

Robert Barkin Inaugural Address, November 11, 2006

The first order of business, of course, is to honor two people who have given so much to JRF. Dan Cedarbaum carried our organization through some very difficult times. But more importantly, he is leaving a legacy of accomplishments, highlighted, of course, by the purchase of our own site for Camp JRF. Thank you, Dan.

And Carl Sheingold has instilled a sense of purpose and direction through his work these last two years as Executive Vice President. He has vision, and we look forward in the coming years to taking advantage of his remarkable intellect and creativity. And thank you, Carl.

I also want to thank my wife, Cathy, and daughter Lena, who are here with me tonight to help me through this evening. I couldn't do this work without their support. My older daughter, Emily, couldn't be here tonight and the burden will be slightly less next year when she takes a semester abroad to study in Brazil. Don't be surprised, however, if we

suddenly open a JRF affiliate in Rio de Janeiro. I also want to thank my brother, Tom, who is also here. At one point a few years, both he and I were presidents of our respective congregations, he in Eugene, OR and I in Bethesda, MD. I used to say that Barkins were presidents of Reconstructionist congregations from coast to coast.

Surprisingly to some, maybe mostly to myself, this is not, as I said, the first Reconstructionist organization that I have had the honor to lead. My first, of course, is my congregation, Adat Shalom. Like many other Reconstructionists today, I found when I first attended an Adat Shalom service that I had been a Reconstructionist my whole life but never knew it.

I grew up in a Kosher household in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and belonged to a Conservative synagogue. Many of you will have your own stories of how you found Reconstructionism, though I know today we have many second and even third generation Reconstructionists in our ranks. At Adat Shalom, I found a home. Almost immediately, I became active in our synagogue's leadership, eventually helping, as president, to hire our

first full-time rabbi, Fred Dobb, and the architect for our current beautiful building – in fact, our Board of Directors approved both positions in the same meeting. Those were interesting days.

At the time that I ended my tenure at Adat Shalom, I was privileged to be honored by the Chesapeake region. I said then that the gratitude really was my own – because of the enormous satisfaction that I gained from helping build an institution that I love. And I feel that way today. I am the one who needs to thank you for having the confidence in me to help lead our movement for the next two years.

Why do I feel this way? Because the Reconstructionist movement has so much of value to offer to the North American – and the world’s Jewish community.

Eighty years ago, when Mordecai Kaplan wrote his seminal work, *Judaism as Civilization*, the world he saw around him was much different than our own. He sought to make Judaism into a religion of its own place and time, reconciling the scientific and

social knowledge that was emerging with the treasured traditions of the past 2,500 years.

In many ways, he succeeded. He discarded supernaturalism, chosenness and a view of Jewish law frozen in the Middle Ages. He conceived of Judaism as an evolving religious civilization, with our precious traditions the sacred work of the Jewish people, changing when necessary, but only with care and study. Bat mitzvah ceremonies for girls, patrilineal descent and women rabbis, once considered unthinkable, are now commonplace and uncontroversial – not only in our own movement, but also in much of the American Jewish community. We continue the work of Kaplan through the teachings of our Rabbinical College and the works of its graduates through the Rabbinical Association.

Yet, Kaplan's work is not done. Too many Jews today are seeking expression of their religious beliefs outside our tradition – because they don't understand that our tradition – at least as it has evolved in our own movement – can answer their needs – or dare I say it – their prayers. We can speak to these unaffiliated Jews through our sense of community,

of congregational participation, of engagement and wrestling with the Jewish texts, of egalitarian values and our commitment to social justice.

We have great contributions to make in repairing the world. In our parasha this week, *Vayera*, Abraham pleads, even negotiates with Adonai, to spare the lives of the wicked people of Sodom and Gomora if only he can find a few righteous individuals. In fact, Midrash says that Abraham was chosen as the patriarch of our people specifically because he would stand up to even the Highest Power in the defense of justice. And, today we note further that Abraham's example is even more remarkable because he was working not just for his own family, not just for his own tribe, but on behalf of all humanity. His sense of social justice is a guide for us today.

Like Abraham, we Reconstructionists also stand up for social justice. We already extend our voice, whether we are fighting to end the genocide in Darfur, to save the planet from global warming or to allow same-sex couples to marry. Reconstructionists are in the lead on the important issues of social justice today. It is no coincidence that national leaders in

the causes of social justice like Steve Gutow and Ruth Messinger, the heads of two prominent social active organizations who will speak to us tomorrow, are deeply rooted in the Reconstructionist movement.

Our goal – if you will our ethical imperative – is to continue to raise the visibility of the Reconstructionist movement in the greater Jewish world. We must become a spiritual home for more people in places where we have no presence today and continue to reach out to others in places where we already have congregations.

We need to reach out to our Jewish young adults. In an article recently in the Forward, Wayne Firestone, the new executive director of Hillel, compared the Jewish camp experience to the Jewish campus experience and said that college life should build the same strong Jewish identity as the experience his children had at Jewish camp. Wayne's children went to Camp JRF. Wayne belongs to Adat Shalom. Another Reconstructionist leading the future of American Judaism.

This leadership from our movement to the Jewish world is not a coincidence. We must make ourselves heard and accessible, not because we want to boost our egos, but because we have something important to say. And we say it better than anyone else.

This is the greatest value of the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation. Just as we, as individuals, join our congregations to add our own voices to others in prayer and social justice and community, our congregations become part of the JRF to make their voices heard so much louder on the issues of religious experience and Judaism in the broader Jewish world – Klal Israel. And JRF participates and will participate with other organizations to make our collective Jewish voice heard, whether it's fighting hunger, building new housing for the poor, or working for the security and religious diversity of Israel in a very dangerous neighborhood. Through JRF, you as individuals have a greater impact collectively than you could ever have alone.

We have accomplished much in our efforts to build a strong foundation for our movement. Our Camp JRF and No'ar Hadash have extended our values to youth. We are

building programs to help support our congregations through consultation and initiatives and to strengthen our ties to Israel. We at JRF are far from finished and with your help – and yes – your financial support we will continue to move forward.

But as we move forward to provide better support for our current affiliates and congregants, I also want to encourage our movement to expand – to reach out to the thousands of unaffiliated Jews who could find a home, a community and a voice in the Reconstructionist movement. It is time that Reconstructionism sheds its label as the best kept secret in American Judaism.

Again, it remains my esteemed privilege to help lead our organization and I look forward to working with all of you and your congregations in the next two years.

Thank you.