



“The Power that Makes for Righteousness” — Congregation-Based Community Organizing

A Reconstructionist Approach to Living a Godly Life

SHAWN ISRAEL ZEVIT WITH BRIAN FINK

“The function of the belief in God is to make us aware of the moral and spiritual context of our conduct, so that we come to move within the orbit of the ‘Power that makes for righteousness.’ Judaism uses the belief in God to make Jews aware of the natural conditions that have to be established and the human relations that have to be maintained for the Jewish people, if it is to achieve their potential collectively and individually.”

—Mordecai M. Kaplan, “The Way I Have Come”
(in *Mordecai M. Kaplan: An Evaluation*,
Ira Eisenstein and Eugene Kohn, eds.)

THE VISION FOR A VIBRANT Jewish peoplehood that embodies the integration of social justice and religion has always been present in the Reconstructionist movement — from the publication of Mordecai Kaplan’s *Judaism as Civilization* in 1934, through the founding of our congregational movement in 1955 and the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC) in 1968, right up to the present. In this vision, Jewish civilization is, as Rebecca Alpert and Jacob Staub have expressed it, “a means to greater ends” — a means to achieve individual fulfillment, to cultivate our responsibility to treat others as *b'tselem Elohim*, reflections of the divine image, and “to seek global justice and



“Pursue Justice” by Rabbi Me’irah Iliinsky. From Isaiah 1:17, in a design inspired by Islamic illuminated manuscripts.

peace among all communities” (*Exploring Judaism: A Reconstructionist Approach*).

In 2006, the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation joined a new initiative in fulfillment of this vision. In formal partnership with the Jewish Funds for Justice (JFSJ), JRF received a grant to help develop a network and resources for Congregation-Based Community Organizing (CBCO) in Reconstructionist communities. The CBCO model of activism, as described on the JFSJ website (www.jewishjustice.org), “unites a diverse range of people, primarily through religious congregations, in the shared goal of building a civic power base capable of making change to promote the public good.” Three core elements are involved:

- Congregants “engage in one-to-one conversations within their synagogue, and often with other congregations, about their social justice passions.”
- Leaders “engage in extensive clergy and lay leadership training and development.”
- Synagogue leaders “work side-by-side with dozens of faith institutions and progressive organizations in their community, across lines of race, class, and faith.”

Reconstructionist Rabbis Mordechai Liebling, Toba Spitzer, and Elliot Tepperman had already paved the way to CBCO in their organizations and congregations and were catalysts for JRF’s involvement. Beginning this winter, (→ page 4)

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a voice for creative Jewish living



From Education to Identity: The Potential for Reconstructionist Innovation

CARL A. SHEINGOLD

JRF IS CURRENTLY engaged in a strategic planning process about which we will communicate more fully in the fall. Some of the themes are already impacting our work and our understanding of how to strengthen our ability to contribute to the life and achievements of our congregations, our movement, and the broader Jewish and world community.

Some of the strategic themes derive from reflecting on some obvious attributes of our movement. We are relatively small. This suggests certain limitations in regard to resources — human and financial — but also the capacity to be agile and to adapt quickly to change. We have justified pride in being a source of innovation for the entire Jewish community. In the context of strategic planning, we ask ourselves: What are the key challenges that confront the Jewish community today? What are the current arenas of needed innovation that, were we to address them, would be a source of pride 10 years from now? Our relatively small size enables us to imagine our movement as a kind of laboratory for experimentation. It also enables us to

imagine that new ideas can quickly spread through our movement. We can share successes, as well as increase our ability to learn from what are always the ups and downs of experimentation.

Let me provide an illustration of this in Jewish education. With the leadership of Rabbi Erin Hirsh and Cindy Shulak-Rome, we at JRF are in the process of significantly upgrading our support for our congregational schools. One of our goals is to help these schools learn from each others' innovative programs. Many such programs exist. For example, of 27 Legacy Heritage Innovation Grants in Jewish education awarded to congregations for their religious schools this year, approximately one-quarter (seven) went to Reconstructionist congregations.

Another development we're most excited about these days is an innovative educational tool to meet the needs of religious schools. The JRF Web-based Curriculum Project is an online interactive resource intended to serve teachers, parents, and education directors. It will provide a menu of textbooks, storybooks, and, eventually, lesson plans, linking directly to the publishers, articles, and websites of interest on each of the major topics taught in religious schools. Each topic is subdivided according to educational goals and age levels and provides a parallel track for Jewish summer camps.

An online demonstration of the JRF Web-based Curriculum Project has been launched this summer to show how the resource will meet the needs of our 100-plus congregations and Jewish congregations in every other stream of Judaism that need help identifying appropriate curriculum resources. The next phase of the project will take several years of research, editorial effort, and Web-based project maintenance and expansion.

As a movement, we can consciously seek to experiment, for our own sake and for the sake of the broader Jewish community. In the field of Jewish education, there is much discussion of what is being referred to as the challenge of "linking the silos" of education. This means seeing Jewish education for young people in a broader context, as being ultimately about building strong and deep Jewish identities at different stages of their development through various forms of Jewish education and experience. There are many settings for Jewish

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identity building: congregational schools, camp, youth groups, Israel trips, and more. “Linking the silos” refers to the fact that most Jewish education programs focus internally. Referring to them as silos employs the visual metaphor of the silos on a farm — each sticking up from the ground but having little relationship to the others. There is little need to link the silos on a farm. The metaphor, in fact, comes from the organizational world where, so often, different units act as if they are silos on a farm, to the detriment of the success of the organization as whole.

The primarily internal focus of our education, youth, and camp leaders is natural and appropriate. The quality of their particular program needs to be their primary concern. But if our ultimate objective is to support the formation of strong and deep Jewish identities among young people, that internal focus can be combined with attention to the other settings and experiences that young people come from and to which they will return. And, ironically, the stronger the silo, the more important the need for linkage — assuming that Jewish identity building, rather than building a particular program or institution, is the goal. For example, the Jewish community has known for a while, and we are vividly learning within our movement, about the power of Jewish camping and the kind of informal education and participation in an organic Jewish community it provides. But it is precisely that powerful experience that




leads to a major challenge: What happens when campers go home, where Jewish life is only a part of their experiences and where Jewish education takes place in an afternoon or weekend school? As Reconstructionists, we believe in the value of living in two civilizations. Thus, the challenge identified here is of more than casual significance. It is in many ways a test of Reconstructionism.

There is another timely example. This summer, for the first time, 35 members of our youth movement, No’ar Hadash, spent a month in Israel. Israel, like camp, has intrinsic qualities that make for a powerful experience in Jewish identity build-

ing. But again: What happens when you go home? Our movement is committed to Jewish peoplehood and the importance of Israel for developing an authentic Jewish identity. But we are equally committed to the creative possibility of building Jewish identity in Jewish communities outside of Israel. We are Zionists, but not classic Zionists. We are looking for Israel to have a role in providing Jewish meaning, but not to substitute for other sources of Jewish meaning. The wonderful relationships we are developing with Israelis seeking to create indigenous religious and cultural alternatives in Israel are all based on our shared view of the creative potential that now exists to treat Jewish identity as a challenge both in Israel and in the Diaspora and as an arena for creative dialogue.

We are now in the process of laying the foundation to seriously engage the “silos” issue in Jewish education. In so doing, we will be taking advantage of our movement’s earned reputation for being a source of innovation. We will also be taking advantage of the fact that our camp and youth movement are both relatively new and their leaders are more

than open to treating their programs in a holistic spirit. We will be seeking to provide leadership for the Jewish community in finding new and creative ways to link our congregational schools with our growing camp and youth movement — to link formal and informal Jewish education, and to link what we expect will become an annual teen trip to Israel to the ability of its participants to play leadership roles when they return home and when they move to college campuses.

These are examples of the many opportunities that we will be exploring in the next several years. 

WE ARE VIVIDLY LEARNING

ABOUT THE POWER OF JEWISH
CAMPING AND THE INFORMAL
EDUCATION AND PARTICIPATION
IN AN ORGANIC JEWISH
COMMUNITY IT
PROVIDES.

CBCO . . .

(→ from the cover)

RRC will be offering training in this model of activism. In my capacity as JRF director of outreach, external affiliations, and *tikkun olam*, and with the support of CBCO intern Brian Fink and our movement’s professional, rabbinic, and lay leadership, we are beginning to lay the foundations for a CBCO network within and beyond the Reconstructionist movement’s 100-plus congregations and institutions.

CBCO enables synagogues to engage powerfully in public life by bringing them through an organizing process that confronts issues of self-interest in their own community and in the Jewish community as a whole. This process of defining the community’s relationship to power, self-interest, and action can help strengthen and grow a synagogue. It very much embodies the Reconstructionist approach to Jewish life by melding *tikkun olam*, the repair of the world, with *tikkun hanefesh*, the healing of interpersonal relationships. The CBCO model provides an understanding of where the impetus for *tikkun olam* comes from — from the in-

CBCO AT BNAI KESHET

I have participated in two or three house-meetings. The issue that has struck me has been how we can find meaning after retirement. In the house-meetings that I attended, I remember hearing some heartbreaking testimonies about people really searching for a meaningful life after they’ve stopped working. They are trying to figure out how we can create intentional communities as we retire — how we can be taken care of without being warehoused.

Jane Susswein
JRF National Board
Bnai Keshet
Montclair, New Jersey

dividual *neshamah* (soul) and its longing for repair — and of how to put into larger service both our altruistic and our self-serving motivations.

CBCO also provides opportunities for networking both within and beyond the synagogue community. Through the various models of CBCO

Rabbi Shawn Israel Zevit is director of outreach and *tikkun olam* for the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation. Brian Fink, a rabbinical student at RRC, is *tikkun olam* intern at JRF.

training, individuals and communities are transformed.

A Step-by-Step Guide to CBCO

Your congregation is interested in community organizing — now what?

In CBCO, existing institutions, mostly religious congregations — which already have leaders, established interpersonal relationships, resources, a shared culture that facilitates group action, and community connections and commitments — are recruited to join a citywide or regional organization.

The local affiliate and national networks train leaders in creating winnable campaigns on local issues that affect the day-to-day lives of their members. In focusing on the “winnable,” CBCO blends idealistic values with pragmatic self-interest.

Although CBCO avoids direct participation in electoral politics, organizations position themselves to become power players by thoroughly researching issues; building alliances; developing strong relationships with leaders in the public and private sectors; and staging large, dramatic public meetings to demonstrate grassroots support to targeted decision-makers.

Step #1: Investigate what's happening locally

There are four international CBCO networks: 1) Direct Action Research and Training (DART), 2) The Gamaliel Foundation, 3) Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), and 4) People Improving Communities through Organizing (PICO). On each of these networks’ websites, there is a listing of local affiliates, organized geographically. You can investigate whether there already is one in your area. (See *Resources for CBCO* at the end of this article.)

“It’s very difficult for a synagogue to build power and do change-work on its own,” says Benjamin Ross of the Jewish Funds for Justice. “It’s important to be part of a larger interfaith organization.”

Step #2: Make contact

You can use the CBCO affiliate’s online directory to contact the community organizer associated with the local affiliate. The organizer will probably want to schedule an initial “one-on-one” conversation with you or with someone else from your synagogue.

During this conversation, which lasts from 30 minutes to an hour, the initial focus will be on each person learning something about the other. A more “nuts and bolts” discussion about the CBCO affiliate and the potential process for becoming in-

volved will likely occur only toward the end of the meeting or at a subsequent follow-up.

Organizers spend a good part of their time meeting with clergy and key leaders of prospective congregations in order to discover a congregation's perceived self-interest and determine how that might fit with the self-interest of the other member organizations and the affiliate. The organizer may invite you to have a similar conversation with members or clergy of other congregations that belong to the affiliate, and/or invite you to observe a local "action" occurring in the near future. Both of these would be excellent strategies for learning more about the organization and for making personal connections with others who are already involved.

"It's key to connect to leaders who are doing this work," says the JFSJ's Ross. "Discuss what it has

meant to them and to their congregants."

If there is not a local CBCO affiliate in your area, the first step toward establishing one would be the creation of a sponsoring committee made up of interested clergy, lay leaders, and other members of the community. This would typically happen in coordination with an organizer from one of the four CBCO networks.

Step #3: Lay the groundwork

Formally joining a CBCO affiliate involves a substantial annual financial commitment, depending on the size of your institution. Since this model of organizing teaches that the power to make change comes from organized people and organized money, paying dues represents a congregation's seriousness of commitment. Af-

CBCO AT BNAI KESHET

I first became excited about this approach by attending the first K'hilot K'doshot conference two years ago in New Jersey. Shortly afterwards, I called everyone in the Reconstructionist movement that I could think of and told them, "This is our model!"

This fall, I attended a seven-day training sponsored by the Gamaliel Foundation, the national network to which our CBCO organization belongs. I found this training to be one of the most transformative and profound training experiences for my rabbinate (apart from rabbinical school, which lasted six years).

Initially, there was some frustration that we didn't immediately dive in to working on local community tikkun olam issues. We first need to understand what our problems and interests are, and then these eventually lead us to issues to address. The more relationships we have, the more redemptive the process will be. Developing and strengthening the relationships among members of our community is valuable, regardless of whether we ever bring any issues into action through the CBCO process.

This is a spiritual process — you need to enter into it with an open mind. Initially, we had no idea of what would come from the involvement and participation of our own members. As we build momentum through the one-on-one and house-meeting processes, we find out what is in my individual self-interest and what is in the self-interest of my congregants. Through this process, we've been able to identify challenges and issues unique to our congregation. From there we can discover how to address these issues, finding the appropriate mechanism, whether within the context of CBCO or through other vehicles.

Through our one-on-ones, we discovered a need for Israel programming of which we had not been aware, and now have developed the infrastructure to address through member-sponsored programming. Integral to this approach to tikkun olam is the importance of doing things in community. At Bnai Keshet, we've found it to be extremely important to always be bringing people along.

The best way to understand congregation-based organizing is by doing it. The process itself changes the dynamic of the conversation, changes people's desire to buy in, and has the potential to influence other aspects of the congregation.

Members of Bnai Keshet initially had an expectation of high levels of transparency and high levels of process. Since we found this to be of higher importance for us than it was for the other members of the CBCO organization, we became willing to advocate for it. However, we came to understand that while our CBCO may not have been as democratic as we wanted, we are still willing to be engaged, since it does so many other things right. We also believe that our efforts to democratize the organization will be beneficial to the organization as a whole.

At Bnai Keshet, our involvement with community organizing happened alongside our pre-existing tikkun olam committee framework and didn't replace it. We came to understand that we ultimately needed to bring in more people than just the members of the tikkun olam committee in order to be successful. The current Bnai Keshet president is planning on attending the next Gamaliel-sponsored seven-day training.

Rabbi Elliott Tepperman
 Bnai Keshet
 Montclair, New Jersey

CBCO AT DORSHEI TZEDEK

Dorshei Tzedek has been involved with the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization (GBIO) for approximately six years, and a formal member for three.

Members of Dorshei Tzedek began attending GBIO events before we officially joined and before we started our own series of house meetings and one-on-ones. One of our members, a professional organizer, pushed it. Through her leadership, other people eventually became excited and involved.

It's very important to involve the board of your congregation in this process. You can't just depend on the rabbi. If only the *tikkun olam* committee is involved, with the same five or six people running around and doing things, you won't be successful.

Formally joining a CBCO organization is a sizable commitment. We contribute approximately 1 percent of our annual budget as dues. Formal affiliation usually requires a vote because of this financial commitment. In our case, at a critical point in the process, as a sizable number of people were involved, we joined through majority vote of the synagogue membership.

There are various ways for members to be involved. These range from one-time commitments — to attend a large action where a local politician is held accountable, or a house meeting in which congregants share brief personal stories and meet other members of the community — to more involved commitments.

In Reconstructionist communities, we tend to talk to each other anyway, so this model may end up being less transformative than it would be in synagogues with a rabbi-driven model of leadership and decision-making. However, the process can be very transformative in other ways. By having members talk about things happening in their lives in the context of the greater congregation, the process can bring to the forefront issues facing the middle class, in ways that otherwise don't happen.

At Dorshei Tzedek, many of these conversations happen during communal Shabbat dinners. Members are given an op-

portunity to share a personal story with public implications. Even with the preconception that we are a largely middle- and upper-class community, experiences are sometimes raised that both touch and surprise people.

Especially regarding our efforts to win affordable health care, we discovered that there are really no issues that Dorshei Tzedek is going to win by itself. Taking a bus to Washington, D.C. is nice, but won't be enough to pass a bill. Yet we did pass a health care bill through GBIO. It's hard to imagine any other type of activism that would have the same type of concrete actual results.

At Dorshei Tzedek, CBCO is our main *tikkun olam* activity right now. It isn't displacing other initiatives. Before our involvement with GBIO, there really wasn't much else happening.

Each new member has a one-on-one with a member of the membership committee, and the *tikkun olam* leaders reach out to new members for actions and other GBIO-related activities. Ultimately, this relational approach to *tikkun olam* happens best in person and by phone, with e-mail used only to announce events.

The point is to strengthen our communities in service of greater transformation. We're not honoring the internal coherence of this work if we don't talk about social justice/relationship within the community.

CBCO is about power — relational power. It helps us develop leaders; we then work together to take action.

From the house meetings that we completed almost a year ago, we began to develop a new elder-care initiative. Now, a year later, we've defined a need to do a Torah of *Hesed* (kindness) process — to figure out how we can better support/care about each other. This process is similar to our previous Torah of Money process, which has transformed our dues structure.

Rabbi Toba Spitzer
President, RRA
Dorshei Tzedek
Newton, Massachusetts

filiates are expected to raise at least two-thirds of their money from member dues and fundraising events, and only one-third from foundations and other large donors. Some affiliates offer a reduced-cost "initial" or "provisional" membership.

Especially due to the degree of financial and human resource commitment, the entire board of the congregation, not only the *tikkun olam* committee, should be involved with the ongoing process at this stage, if not earlier.

Many congregations engage in an internal "one-

on-one" or house-meeting campaign within their congregation before formally joining an affiliate. Regardless of the ultimate decision whether or not to join a CBCO affiliate, one-on-ones and house meetings can be extremely valuable tools. One-on-ones connect disparate segments of the congregational community, reintegrate alienated and unengaged community members back into the life of the community, and help leaders learn how best to meet the varying needs of the community.

For these reasons, the membership and pro-

gramming committees of the congregation should also be involved by this stage. "If this work is something that you're interested in," advises Ross, "you should think beyond the *tikkun olam* committee and the typical people who tend to do social justice work. The CBCO approach is about tapping into and expanding a relational culture. Through the community organizing process, you need to bring in new people and develop new leaders, which often means creating structures that are parallel to previous and other ongoing social justice work within your communities. You need to build a strong core team that understands the arc of organizing work and what's ahead."

Step #4: Move into action

Once you've joined an affiliate, organizers will train your congregation's leaders, not just in political skills, but also in how to build relationships of mutual understanding and trust. Through this process, participants find ways to identify and act on common problems effectively. The CBCO networks have developed a very deliberate and skilled process for doing so, which occurs locally or at regional

CBCO AT BNAI KESHET

One-on-ones are countercultural in our society. These interactions create a deep sense of connection. We become aware of each other on another level, leading to internal actions. We become able to create structures in our community that can respond to people's stated needs. The level of contact with one another increases and transforms the community and people's level of connection to the community.

Lisa Schneier
Dorshei Tzedek
Newton, Massachusetts

trainings. "You must work with skilled trainers," Ross emphasizes. "This is one of the benefits of being connected with a local organizing group and their national affiliate. The goal of CBCO organizations is to transform congregations and communities, investing them with leadership development and training. If you have a good trainer, it's a blessing to work with them."

Through this process, often in conjunction with community house meetings, issues emerge that can

CBCO AND THE JRF

Rabbis Shawn Zevit, Brant Rosen, Toba Spitzer, Elliott Tepperman, and Mordechai Liebling, along with Brian Fink and more than 20 other leaders from 10 JRF congregations, represented our movement in February, 2007 at the second Jewish Funds for Justice (JFSJ) national conference on Congregation-Based Community Organizing (CBCO) in Santa Clara, California.

At the conference, 30 people came together for a Reconstructionist caucus to discuss next steps in bringing this powerful organizing and social justice approach to their congregational life.

Rabbi Toba Spitzer was a keynote speaker at the conference; Rabbi Tepperman taught a text study; Rabbi Zevit and Brian Fink convened the Reconstructionist caucus session. Rabbi Mordechai Liebling, former executive vice president of the JRF, is the associate executive director of the JFSJ and supervises CBCO efforts there.

As part of the conference, more than 500 people attended an event that called on state Assembly members, as well as County Supervisor Liz Kniss, to take leadership on expanding health coverage to millions of uninsured Californians.

After hearing from members of People Acting in Community Together (PACT) and Peninsula Interfaith Action (PIA) who are directly affected by the soaring costs of health insurance, Assembly members Beall, Lieber, and Ruskin all made commitments to work with the governor to produce legislation this year that will provide every Californian with

access to quality, affordable health coverage.

In response to concerns about cuts in state funding to county hospitals and clinics, all three Assembly members expressed their commitment to ensuring that the county hospitals and clinics continue to receive adequate funding. A proposal developed by Working Partnerships USA, the County Health and Hospital System, and the Santa Clara Family Health Plan would offer 5,000 working adults the opportunity to get coverage at no additional cost to the county.



Left to right, Rabbis Shawn Zevit, Jonah Pesner, and Elliott Tepperman.

CBCO AT JRC

"I'm thinking of the term 'organic community,' coined by Mordecai Kaplan, which defines Jewish identity and self through belonging and connections with other people. CBCO reflects a new way of harnessing this energy. It is very Reconstructionist."

Rabbi Brant Rosen
Jewish Reconstructionist Congregation
Evanston, Illinois

be acted upon publicly. A successful example of this is congregation Dorshei Tzedek's involvement with the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization (see page 6).

"Taking things slow is often fruitful," Ross suggests. "Don't rush ahead. Take a second to check-

CBCO AT RRC

"The CBCO focus of examining the contrast between 'the world as it could be' and 'the world as it is,' I find similar to the Reconstructionist contrast of living between two civilizations."

Michael Ramberg
RRC student

in, making sure that you have the right group of people with you. Build a base. Have a solid core group. Don't bring an initiative or a proposal to a board of directors and larger congregation before you're ready. Otherwise, it could be detrimental to

CBCO AT SAJ

"I did a number of one-on-ones with SAJ members and found them to be very rewarding. But before that, I was interviewed by Maddy Lee of our congregation, who made me feel very comfortable by taking a keen interest in everything I had to say about my Jewish background and my commitment to social action. I was then able to approach other people in the same manner, and I learned a lot about who they were, what really mattered to them, why they were members of SAJ, and what their aspirations were.

"A couple of lasting friendships developed out of this. I think the one-on-ones are a wonderful way to bind people together and make them feel like they're a community and important to one another, which merely labeling the membership 'a community' cannot do. This is important nowadays and in a big city, where it is easy to feel disconnected. Also, a number of suggestions for making our synagogue more responsive to members' needs were forthcoming and very useful. I would recommend that all synagogues do it."

Karen Greenberg-Perkus,
The Society for the Advancement of Judaism
New York, New York

CBCO AT KEDDEM CONGREGATION

"In community organizing, we draw ourselves back to listen. This way of carrying on a conversation mostly by listening seems very values-based and Reconstructionist to me."

Doug Smith
Keddem Congregation
Palo Alto, California

your long-term goals. If community organizing is only an exercise in building community, it can be very frustrating," Ross continues. "Make sure that there's an understanding that there's an action component at the end of the work. The *takhlis*, the justice/change work, needs to be there."

Step #5: How JRF can help

In partnership with your congregation, JRF can provide Web resources and Jewish texts for study and reflection, and facilitate networking with Jewish organizations already involved with CBCO.

We at JRF look forward to helping our member communities deepen their social justice work in the years ahead, in partnership with the Jewish Funds for Justice and CBCO networks around North America. This coming year, supporting our member communities to explore the CBCO model, along with our work in reducing hunger and poverty, developing sustainable synagogues, partnering with our external affiliates, and generating resources for our growing *tikkun olam* resource library, will all be part of JRF's commitment to social justice and personal transformation in the world. 

resources for CBCO

To contact DART, go to www.thedartcenter.org/affiliates.html. For Gamaliel, go to www.gamaliel.org/DIRECTORY/default.htm, then browse through the regional directories on the left-hand side of the page. For IAF, go to www.industrialareasfoundation.org/iafaffiliates/iafaffiliatesnat.htm, and then browse through the regional directories on the left. For PICO, go to www.piconetwork.org, and use the pull-down menu on the right side.

Read Ari Lipman's article on Dorshei Tzedek's involvement with the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization in [The Reconstructionist](#), Fall 2003, available at www.therra.org/Reconstructionist/Fall2003.pdf.

Visit JRF's CBCO webpage at www4.jrf.org/cbco.

On Our Evolving Liturgy

A Response to Daniel Cedarbaum

ELAINE MOISE

In the last issue of *Reconstructionism Today* (Volume 14, No. 2, Winter 2006-2007), Daniel Cedarbaum, the immediate past president of the JRF, set forth his views on our liturgy (“Reconsidering Reconstructionist Liturgy: The Kaplanian Paradox”). I find his views significantly at odds with my own, and with those of many other members of our movement with whom I’ve exchanged e-mail and conversation on this topic. I’d like to explore some of these ideas further.

Dan writes:

Almost 20 years ago, a knowledgeable Conservative Jew chided me in a way that has troubled me ever since. “You Reconstructionists,” he said, “believe that you can distinguish a denomination on the basis of liturgical changes, like substituting ‘mevi ge’ulah’ (bringing redemption) for ‘mevi go’el’ (bringing a redeemer/messiah) in the first paragraph of the *Amidah*. Do you really think that more than a handful of people even notice these changes, much less think that they are important?”

Allowing license for hyperbole, I think he was making an important point.

I don’t think so; I do believe, though, that starting with this anecdote to a great extent trivializes the entire issue of liturgical change and innovation. I don’t believe that Reconstructionists try to “distinguish our denomination” on the basis of a few differences in words. Rather, the liturgical changes found in *Kol Haneshamah* and its predecessor Reconstructionist *siddurim* represent the endeavor of thoughtful liturgists, beginning with Mordecai Kaplan, to find language for prayer that would feel authentic to those praying.

Dan begins his discussion by talking about Kaplan’s “If you don’t believe it, don’t say it” approach to prayer. It is this approach, he explains, that in the name of intellectual honesty caused Kaplan to remove from the liturgy references to resurrection of the dead, a personal messiah, a

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desire for the restoration of the sacrificial cult in the Temple, and the “chosenness” of the Jewish people. But he goes on to point up the supposed “paradox” on which he has based this article:

Kaplan also believed that prayer must not be allowed to somehow “substitute” for action, that the affirmation of values which may be represented by the words spoken in prayer should not “convince” the worshipper that “he [sic] has worked for the realization of those values . . .”

I do not, in fact, see a paradox here. Kaplan does not state, at least not in the excerpt quoted in Dan’s article, that all davening should be “quotation rather than affirmation.” Indeed, in the Introduction to the second edition of the *Sabbath Prayer Book* published by the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation, the editors (Rabbi Kaplan, Eugene Kohn, Ira Eisenstein, and Milton Steinberg) write:

... There is, we are convinced, a great need for a worship text adapted to the outlook of Jews who are devoted to the Jewish tradition, and also to the truths and aspirations of the modern spirit.

A prayer book capable of ministering adequately to the needs of such Jews must conform to the following four principles . . .

Fourth: it must exhibit courage as well as reverence, the courage to set aside or modify such prayers or phrases as are unacceptable to modern men [sic], whether intellectually, morally, or aesthetically. Otherwise integrity in worship becomes impossible, if indeed worship is not discouraged altogether . . .

Further, I cannot agree that most people who are in synagogue believe that they are “quoting” rather than “affirming.” It’s certainly true that Jews find themselves identifying with the history of the Jewish people as they pray. There is an emotional power in knowing that you are engaging in an activity that is much like the activities in which our ancestors also engaged. But my experience as a service leader tells me that people want to “relate” to the text, rather than “quote” it; they want to find a personal connection to the prayers, be it emotional, intellectual, or moral, as they pray.

Were this not the case, I don’t believe that the strong movement toward feminist/feminized liturgy, with results now reflected in Reconstructionist, Reform, and even Conservative *siddurim*, would have happened over the last 30 to 40 years. If we were all convinced that we were “quoting” rather than “affirming,” reading the *siddur* would be a lot more like reading from the Torah. When the Torah is read, very few of us, I think, feel inclined to change

reconsidering

the words. We are “quoting” an ancient text, we know that’s what we’re doing, and we work to find or create interpretations of this text to which we can relate today. Certainly, parts of our “traditional” prayer text also qualify as ancient, and we certainly create new interpretations, but we do not, generally, approach the text in the same way. We want to be able to affirm.

Dan continues with a discussion of two generational changes from Kaplan’s time to our own, which he believes weakens the “don’t say it if you don’t mean it” approach. The first is a lack of Hebrew and liturgical literacy among non-Orthodox Jews. He writes:

Today, neither childhood immersion nor adult study has provided the great majority of Reconstructionists with the knowledge of traditional liturgy that the previous generations of Reconstructionists possessed. The level of Hebrew literacy among non-Orthodox Jews is probably at an all-time low.

There is some real truth here. Kaplan’s concern was that his generation knew and understood the liturgy, and would reject Judaism as their exposure to modern American and scientific ideas rendered it increasingly “unbelievable.”

For today’s Jews, the issues are different. I certainly

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ly know many Reconstructionists (and Jews of other denominations as well) who have little or no Hebrew knowledge or training. How should we react to the presence in our congregations of so many people whose Hebrew literacy is virtually non-existent? Not, I suggest, by asking people to say things that they wouldn’t want to say if they understood them! Ideally, we would provide the educational possibilities for both children and adults that would allow all Jews to be comfortable with Hebrew and with liturgy. I would argue further that we have an obligation

to make sure that the Hebrew and the English in our *siddurim* say the same thing; this way, people will know what they are reading as they learn. The second generational change, Dan explains, is that as post-moderns, our understanding of “truth” and “myth” is “more subtle” than that of our “Reconstructionist forebears.” Therefore, we can talk

about Torah from Sinai, or the crossing of the Sea of Reeds, and recognize these stories as having a mythic “truth” whether or not they are historically correct.

Dan then says,

Reconstructionists today can (or should be able to) appreciate the metaphorical power of sympathetic invocations in the liturgy of such national archetypes as the Davidic monarchy or the Temple cult, despite the serious problems posed by those institutions as historical realities—and having nothing to do with an actual desire for the restoration of the institutions. . . .

As an avid reader and student of the myths and legends of many peoples, including our own, I can certainly appreciate metaphors. But for the same people Dan describes earlier, those who are unfamiliar with liturgy, what would make it clear what’s “real” and what’s intended as metaphor alone? For the average “Jew in the pew,” what’s in the *siddur* is what they see. How do we think most people will know that when an Orthodox *siddur* says, “accept our offerings,” it means it, but if our *siddur* says it, it doesn’t really? If people do not understand Reconstructionist thinking when they enter our movement’s synagogues, how will they learn about it if the *siddur* seems identical to the one found in the Orthodox (or the Conservative, or the Reform) congregation?

Dan writes further, “Rabbi David Teutsch explicitly makes this point [about metaphorical power] in his “Commentary” on “*V’zot ha-Torah*” on p. 406 of *Kol Haneshamah: Shabbat Vehagim*, but he does not acknowledge its broad applicability to other liturgical formulas.”

Perhaps the applicability is not quite so broad. There is a place for mythic imagery in our *siddur*; not necessarily because we are “quoting” rather than “affirming,” but because the drama of such myth has emotional truth. The crossing of the Sea of Reeds, the Revelation at Sinai — these are a part of our “mythic past.” Wishing for a king messiah from the line of David, praying for the restoration of the Temple cult — these are expressed as wishes for the future. I hope for a “messianic age” someday; reading about a king and a ritual abattoir does not nourish my thoughts about this utopian dream.

Dan then asks what appears to be the key question of his piece:

Taken together, these two generational changes give rise to a fundamental paradox of Hebrew liturgy for the Reconstructionist movement today: If most Reconstructionists do not know the differences between the Reconstructionist and traditional versions of almost any of the modified prayer texts, and if those Reconstructionists who understand exactly what changes have been made to the traditional liturgy, and the reasons for those changes, are precisely the ones who are most comfortable preserving the traditional versions for the reasons outlined above, then for whom, and for what purpose, is the liturgy being reconstructed?

From my perspective, this question makes two incorrect assumptions. First, regarding those with Hebrew and liturgical knowledge: It is my experience that Reconstructionists (and other liberal Jews) with the most functional Hebrew are the most uncomfortable with the traditional liturgy, not because we can't understand it, but because we can. Those of us who really understand and care about liturgy want to *daven* with words that work for us. For many of us, the more "traditional" words don't work.

I *daven* every once in a while at a local Conservative congregation; when I do, I bring *Kol Hane-shamah* so that I can pray the *Amidah* and other parts of the services as I want to pray them. I sing the *Aleynu* as we sing it at Keddem Congregation, my Reconstructionist synagogue in Palo Alto, California. I certainly know the traditional liturgy, and I understand the Hebrew. I am simply not "comfortable preserving the traditional versions" any more than I am comfortable at a service in a room with a *mekhitzah* (partition; another "tradition" that I understand quite well).

Second, regarding those who "don't know the difference": At Keddem, we spend time at our junior congregation teaching our children about differences between our liturgy and "traditional" liturgy. We teach this in our adult education classes, too. Those who want to learn will learn. They get it. If you teach people, they may or may not care, but they will understand. To say, "They don't understand it anyway, so what difference does it make?" is both patronizing and an abrogation of our responsibilities as serious Reconstructionists who care about our "religious civilization."

Dan then raises another "paradoxical aspect of reconstructing a traditional prayer text" — that doing so may deprive the text of historical resonances that should appeal to us as rationalists.

In light of the previous discussion about the low state of Hebrew and liturgical awareness among modern Reconstructionists, I find this a curious argument. How are those congregants who don't know either Hebrew or liturgical history to recognize this, even with the more "traditional" text restored? In the midst of worship is probably not the time most people would choose for historical analysis of prayer, any more than most concertgoers do Schenkerian analyses of Brahms concerti during performances. The historical analysis of liturgy is a fascinating study, and belongs in our adult education programs. This allows both our liturgy and more "traditional" liturgy to be put into the proper context, helping to remedy the lack of liturgical literacy discussed earlier.

Dan goes on to specifically suggest that references to the restoration of the Davidic dynasty (i.e., a personal messiah, rather than just a messianic age) and to the resurrection of the dead, be restored to Reconstructionist prayer. I've addressed the former item above. Regarding the latter, Dan says,

Because most Reconstructionists today, unlike their predecessors, can relatively easily reinterpret references to the resurrection of the dead in a metaphorical manner, and because they can say words like "*mehayey hameytim*" ("who revives the dead") without choking on them, reinstatement of the traditional language in Reconstructionist Hebrew liturgy should be considered.

I can certainly say these words without "choking" on them, but I'd rather not. Again, if our ideas are not made clear in our liturgy, how will people recognize them?

Eric Mendelssohn, a former member of the *sid-dur* commission that produced *Kol Haneshamah*, wrote in an e-mail communication:

There is a wonderful rabbinic tale used to talk about "Song of Songs" — in which a boy is sent to market and asked to buy a pail. He returns and his father is very upset because the pail has a hole in it. He gives him a severe lecture about why a pail should not have holes. The next week he is sent to buy a sieve — he returns empty-handed. His father asks him why, and he responds, "They all were full of holes." The father then says "A pail is supposed to have no holes; a sieve is supposed to have many holes."

The rabbinic moral of this story is "the Torah is literally true and Song of Songs is metaphor." It seems this simple story points out to us that we

should NOT assume that everyone can tell the difference between what is proclaimed from the *bimah* that should be understood as literal and what is proclaimed from the *bimah* that should be understood as metaphor.

Eric's right; not everybody can tell.

Dan writes:

If I am correct that, for the reasons suggested above, we cannot expect Reconstructionists today to be familiar or comfortable with more than one Hebrew liturgy, then that is another important reason to make as few changes to traditional prayer texts as reasonably possible.

But which "traditional" prayer text should be the "standard?" Chabad *siddurim*, which use "*nusah Ari*," are different from "standard" Ashkenazi Orthodox *siddurim*. Sephardi *siddurim* are different from Ashkenazi. Over the last 1,000-plus years, the *siddur* has constantly changed from place to place and from time to time. I doubt that it has ever been the case that "all Jews" used the same *siddur*. There are even stories in the Talmud that show us how far back variations in liturgical practice may be found:

When the *beth din* sanctified the New Moon in Usha, R. Johanan b. Beroka went down [before the ark] in the presence of Rabban Simeon b. Gamaliel, and read as prescribed by R. Johanan b. Nuri. Rabban Simeon said to him: That was not the way they used to do in Jabneh. On the second day, R. Hanina the son of R. Jose the Galilean went down and read as prescribed by R. Akiba. Rabban Simeon b. Gamaliel said: So they used to do in Jabneh.

(*Rosh Hashana* 32a, Soncino tr.)

So, the idea that we should "go back" in the name of Jewish unity is not even "wishful thinking"; it's an attempt to return to something that never was. If you accept the premise that it's only possible to learn "one liturgy" (which I don't, actually) then let's make sure that the one liturgy Reconstructionists are familiar and comfortable with is an evolving liturgy. (I've heard more than a few Reconstructionists suggest that our liturgy ought to be in a loose-leaf binder, so we can keep adapting it as need be. I don't see any problem with that, except that sometimes the pages fall out!)

My nine-year-old son is capable of dealing with differences in liturgy between what he does at Kedem and what he does at *tefillah* at his unaffiliated (liturgically more-or-less Conservative, and certainly conservative) day school. It doesn't confuse him in the least; he just knows some Jews do it one

way and others do it a different way, and mostly he knows why. Again, education is the obvious answer to the worry about the "depressing experience" of the Reconstructionist child at an unfamiliar Jewish service.

As a final argument, Dan writes:

With regard to liturgy, I have an important ally: My position is similar to the one advanced toward the end of his life by no less a figure than Rabbi Ira Eisenstein, z"l, Kaplan's son-in-law and in many ways the father of the institutional Reconstructionist movement.

Rabbi Eisenstein, z"l, was entitled to change his mind. All of us who believe in liturgical evolution, as conceived of by Mordecai Kaplan and continued today, are equivalently entitled not to change ours.

In conclusion, Dan notes that "the next series of Reconstructionist prayerbooks not only could, but should, look very different from either of its predecessors."

I agree with this statement completely, but I suspect that my hopes for 21st-century Reconstructionist liturgy probably don't match up with Dan's. As we are the "evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people," so our liturgy must continuously evolve. Evolution of liturgy may have many forms, and at least one valid form of liturgical change is to remove and/or change those words that no longer speak to us.

To some extent, even change as change is valuable. As Syd Nestel of Congregation Darchei Noam in Toronto wrote, in an e-mail communication:

I would oppose reversing our liturgical changes, because I think it sends the wrong message. Reconstructionism starts from the premise that the Jewish world is broken and in need of Reconstruction. It starts from the premise that change is inevitable and a good thing. So to reverse the changes in order to create a false consensus of practice in order to promote a mythical *Klal Yisrael* is wrong IMO. And to reverse the changes simply in order to preserve older forms of prayer as intrinsically valuable, is to reject any possibility of change.

Finally, I quote from Mel Scult, Mordecai Kaplan's biographer, who wrote in an e-mail:

I don't think we have yet solved the problem of making prayer meaningful. . . . Nonetheless, I strongly support Kaplan's approach to liturgy. Kaplan was deeply revolutionary in ways I am only beginning to grasp. It was in the liturgy where his radicalism was

most clearly expressed. Therefore, I would advocate keeping the changes, if only to remind us that we must face up to the challenge of a meaningful Judaism with courage and creativity. The key to awakening us from our religious torpor is creativity and change, and Kaplan intuitively understood this. I am not sure what the answer is regarding prayer, but I know it does not lie in doing things as they have been done.

Amen. 

Daniel Cedarbaum replies:

FIRST AND FOREMOST, I want to thank Elaine Moise for expressing her views on Reconstructionist liturgy so eloquently. My primary purpose in writing on this subject was to provoke the kind of thoughtful response that Elaine has produced and, hopefully, to stimulate a series of ongoing conversations about how we pray, or *daven* (synonyms for some but not for others). As I have written in these pages before, I believe that we Reconstructionists discuss serious ideological issues in a serious manner too infrequently, and on that point I take Elaine and myself to be in complete agreement.

As to the substance of her arguments, forceful though they are, Elaine has not convinced me to change my position. At the risk of oversimplifying the matter, she comes down strongly in the “If you don’t believe it, don’t say it” camp, and I come down strongly in the “quotation rather than affirmation” camp. I don’t believe that I can prove Elaine wrong, but neither do I believe that she can prove me wrong. She offers Mel Scult as a witness for her side, and I offer Rabbi Ira Eisenstein, *z”l*, as a witness for my side. In the end, when we talk about what sort of liturgy is both intellectually honest and emotionally satisfying, I am convinced that, within broad bounds, we are discussing highly subjective matters. In other words, Elaine and I are just going to have to agree to disagree.

Having said that, as with halakhic matters as to which strong arguments can be marshaled for more than one result, we will ultimately need to make decisions about what the Reconstructionist liturgy of the future will look like. And here I believe that we will need, in some way, to count votes, and I guess that is appropriate for a movement so committed to democracy. We will have to go out and see what the people want. (By the way, I am certainly not suggesting that we take a

simple poll; rather, I believe that we should create alternative versions of various pieces of our liturgy to be tried out in actual services in some of our congregations and see how the participants respond.) In the absence of such testing, I cannot be sure that my views represent those of more than a handful of Reconstructionists, but Elaine cannot be sure that hers do, either.

Just to be clear: I believe that Elaine misunderstands what I claimed in my article to be the “fundamental paradox of Hebrew liturgy for the Reconstructionist movement today: If most Reconstructionists do not know the differences between the Reconstructionist and traditional versions of almost any of the modified prayer texts, and if those Reconstructionists who understand exactly what changes have been made to the traditional liturgy, and the reasons for those changes, are precisely the ones who are most comfortable preserving the traditional versions for the reasons outlined above, then for whom, and for what purpose, is the liturgy being reconstructed?” I meant this question to serve as a sort of hypothesis and to be subject to empirical testing.

A couple of quibbles: I never meant to suggest that we could identify a sort of “Platonic” traditional *siddur* that all Jews would accept as normative. But neither do I see much of a problem in choosing “which ‘traditional’ prayer text should be the ‘standard’” for us. The history of Reconstructionist liturgy establishes that we have already made this decision: With a few exceptions, we have classified ourselves liturgically as non-Hasidic Ashkenazi Jews. Our ideological ancestors are the *mitnagdim* of Lithuania, and I would guess that a relatively small minority of us have actual familial roots in Sephardi or Chabad Jewry. Today, what is understood to be traditional, non-Hasidic, Ashkenazi liturgy is remarkably uniform. I see no reason to change our approach in this regard.

Finally, with regard to my serious concern about expecting our children to be familiar with more than one liturgy: Although I am pleased that Elaine’s son is apparently receiving an excellent Jewish education at his “more-or-less Conservative” day school and can move from a traditional service to a Reconstructionist service and back again, without confusion, the percentage of Reconstructionist kids enrolled in Jewish day schools (of any kind) is very small. Moreover, for reasons both practical and philosophical, I would not want to base any decisions about Reconstructionist liturgy on the assumption of a significant increase

in the percentage of our children who will receive traditional day-school educations in the future.

On a positive note, I strongly agree with Elaine that, for pedagogical reasons, we should “make

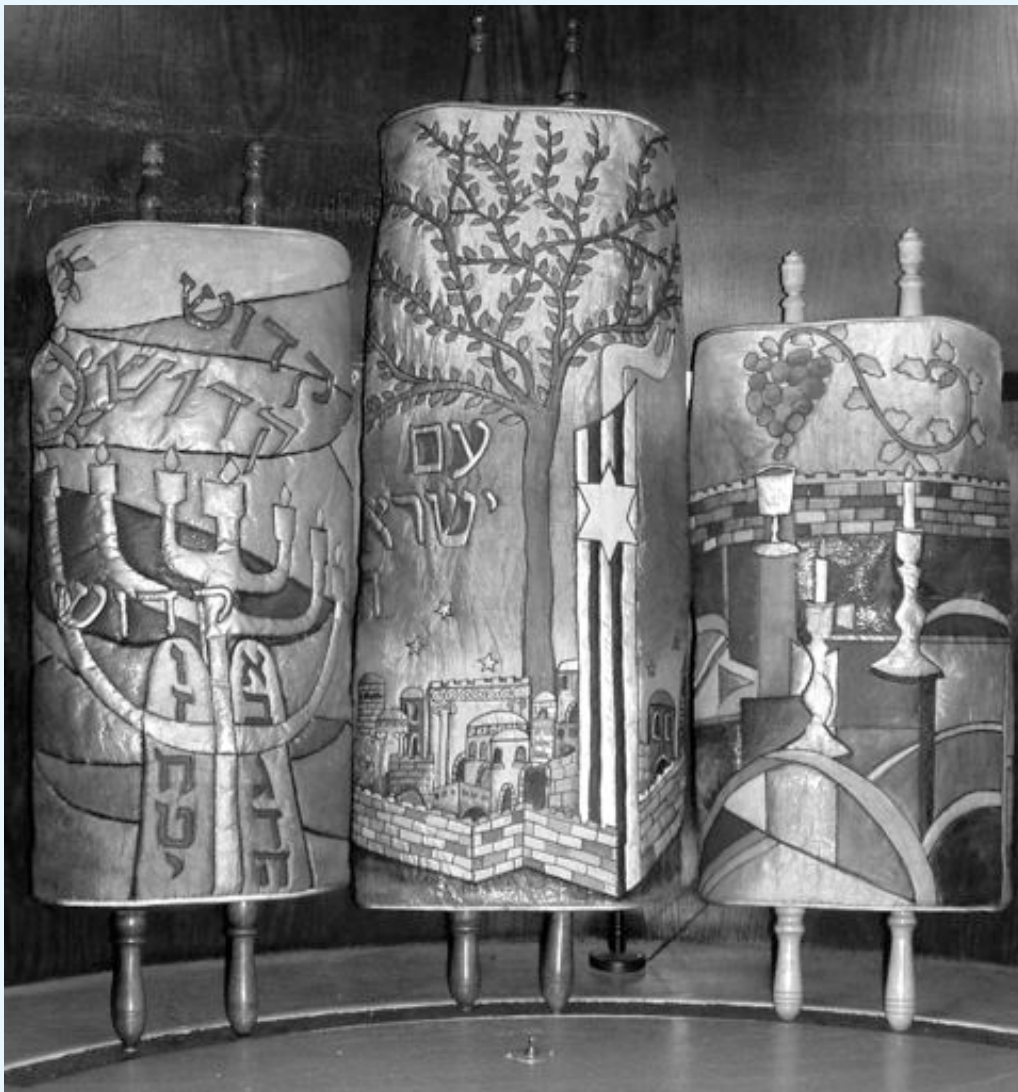
sure that the Hebrew and the English in our *sid-durim* say the same thing.”

With gratitude to Elaine, I look forward to continuing the conversation. ✡

recreating

THREE MANTLES BY SUZY FRIEDMAN

Congregation Beth El Zedeck
Indianapolis, Indiana



Suzy Friedman is an Indianapolis-based fine artist specializing in Judaica art and painted landscapes. Her work in Judaica art began with original designs for Jewish-themed calendars, book covers, posters and event invitations for a variety of local Jewish organizations. She now creates a wide variety of Judaica art, including *tallit-atarot* and *tallit* cases in both needlepoint and as painted designs on hand-dyed raw silk, as well as magnificent original wedding *ketubot* and celebratory artwork for births, anniversaries, and bar and bat mitzvahs. Visit her new website, www.suzyfriedmanarts.com, or write to her at suzyfriedman@comcast.net.

Its Time Has Come: Of Taoism, Space Aliens, and Reconstructionist God-Language

JEREMY SCHWARTZ

I WOULD LIKE TO CONVINCe YOU that we should make a particular change in the way we talk about God. First, I must take two little side-trips, involving Taoism and space aliens. I hope you'll stick with me.

For a long time, I have been fascinated with the Chinese notion of the Tao. "Tao" literally means something like "Way" or "stream path." The Tao is the central principle in the religion of Taoism. The Tao is the unitary essence of the seemingly fragmented universe. It is also the natural (good?) flow, with which one should coincide one's actions if one is wise. To flow counter to Tao is foolish and only causes trouble. I've often been struck by the similarity of Tao and various Jewish ideas of God.

Consider the following passages from the *Tao Te Ching*:

Ch. 1:

The Tao that can be told is not the Eternal Tao.
The name that can be named is not the eternal name.
The nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth.

Ch. 14:

Look, it cannot be seen — it is beyond form.
Listen, it cannot be heard — it is beyond sound.
Grasp, it cannot be held — it is intangible.
These three are indefinable;
Therefore they are joined in one.

From above it is not bright;
From below it is not dark:
An unbroken thread beyond description.
It returns to nothingness.

Rabbi Jeremy Schwartz serves as rabbi of Reconstructionist congregation Temple Bnai Israel in Willimantic, Connecticut. He loves to teach and write about liturgy, Israeli poetry, and the ideological bases of tikkun olam.

The form of the formless,
The image of the imageless,
It is called indefinable and beyond imagination.

Stand before it and there is no beginning.
Follow it and there is no end.
Stay with the ancient Tao,
Move with the present.

Knowing the ancient beginning is the essence of Tao.
(Translation by Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English)

I'll come back to the Tao, but now I'd like to tell you a little story about a space alien.

Once upon a time, a space alien came to visit earth. This particular alien was about human-size, maybe a little bigger, and looked a lot like a giant mushroom with tentacles, or an octopus with a stem. I'll tell you some other things about the alien and its type. It happened that these mushroom-looking aliens were superior to human beings in every way. (I'm sorry if that's upsetting to you.)

The aliens had free will, but with a more developed and sophisticated moral understanding, a better aesthetic sense, were more physically powerful and adept than us, and also more intelligent. Since

you, my reader, are an earthling, and earthlings are sometimes obsessed about these things, I will also tell you a little about reproduction among these aliens. Without going into details, it does take two of them to make a baby, but there are no males and females; any two loving, adult space aliens of this sort can reproduce. It has to do with spores in their tentacles, I think. Anyway, one time one of these aliens came to earth and developed a friendship with a Jewish girl named Freydl. Being of a sensitive nature, the alien at first hid itself from Freydl, not wanting to scare her. But slowly, at first with written messages, it introduced itself to Freydl until finally they met face to face. To make a long story short (after all, this is just a side-trip in an article about God-language), Freydl developed a deep, personal relationship with the alien, and was nearly heartbroken when it had to go back to its planet. Nonetheless, she was filled with joy at having had the experience.

And now, having talked about the Tao and about a space alien, we're ready to talk about God.

I take it as a theological given that God cannot be accurately described with such a limiting



attribute as “male.” Also, not “female.” It is also more broadly true, as Maimonides taught, that no linguistic attribute accurately describes God. Nonetheless, our words can point in the right general direction or can mislead. To speak in prayer of God as אורח/Awesome seems relatively unproblematically to point toward God. To speak of God in the traditional, exclusively male language of “Father,” “King,” “He,” “Lord,” and so on seems to me to be misleading. It encourages a limited, physical, and, therefore, idolatrous notion of God.

In English, the most common solution to this problem has been to avoid third-person pronouns when referring to God. This is accomplished, when translating original Hebrew, by changing third-person text “about” God to second-person text “to” God, by changing verbs from active to passive and eliminating the divine subject, and by substituting “God” or another divine appellation for the pronoun. This is the approach of the Reconstructionist and Reform *siddurim* and of the new, “gender-accurate” JPS/Plaut *humash*.

There are two problems with this approach. The first is that it often weakens, or otherwise distorts, the poetry and meaning of the original. This is particularly true of the increased use of the passive voice. The second problem, in my mind very important, is that it leaves us and our children with the experience that the only third-person pronouns attached to God are “He” and “Him.” We all hear these pronouns in the general communal discourse, and, with the pronoun-avoidance strategy, our liturgy and God-talk does nothing to dissuade us from the pagan notion that God is male. In other words, pronoun-avoiding liturgy and Torah text are not fully serving the primary function of pointing us toward God in the context of a culture whose general God-talk points us away from God in the matter of gender.

The most common arguments against using the pronoun “It” for God is that “it” only refers to inferior beings and to (mere) things, with which we cannot have any personal relationship. The side-trips above make it clear that neither of these arguments is correct. You can see from the description of the Tao that “It” seemed the natural pronoun to use for the most powerful, central Principle/Flow/Process/Power of the universe. I very much doubt there is any English translation of the Taoist classics that refer to the Tao as “He.” Why not? Because, in the realm of intellectual history, the Tao is not descended from a pagan, male deity, as the Jewish God is descended from Ba’al or El and their type. There’s absolutely no reason to call the ONE of the


universe, the prime mover, the first principle, or the Power that makes for salvation “Him,” except that intellectual history. But we Jews have known for a very long time that God is really more like the Tao than like Ba’al, and I think it’s time we start talking about It that way. To do so will help point us toward the true God, when the pervasive language of “Him” is pointing us away.

The second seemingly compelling reason that I have heard for avoiding the pronoun “It” in relationship to God is that it is difficult to have a relationship with an “It” — thus, the story of Freydl and the space alien. My guess is that it didn’t seem strange at all to you that Freydl had a strong, personal relationship with an “it.” Again, as with the Tao, the issue is not really God’s superiority or availability for relationship; it’s the desire to have God be human.

And there is a place for that: Since all language about God is metaphorical, and since many of our most moving and instructive metaphorical images are human — parent, lover, teacher — we should continue to use those metaphors, among others. It may be legitimate to use the appropriate pronoun with a particular, gendered metaphor: God is our Father and He loves us; God is our Mother and She teaches us. But God also blesses us with the understanding that It is not truly either “He” or “She.” So I think we should start speaking of God as It is. We must do so if we are to break the idolatrous hold “He” has on our culture.

Let’s start at the beginning:

By beginning, God created the heavens and the Earth.
 The Earth was chaos and emptiness and darkness
 over the face of Watery Depths,
 with breath of the divine hovering
 over the face of the water.
 God said, "Let there be light!"
 There was light.
 God saw that the light was good,
 and God divided between the light and the darkness.
 God called the light "day"
 and the darkness It called "night."
 There was evening and there was morning: one day.
 (My translation of the beginning of Genesis)

Given that we have all been raised worshipping a male, Zeus-like god, speaking of God as “It” is awkward at first. But as I demonstrated above, it is actually the most natural way of referring to what most of us actually think God is, and I can say from experience that one gets used to it. (Or should I say “It”?) 

Mussar and the Contemporary Jew

Ira Stone's *A Responsible Life: The Spiritual Path of Mussar* (Aviv Press)

REVIEWED BY NANCY FUCHS-KREIMER

FULL DISCLOSURE: The author of this book is my teacher. I have been attending Rabbi Stone's Mussar Institute in Philadelphia weekly for close to two years. I consider him an extraordinary teacher who exemplifies in his life, hour by hour, what this book is about. Thus, I came to the reading positively disposed, but also with outsized expectations. I was hoping for something I could put in the hands of my family and friends that would make it perfectly clear why I am so excited about the study of *Mussar*, so committed to the practice, and so hopeful concerning the *Mussar* renaissance in the Jewish world today. In large measure, my expectations were met. The book is not an easy read. Not every page is lucid, although many, many are profound. To anticipate the bottom line: If you have any interest whatsoever in the reconstruction of Jewish life along ethical and spiritual lines, you must read this book.

In the 1980s, when I attended RRC, we spent one week in our Modern Civilization class learning about the Mussar movement. It seemed to be sufficient at the time.

We were taught that in 19th-century Lithuania, Rabbi Yisrael Lipkin of Salant (known most commonly as Israel Salanter) led a movement of reaction to a talmudic Judaism that had grown arid and stultified. He helped his followers rediscover the classic texts of *mussar* (literally "instruction") that Jews had written over the centuries, books such as *The Duties*

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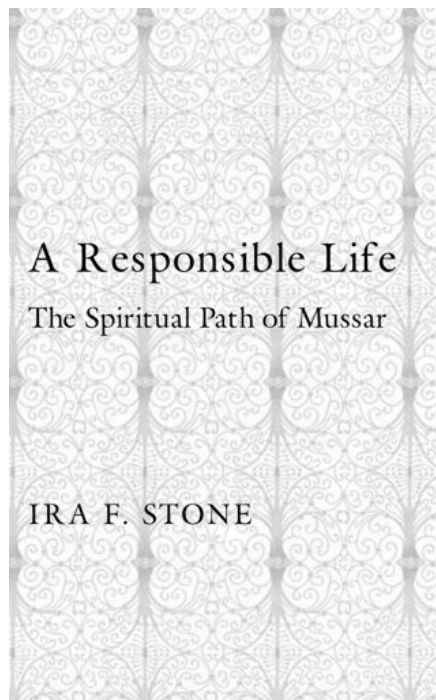
of the Heart (*Khovot Halevavot*, 10th century) and *The Path of the Upright* (*Mesillat Yesharim*, 18th century). Rabbi Salanter developed a network of *yeshivot* in which the strenuous effort to perfect ethical behavior was the central theme. His goal was to refocus Jewish life on the most important human task — our responsibility for other human beings. The purpose of religious practice was developing one's character: another's material needs were one's spiritual needs. In fact, Rabbi Salanter believed that without attention to *middot* (character traits), *mitzvot* were empty of value.

I recall being compelled by this idea and intrigued by the fact that Rabbi Salanter seemed to be working with sophisticated notions of the human psyche,

including the unconscious — and this before Freud had ever written a word! Unlike my fellow students who were excited by the study of the Hasidic movement, I had no place to take my interest and move from *Mussar-in-the-history* book to *Mussar-in-life*. As far as anyone in the liberal Jewish world knew, there was no "neo-*Mussar*" parallel to the emerging neo-Hasidism. Many of the practitioners of *Mussar* had died in Europe during World War II; those that remained were almost entirely in Orthodox communities. What Gershom Scholem and Martin Buber had done for Hasidic literature had yet to occur for the texts of the *Mussar* movement.

Rabbi Ira Stone has devoted decades of his life to addressing that gap. He has translated texts and written commentaries and he doubtless will continue that work, along with others. At the same time, he has worked to create a contemporary practice of *Mussar*. In addition to being the spiritual leader at the Conservative Temple Beth Zion-Beth Israel since 1988, Rabbi Stone directs the Philadelphia Mussar Institute. At this point, Stone is at the forefront of the revival of *Mussar* in American Jewry and is, to my knowledge, the most learned and profound teacher of this material to the non-Orthodox world.

The version of Mussar presented in this book is Rabbi Stone's own distillation, derived from his years of studying the French-Jewish philosopher Emman-



uel Levinas. Many people consider Levinas to be the greatest philosopher — Jewish or non-Jewish — of the 20th century. Many others will attest that he is also one of the most difficult to understand! Levinas did, however, offer us a quick fix: He once said that all the ethical principles of all the philoso-

IRA STONE IS TALKING

ABOUT A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

THAT IS SLOW, ARDUOUS,

DOWN-TO-EARTH WORK.

phers could be summarized in two words, the oft-repeated rote phrase, “after you.” Stone also has spent years studying the writing of Rabbi Simḥah Zissel of Kelm, whose signature phrase is “to bear the burden of the other.” As you can see, Levinas and Simḥah Zissel are decidedly countercultural today. Stone does not attempt to soften their edges or make them more appealing to our self-involved age. The written

material on the back of the book might give you the wrong idea in touting such phrases as “self-improvement” and “spiritual growth.” Stone’s system is not as interested in you as it is in the “other” whose burden you must bear. His program is much more about “insomnia” — staying awake to ethical demand — than about any kind of spiritual highs. In fact, the very word “spirituality” might seem misleading. The truth is, Stone is talking about a practice that is slow, arduous, down-to-earth work.

In Stone’s understanding, God is in the face of the other who confronts us with his or her need; we don’t get a lot of opportunity to just hang out with God and chill.

I believe it is the very demandingness of *Mussar* practice, as Rabbi Stone teaches it, that is so appealing to those who have found their way to it. Our world is filled with spiritual programs offering us all manner of happiness and healing. Indeed, one of Kaplan’s insights was that we need to reconstruct Judaism to make it rewarding and enticing, guilt and nostalgia having almost run their course. Nothing wrong there. But perhaps we ask too little of people, promising them much and requiring only what they find they can or want to do. In Stone’s world, we see the reverse. Much is asked of the individual, very little is offered in the

way of immediate gratification, solace of the spirit, or any version of warm fuzzies. Sometimes you bear the other’s burden and he kicks you for it. Rabbi Stone tells you to keep going.

People are sometimes surprised to learn that Mordecai Kaplan translated into English a major *Mussar* text back in 1936. In the introduction to his translation of *Mesillat Yesharim*, Kaplan explains that this book is being issued in English in large part to refute the claims of Christians that Judaism is all about acts rather than qualities of soul. He remarks that it is unlikely that Jews today will be reading this text for purposes of personal edification. It is a mark of how our world, and Reconstructionism, have changed that Rabbi Stone now teaches a four-semester *Mussar* class/practice group at RRC.

A Responsible Life provides 1) a window into Stone’s sophisticated Jewish theology, 2) a blueprint for the contemporary practice of *Mussar*, and 3) a translation and commentary of part of *Hokhma u-Mussar*, a 19th-century text by Rav Simḥah Zissel of Kelm. All this in less than 250 pages! The volume is an unusual combination of the metaphysical and the down-to-earth, the abstract and the applied.

It is in presenting the practical, modern-day application of *Mussar* that *A Responsible Life* makes its most immediate contribution. The work toward spiritual refinement and character change is exemplified in the taking of a *heshbon ha-nefesh* — an accounting of the soul. Rabbi Stone presents a classic chart delineating 13 common *middot* that are the subject of this accounting, and that are employed by many schools of *Mussar*. It is these character traits, at first, to which the serious student of *Mussar* attends on a week-by-week basis, toward the goal of bringing his or her reactions to life, from waiting in line at the bank to dealing with a serious relationship challenge, to conscious awareness. Following the list (which includes such traits as equanimity, patience, and humility), Stone presents a succinct outline of how the *mid-dah* work is accomplished individually as well as in a supportive group of peers engaged in the process (the *va’ad*). I can attest, from firsthand experience, to how powerful this process is.

It is a tall order to ask an author to be both deep and accessible, challenging and user-friendly. When the book errs, it does so on the side of complexity. That seems entirely congruent with the Mussar approach. It is not (→ page 22)

RT periodically features reviews of books of interest to our community. If you would like to recommend a book or write a review, contact Lisa Kelvin Tuttle at rteditor@jrf.org.

On Mark Rothko, Jewish Identity, and Reconstructionism

Launching the “Recon Salons”

BARRY NOVE

KATE ROTHKO PRIZEL, daughter of the late artist Mark Rothko, spoke about her family’s Jewish journey at a recent “Recon Salon,” which she and her husband, Dr. Ilya Prizel, hosted at their home for leaders of Adat Shalom (Bethesda, Maryland) on May 17, 2007. Mark Rothko, who was born Marcus Rothkowitz in Dvinsk, Russia (now Daugavpils, Latvia), came to America as a boy with his mother and sister before World War I to join his father, who had settled in Portland, Oregon. When Mark was only a teenager, his father died at age 42. As the only son, Mark went to synagogue to recite *kaddish*. After more than 10 months of going to synagogue every day, Mark broke with Jewish tradition and made the decision never to set foot again in the synagogue — and he never did.

Kate’s parents (her mother was not Jewish) met in New York, where Rothko started his career as an artist and would later gain fame.

Following Rothko’s death in 1970, Kate went through her father’s papers and was surprised to discover that he had been a frequent donor to secular charities in Israel. When Kate met Ilya Prizel at university, her Jewish journey began to come full circle, reconnecting her to Judaism and ultimately to Reconstructionist Judaism. This Recon Salon focused on Jewish identity. Ilya Prizel — now a professor of East European studies and



Barry Nove is director of development at the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation. He joined the staff of JRF in August, 2006, with more than 20 years experience in all areas of development. He also serves as a fundraising consultant to congregations in the movement.

political science at the University of Pittsburgh — presented his own studies on identity in the 20th century.

In an effort to engage leaders in congregations across North America in discussions of Reconstructionist issues and movement growth, the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation (JRF) launched the Recon Salon programs in February 2007. Four programs have been held, with plans for upwards of 20 over the next 18 months.

The first was held in Chicago at the home of Margie and Mark Zivin, members of the Jewish Reconstructionist Congregation (JRC) of Evanston, Illinois. Mark is treasurer of JRF and helped to establish the vision of the Recon Salon. The first participants were so excited to become part of a conversation about the movement that they asked

their host to make the program a regular event, and a follow-up program is already being planned.

One guest was Deborah Newberger, president of the neighboring Reconstructionist congregation, Shir Hadash, in Northbrook, Illinois. She shared her own Jewish journey and what brought her to Reconstructionist Judaism, to leadership of her congregation, and to national chair-

manship of No’ar Hadash — the Reconstructionist youth movement. (No’ar Hadash held its very first Israel Experience this summer, sending 35 teens to Israel for a month.) Deborah and her husband Michael Izbicky then hosted a Recon Salon at their home on May 19, which featured Rabbi Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer, a leading scholar on interfaith issues and an associate professor and director of the religious studies program at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC).


The Reconstructionist Synagogue of the North Shore in Plandome, New York, held a Recon Salon on May 9, organized by JRF board member Hans Grunwald. The program, which featured Dr. Carl Sheingold, executive vice president of JRF, was held in a question-and-answer format that probed the gamut of Reconstructionist issues and think-

reconvening

ing. Members of the congregation who had been active at RSNS for well over 10 years discussed a historical view of the changes they had seen in their congregation and the movement since the days when Rabbi Ira Eisenstein served as their rabbi when he started RRC.

The Recon Salons are intended to engage communities in conversation. There is no solicitation of funds at these events. They provide JRF with feedback and offer attendees the opportunity to participate in the evolution of Reconstructionism, offering

their thoughts and ideas while learning about the movement's current directions and key activities.

For more information about this program, please contact Barry Nove, director of development at JRF, at 215-885-5601 ext. 19, or e-mail bnove@jrf.org. To learn about supporting JRF, visit www4.jrf.org/development, or if you are interested in learning about the benefits of planned giving to your synagogue and/or the movement, visit the beta version of JRF's new interactive planned giving website at <http://jrfplannedgiving.org>. 

recreating

ARTWORK BY SHIRAH RACHEL APPLE

Shir Hadash
Milwaukee, Wisconsin



Shirah Rachel Apple creates visual *midrash* — commentary — and opportunities for interaction that reflect the American Jewish experience. Using spices, thread, and other familiar materials, she transforms them with a sensibility of the work of the hand into beautiful, intimate and interactive objects that celebrate Jewish rites of passage and the gift of living every day. As an artist with a strong community focus, Shirah has conducted programs and collaborations with adults and children at organizations and synagogues throughout the Baltimore and Washington, D.C. areas. View more of Shirah's artwork at <http://shirahrachelapple.com>.

Curaçao's Mikvé Israel-Emanuel Turns 275

RUTH WENGER AND JONATHAN MARKOWITZ

It is difficult to convey the emotions that overcome us when inserting the large brass key into the lock plate of the front door and turning it twice to the right. We feel the large mahogany doors swing open slowly, allowing us to pass from the tumult of everyday life into peaceful twilight of the sanctuary. . . . Although the building has gone through several major changes in its 275-year history, this feeling must have overcome our forefathers when they entered the building for its dedication. . . . Standing in this fascinating world created by our Sephardic forefathers, one is overwhelmed by the sacred "old world" mysticism of our Snoa, which makes it so unlike so many other synagogues in the Western Hemisphere. This feeling is magnified manifold when the interior of the synagogue is aglow with the warm, shimmering lights of 144 candles mirrored many times over in the gleaming brass and silver ornaments of this, our ancient Snoa.

—275th Anniversary tribute book of
Mikvé Israel-Emanuel,
Curaçao, Netherlands, Antilles

DURING THE WEEK of April 16-20, 2007, Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel of the Caribbean island of Curaçao celebrated the 275th year of their synagogue's dedication. Affectionately called "Snoa" [most likely an abbreviation of *sinagoga* —Ed.], the synagogue is the hub of Jewish life on the island. The Snoa was beautifully restored and made ready for this momentous occasion. It was on *erev Pesah* 275 years ago that this three-story synagogue and multi-use compound was dedicated. The original congregants were Sephardic Jews who helped establish the bustling community of the deep-water port in Willemstad, Curaçao. These Jews built their synagogue in the Dutch style, with three bell-hipped roofs, a bright yellow exterior, and an interior lush with mahogany, brass chandeliers, and white sand floors.

Not only is the building an architectural masterpiece, it houses a spiritual dimension of great import. The original members carried with them

Ruth Wenger and Jonathan Markowitz are members of the Jewish Reconstructionist Congregation in Evanston, Illinois. Jonathan is a member of JRF's national Board.

Torah scrolls from pre-1492 Spain; their oldest scroll dates from 1320. The sand floors commemorate the efforts of the hidden Jews in the Iberian Peninsula to practice Judaism in secret silence, and the exile in the desert of the Israelites. They named their congregation Mikvé Israel (the Hope of Israel) in these new lands. Their museum showcases the vibrant life of the Sephardic culture on the island for almost 300 years.

Originally, the Jews were Sephardic Orthodox, but today the congregation is part of the Reconstructionist movement. Like many of our North American shuls, the congregation experienced a rift in the 1800s and a group broke off to form a Reform temple. Ten years ago, the two congregations were joined under the Reconstructionist mantle.

We attended erev Shabbat services and were quite moved by the experience of chanting from the Kol Haneshamah siddur on an island 35 miles from the coast of Venezuela. Also impressive was the ark opening, which showcased 14 sifrei Torah scrolls in a four-panel mahogany ark.

The Jews of Curaçao were on the island for just 12 years when they set out to build their Snoa. Like many of our modern-day congregations in the midst of building campaigns, they met their starting costs for construction but ran into considerable cost overruns. To make the final payments, four families contributed bases for the four pillars that support the structure. These glorious pillars represent the four matriarchs of the Jewish people, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah, and all the women of the congregation. The interior design of the Snoa was modeled on the main Sephardic synagogue in Amsterdam. The building was dedicated the 15th of *Nisan* 5492, the first day of Passover, 1732, making it the oldest synagogue in continuous use in the Americas.


The celebration week opened with a commemorative service and a keynote address from Rabbi Avraham Soetendorp of LJG of the Hague, Netherlands (*Liberaal Joodse Gemeente den Haag* — the liberal Jewish community). The following day, the restoration and architecture of the Snoa was celebrated at the Curaçao Maritime Museum by two special exhibitions. First was an original art showing by island artists. The island's spirit of religious tolerance and openness was quite evident. In fact many of the artists were not Jewish, some were Dutch nationals, and one was even Polish. Second was a tour of the architectural renderings of the Snoa structures and restorations and its cultural

contributions to Curaçao, which is a special exhibit at the Maritime Museum.

The celebration continued on Wednesday with a Snoa concert featuring three *hazzanim*, Avery Tracht, Faith Steinsnyder, and David Perper. More than 500 tickets were sold and the attendees were treated to a glimpse of the Snoa in its full splendor. The 144 candles in the chandeliers were lit giving the sanctuary a warm glow. The concertgoers were invited to dream of being at services there 275

years before. Needless to say, the mood and the music were magnificent.

The final event of the celebratory week was a panel on Snoa architecture around the world featuring Dr. Bernard Buddingh of Curaçao, Joel Cahen from the Netherlands, and Rabbi Simeon Maslin. All the events were well attended by congregants and fellow Curaçaoians.

We could feel the Snoa's place in history and see the connection to Judaism in the Americas. 


Mussar . . .

(→ from page 18)

supposed to be easy. That said, I can testify that having studied and taught Jewish thought for many years, I still found some of the theology rough going. This should not dissuade anyone from working with this material, but I suggest that it may be best to do it with the support of another person. In this work, “two are better than one.”

One of my personal quibbles is not with the book, but with *Mussar* itself. The unit of analysis of *Mussar* is the individual. Thus, the development of character is understood in terms of the interpersonal — family, friends, immediate community. What I miss is an awareness of the way in which structures of our society such as class, race, and gender undergird the personal issues discussed. For example, as privileged people in a society of economic inequality, conversations about gen-


erosity, frugality, and the like only take us so far when we stay within the *Mussar* framework. After becoming “masters of a fine soul” (as Rav Simḥah Zissel would say), we ought still to be asking broader questions. As Jews, for example, we might want to consider what it would mean to see the Palestinian people as our communal “other.” For those questions, one needs to look elsewhere than *Mussar*, at least for now.

A Responsible Life is not what I'd call a “beach book,” but something much better: a book that can set you on a path of transformation. So get yourself a friend to read it with. Get yourself a teacher to talk it over with. Get yourself a group to practice with. And by all means, get yourself the book. 

Temple Israel

(→ from back cover)

that has seen its enrollment grow in recent years, as well as an active *havurah* membership. Currently, six groups of 10 to 25 people each meet regularly to provide extended families for congregants who came from other areas and to help meet the social and intellectual needs of a wide range of Jewish residents.

We know that Temple Israel will add to the dynamism of our movement, and we look forward to sharing more about them. 

KOL HAKAVOD!

The Reconstructionist Rabbinical College graduated 11 rabbinical students on June 10, bringing to more than 300 the total number of rabbis graduated from the institution. The landmark ceremony was the 35th in the College's history. Receiving a Master of Arts degree in Hebrew Letters and the title of “Rabbi” were Geoffrey Basik, Jethro Berkman, Kevin Bernstein, Megan Sanders Doherty, Me'irah Iliinsky, Audrey Jill Marcus-Berkman, Debra Lynn Rappaport, Sarah Niebuhr Rubin, Shira Singer Stutman, Michal Myers Woll, and Adam Zeff. JRF celebrates the achievements of our movement's newest spiritual leaders and wishes them joy and success. *Yishar kokhakehem v'mazal tov!*

ANYTHING MISSING ON YOUR JEWISH BOOKSHELF? WHAT'S THERE FROM THE RECONSTRUCTIONIST PRESS?

Do you have the Shabbat prayerbook? How about your own Maḥzor (High Holy Days prayerbook)? Is there a child in your life who might enjoy the lovely new children's Shabbat prayerbook?

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1,250 pages, hardcover \$36 retail (\$28.⁸⁰ JRF members)

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Two volumes, coil-bound 8 " x 11" \$75 retail (\$55 JRF members)

This is the entire Shabbat Vehagim prayerbook, enlarged to 130 percent of its original size. It is useful as a leader's edition, for the visually impaired, and for people new to Hebrew.

LIMOT HOL: THE DAILY PRAYERBOOK

552 pages, hardcover \$28 retail (\$22.⁴⁰ JRF members)

Limot Hol features liturgy for a daily minyan, and includes an omer count, havdalah, the bedtime shema, netilat lulav, and hallel for Rosh Hodesh, Hol Hamo'ed, Hanukah, and Yom Ha'atzma'ut. There are also readings for American holidays, Jewish holidays, mourning, and themes such as prayer, nature, and Torah study.

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By Rabbis Sandy Eisenberg Sasso and Jeffrey Schein

104 pages, hardcover Special promotion — see below!

This beautiful hardcover Shabbat prayer book for children ages 5 to 9 makes a wonderful gift for the whole family to share at home.

Featuring:

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- Folktales with questions for discussion
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SPECIAL PROMOTION ON THE CHILDREN'S SIDDUR!

Non-transliterated version: From now through August 15, siddurim are \$12 each (a 50 percent discount off the retail price) for orders of 22 books or more. For orders of one to 21 books, the price is reduced from \$24 to \$20 each for non-members, and from \$21.⁶⁰ to \$18 each for members of JRF congregations.

Transliterated version: All siddurim are 10 percent off the retail price for one to 21 copies. Bulk orders of 22 or more are \$18 per siddur.

To order these prayer books, or to get a full list of Reconstructionist Press titles, e-mail hdunbar@jrf.org or call (215) 885-5601.

JRF Welcomes Its Newest Affiliate

Temple Israel of Duluth, Minnesota

The Jewish Reconstructionist Federation is delighted to welcome Temple Israel of Duluth, Minnesota, as its newest member community and the second Reconstructionist-affiliated congregation in Minnesota. With the spirited leadership of Rabbi Amy Bernstein, the 200-household congregation is excited about joining the Reconstructionist Movement.

Rabbi Shawn Zevit, JRF's director of outreach and *tikkun olam*, who facilitated the affiliation process said, "It is wonderful to welcome Temple Israel into the network of Reconstructionist member communities. We have been in dialogue for a few years together, and there was clearly interest in our approach to Jewish life, in no small part because of the inspirational spirit of Rabbi Amy Bernstein. In our experience at JRF, communities that really commit to the educational process of affiliation in an open and involved way across the congregation or havurah, are transformed by that process in terms of the clarity and vision of their shared mission. Temple Israel spent the better part of last year working with us and internally to study Reconstructionism, involving the entire community in their decision-making process. This is Jewish values-based decision-making and democratic, participatory process — hallmarks of Reconstructionist Judaism at its best."

Rabbi Bernstein, a 1997 graduate of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, has been Temple Israel's rabbi for 10 years. "For me, it's been very interesting to watch the congregation develop and see the Shabbat morning *minyan* shaped and

informed by Reconstructionism," she said. "Our movement is answering a genuine need of Jews today and I am excited about the potential."

Temple Israel's president, Michael Rosenzweig, expressed his enthusiasm for the new relationship. "We're very excited to be a part of the Reconstructionist Movement and all that it has to offer us," he said.

Temple Israel's roots go back to the late 1800s.

Jewish settlers arrived in the Duluth area as early as 1850. In 1885, the first Reform congregation was incorporated, and by 1915 there was one Reform congregation, four Orthodox congregations, and the forerunner of what was to become a Conservative congregation in Duluth. In 1951, a Jewish community center was built to serve the social, cultural, and educational needs of the area. At its peak, the Jewish population in Duluth numbered 3,000-3,500 people; now there are approximately 800-900 Jews in the area. With this decrease in population, the Reform and Conservative congregations merged in 1971 and created Temple Israel, the only liberal congregation in Duluth. The congregation, which is also affiliated with the Union for Reform Judaism, completed a year-long process toward a majority vote on applying for dual affiliation with JRF last December.

Members of Temple Israel play an active role in the community at large and Rabbi Bernstein serves as a link between the Jewish community and Duluth/Northeastern Minnesota. The congregation has a vibrant religious school (→ page 22)



Reconstructionism Today

Jewish Reconstructionist Federation
Beit Devora
101 Greenwood Avenue
Jenkintown, PA 19046