

Reconstructionist Judaism, Past, Present and Future: A Symposium

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

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

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

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

David Teutsch

1. Reconstructionist thought regard-

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Central to Kaplan's thinking was the

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Jane Susswein

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

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

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

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

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

What are the key questions of Jewish

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

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

more challenging.

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

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

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Amy Klein

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

While key contributions of Reconstructionist Judaism to North American

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

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

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

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Brant Rosen

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Isaac Saposnik

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

We are a movement of strugglers

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Dan Ehrenkrantz

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Amy Goldsmith

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

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

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

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

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

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

The biggest "aha" moment of that

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

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

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

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

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

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Shawn Zevit

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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