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Reconstructionism: From Head to Heart

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Stereotypes die hard. This is as true for movements as it is for ethnic groups. A stereotype allows us to characterize a group simplistically, depriving us of a closer examination which is bound to yield a richer, more complex, if ambiguous, portrait.

Reconstructionism has long been dismissed by its less thoughtful critics as "too rationalistic," "emotionless," or "overly intellectual," suggesting that there is no fulfillment in a religious system that glorifies the mind over the spirit. Implied in this often-heard critique are two erroneous assumptions. The first is that other versions of American Judaism provide a wealth of religious fervor unavailable in Reconstructionism. The second is that a movement which takes intellectual honesty seriously is incapable of emotionalism. Neither assumption would stand up to closer scrutiny.

Nonetheless, at the core of every stereotype lies some kernel of truth. Reconstructionists must take a closer look at themselves and their movement to see what validity lies behind this stereotype.

It is impossible to separate the image forged by Reconstructionism in America from its original context at The Jewish Theological Seminary. There, students for many years saw themselves as disciples of either Abraham Joshua Heschel, the traditional mystic, or Mordecai Kaplan, the progressive rationalist. This is not to suggest that there was any rivalry between the two men (they were, in fact, good friends), but rather that the loyalty they instilled went far beyond what one might expect from teacher-student relationships. They were "rebbe's" in the sense that their students not only heeded their teaching but looked to them as role models for a particular rabbinic lifestyle. The result was some degree of polar-typing between the two groups. Heschel's writing was not clear or precise; Kaplan's was not poetic or inspirational. Due to over-exuberant loyalty, the soon-to-be-rabbis denied themselves the wisdom that existed in the other camp.

Over the years, no one in the Reconstructionist circle seemed inclined to correct the characterization of their philosophy as overly intellectual and rational. Quite the contrary, while meant as a criticism, Reconstructionists

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saw it as a compliment. They thought that Conservative rabbis following Heschel's footsteps were typically unaware of the challenges of modern life, prone to ambiguous theology and victims of the over-used "leap of faith" sanctioned at the Seminary. That is to say that while rational scientific inquiry of the Jewish past was encouraged, for purposes of one's personal religious faith certain non-rational beliefs were considered perfectly in order. In contrast, Reconstructionists felt smug about being the bearers of a philosophy that was realistic, dynamic and consistent. Once supernaturalism was rejected, the classic Reconstructionist positions on Jewish peoplehood, halakhah, and "chosen-ness" followed quite naturally. Thus the stereotype was re-enforced and Reconstructionist congregations attracted a membership that was made in the image of Kaplanian philosophy.

A changing audience

Times have changed. In the early part of this century Kaplan spoke to a generation familiar with traditional Judaism. His own commitment to tradition stood in contrast to Reform, yet his willingness to question, challenge and modify showed that he was prepared to take Judaism out of a medieval halakhic framework and into America's twentieth century. Kaplan grounded Judaism in a rational foundation which allowed many Americanized Jews to retain their Jewish commitment. Today, in contrast to Kaplan's audience of fifty years ago, Jews often walk into synagogues without the faintest notion of what being Jewish entails. They are part of what was believed to be the lost generation of American Jews because their parents were unaffiliated and they themselves received no Jewish education. For a variety of reasons (which space does not allow me to detail here) they are finding their way back to synagogues to rediscover, for themselves and for their children, what Judaism has to offer.

For the most part, these Jews have a burning desire to learn. Any way that you can package intellectual Judaism, they want a part of it. I cannot say the same is true for worship. I am told that at the recent Council of Jewish Federations' convention, the Shabbat services were empty while the study sessions that preceded them were packed. This is a phenomenon which many rabbis experience in their own synagogues. Insofar as Reconstructionist congregations have always attracted more than their share of intellectuals, this has been a problem of long-standing.

Why is this a problem? Aren't we taught that in Judaism study is worship? The answer is that study is a form of religious devotion only when that which is learned is taken to heart and not merely to the head. All too often the intellectual curiosity that we find in the synagogue is a substitute for religious commitment. In the synagogue context, intellectualism becomes more an excuse than a virtue. It allows Jews to be perennially skeptical and too "enlightened" to engage in sincere prayer or powerful ritual. It allows the rabbi to be an intellectual savant without being a true teacher, thereby creating a Judaism which functions more like a course in a free university

than a vibrant, pulsating faith which enters one's heart and home. This is not a call to return to what we believe was the simple piety of our ancestors, but rather is a warning for us to be aware of how we use our greater sophistication to keep Judaism at arm's length.

Enter spirituality

It is no surrender to the religious fanaticism of our times to expect our religion to provide us with spiritual electricity. Many more Jews today are plagued by the feeling of depersonalization in our overly secular society than are in danger of becoming irrational zealots. If Reconstructionism is religious humanism and not merely secular humanism then no apology should be needed for invoking the terminology of transcendence, spirituality and emotion in synagogue. If a rabbi is to succeed in getting a congregation to stop just talking about Judaism and begin doing it, something more personally compelling than "peoplehood" or "folkways" must be offered. There should be a difference between a rabbi talking about prayer or *mizvot* and Margaret Mead describing tribal rites in Samoa.

If Reconstructionism is to facilitate the reintegration of Jews into Jewish lifestyles, then it must not limit its vocabulary solely to the rational and intellectual. Prayer is not merely a valuable experience by virtue of the fact that one does it with other Jews. Nor is it an intellectual excursion into what our ancestors believed. Rather it provides an outlet for our deepest fears and highest hopes. It is an emotional expression that comes from the heart, not from the head. The more we direct our *kavvanah*, intent, on the traditional liturgy, the more we realize that those ancient prayers encompass our own life experiences in a language more authentic than the best contemporary reading.

That we are deeply indebted to Mordecai Kaplan for his contribution to our understanding of Judaism goes without saying. Yet his principles can also be abused in a way which allows them to become barriers to the most basic expressions of religion. Such is the case with the principle of "unity of thought and action." The Reconstructionist liturgy reflects changes that make it consistent with the beliefs that are subscribed to. Yet even if one accepts the reasons for the elimination of the chosen people formula, obedience to this principle should not be elevated above all else. Take the case of a family that has the privilege of celebrating a bar *mizvah* with three generations present. If the father states that the most important moment for him will be when his son chants the same Torah blessings that he chanted and his father and grandfather before him, should the rabbi insist on the Reconstructionist version of that blessing so as to insure unity of thought and action? There must be a place in the practice of Reconstructionism for sentimentality and tradition even when it does not meet "rational" standards.

I have worked in a Reconstructionist congregation for a number of years and have long considered myself a dyed-in-the-wool rationalist. Yet it

gradually became obvious to me that there was a great spiritual hunger in the community that wasn't being met by our worship format or Kaplanian philosophy. On a family *kallah* we experimented with some neo-hasidic modes of prayer, meditation and *niggunim*. People *davened* with *tallitot* over their heads and others unabashably spoke of "God-experiences." We even read Heschel and never for one moment felt that we were betraying Kaplan. We did not leave the weekend less Reconstructionist but more fully Jewish.

There is much about Reconstructionism's rational approach which draws Jews back to their religion. But these Jews are ultimately not looking for ideological precision. They are looking for a spiritual home. Rabbis must be prepared to speak to their congregants hearts as well as their minds. Only then will they feel welcome. Kaplan himself understood this when he said that belonging is prior to believing. Unfortunately, all too few have understood the implications of this statement and how to put it into practice.

While the stereotype of Reconstructionism may have some merit, its intellectualist malady is not without remedy. Reconstructionism can continue to be rigorously honest and rational, *and* begin to meet the spiritual hunger of the returning Jew. This requires an expansion of the Reconstructionist vocabulary to include the Heschelian poetry of spirituality. It also calls for Reconstructionists to be more accepting of the metaphors of the traditional liturgy for their power of association, even if their own versions are more intellectually precise. It suggests that the expression of emotion be encouraged in the synagogue without judging whether such demonstrations are consistent with the stated philosophies of the movement. These suggestions for expanding Reconstructionist vocabulary and expression have nothing to do with theology. They merely recognize the fact that a naturalist does not have less spiritual needs than a supernaturalist; the former is only more constrained by the language chosen to express them.

Ironically, this examination of the Reconstructionist stereotype and its remedy may carry with it an important message for other sectors of American Judaism who have yet to ask themselves honestly whether they are in fact reaching Jewish hearts and bringing Jews back into the fold. In sum, it is time to call a halt to the polemic and realize that Heschel and Kaplan are not irreconcilable. One represents the heart and the other the mind. Both are basic to an integrated Judaism. □