalism might define it, is looking and acting like others. But as a *humanizing process*, a civilization is the *cumulative heritage of knowledge, experience and attitudes acquired by the successive generations of a people in its striving to achieve salvation*. That heritage links the generations together into a continuing unity. It consists of a variety of elements; memories of the people's past and hopes concerning its future; a particular language and literature; specific laws, morals, customs and folkways; evaluations of life and an assortment of art forms. Various items are chosen from each of these elements and are made the object of special regard and reverence; they are treated as sacred. Taken in their entirety those items constitute the religion, or the religious aspect of the civilization.

To grasp, however, the essence of a civilization, we must do more than recognize the organic unity of all of its elements. We must learn to appreciate its inter-related functions which have one basic purpose, namely, that all who live by that civilization should feel the need of one another. Only in that way can they get the most out of life and give their maximum to it. The precept "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself"¹ is not some fantastic aspiration, too good to be practicable. It is nothing more than an elementary requirement that those who belong to the same civilization shall want and welcome one another, and not regard one another as rivals and as a thorn in each other's side. By the same token, the precept "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God"² means experiencing a need for and welcoming God. It means so to

accept life that for its sake we are prepared to be and do our utmost and even willing to bear the worst that may befall us. Whenever we say "Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God" we, in effect, welcome God on those terms. This is what makes Judaism a religious civilization.

Accordingly, our answer to the challenge of modern nationalism should be: We Jews depend upon Judaism and the fellowship of the Jewish people for that feeling of being needed and welcomed, without which we can neither live a normal healthy life, nor possess the essential ingredients that go into the making of worthy character and personality. We need Judaism to help us maintain our human dignity and achieve our salvation. Almost ten percent of the American people declare themselves anti-Semites,³ and harbor the criminally insane sentiment of wishing to destroy us. Twice that number are ready to join them upon the flimsiest provocation. In the country as a whole, Jews at best are tolerated, but neither desired nor welcomed. Our best friends will forgive us our being Jews, but can seldom forget it. This is presently true of all democracies.

In a modern replica of Voltaire's *Candide* called *All for the Best* by Bentz Plagemann⁴ the principal character, a navy doctor, David Foster, sums up the "excruciatingly broadminded" attitude of the average liberal American toward Jews in the following: "I flatter myself that I am broadminded. I do not go out of my way to make friends with Jews, but I do not avoid them. . . . They weren't in my fraternity at Martin Towers. It seemed the only sensible way to avoid discrimination."

In *Earth Could Be Fair*, Pierre Van Paassen⁵ describes a Jew in the person of David Dalmaden. David Dalmaden, who was fully aware of what it meant to be a Jew even under the best of circumstances, said, "The farmers speak of their country, their laws, their market, their religion. It all hangs together like pearls on the same string from one end of the country to the other, and from ancient times onward into eternity. Even the cows and the horses and the sheep and the chickens are an integral and inseparable part of the whole, and all of them, men and beasts, live in self-evident happiness. But I feel as if I am not a part, as if I do not belong. I am an outsider."

All of these facts combine to justify us in strengthening our own Jewish civilization, not for the purpose of making our way to where we are unwelcome, or for segregating ourselves from those who are ready to accept us, but to find in one another that acceptance and welcome

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which for a long time to come we shall not find among our non-Jewish neighbors.

The fact that our non-Jewish neighbors are not glad to receive us should not make us resentful or bitter. They belong, after all, to a part of the human race that has been indoctrinated for over two thousand years with a vicious hatred toward our people. They have had it drilled into them that we are the incarnation of evil. We should not expect them to overcome in the course of one or two generations the effects of such persistent propaganda of hate. In the meantime, however, we and our children and our children's children are entitled to our share of happiness, for which being needed and welcomed is an indispensable prerequisite. Eretz Yisrael Jews need and welcome their fellow-Jews. That is the way we Jews in the United States should feel toward one another. We need that feeling of comradeship, if we are to be integrated, self-respecting and fearless human beings. Surely the United States can benefit but little from citizens who live broken, self-hating and fear-ridden lives.

2

THE JEW'S TASK TO LIVE IN TWO CIVILIZATIONS

Judaism cannot long survive here, unless we are convinced that corporate Jewish life can fit into the pattern of American democratic nationalism. Such a conviction must square with a tenable philosophy of American life. According to that philosophy, the United States has a right to expect the individual citizen to identify himself completely with her vital interests, and to participate unreservedly in all of her legitimate strivings. The individual is permitted to have interests and to engage in activities which are confined to a limited group within the American population, and which that group shares with nationals of other countries, as long as those interests and activities do not interfere with those of other Americans. This is the meaning of that individual freedom which is the essence of democracy. All genuine democracy recognizes the right of individuals and of groups to be different. The recognition of the Jews' right to be different affords them the opportunity to develop the differential factors in Jewish life, in any way that is not detrimental to the equal and similar rights of other groups and individuals, or to the general welfare. This is tantamount to saying that the American Jew should find it possible to live in two civilizations simultaneously, the American and the Jewish.

Living in Two Civilizations

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Let those who doubt the possibility of living in two civilizations be reminded that this is exactly what every Christian American is trying to do. By the same token that Judaism is a civilization, Christianity also is a civilization.* This, in effect, is the meaning of the remark made recently by a well-known Christian theologian who said: "We are Christians in spite of speculation."⁶ He implied that Christianity was not a matter of abstract thought but of collective life. It is highly instructive to learn that, among Christians, the question, "What is Christianity?" is no less perennial than is the question, "What is Judaism?" among Jews. The reason is that each is more than a religion.⁷

Christianity also consists of a tradition, a way of life and customs that are visibly, tangibly and audibly Christian. Catholicism is a highly intensive civilization; Protestantism is an attenuated civilization and a torso of the former. In either case, Christianity happens to have its roots in the same land as Judaism, though it has branched out all over the world. Every land in which it is at home is its homeland. To the Christian American, the Jordan is just as familiar as the Mississippi. He would deem it vulgar to assert that Jesus means less to him than George Washington.

The Jewish judge who, some time ago, wrote that, to the American Jew, Jefferson and Lincoln were more important than Abraham and Moses,⁸ spoke only in his own name, and merely proclaimed that he was less of a Jew than most Christians are Christian. For American citizens to live in two civilizations may not be compatible with American jingoism, but it is unquestionably compatible with the American dream. It was the recrudescence of jingoism, among other things, that moved Thomas Wolfe,⁹ one of the profoundest interpreters of the American spirit in recent times, to write the following in his posthumous novel, *You Can't Go Home Again*: "I believe that we are lost here in America, but I believe we shall be found. . . . I think the true discovery of America is before us. I think the true fulfillment of our spirit, of our people, of our mighty and immortal land is yet to come. I think the true discovery of our democracy is still before us." Nothing seems more incongruous than that Jews, who claim that they are Jews in religion only, should make it a specialty to forget the American dream and act the jingo.

The extent to which Jews are fearful of being as frankly Jewish as the Christians are Christian is never so flagrant as when our Government takes a census of its population. That census reflects the extent

* See above p. 89.

to which Americans accept the fact of living in two civilizations. Those who accept it without any reservations show no reluctance in having their church affiliations registered. Jews have been so intimidated by the hostility against them that they are afraid to avail themselves of the rights claimed by other citizens. Their leaders squirm at having the census taker register them as Jews.

It so happens that, in this country, every group in whose life some form of religion either has played, or still plays, a dominant role, is a minority group. Of all such groups, the one which seems to be least afraid, ashamed or confused, and has no difficulty in recognizing who belongs to it and who does not, is the Roman Catholic. This fact comes out in the remarkable definiteness and exactitude of the statistics which give the number of its communicants and the annual increase in their members. The Protestant groups are not able to report similarly reliable statistics about themselves. But the most unreliable and uncourable are the statistics concerning Jews. The main reason, of course, is that Jews do not know what makes them Jews. For fear of being misunderstood, they dare not use the traditional term "nation." For fear of being discriminated against they avoid the term "race." For lack of a category that properly describes them, they answer to the term "religion" merely because they know no other. But, paradoxically, most of them are not affiliated with any Jewish religious body. They do not actually know what differentiates them from their fellow-Americans.

Consequently when our Government asks for statistics about Jews, no responsible Jewish agency is prepared to submit reliable figures. In certain Jewish circles which engage in protective self-discoloration, underestimating the number of Jews in various communities has become quite an art. The whole matter of Jewish statistics in this country has become the private property of a well-meaning statistician and the few people whom he has succeeded in interesting in his project. Very few of us are aware of the predicament which the absence of an authoritative source of demographic information about us creates for certain Government personnel.

The political pattern to which it is important to have our status as a group conform must be the one that is likely to remain permanent in this country. It would, therefore, be illusory to plan a status based on the hope or expectation that the political pattern of this country will be modified to permit cultural pluralism. Foreign national cultures can, at best, be but a passing phase in the life of the first two or three

generations of immigrant populations. *The only kinds of groups likely to remain permanent within the political pattern of this country are those that have religious significance for their adherents.*¹⁰ The Jewish people must have as much religious significance for the American Jew as the Church has for the individual Christian. It would then be as entitled to a place in the frame of American life as is the Church. For a corporate entity to have religious significance, it need not be of a transcendental or supernatural character. There are many ways in which a group can have religious significance for the individual.

American democracy recognizes two distinct types of church groups, visible and invisible, corresponding with a distinction in Christendom itself. The Catholic Church is the outstanding visible Church, possessing visible and tangible manifestations of its international solidarity. Its milieu, its buildings, its personnel, its discipline, its great art, music and sculpture—these are the concrete embodiments of its collective spirit. In large measure, this is true, also, of the Episcopal Church. The other denominations tend to fade into invisibility. That is the main cause of their gradual deterioration. *Because visibility and tangibility are essential to keep any group spirit alive, we Jews should strive to achieve a community status which is analogous to that of the Catholic Church.*

Nothing in this suggestion, however, should be taken to imply anything like the authoritarian or totalitarian character of group organization typical of that Church. On the contrary, the organization of a Jewish community must parallel internally the most genuine type of democracy in the American political pattern, and allow for diversity in matters of religious belief and practice. But as a group that forms part of world Jewry, American Jews should interpret their solidarity as a religio-cultural one, entirely parallel to that of the Catholic Church.

3

LIVING IN TWO CIVILIZATIONS CALLS FOR A REDEFINITION OF RELIGION

It may be asked: How can a community, which permits diversity of religious belief and practice, claim religious status? What would entitle us Jews to be designated as a religio-cultural instead of merely a cultural group? The answer is to be found in a proper understanding of what we mean by "religion." If, for example, we were to accept the

popular notion of religion, and maintain that for a group to be called "religious" it must lay claim to having originated with some supernatural event or person, we would have to exclude from the category of "religious" eighty-three per cent of the rabinate who, according to a recent study, no longer believe in the supernatural origin of the Jewish people.¹¹ The only way in which it is possible to determine whether we are entitled to designate our communal status "religious" is to ascertain whether that status will fulfill the function that is generally meant by religion.

The function of a religion is to enable those who live by it to achieve salvation, or life abundant. If the indivisible peoplehood of the Jews is as indispensable a means to the salvation of the Jew, as the Church is to that of the Christian, it serves a religious function. Since the Jewish community is the medium through which that peoplehood would enable the Jew to achieve his salvation, it is entitled to all the privileges and immunities that the modern democratic state confers upon all religious bodies. To be sure, salvation would not consist, as it did in the past for all Jews, in a feeling of confidence in the coming of a personal Messiah, who would gather all Jews back to Eretz Yisrael, and in eternal bliss to be enjoyed by each Jew in the hereafter. It would consist rather in the cultivation of basic values like faith, patience, inner freedom, humility, thankfulness, justice and love which enable a man to be and do his best, and to bear uncomplainingly the worst that may befall him.* A religio-cultural community that can help its members achieve that kind of salvation is invaluable to a democratic state, whose strength consists in a citizenry of self-reliant and self-respecting men and women.

What seems to trouble some people, when the idea of living in two civilizations is suggested to them, is that it would necessitate splitting our personalities, and giving, as it were, one half to each civilization. This mechanical notion is as groundless as imagining that we cannot be as proficient in two languages as we can be in one. The very contrary is the case. They who know English only, do not even know English. Those whose life horizon is limited to their one native civilization do not know even that one as well as they should, if they are to be citizens of the world. Moreover, they cannot elicit from it all the good that is latent in it.

The vicissitudes of history have brought it about that the average human being has to draw upon two civilizations to obtain all those

* See Chapter XV.

values which he requires for his self-realization as a human being. It is a need to which Christians are no less subject than Jews. A way of life that is exclusively American could nowadays be lived only by the American Indian. When the Europeans brought Christianity to this country, they brought a civilization which they have since been synthesizing with those elements of American national life that are the products of the new American physical environment and of the historical events that have created the American people. This business of living in two civilizations may call for new powers of mind and heart, and to that extent may mark an advance in man's development. In music, too, harmony was unknown five hundred years ago, a fact cited to prove that, as the human race matures, it discovers latent powers in itself, the existence of which it did not at first suspect.

One may question the extent to which Protestantism may be regarded as a civilization, since it has broken with the visible Church, and has given up the distinctive Latin culture of the Roman Catholic Church. No such question, however, can arise with regard to Catholicism which is, beyond all doubt, an affirmative and aggressive type of civilization. Yet no one would suggest that being an American Catholic means living on two different planes, or being a Catholic part of the time and an American the rest of the time. Nor may the right of Catholics to live their Catholic civilization simultaneously with the American be questioned, without impugning the fundamentals of American democracy.

It is true that an authoritarian and supernaturalistic Catholicism, carried to its traditional and logical conclusion, does place the Catholic citizen in an anomalous position. Such a conclusion implies that he must regard non-Catholic American people as living in sin, because its Government does not defer to the authority of the Vatican. The Church, however, is too wise to insist upon translating that implication into practice. That would be incompatible with whole-hearted allegiance to the American Government. On the other hand, it is part of American democracy to accept the actual *modus vivendi* by which the Church abides, and to recognize the right of its adherents to foster Catholic civilization without let or hindrance.

It is a well-known fact that the Puritans endeavored to establish in America a way of life based on Biblical law. One does not regard the Puritan spirit on that account as segregationist and as alien to the American pattern of life. Why then should the efforts of Jews to live by Biblical law, as embodied in Jewish civilization, be an evidence of

segregationism? If it is legitimate for the Irish to parade on St. Patrick's day, in glorification of the patron saint of a non-American nation, why would it be less legitimate for Jews to carry the *Sefer Torah*?¹² In procession through the streets on *Simhat Torah*?¹³ On Palm Sunday, the streets are thronged with Christians bearing palm branches, but on *Sukkot*,¹⁴ Jews, if they must carry a *lulav*¹⁵ through the streets usually wrap it in paper to conceal its identity, because they assume that any flaunting of a distinctively Jewish culture trait will expose them to the charge of ghettoism. Why is it American to go about on All-Saints Eve in masquerade, and an exotic practice to do the same on *Purim*? Why should Jews consider it a good American practice for Christians to display Christmas trees and sing Christmas carols in public, while feeling too inhibited to display the *Hanukkah* lights publicly and to sing Hebrew hymns in the streets?

In the Diaspora, Jews are bound to identify themselves spiritually as well as culturally with the nations among which they live. *Judaism, to evoke American Jews' loyalty, must be not only compatible with their loyalty to America but also corroborative of it.* In the cultural melting pot of American life, no cultural variants have any chance of surviving unless they can make good the claim of transcending in significance the groups that foster them. This means that the cultural variants have to be of a religious character and function, for only thus can their significance be universal. Only thus can they give to each individual who lives by them that which enables him to order his life so as to achieve his self-fulfillment as a human being. Whatever values American life itself begets are at present lacking in that religious character and function. This is why it looks to the religious cultures, which its various historic groups have brought with them, to give the individual citizen the moral stamina and sense of responsibility which are indispensable to national survival and health. Judaism looks to the religio-cultural heritage which Jews have brought with them to accomplish this for its Jewish citizens. *That expectation is a challenge to us Jews not only to retain our group life in this country, but also to achieve a religious orientation that might prove of great value to the religiously starved mankind of our day.*

Judaism, or the religious civilization of the Jewish people, in its present effort to arrive at a *modus vivendi* in the midst of other civilizations has the opportunity of making an important contribution to the recognition of a far-reaching social principle, namely, that any civilization which has no aggressive purpose or "mission" has an in-

trinsic right to live either by itself, or in symbiosis with any other civilization.

The commonwealth status which the Jewish people seeks to achieve in Eretz Yisrael is the expression of the desire on the part of the Jewish civilization to live by itself. As a civilization, it is the product of a particular land, and, so long as it survives, it is entitled to live in that land. Having been driven out by *force majeure* did not deprive it of that right. The argument that the modern Italians have a claim on Britain or France analogous to that of the Jews on Eretz Yisrael is the height of absurdity. The Italian civilization has no roots in either country, whereas the Jewish civilization is inconceivable without Eretz Yisrael.

Moreover, a civilization has a right to live cooperatively with another civilization in any one country so long as it has no intentions of competing with the latter, much less dominating it. Such cooperative living may be interpreted in terms of group equality, as in countries where minorities as such are granted political rights, or in terms of individual equality, as in the United States. In the latter case, the individual has only one set of religious values to live by.

What would happen, if the civilization that is still without definitive religious values were to evolve them? Would not one who lives in the two civilizations be expected to live by the two sets of religious values? The only possible answer is an affirmative one. For just as the two civilizations are hyphenated in the individual who lives in both of them simultaneously, so would the two sets of religious values have to be hyphenated in him. Religious hyphenism would, therefore, have to be recognized as legitimate. Nothing better could happen to human life, for that would enable religion to function as a unifying instead of as a divisive influence.¹⁶

Before religion, however, can so function, the various historical and organized religions would have to renounce their exaggerated pretensions to being the sole possessors of the key to human salvation. Each would have to acknowledge that the others are equally apprised of ways of salvation for their own adherents, that each, in its particular way, seeks to embody ideals which are of universal validity, but which can best be realized for each group in relation to the cultural traits and social institutions resulting from its own collective experience. Just as there can be no peace among nations as long as each insists on absolute sovereignty, so there can be no peace among religions as long as each insists on being in exclusive possession of absolute or revealed truth.

The undertaking to live in two civilizations simultaneously is, to be sure, a new experiment in the art of living. But for us Jews to try out better ways of human living should be nothing new. It may be that we have in us the kind of stuff which, having remained unsummed in the iron furnace of Egypt, cannot be liquefied in any of the modern national melting pots. Being loyal to two civilizations is as ethical as being loyal to father and mother. "The serving of two masters," said Harry Wolfson,¹⁷ "is not a moral anomaly, unless, as in the original adage, one of the masters be satanic."

Sometimes nature, instead of waiting for chance to bring new species into existence has the same living creature undergo changes in structure and function. The slowly crawling caterpillar, for example, is transformed into the winged butterfly. In such creatures, life seems to be too impatient of evolution's slow course. Driven by some overpowering creative urge, life leaps far ahead of the stage in which it happens to be. The result is a new type of being that emerges from one continuing life. This process is known as metamorphosis.

We would do well to read the meaning of human development in the light of this extraordinary phenomenon in nature. Physically, man is subject to the slow process of evolution which has to be measured with the yardstick of geological eons. But mentally and spiritually, man finds natural evolution too slow. His irresistible urge to be more than what he is may be regarded as a yearning to achieve metamorphosis into a higher order of being. It has somehow fallen to our lot as a people to herald and incarnate this principle of human metamorphosis. With our messianic ideal, we Jews have awakened in the human heart that discontent which is the forerunner of a regenerated humanity. If we can reinterpret our messianism as future-mindedness, then, by all means, let us retain it. Some one well said: "Perhaps, unless we can learn to think of ourselves as we might be a hundred thousand years hence, we shall destroy each other one hundred months hence. Perhaps only the Utopians can help us survive."¹⁸

From the standpoint of this interpretation of human history and of Israel's place in the world, the circumstances which have made it necessary for Jews to live in two civilizations are part of the metamorphosis which the human race is undergoing at the present time. This necessity is a challenge to the Jewish people. It compels the Jewish people to reconstitute itself into a different kind of people from that which it was in the past. It must assume a new incarnation.

In order to survive as a corporate entity, Jews must now transform themselves into a newly differentiated type of society, partly as a Commonwealth developing in its own historic landscape, and partly as a people which can integrate itself with other nations in other lands, without losing its own individuality. In the present world order, with its unlimited national sovereignties, this may sound utopian. That world order, however, is doomed. Humanity cannot survive under it. The same developments that point to a warless world point to the new type of people which the Jews must now become or perish. The will of the Jewish people to live has thus become one with the will of mankind to live and to overcome the forces that threaten to destroy it.

According to our Sages the verse in Psalms which reads "This shall be written for the last generation,"¹⁹ refers to a people that is moribund. "But," they add, "the concluding words of that same verse, 'And a people which shall be created shall praise the Lord,' imply that the Holy One, blessed be He, will transform that people into a new being."²⁰



Becoming a "Kehillah Mekabelet"

The Struggles of Transformation

ROBERTA ISRAELOFF



Illustration by
Lawrence Bush

"WE REGARD THE JEWISH VALUES that affirm the inherent dignity, integrity and equality of human beings as having primacy over historically conditioned attitudes based on . . . texts that condemn homosexuality as an abomination. It is our duty to correct the misunderstandings and resulting injustice of the past and to fulfill the Jewish obligation to seek justice."

This paragraph appears in "Homosexuality and Judaism: The Reconstructionist Position," a groundbreaking report issued by the Reconstructionist movement in 1993. To "seek justice," the report urged "all Reconstructionist affiliates, rabbis, and members of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College community to engage in a process of education about the issues relating to Judaism and homosexuality."

I first heard about the report through my rabbi at Kehillath Shalom (Cold Spring Harbor, NY), Arthur Schwartz. A political activist and longstanding ally to the gay and lesbian community, he mentioned it at a board of trustees meeting in the Autumn of 1994. He suggested that our synagogue become a *Kehillah Mekabelet* (Welcoming Congregation),

and asked if anyone would be interested in working with him on this issue. New to the board, I had been looking to carve out a niche for myself. This seemed a perfect opportunity.

I'm happy to report that Kehillath Shalom today has an official policy statement welcoming gay and lesbian Jews into our congregation. Unhappily, we also have fewer gay members than we had before we adopted our welcoming policy statement. Looking back on the process that unfolded over the past four years, I can't help but acknowledge that we made many well-intentioned mistakes — all understandable, costly and avoidable.

Our first mistake was assuming that we had our finger on the membership's pulse and could accurately gauge their collective position on this sensitive issue. Sheer *chutzpah!* Yet our assumption had a historical basis. Kehillath Shalom is a 200-member congregation on Long Island's North Shore. Its founding members broke away from a more traditional synagogue in 1968, at the height of the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements, because of their passionate belief that social and political issues belong squarely on the *bimah*. Reconstructionism itself, moreover, arose from a philosophical (→ page 4)

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RECONSTRUCTIONIST
KASHRUT

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A RECONSTRUCTIONIST
EDUCATOR IN CHINA

a voice
for
creative
Jewish
living

Reconvening

Kehillah Mekabelet

(→ front cover)

commitment to rethink issues and renounce orthodoxies. Because we embrace the same, distinct version of Judaism, it's a short step to assuming we also think alike on political and social issues.

*Our second mistake followed fast on the heels of the first. Assuming that 90 percent of our members already supported our position, we didn't see the need to spend weeks educating and sensitizing congregants to the needs of gay and lesbian Jews. We decided to forego the careful curriculum offered by the JRE, *Homosexuality and Judaism: A Reconstructionist Workshop Series*. It seemed unnecessarily lengthy.*

In its place, we devoted one of our customary Friday Night Forums to the issue. Our panel of speakers included Rabbi Schwartz, a gay member of our congregation, several prospective members from the gay and lesbian communities, and the mother of a gay man who had died of AIDS. Sixty people showed up, despite frigid weather, and the discussion that followed was lively.

Most who spoke sounded supportive; in fact, only one congregant voiced reservations. By singling out one group for "special mention" in our by-laws, he said, we'd be setting a "dangerous precedent." He was also worried that we'd become known as the "gay shul" —

that gay and lesbian Jews would flock to our congregation, upsetting our companionable equilibrium and irrevocably altering the social chemistry that had been established over the years. As it turned out, these were the two most common objections to formalizing a welcoming policy.

Few other members seconded his objections, however, and by the evening's end we had

formed a committee of six to draft the policy statement. One committee member was a gay man, and two were lesbians, including a prospective member of our congregation who

worked in human resources for a large corporation and devoted much of her time to promoting diversity. I served as chair.

The man who spoke up at the Forum attended our first meeting with a friend to voice in greater depth their problems with our proposed policy statement. Then they listened as the gay and lesbian members of the committee asked why they should be denied what was granted to all other Jews: the right to show up at a Shabbat service with family, to exchange a Shabbat kiss, to be married under a *huppah*. They talked about the extent to which they had felt excluded from synagogue life and Jewish life because of their sexual orientation.

I saw in the eyes of the two men a moment of what psychologists call "softening." Previously stony positions became surprisingly porous. One man changed his position; the other still objected to gay and lesbian marriages taking place within the sanctuary. Both seemed to realize that our bond as Jews was much greater than what divided us.

"We need more programs just like this one," said the human resources expert as we walked together to our cars. "I have lots of material and know many speakers. We need to listen to each other. People need to feel as if they can say whatever they're feeling. We need to build a consensus. These kinds of changes are best accomplished over time."

But I was impatient. As heartened as I was by the process I had witnessed, I respectfully rejected her recommendation. "Let's get the by-laws amended," I said, "and then we can schedule programs."

*The folly of this decision didn't haunt me right away, as the board meeting at which we first presented our amendment went smoothly. A majority was amenable to adopting the statement, and affirmed this in a motion before returning it to committee for some minor tweaking. A month later, however, when the newly-worded proposal was presented to the trustees, it was as if the issue were being raised for the first time. A very heated debate arose; *halahic* objections were raised.*

"I don't mind having gay members, but I'll never countenance having a commitment ceremony taking place on the *bimah*."

"That's like inviting someone into your

WE SHOULD HAVE
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"Homosexuality and Judaism: A Reconstructionist Workshop Series"

THE 1993 REPORT ON *Homosexuality and Judaism: The Reconstructionist Position* was accompanied by this series of eight workshops (each about 2-2½ hours) designed to enable congregations to "incorporate the Reconstructionist approach by bringing to bear both Jewish texts and contemporary scientific understanding of the issues, addressing personal attitudes and experiences." Participating groups should number no fewer than five and no more than 25. The workshop series guide, edited by Rabbi Bob Gluck, includes guidelines for facilitators, Jewish texts, workshop outlines, curricular resources for Jewish schools, and "recommended commitments and actions" for becoming *Kehillot Mekablot* (Welcoming Congregations). This 104-page document is available from the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation for \$18.

home but refusing to serve them a meal."

"Why do we need an official statement? It's already policy that everyone's welcome."

"In the past, gay and lesbian Jews weren't welcome. We need to send a message that things have changed."

"Why don't we extend to gay couples the same rights as interfaith couples?"

"Because a gay Jew is a Jew! There should be no restrictions."

"This is nothing short of a civil rights issue!" I heard myself proclaiming, my voice more self-righteous than I meant it to be. "How can we Jews persecute other Jews?"

Rabbi Schwartz wisely intervened, withdrawing the proposal without a vote.

Driving home in a blind fury, I realized that we had made yet another mistake. We should have enlisted the services of a facilitator to see us through this process: someone who would give people permission to speak from their hearts and ultimately bring us together. That was the role I had foreseen for myself, but I was clearly having difficulty separating people from their opinions.

When our sorely disheartened committee reconvened, all of us knew, none better than I, that we had to backtrack. Now I welcomed input from the human resources expert. She and Rabbi Schwartz suggested that instead of focusing on the policy statement itself, we plan two or three educational programs for the membership and place a series of articles in the congregational newsletter about the process in which we were engaged.

After a period of time, the phone started ringing. People who long supported this issue were offering their help and expertise. Their

eagerness made me realize that we should have tapped the resources in our own community months earlier. Sure, we had advertised the Friday Night Forum and placed an article in the newsletter, but that wasn't enough. We hadn't cast our net wide enough, hadn't asked enough times.

With this infusion of new energy and commitment, we scheduled two Friday Night Forums on successive months. The first featured the Rev. Robert L. Pierce, executive director of the Long Island Council of Churches and pastor of a neighboring church that had recently adopted a welcoming statement. He assured us that his congregation had voiced many of the same concerns as ours — and none had come to pass. Also speaking was Dr. John E. Hirsch, author of the Reform synagogue movement's policy statement on homosexuality and Judaism. He spoke movingly of the pain of not being able to celebrate Shabbat in the ways heterosexual Jews can. "I want to kiss my partner 'gut shabbos,'" he said. "I want to be able to dance with him at congregation dances." After their talks, they answered many questions.

The second Forum featured a panel of speakers from Congregation Beth Simchat Torah, a New York synagogue with a largely



**THE WORK,
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gay and lesbian membership. Eight people *shlepped* out to Long Island on a Friday night, braving the nightmarish traffic, to share their vastly diverse experiences. We heard from kids just out of college, from grandmothers, from lawyers, doctors, secretaries and social workers, all explaining their journey and the soul-saving solace they had found at their *shul*. They, too, patiently answered questions.

Eventually, at a board meeting in May of last year, our committee recommended the adoption of a welcoming statement, not as a by-laws amendment but as a freestanding policy statement that would go out to all new members and be printed in all literature about the *shul*. With a minimum of debate, this motion passed handily.

Our jubilation was short-lived. Within days, our gay male committee member resigned, unable to quiet the voices he'd heard during the first board debate. The human resources expert found another *shul* to join. "I could never feel at home here," she said.

I wanted to convince them to give us a chance — even as I knew that the words could not be taken back and some attitudes would never be changed.

Over the course of the past year, I've had plenty of time to reflect on the mistaken assumptions and lapses of judgment outlined in this article. Given the chance, I'd now pursue our goal of becoming a *Kehillah Mekabelet* very differently — and I hope that other Reconstructionist synagogues can learn from our mistakes.

I keep returning to one error that was mine alone. Many times amid the debate, a congregant would ask me, "Why are you doing this?" Why had I, a heterosexual woman, taken up this particular cause? I never adequately figured out how to respond. Often I grew angry and declaimed that prejudice of any type was abhorrent, and that we Jews should be especially sensitive to its ravages. Too often the person posing the question would shut down, turned off by my self-righteousness.

Other times I told a story about one of my

oldest and dearest friends, who is a lesbian. Years earlier she had poured her heart out to me about hating Monday mornings, when everyone in the office reported on their weekend activities. Though she had a long-standing relationship and as active a weekend as anyone, she could never join in to talk about what she and her lover had done.

To which I suggested: "Why don't you just refer to Julie as 'he'?"

I'll never forget the mournful look she gave me. I had betrayed her.

"And that's why," I would explain, "when Rabbi Schwartz asked for help, I volunteered — to atone for the injury I inflicted on my friend. Thanks to her patience, I learned about the rigors of her life, about the pressures and problems I couldn't even imagine. To change a pronoun, to refrain from touching, to hesitate on the threshold of the *shul* because you're not entirely sure that you're welcome — this all means denying your humanity, your God-given completeness."

Sometimes, from a look in the listener's eye, I saw that this story worked; sometimes it didn't. I never settled on the right approach, even as I persist in believing that each hardened heart is waiting only for an explanation eloquent enough to unlock it.

Maybe that faith is naive. Maybe the process of shucking off thousands of years of prejudice simply takes this long, whatever your tone or anecdote. The work, after all, is about changing hearts, not simply passing resolutions.

There's much remaining to be done at Kehillath Shalom. We need to find a way to welcome gay and lesbian Jews not only on paper, but through programs and outreach. It won't be a smooth ride, and it won't happen overnight. Still, I am intermittently hopeful. *✠*

Roberta Israeloff is author, most recently, of Kindling the Flame: Reflections on Ritual, Faith, and Family, to be published in August by Simon & Schuster.

Has your congregation gone through a process towards becoming a *Kehillah Mekabelet*? Please write a letter about it to RT, 30 Old Whitfield Road, Accord, NY 12404; e-mail Babush@ulster.net.

Adoption and Conversion

A Reconstructionist Discussion

In recent months, numerous Reconstructionist men and women with an expertise or personal stake in adoption matters were invited by RT to participate in an e-mail dialogue about adoption and Reconstructionism. The discussion focused on the Jewish custom of converting adopted infants born of non-Jewish birthmothers. Given the adoption theme within the Passover story (Moses is saved and ultimately adopted by the daughter of Pharaoh, although it is Yoheved, his birthmother, who raises him to maturity — Exodus 2:10), we thought this season an appropriate time to present the discussion. Reader comment is welcome.

LAWRENCE BUSH: I'd like to begin this discussion by challenging the prevailing Reconstructionist view about the conversion of children, including infants, who are not "born Jewish." In her book, *Adoption and the Jewish Family*, Shelley Kapnek Rosenberg makes clear that Reconstructionist Judaism "requires" conversion in such cases. She quotes from a 1993 Reconstructionist conversion manual by Rabbis Shai Gluskin and Yael Levy, which sees the traditional rituals as "imperative parts of the conversion process" and emphasizes "their meaningfulness and transformative potential."

RABBI SHAI GLUSKIN: What Yael and I wrote was a Reconstructionist conversion manual, not the Reconstructionist Conversion Manual. It was written for a practical rabbinics independent study at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical

Participants in this discussion include:

LAWRENCE BUSH, editor of *Reconstructionism Today*. Bush is the adoptive father of twins, now 13 years old.

RABBI SHAI GLUSKIN (RRC '95), JRF Associate Director of Education.

RABBI MICHAEL REMSON of Congregation Beth Shalom in Naperville, IL. Remson is the adoptive father of two children, now grown.

SHELLEY KAPNEK ROSENBERG, author of *Adoption and the Jewish Family* (Jewish Publication Society, 1998). Rosenberg is the adoptive mother of a boy, now 19, and the biological mother of a 14-year-old daughter.

reconsecrating



LAWRENCE BUSH

College. Yael and I had our own process in creating the document, including consultation with rabbis and a lot of text study, but there are no official Reconstructionist policies included in the manual.

BUSH: But it reflects a values-based decision-making process that deserves to be aired and revisited within this movement. Each of us also has a personal stake in the matter, as adoptive parents, policymakers, rabbis, or some combination of these identities.

So let me begin with a confession of my own bias: I adopted my twins at birth, and I felt offended by the very notion of having to convert infants based on their birth mother's non-Jewishness. Shelley quotes me accurately in her book (calling me "Ken"): I "dislike 'bloodline Judaism,' believing that Jewish identity belongs to anyone who wishes to affirm it." My son was circumcised by a Conservative rabbi, and we did a tree-planting for both my son and daughter, based on a Talmudic tradition that eventually leads to *huppa* (wedding canopy) poles being cut from the tree. But we did no *mikveh* (ritual bath) or formal conversion. Doing so would have felt to me like submission to some Orthodox norm.

RABBI MICHAEL REMSON: No one in the Reconstructionist movement is under the illusion that their conversions would be accepted by the Orthodox. Like most of my rabbinic

colleagues, I believe we need to tell the truth. When I officiate at a conversion, I tell people that segments of the Jewish community will not accept this, and I discuss what that might mean in their future.

Some non-Orthodox Jews consider having Orthodox conversions simply because they know their children are going to be raised in an intensively Jewish environment and want them to be unencumbered.

BUSH: I know that many Jews and certainly most Israelis make exactly such a "surrender" at each life-passage, but since I see the fundamentalist/interpretive split in Jewish life as essentially irreparable, I'd rather actively seek to undermine the notion that Orthodoxy has more authenticity than liberal Judaism.

REMSON: The goal is not ideological. The goal is to maximize children's freedom, as Jews, to live Jewish lives.

I am troubled by your position that a Jew is anyone who calls himself or herself a Jew. Does Judaism stand for something, or can each person decide what it stands for? Are Jews who accept Jesus still Jewish? What about non-Jews who go to "messianic" synagogues? Are they Jewish because they say they are, or because their "rabbi" converts them? We Jews may not agree when it comes to determining how someone comes into the group or leaves the group, but that doesn't mean there are no doors.

BUSH: I'd rather risk an "open door" policy than support a kind of racialist Judaism. It is more important to recognize the voluntary nature of Jewish identity and to assume inclusiveness for those willing to volunteer, than to continue to "protect" our peoplehood with these strictures. Since Reconstructionism has long rejected the "Chosen People" concept, why accept the notion of conversion of a "new soul," as it were — a person unshaped by non-Jewish values? Isn't there a mystical sense of Jewish superiority at work here?

REMSON: I am not troubled by the thought that bloodlines will make someone Jewish. This is not a racist position. As an analogy, to recognize that someone is black because they have black parents is not making a racist statement — even if the person would not be recognized as black to the casual observer. Some people who fall into this category have

black identity and others do not, but no one can say that those who have black identity did not get that black identity through bloodlines.

BUSH: Blackness is an actual racial identity (as well as a more subjective consciousness identity), which our racist culture has distorted by considering race to be such a big deal and even "a drop of black blood" to be

definitive of a person's identity. Judaism, on the other hand, is to my mind strictly a consciousness identity. Really, because my mother was Jewish, are Abraham and Sarah *truly, biologically* to be considered my ancestors? There are, for most Jews, no family trees that bring us back to the Holy Land, and given the "wanderings" of the Jews for two millennia and the realities of intermarriage, rape and conquest, we are truly a racially mixed people. Ours is an identity of consciousness and aspiration:

Abraham and Sarah are our *spiritual* ancestors, our *adoptive* ancestors, if you will. Yet Jews continue to think in terms of bloodlines and ethnic identity, and conversion law is the main prop for that thinking.

I think Reconstructionist Judaism should recognize bloodline Judaism as no longer reflective of our values. Jewish history during the last century — indeed, human history during the last century — has placed racism much higher on the list of human evils, and our Judaism should reflect that history.

GLUSKIN: I believe meaningful boundaries can exist that have nothing to do with superiority or even chosenness. My goal is to reconstruct, and what I've found is that our Judaism is a lot more stable, not just in terms of survival, but in terms of its ability to communicate meaning, when we use the parts of the foundation that are in good shape. The rituals of circumcision and especially *mikveh* are spiritually rich in welcoming adoptive children into our community.

There is also tension between the universalist and particularist aspects of our tradition. It is good that they remain in tension. To privilege the universalist in regard to adopted children tilts too much toward the universal. Fifty-plus years of Reconstructionism has proved that it is possible to affirm the particular without arrogance and self-aggrandizement.

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REMSON: The Reconstructionist movement recognizes that non-Jewish adults need to convert to Judaism in order to become Jews. The new *Kol Haneshamah* prayerbook did not obliterate the first sentence of the *Amidah*, in which the patriarchs and matriarchs are referred to as our parents. Rather, there is the recognition that adults who convert become "adopted" into the communal family, and adopt

the patriarchs and matriarchs as their own ancestors.

Most liberal rabbis also recognize that those who were born Jewish, were away from Jewish life for their entire lives and now choose to identify do *not* need to convert. Clearly, the bloodline makes a difference. Does this mean that we treat birth children and adopted children differently? Yes, but that is because there *is* a difference between birth children and adopted children.

SHELLEY ROSENBERG: I agree. I think that adoptive parents must realize that our families *are* different and should not pretend not to be. The Jewish conversion ceremony symbolizes this fact, and if there is something in Judaism that helps us to realize and deal with it, I don't think that's bad. I don't look at any of this as bowing to the Orthodox or debating "who is a real Jew." I look at it as a spiritual statement — a first opportunity to acknowledge that my child was adopted but is now joining both my family and my religious community. There are things that one does legally in order to make that happen, and there are things that one does Jewishly in order to make it happen.

There is something very important about what people inherit from their birth parents — and perhaps this is something that Judaism, in its wisdom, realized and made provision for. When we adopted our son, I wanted to believe that everything was "nurture" — that he was a "blank slate" whom we would create in our image, including as part of the Jewish community. I learned very quickly that this was not the case — that there were many facets of our son, both positive and negative, which had much more to do with inheritance than with what he got from us. "Bloodline" does have validity and should be recognized as something important to adopted people and their families.

BUSH: I think it's good to offer meaningful conversion rituals for those families interested in engaging in them. But we're talking here about whether or not adopted children will be considered Jewish by the Reconstructionist community. A policy on conversion would be received as a "must do," not just a nice offer. And it seems to me that adoptive families, who are trying to deal with that feeling of being different, trying to celebrate themselves, trying to normalize — on top of simply trying to get used to life with infants! — should not be required by the Jewish community to do anything a "birth family" would not have to do.

I remember the complex feelings my wife Susan and I had as we were entering into the adoption process: how we were, essentially, having to apply for a parenting "license" because of the biological fluke of our infertility. I understood and appreciated the need for home visits by social workers and the rest of the rigamarole, but I found it ironic that any 16-year-old without an infertility problem could become a parent *without* a license.

So then I need *another* license to have a Jewish family? Though my wife and I are both Jewish, though we "met" our children one hour after their birth and brought them home straight from the hospital — still, because of religious law and custom based on an entirely different Jewish social reality than that of today, I'm "different" from other Jewish families and need to have my babies converted? Which values are we serving here?

GLUSKIN: One value is the importance of belonging. One of Mordecai Kaplan's postulates, central to Reconstructionist values, is that belonging precedes believing. The fact that Jewish identity, from a Jewish legal point of view, is passed down through the blood, has been a major contributing factor to the pluralistic nature of Jewish religious thinking. Because our identity is not based on what we believe, there is much freedom within Judaism for there to be *shivin panim Torah* — many ways to interpret the Torah. The moment we drop the ethnic aspects of Judaism and transform it into a universalistic religion, we are privileging believing over belonging. We would be forced to come together to articulate the essential aspects of Jewish belief, which would then define our ability to belong. To force us to create a dogma for the sake of universalism would mean, I fear, destroying what is best about Judaism.

ROSENBERG: When I give talks on the topic, I tell people that I believe it very important (and very Reconstructionist) for people to know the *halahah* (Jewish law) — and then to decide personally what feels right to them. They need to understand the ramifications of their decisions. If their child is not converted by an Orthodox *bet din* (rabbinic court), that child will not be considered Jewish by certain members of the Jewish community. There will be certain doors closed to them — rightly or wrongly. I also explain that it is something the adoptee, when grown, has a choice to change — just as he or she has a choice whether or not to remain a Jew, and a choice of how to practice his or her Judaism. This is a choice that any Jew has, of course, but it is much more pressing to the adoptee.

I have found in my research that many (note that I don't say all) adopted Jews find themselves questioning their Jewish identity. They "don't feel Jewish," no matter how observant their adoptive home. They know that they would have been something else. Therefore, solidifying their entrance into the Jewish community through the gateway ceremony of conversion is very important and meaningful.

GLUSKIN: Shelley is talking about the benefit of the child, which is the second value sustained by Reconstructionist conversion. In the Talmud's discussion of conversion of a young child (B. *Ketubot* 11b), the rabbis struggle with the authority of the community and the parents to make the child a Jew without the child's permission. There is huge respect here for the autonomy of the child. The rabbis turn to a principle called *zhat hu lo* — literally, "the benefit is his" — which applies to situations in which a person can act on behalf of another who isn't present only if it is indisputable that the action is to the absent person's benefit. The young child (under three years old) is considered like an absent person and the community and parents can then act for his or her benefit by converting the child.

But there is an objection: How can the taking on of the commandments, especially the prohibition of non-kosher foods, be considered a "benefit" to anybody? The response is that the *mitzvo* are not a burden but a benefit, and a young child growing up with them would know no other way.

Even with this argument there is discomfort with the idea that the minor convert's au-

tonomy should be completely removed. The response is that upon maturity, the child convert is given an opportunity to reject his or her Jewish identity.

Most Reconstructionist rabbis today believe that giving a child that opportunity upon maturity is *not* to the benefit of the child. Still, though we may find the Talmud's final "answer" not currently applicable, the Talmud's debate on adoption and conversion models an approach that we can emulate in our own discussion. The Sages' acknowledgement of the complexity of the issue, and their attempt to see the undesired consequences of each decision, are helpful in inspiring us to be thoughtful about our process. Probably of greatest value left to us in the Talmudic discussion is the idea that all our actions in this regard must be for the benefit of the child. **R**

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