



Reconstructionism for the 21st Century

A Taste of the 41st JRF Convention

From Thursday, November 11th through Sunday the 14th, 2006, over 450 Reconstructionists and like-minded friends gathered at the Hyatt Regency Philadelphia to learn, davven, network and explore the theme, "Our Evolving Jewish Journey: Peoplehood and the Quest for Spiritual Community." This was my first Convention, and it left a meaningful impression. Some high points for me personally were the energy and excitement of singing and praying along with hundreds on a Shabbat morning, our joined voices creating a powerful, prayerful space; serving as co-moderator with JRF's new president, Robert Barkin, for a panel on congregational growth attended by 60 folks committed to their synagogues, in search of strategies and support; and the thrill of learning from four pioneering Israelis broadening pluralistic alternatives in Israel.

There were more than 50 workshops on topics spanning liturgy, values-based decision making, music, Israel, the arts, and social action; and, in addition to the wonderful services, Shabbat Torah study and Beit Midrash learning sessions in the afternoon rounded out our communal day of rest.

The Convention's opening plenary session, "Reconstructionism for the 21st Century: Aspirations, Expectations, and Innovations" gave four Reconstructionist rabbis who are recognized leaders in the Reconstructionist movement — Richard Hirsh, Toba Spitzer, Les Bronstein, and Michael Strassfeld — an opportunity to share their insights, hopes, and visions for Reconstructionist Judaism, and to discuss some core principles that have guided us and need to remain central as the movement evolves. We present their remarks here both to share some of the flavor of the Convention and to assist you in your own "evolving Jewish journey." —Lisa Kelvin Tuttle, Editor



*A moment of celebration at Convention
Photo by Eli Bogom-Shanon of Mishkan Shalom in Philadelphia.*

What Would Kaplan Think?

RICHARD HIRSH

WHEN I WAS a 21-year-old college senior who had recently discovered Reconstructionist Judaism, it occurred to me to write to the movement's founder, Mordecai Kaplan, and ask him some questions, including, of course, what he thought about the idea of "reconstructing Reconstructionism."

Kaplan was then 94, living in Jerusalem, and so it was many weeks later that I received an Aerogram reply (for those of us old enough to remember Aerograms), written out in Kaplan's precise handwriting. After going through my other questions and offering replies, he concluded thus: "Your idea of reconstructing Reconstructionism before having gone through the training for the Reconstructionist rabbinate is totally irrelevant, and therefore meaningless. Sincerely yours, Mordecai Kaplan."

So it is with no small amount of trepidation that I find myself on this panel with these wonderful colleagues, each of whom has been an important rabbi for me, particularly in challenging me to rethink, revise, review, and reconstruct the Reconstructionism that I embraced some 35 years ago.

My assignment is to place the question of reconstructing Reconstructionism into (→ page 4)

INSIDE

- 2
SOME REASONS
TO CELEBRATE
- 4
MORE CONVENTION
ADDRESSES
- 15
JRF AND
GLOBAL WARMING
- 17
RECONSIDERING
OUR LITURGY
- 22
ART GOES TO
SHUL

*a voice
for
creative
Jewish
living*



Some Reasons to Celebrate

CARL A. SHEINGOLD

There is a rich vein of Jewish humor that builds on a stereotype of our people as being a rather dour and pessimistic lot. It is said Jews don't know how to take "yes" for an answer, or that we always see the glass as half empty rather than half full. And then there is the dated joke about the Jewish telegram that reads, "Start worrying, letter to follow." We also know there is some truth to the stereotype and historical reasons for it that are not joking matters.

In the many years during which I was a Reconstructionist by affiliation but not working for the movement — when I was more an observer — I often felt discomfort with what sometimes seemed to me to be the excessively negative bases of Reconstructionist self-definition. In articulating who we are, too much seemed to be based on what we don't believe or don't do, with too little of what we do and what we affirm. Here, too, I always understood the reason for this: The first stage of any movement is one of separation and distinguishing oneself from others. Articulating what one is *not* is important and natural.

I feel less of that negativity today and I think that is important and worthy of celebration.

Dr. Carl A. Sheingold is executive vice president of the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation.

Reconstructionism Today (ISSN 1072-3250; USPS 457-140) is published three times a year by the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation (JRF), 101 Greenwood Avenue, Jenkintown, PA 19046. Subscriptions are \$16 per year; \$20 foreign; single copies, \$5. Individual membership in JRF (\$80 per year) includes a subscription. Manuscripts and queries should be sent with a stamped, self-addressed envelope, to: Editor, *RT*, 101 Greenwood Avenue, Jenkintown, PA 19046 (e-mail: ltuttle@jrf.org).



Editor: Lisa Kelvin Tuttle

Editorial Board: Robert Barkin, Lawrence Bush, Daniel Goldman Cedarbaum, Dan Ehrenkrantz, Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer, Shai Gluskin, Seth Goldstein, Ron Goldwyn, Richard Hirsh, Melissa Klein, Nina Mandel, Victoria Free Presser, Carl A. Sheingold, Andrew Silow-Carroll, David Teutsch, Shawn Zevit

Periodicals postage paid at Jenkintown, PA and additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Send change of address to JRF, 101 Greenwood Avenue, Jenkintown, PA 19046.

There has been much to celebrate in the past few months, starting with the 41st JRF Convention. The JRF Convention, for me — and so many others, as evidenced by the evaluations — showcased all of our positives.

At our Convention we had Israeli guests — Ruth Calderon, founder of Alma Hebrew College in Tel Aviv; Rani Jaeger, a lecturer in history and Jewish thought at Alma and founder of the Israeli secular congregation Beit Tefilah Yisraeli (Israeli House of Prayer); Roni Yavin, Executive Director of Elul, a Center for Pluralistic Jewish Study and Dialogue in Jerusalem; and Meir Yoffe, Executive Director of Panim for Jewish Renaissance — all leaders within an informal movement representing the same positive shift within Israel toward many aspects of Jewish culture and religion that previously were rejected within classic Zionism and the "traditional" forms of Israeli secular Jewish identity. The response of Convention participants to our guests, as well as their response to our Convention, suggested how much our ongoing relationship with them can mean, not least in providing us with a basis of connection to Israel that is deeply positive.

At the plenum at Convention, we had a transition in the leadership of JRF, on the Board, and with Dan Cedarbaum completing his four years of service as president and Bob Barkin beginning his term in that office. We often make wry comments about the burdens of leadership, but at moments of transition such as these we can experience such positive feelings of pride in what real leadership can accomplish — looking to the past and the future — as well as gratitude for the contributions leaders make to our congregations and our movement.

Shortly after Convention, I spent a good deal of time with Rabbis Richard Hirsh and Dan Ehrenkrantz, leaders of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association (RRA) and Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC), respectively. In anticipation of the announcement of new policies from the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards (CJLS) of the Conservative movement regarding the role of gay men and lesbians in rabbinic ordination and same-sex marriage, Richard, Dan, and I had a practical focus: to do our best to ensure that in

the anticipated press coverage, the Reconstructionist movement's positions and significant experience with this issue would not be ignored. I believe that we achieved our goal.

But as important as this was, equally important to me was the pleasure of working collaboratively with my colleagues and the pride I felt not only in respect to our movement's policies, but also the spirit in which those policies have been implemented. To adopt a position of acceptance and inclusion is one thing. Words like "inclusion" or "acceptance" or "tolerance" to me convey the goal of avoiding the negative: We will not exclude. We will not reject. We will not exhibit intolerance. But I believe that we have higher aspirations and can claim some significant degree of achieving those aspirations. We aspire to not just include but welcome and celebrate diversity in this and other areas. We aspire to benefit from the creativity and richness that result from a true engagement with diversity. Richard, Dan, and I found ourselves not just talking about policy but affirming that the rest of the Jewish and, indeed, entire religious world have things to learn from our experience in living — not just preaching — full inclusion and diversity. It is perhaps a reflection of this that in anticipating that the Conservative movement would take only partial steps in regard to this issue, we were not inclined to criticize. We were inclined to celebrate the fact that they were moving in the right direction.

There are times when clichés ring true: "May we go from strength to strength" seems to me just right in closing this column. ✡

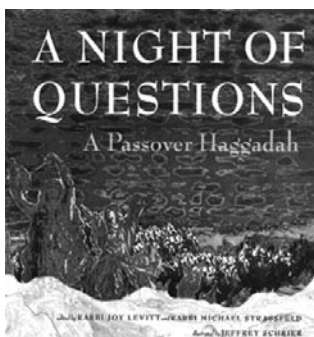


Roni Yavin, Ruth Calderon, Meir Yoffe, and Roni Jaeger, with JRF Executive Vice President Carl Sheingold.

Photo by JRF Communications intern Joysa Winter.

resources

- Read the story "Pluralistic Judaism in Israel: A Report from the JRF Convention," and view video clips of presentations by Ruth Calderon, Rani Jaeger, Roni Yavin, and Meir Yoffe at www4.jrf.org/conv06-pluralism.
- To learn about the Israeli organizations mentioned in this column, visit their websites: Alma College, www.alma.org.il/eng/e1.html; Panim, www.panim.org.il; Beit Tefilah Yisraeli, www.kbyonline.org/beit-tefilah/index.html; and Elul, www.elul.org.il/enhome.shtml.
- To read the Reconstructionist movement's response to the rulings of the Conservative movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards vote, see www4.jrf.org/node/276.



A NIGHT OF QUESTIONS: A PASSOVER HAGGADAH

Rabbi Joy Levitt and
Rabbi Michael Strassfeld, editors
Illustrated in full color
by Jeffrey Schrier

To order call JRF's Reconstructionist
Press at 1-877-JRF-PUBS

Rooted in tradition, yet accessible to all, this beautifully illustrated volume is a rich resource for the Passover holiday and for your seder.

Along with the traditional prayers (translated and transliterated), biblical text and commentary, are song lyrics and a play for children. Sold separately is an accompanying recording of 30 traditional and contemporary Passover songs (CD or cassette). Softcover, 160 pp, \$22.00, \$17.60 for JRF members. Volume discounts available.

CAMP JRF

**SO MANY FRIENDSHIPS MADE AND STRENGTHENED
JOIN US FOR SUMMER 2007!**

CAMP JRF is the place to be for a summer of friends, sports, arts, nature, and positive Jewish learning. Join us on the spectacular Aaron and Marjorie Ziegelman Campus in the Pocono Mountains, where we will continue to build a fun and enriching Reconstructionist community. Sign up now — space is limited!



Aleph Session: June 27 – July 22 • Bet Session: July 25 – August 12
Nitzanim (Mini-Camp): July 25 – August 5

For more information and to register,
visit www.campjrf.org or call us toll-free at 877.CAMP.JRF

Convention . . .

(→ *from the cover*)

some historical context, and then offer a few observations about the tension between ideology and methodology — the tension between what we think and what we do — in approaching the question of “why is this movement different from all other movements?”

Briefly, a few observations:

1. Once upon a time, there was no difference between “Reconstructionism” and “Kaplanism.” As an approach clearly gestated in and then generated by the thinking of one person, for many years, if you wanted a definitive answer as to what Reconstructionism was, you read Kaplan. Although there were a few other rabbis who were early disciples, it was a rare occasion when they challenged the master, and when they did, they were often on the losing end of what Ira Eisenstein once called the “one-to-three” votes.

Kaplan was the source: in 1934, when *Judaism as a Civilization* was published; or 1935 when the magazine *The Reconstructionist* was founded; or 1940, when the (original) JRF (Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation) was created; or in 1945, when the first Reconstructionist Sabbath Prayer Book was published (and burned); or in 1955, when FRCH (the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Havurot, predecessor of JRF) was created; or in 1968, when the RRC opened its doors.

2. *That Kaplan could give definitive answers* should not be confused with Kaplan having given consistent answers. We know the old adage: “consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds.” And his mind was anything but small. But let’s be honest, within a reasonable range of opinion, you can find in Kaplan what you’re looking for, which is not unusual considering his long career and his voluminous writings.

There is a tension in contemporary Reconstructionism. Some think our distinctiveness is a matter of style — that we are all about “participatory-

warm-and-welcoming-inclusive-pluralistic-democratic-egalitarian communities.” This is important, of course, and every survey of Jewish life tells us that people want to belong, to be connected, to be noticed, cared for and listened to. Jews may still be the people of the Covenant, but they are also consumers, devoting, as do other North Americans, their discretionary time, energy, and finances to causes and communities that meet their needs, not necessarily to those that would claim their loyalty.

If we want to appeal to Kaplan in support of stressing “how we do it” over “what we think,” we can find an ample number of citations from his writings that support the need to create the very type of communities that we have come to value. Here is one: “Reconstructionism is at its best when it functions like the Socratic method of inquiry, in which the method and not the conclusion is the essential” (*Not So Random Thoughts*, p. 295).

The other side of our tension is that some Reconstructionists think that our distinctiveness is a matter of thought — that we are all about “Judaism without supernaturalism,” and that we need to be an address for those contemporary Jews for whom belief in a supernatural God is alienating, for whom belief in a divinely revealed Torah is idolatrous, and for whom the idea of the Jews as the chosen people is a moral mistake and an ethical error.

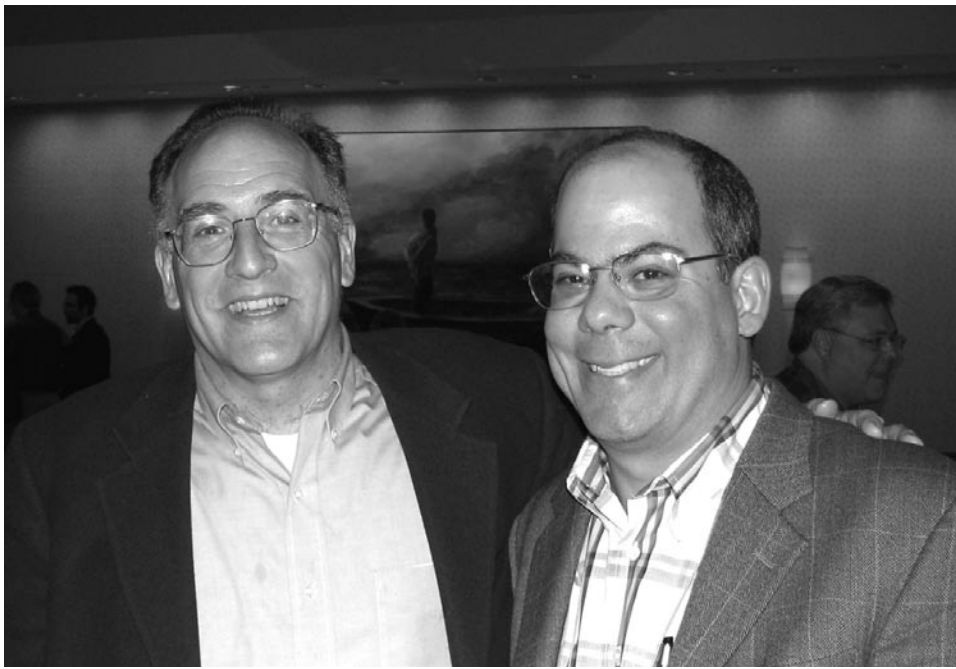
If we want to appeal to Kaplan in support of stressing “what we think” over “how we do it” we can find the requisite citations from his writings that support the need to speak in a naturalistic and humanistic voice. Here is one: “Supernaturalism is the backwater whence arise the illusions that befog us” (*Not So Random Thoughts*, p. 156).

3. *Kaplan never resolved his ambivalence as to* whether Reconstructionism should be a movement unto itself (“Judaism without supernaturalism”) or a school of thought influencing the other religious, secular, cultural and national approaches to Jewish life (“Judaism as the evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people”). In some ways, our tension between what we think and how we act is a continuation of the conversation that Kaplan had with himself.

That said, even as we grow and mature, we continue, like all children, to carry around some of the unresolved issues of our parents — as is evidenced in the nature of the conversation we are having today.

By the time the first minyan of Reconstructionist rabbis established the Reconstructionist Rab-

Rabbi Richard Hirsh is executive director of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association and was editor of The Reconstructionist from 1996-2006. He is the author of The Journey of Mourning, part of the Center for Jewish Ethics series, A Guide to Jewish Practice, recently published by the RRC Press.



Incoming JRF president Robert Barkin and outgoing JRF president Daniel Cedarbaum. Photo by Joysa Winter.

binical Association (RRA) in 1974, control over the meaning of the movement had begun to slip away from Kaplan and his disciples. As the number of Reconstructionist congregations and *havurot* grew through the 1970s, '80s, and '90s, the nature of the movement also began to change. We have long outgrown the proverbial phone booth (for those of us old enough to remember phone booths) in which the first Reconstructionist gatherings were alleged to have been held.


Today, with almost 300 Reconstructionist rabbis in the RRA, and 108 affiliates in the JRF, we would be hard-pressed to point to any one person or agency or institution as owning the definitive meaning of Reconstructionism. By default as well as by design, we are now in the business of "reconstructing Reconstructionism."

4. I sometimes think we have an unofficial slogan: WWKT ("what would Kaplan think?"). We have our Reconstructionist fundamentalists, who may not believe the Torah was given at Sinai, but are pretty well-convinced that *Judaism as a Civilization* was. When contemporary Reconstructionism expands to include spiritual practice as a core concern, and appropriates the mythic metaphors of Kabbalah and Hasidism, we sometimes imagine that Kaplan would as much *plotz* as *kvell* were he to turn up at a JRF Convention Shabbat service (which in itself would be quite a challenge to Judaism without supernaturalism). And were he offered an *aliya*, with a choice of "*Baruh ata Adonai*," "*B'ruha at Yah*," or "*Nevareh et ayn Ha-*

Hayim," God knows which one he would choose. (Maybe only God knows which one he would choose!)

There is a *midrash* that imagines Moses being time-transported to a rabbinic academy some 1,200 years after his lifetime. He is perplexed and puzzled at being unable to understand what is being discussed. It is only when one of the rabbis says "this is the *halakha l'Moshe m'Sinai*" — "this is the law as transmitted from Sinai through Moses" — that his anxiety is assuaged. While the content may have changed, it is the continuity that the rabbis claim in the name of Moses that confers legitimacy on what they are doing, no matter how different it may be from what Moses meant in his own time.

I think that if Rabbi Kaplan were here this afternoon he might be puzzled and even perplexed about some of what is under discussion. But I would also like to think he would be comforted in our gathering of our various viewpoints under the heading of "Reconstructionism." While the content may be changing, the continuity of our Reconstructionist conversation confers legitimacy on what we are doing, although it may be quite different from what Kaplan intended in his own time. But he would have been the first to say that as circumstances change, so must we.

So it seems appropriate to conclude with the Kaplanian observation, from *Not So Random Thoughts* (p. 293): "People say the future isn't what it used to be; neither is the past. Both are in need of reconstruction if we are to have a livable present." 

“Peoplehood” Reconsidered

TOBA SPITZER

ONE OF THE MORE intriguing moments to me in that central narrative about who we are as a people — the Exodus story — occurs during the story of the Golden Calf. As you might recall, Moses goes up on Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments, the instructions for the Israelites to form a new society. He disappears for 40 days and nights, and the Israelites begin to freak out, convinced he’s not coming back. In his absence, they convince Moses’ brother, Aaron, to construct a golden calf, which they begin worshipping as the symbol of their liberation from Egypt.

Up on Mount Sinai, God is understandably upset about this turn of events. The Great Power of Creation and Liberation tells Moses that the Israel-

ites have already broken the covenant that they’d agreed to, and that God is now going to destroy them, and will start all over again with Moses and his descendants.

What is intriguing is the scene that follows, as Moses argues with God not to destroy the Israelites. In essence, Moses here is reminding God that God needs the people — this covenant business is a two-way street, and just as the people need God, so too does God need the people.

I would suggest that this is a significant proof-text for Mordecai Kaplan’s arguments about the centrality of “peo-

plehood” for an understanding of Judaism. Moses here is making Kaplan’s argument: that there can be no Judaism — no covenant, no revelation of Jewish law and tradition — without the Jewish people. God can’t do it alone, and Moses all by

himself is not enough. God needs this stiff-necked Israelite community in order to become manifest in the world through what today we call the Jewish civilization.

Kaplan’s notion of the centrality of Jewish peoplehood was revolutionary when he articulated it in the early decades of the 20th century, but I think it needs some serious revisiting and perhaps reconstructing as we begin the 21st century. It’s a concept that too often in our movement has gotten a bit thin. What I would like to suggest today is a way to reframe how we think about this central idea, to give it more power and meaning in this historical moment.

When Kaplan said that “belonging precedes believing,” he wasn’t saying that belonging was necessarily more important than believing. He was making what was to him a statement of fact: that human beings form their belief systems in the context of community, within a particular culture and civilization. And even more than cultural context, a person’s civilization — especially his or her religious civilization — is the vehicle for that person’s “salvation,” meaning, for Kaplan, the fulfillment of his or her potential as a human being. People need community because it is only in the communal context, and in relation to their history and inherited belief systems, that they can discover meaning and attain the highest human values.

Even more: for Kaplan, the ethnic or religious group had a kind of creative energy, as well as a group consciousness, that gave life to those values and ideals, that shaped them over time. Kaplan understood that ideas and beliefs couldn’t exist in a vacuum, didn’t float “out there” in some detached way. They were the organic outgrowth of vital, meaning-making communities.

Based on this understanding, Kaplan called on American Jews to invigorate the structures of organic community, because he was afraid that as cohesive and coherent Jewish communal structures fell apart, Jewish beliefs and customs would wither. And he was right. As Jews have assimilated into the dominant American culture, as Jewish neighborhoods become a thing of the past, as fewer and fewer American Jews are fluent in any Jewish language, whether Yiddish or Hebrew or something else, Jewish civilization for a majority of American Jews has become increasingly superficial and haphazard, if it retains any meaning at all.

Unfortunately, what I see in response from a number of my Reconstructionist colleagues is a

IF KAPLAN WERE HERE,

HE MIGHT BE PUZZLED AND
EVEN PERPLEXED ABOUT SOME OF
WHAT IS UNDER DISCUSSION. BUT
HE WOULD BE COMFORTED IN
OUR GATHERING OF OUR VARIOUS
VIEWPOINTS UNDER THE
HEADING OF
“RECONSTRUCTIONISM”

Rabbi Toba Spitzer has long been devoted to issues of peace and justice and involved in the struggle for peace in the Middle East. An experienced Reconstructionist educator, she has written innovative curricula on the Book of Exodus and on the Reconstructionist prayer book, Kol Haneshamah. She is the rabbi at Congregation Dorshei Tzedek, a JRF affiliate in West Newton, Massachusetts.

CONVENTION QUOTABLES

COLLECTED BY JOYSA WINTER

I came to the convention because I saw the call for artists online, and I wanted to be a part of the group of artists sharing (Saturday night). I've been doing storytelling in my community for several years now. The energy here (at the convention) is just so incredible because everybody is filled with such joy and a kavanah of being. It was just a delight being here!

Lisa Libowitz
Beit Tikvah
Baltimore, Maryland

The services, the singing and the chance to see friends who I don't often get to see — this is the best part of coming to Convention. The ruah here — it's just really deep, really ecstatically high. It's so wonderful to be in the company of people who are really into Judaism, in a deep and caring way.

Barbara Nordstrom-Loeb
Congregation Mayim Rabim
Minneapolis, Minnesota

call back to “peoplehood” that misunderstands Kaplan's basic premise. People both within and outside our movement seem to think that if you just tell American Jews to feel more connected to other Jews, they will magically feel it. And that if they do then feel that connection, Jewish life will flower once again.

But you can't tell people to “belong” when they don't feel a sense of connection, any more than you can tell them to “believe” in something that is alien to their experience, or tell people to “behave” according to Jewish law when those laws are no longer relevant to their lives. My observation is that many — perhaps most — American Jews don't experience, any longer, a sense of organic connection to Jews with whom they are not in any immediate or close relation. An organic, powerful sense of belonging to a Jewish collectivity that is greater than one's own immediate Jewish community is more-or-less a thing of the past for a majority of American Jews. While there are marvelous, creative things happening in the American Jewish community, and while Jewish civilization, in a broad sense, continues to develop and grow, a sense of “belonging” is not, to my mind, the driving factor behind those creative impulses. Ethnic Judaism — still a powerful force in the first half of the 20th century, when Kaplan's ideas took shape — is on the decline. In Kaplan's formative years, Zionism was a dynamic, visionary expression of Jewish nationhood. In our time, it is primarily a defense of the status quo, or a fearful reaction to attacks on Israel.

Even with all that, I do not want to give up on “peoplehood.” I just want to think about it a bit differently. I would suggest we start by remembering that Kaplan never argued for community for community's sake alone. He understood that Jewish peoplehood was in the service of something greater. And that something was “salvation.” For

Kaplan, God was not just a Process or a Power — it was a Process that Makes for Salvation. Similarly, Jewish civilization — like every religious civilization — was a manifestation of a communal search for salvation. Ultimate salvation, for Kaplan, meant a world in which every human being could come into the fullness of his or her potential, a world free of the poverty and oppression that keeps so many people unable to achieve that goal. And the Godly Power of Salvation is that force, active in the universe, that both guides and empowers us to achieve that goal. The Jewish people, then, are a collectivity, a civilization, that “makes for salvation” both for its members, and as part of a larger human project of liberation and fulfillment.

I think the traditional Jewish concept that most powerfully captures this idea is the notion of *brit*, covenant. In imagining the moment at Sinai, the book of Exodus introduced an entirely new and radical idea into the world. This was not the idea of one God. Rather, it was the idea that divinity, the Creative Power of the Universe, would seek to come into relationship with a human community through the mechanism of *brit*.

Until this innovation, the type of covenant which we associate with the receiving of Torah at



Colorful wares at Convention vendors' showcase. Photo by Eli Bogom-Shanon.

Mount Sinai was a political convention, a way that a more powerful nation secured the loyalty of a less powerful nation. But the *brit* between YHWH and the Israelite nation was much more than a political treaty. It was an all-encompassing system of obligation that demanded not only tribute to the law-giver — God — but also a code of ethical and moral behavior towards every other person in the community. It was founded on the centrality of two principles: *tzedek*, justice, and *hesed*, covenantal love or loyalty. The Israelites were told that their relationship with God — that is, their connection to the ultimate Source of blessing, of goodness, of power — was contingent upon their treating one another with the proper balance of justice and love. The relationship of human beings with God could not be separated, in this new idea of *brit*, from their relationships with one another.

How might we understand the Biblical ideal of “covenant” as Reconstructionists? I would imagine that most of us do not believe in a supernatural God who revealed His laws at Sinai and imposed a covenant on a community there. How can covenant be meaningful if we understand God as a Process, and if we don’t adhere to the stipulations of the covenant as law? Can we reconstruct the notion of ‘*brit*’ outside the confines of the idea of chosenness? And how might this all help us, anyway?

Here is how I understand the Biblical notion of covenant from a Reconstructionist point of view: Most simply put: by entering into covenantal relationship with others, we make possible a real relationship with God. And vice versa: our communal relationship with the Godly Power of Creation and Salvation makes possible true, morally grounded

relationships with one another — as a community and as a society.

We can think of covenant as a structure — a social structure, a structure made of practices, both ritual and ethical, a structure made up of moral norms and obligations. It is through this structure that the Power of Godliness becomes manifest in the world. This is what it means to say that God “needs” the Israelites at Sinai; that God “needs” us today. Without the covenantal structures — the communities, the congregations, the societies — that we create, God or Godliness cannot become manifest, cannot become real, in this world. And we, in turn, cannot achieve what Kaplan called “salvation” — our fullness as human beings — outside of the covenantal relationship with other people and with God.

So “peoplehood” remains critically important, but it must be understood not as ethnic identity, not merely as a sense of belonging, but as covenantal commitment. The traditional notion of covenant challenges us to experience a sense of obligation as a collective — we have mutual obligations with all those with whom we are in covenantal relationship. We experience this in our congregations as obligations of *hesed* — of caring for one another, of welcoming new members. We also experience covenantal commitment in taking seriously that which is at the center of our communities: our mission and vision, our commitments to Jewish learning, to social action, to acting on our values both internally and in the broader society. We experience “belonging” ideally not as a value in and of itself, but as the framework within which we carry out the sacred work of fulfilling our *brit* with one another and with God.

The level of the congregation is at the same time

CONVENTION QUOTABLES

This is my first year coming to the JRF Convention because I just became Jewish! I found the Reconstructionist movement online, through the JRF website, and from that I began studying and found my congregation, Beth Hatikva. It is so wonderful being surrounded in such a warm, welcoming community. The services, the music, the dancing — that is what I will take away the most from this experience.

Leslie Weber
Congregation Beth Hatikva
Chatham, New Jersey

The Woodstock Shabbat service was truly unforgettable! I thought I was going to some sort of '60s-styled service — I didn't realize it was being led by the congregation in Woodstock, NY! I so appreciated the experience: Lots of people tightly packed into a room, with such singing — you could actually feel the sounds of the music vibrating through your feet, as well as hearing it. It was marvelous!”

Phyllis Lerner
Adat Shalom
Bethesda, Maryland

the place where we can most easily experience covenant as real, and the place where we face the very real challenges of living up to the covenantal ideal. Understanding the centrality of *brit* in the way that I am suggesting means that we begin to understand our congregations as laboratories for covenantal living. What is the realistic extent of the obligations that we owe one another, from helping one another care for sick family members, to providing financial assistance to members in need, to providing emotional and spiritual support to those who struggle and suffer? What can we demand from one another, how can we challenge and support one another, in the realm of spiritual practice and commitment to Jewish living?

Covenant is meaningless if it does not involve real obligations and standards with which we can hold ourselves accountable. While our current emphasis on “belonging” implies that inclusivity is the overarching Reconstructionist value — and I have encountered many in our movement who do believe that that value trumps every other — a shift in emphasis to covenantal commitment makes clear that inclusion in the community is meaningful only to the extent that we are a collective that shares values and vision and goals. We certainly want to be as welcoming as possible — but at the same time we can never forget that our communities exist for the sake of something *else*, something higher, something Godly, and that we fail in that goal if we focus too much on making everyone comfortable, and not enough on remembering why we’re together in the first place.

The idea of covenantal community is harder when we move beyond our own congregation, and beyond our movement, out to the Jewish people in a more general way. Here I think we have serious questions to wrestle with — questions that many in the Jewish community are dealing with right now. Who, exactly, am I — are we — in covenantal relationship with? With every Jew, no matter what? With those Jews with whom I share some basic assumptions and values? With Jews in my city? In my country? In Israel? All of them? Some of them? I will be honest and tell you that at this moment, I do not feel particularly connected, on any level, with the ultra-Orthodox Jews who



Making a joyful noise at the Harmoniyah (Reconstructionist music network) music-sharing session. Photo by Joysa Winter.

are violently trying to suppress the gay pride march in Jerusalem which is scheduled to happen tomorrow. Should I? Should they feel covenantally connected to me? I pose this as a real question, one we need to ponder further.


Our legacy as followers of Mordecai Kaplan also demands that we understand the importance of entering into covenantal relationship with non-Jews. As Americans or as Canadians or as citizens of whatever country we reside in, we need to be thinking about our covenantal commitments to our fellow citizens. Here in America, especially — and it is wonderful to be able to talk about this here in Philadelphia, so near the historical roots of our republic — we need to revitalize the language of covenant, to make it kosher once again to talk about the commitments that citizens owe one another, the obligations we have to care for one another, the legitimacy of the governmental and social institutions that help us implement the demands of *hesed* and *tzedek*. According to the demands of the Torah, the covenant demands that we be particularly mindful of our obligations to those with the least power in our communities. Our rejection of the notion of chosenness allows us to use the language of covenant not only in connection to our particular life as Jews, but also in thinking about our relationships with the larger non-Jewish world.

I’d like to close with a few sentences from

a wonderful article by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the former chief rabbi of Britain, where he writes about the distinction between social contract and social covenant. Rabbi Sacks says:

a covenant is predicated not on [self]-interest, but rather on loyalty and fidelity. . . . A social contract is maintained by the threat of external force, the Leviathan of the State. A covenant, by contrast, is maintained by an internalized sense of identity, kinship, loyalty, obligation, duty, responsibility, and reciprocity . . . ”

To come back to that moment on Mount Sinai, when God and Moshe and the Israelites confront the

reality of the Golden Calf: Here we see that even — or perhaps especially — at the moment of crisis, a covenant binds them. It’s very difficult just to walk away from a covenant, even for God. And it is precisely that “internalized sense of identity, kinship, loyalty, obligation, duty, responsibility, and reciprocity” that makes the Sinai covenant endure, and that has allowed the Jewish people to endure. But the reality is that covenant doesn’t just happen. It takes effort, intentionality, patience, a willingness to open ourselves to others and to take seriously our common commitments. May we be renewed in our own efforts towards building covenantal community, and may the blessings of those communities continue to strengthen and inspire us. 

Reconstructionist Wellsprings

LESTER BRONSTEIN

I WANT TO START with a quotation from *Bereyshit* 26:18. “So Isaac went back and re-dug the wells of water which had been dug in the days of his father Abraham, and which had been filled in (stopped up) by the Philistines after Abraham’s death. And he called them by names similar to those which his father Abraham had called them.”

When Kaplan put forth his model for a Judaism of his own time and place, he used the image of “reconstructing.” Judaism was somehow “broken” and “displaced,” and the task at hand was to “reconstruct” it — to put it back together so that it remained authentic to its original form, but sufficiently altered to work in new circumstances.

He might just as well have used the image of “wells filled in.” The ancient wells, dug by our ancestors, had over time become filled in with earth. Their life-giving waters had for many of Abraham’s descendants become inaccessible, undrinkable. How had the wells become stopped up? By centuries of exile and oppression; by migration and upheaval;

Rabbi Lester Bronstein, rabbi of JRF affiliate Bet Am Shalom in White Plains, NY, is a writer, musician, and lecturer whose articles have appeared in numerous Jewish periodicals. He is a leader in many local and national Jewish and Reconstructionist organizations as well as a performer with Begeg Kefet, a philanthropic musical group dedicated to the presentation of new Jewish spiritual compositions.

most recently by the unprecedented meeting of Judaism and American democracy and modernity; and of course by the Shoah, and by the radical re-definition of Jewish history in the time of the State of Israel.

Kaplan developed a technique for unstopping the wells, or better, for “redigging them.” He wanted the water to taste as sweet to us as it must have tasted in ancient times. He didn’t want us to create a new Judaism. Even Reform, which itself was hardly a new religion, was too different for Dr. Kaplan. He wanted old wells with new access and new names, but names which sounded like the old names.

Who would re-dig these wells? Who, indeed, but us? Only the Jewish people — and then only the few among us who felt compelled to do the work as a matter of spiritual life and death — only the Jewish people could shovel out the silt of the ages.

And who are the Jewish people? Certainly not an ethnicity, at least not any longer. The Jewish people are all those who are either born into this tribe, or who have courageously joined it, or been brought along into it one way or another, but who in any case understand that Jewishness is central to their identity, and that it will continue to be their central identity, even when they are not currently inspired by the available options in Jewish life. (Judaism can be entertaining; it is not entertainment.)

Early in my sojourn with the Reconstructionist movement, I would hear the following speech, over and over, at conventions and banquets: “If it weren’t for Reconstructionism, and especially for Congregation So-and-So, I simply wouldn’t be a

CONVENTION QUOTABLES

Our congregation recently broke away from a Reform temple, and we're on the path toward JRF affiliation, so another member and I decided to come to the convention to learn more. Our community has twelve households, and we've been using the Reconstructionist siddur and crafted our own service — you might call it a Reformed service. But being here, seeing Reconstructionist rabbis conducting Reconstructionist

services, I can't tell you what that has meant to me. I haven't been able to cry for years, not even when my uncle died, but this morning, at the Shahaarit service, I just bawled and bawled. It wasn't tears of pain, it was tears of joy. I felt like I had come home.

Doug Marks
Congregation Kavod La'Olam
Pensacola, Florida

Jew today." I know that some of you may resonate with that point view. My take on it is: Really? And why would they not be Jews today? Who gave them permission to give themselves permission to desist from the holy task of our covenant, as in *v'lo atah ben horine l'hibatel mimena*, "you are not free to desist from the task"? Or as in Hillel's maxim, a central idea in Judaism, *al tifrosh min ha-tzibur*, "Don't separate your self from the community"?

Yes, I think our movement should do all it can to attract the disaffected. It should invite everyone to drink deeply from our newly dug wells of Torah, of spirituality, of sacred celebration of our civilization's glory. *Harkhivi m'kom oholeh*, says Isaiah — "Enlarge the place of your tent." We should make our tent large enough to accommodate those seekers, to the extent that they really want to try doing what we're trying to do.

But I think we should spend the majority of our temporal and financial resources on digging and re-digging those wells in the first place, and on doing so with those — and by those — and for those who already know that, for better or worse, they must be part of the Jewish enterprise.

I want us to attract those people to our program. I want them to see that we offer the very best synthesis of spirit, practice, thinking, acting, learning, literacy, commitment — the best synthesis of our particular Jewish selves and our universal selves

— the best that is available anywhere on the Jewish scene. I want them to come to us because we are serious and demanding of ourselves and our people, in spite of the personal and communal autonomy that necessarily governs our lives. I want them to feel responsible for the future of the Jewish people, and I want them to see Reconstructionism as a particularly responsible group of Jewish practitioners. Right now it is that, but sometimes it is also not that. That's what I want us to work on.

I'm sure this sounds elitist. I'm okay with that. Re-digging the wells is not for everyone, not for most people. But we are not "most people." And Kaplan was not "most" teachers. He was a visionary, and we are his murky vision. Even his wells have, to a degree, been stopped up. In re-digging them, we will certainly not be replicating Kaplan's program. But we will be rediscovering his marvelous method for the renewal of Jewish life, and applying that method to today's questions.

Isaac and his men re-named the wells. The first was *esek*, "contention." That sounds about right for us. The second was *sitna*, "disputation." That sounds even better. Finally, he named the third well *rehovot*, "ample room." That's what we have now: ample room to bring in all those who really want to do this difficult and rewarding work: rediscovering a wellspring of Jewish life, buried in the silt of time, waiting to be drunk from deeply by those who want not a "new" Judaism, but an ancient Judaism "renewed."



My favorite part of convention was going to the different styles of services. At my synagogue we are really very spoiled, but it's very interesting to see what other folks are doing and to experience different flavors of Reconstructionism. I really enjoyed learning from different rabbis, and I especially loved the workshop on Yehuda Amichai, which was so well-prepared and included wonderful discussions and insights from the attend-

ees. I've been wanting to go to a JRF convention for years, but the proximity, the fact that I could drive here, is what made it possible for me to go this year. I'm so glad that I did!

Susan Kimmel
Adat Shalom
Bethesda, Maryland

Powerful Meaning in Not Knowing the Answers

MICHAEL STRASSFELD

I WANT TO SHARE with you some of my own not-so-random thoughts. In some ways I think we face the same challenges as the rest of the Jewish community in our contemporary times. The question really is, are there some ways that we as Reconstructionists can uniquely respond? Or are there tools that we bring to the table, to the discussion, that can enable us to respond in a particular way? It seems to me that we begin with the question of what are the needs and challenges of our time as we look at the Jewish halls around us, as did Kaplan respond in his time by setting forth Reconstructionism, and by saying that many Jews no longer believe in a supernatural God, and so on.

So what are those challenges? What are the pieces of the Jewish tradition, of our practice and of our communities that need reconstructing?

One of the reasons I was asked to be on the panel was to talk about spirituality, which is a word of indistinct meaning — a word that some people find

troubling, or would even perhaps wonder whether it really is a part of the Reconstructionist framework. Or whether, as was said, if Kaplan were confronted with the common forms of spirituality, what would be his reaction — approving or not? I think part of the reason I was asked to talk about this is because of my own biography. So let me just share that with you a little bit.

IT'S IN THE ORDINARY MOMENTS,

NOT THE EXTRAORDINARY

MOMENTS, THAT THE

SPIRIT IS ENGAGED.

I grew up in an Orthodox world. I went to a modern Orthodox day school, and I think the formative part after my growing up years was being part of Havurat Shalom, one of the early *havurot* of the *havurah* movement. That was around

Rabbi Michael Strassfeld, rabbi at the Society for the Advancement of Judaism in New York, is perhaps best known as coauthor of the three volumes of The Jewish Catalog. His newest work, A Book of Life: Embracing Judaism as a Spiritual Practice, was recently published in paperback.

the same time as Aerograms [referring to Richard Hirsh's talk —Ed.], and the telephone booths that Superman could change in. This *havurah* was greatly influenced by one of its members, Art Green, who I'm sure all of you know of, if not have heard him speak. Therefore, one of the central things that we studied in the *havurah* was Hasidism. And yet, there was a small group within Havurat Shalom — of which I was one of the three members — that called ourselves "The Sons of Lithuania." We were the anti-Hasidic wing, and we formed after an hour-and-a-half class that someone gave about "Mystical Nothingness in the Lurianic Kabbalah" and we said, "Boy, that was really the true title of that!"

So beginning somewhere there, I've come some far distance on a journey. Today, for me, the early Hasidism is the source of much of the text that I find personally meaningful. Its music is the music that my soul resonates with. And it has become for me an important source of teachings about spirituality for today. I want to read "spirituality" as not something that is narcissistic or just focused on oneself, but really in the basic Hasidic teaching of spirituality through the everyday, or as it's called, *avodah sh'b'gashmiut*. That is, rather than spirituality being about a withdrawal from the world or from other people, it is really about the everyday. It's in the ordinary moments, not the extraordinary moments, that the spirit is engaged, that the spirit is elevated — that in fact, we can strive to practice and to be who we want to be.

So to add to the 'B' list of Belonging and Believing, I would suggest Being as key as well, and that what I would want to read spirituality as about is the attempt to find meaning, to convey meaning in our lives. And I think a basic challenge for Judaism is the task of bringing meaning, of conveying the richness of the Jewish tradition as something that has something to say about the basic issues, the opportunities and challenges that each of us as individual human beings, and each of us as Jews, will face in our lives. If somehow we can convey to ourselves, to our communities, to people out there in the world, that Judaism, in fact, has some wisdom and some teaching — not necessarily answers, but wisdom and teaching — about those things that are most critical to living our lives, then we will create vibrant communities, a vibrant Jewish life that will be filled with spirituality. In its most basic definition, spirituality is really a sense that there is something larger than ourselves in the world, and therefore, it cannot be narcissistic. It cannot be a withdrawal from the world. It cannot be that the world of the spirit, and not social justice,

is the only thing that's central. Spirituality is really about the attempt to create meaning, to find meaning.

Therefore, we move from there to practice, which is a challenge for liberal Judaism. Why should we practice? Rabbi Toba Spitzer set forth, in part, the notion of covenant, which is one way to think about it. I want us also to think about it as spiritual practice. A practice is something that you do on a regular basis — not because someone has commanded you to do it, not because it's the tradition to do it, but because you want to do it. Use any example, whether it's learning to play a musical instrument or going to exercise in the gym. If you exercise once in six months, it doesn't really give you any of the benefits that exercise is supposed to give to you. I exercise on a regular basis, not because it says it in the Torah, not because Kaplan said it in any of his not-so-random thoughts, but because I want to get the benefits of exercising on a regular basis. Therefore I do it even when I don't want to do it, mostly even when I don't want to do it, because I know that it's become my practice. It's become my self-discipline to do it.

I would suggest that one way to think about *halakha* as a path, the way that we walk in the world, is to think of it as a practice that we take upon ourselves because we find pieces of it, or much of it, or this one piece of it, meaningful.

I think a few other things need our attention, and some need our reconstruction. Toba has really set out the possibilities and the challenges of community. I don't think we can emphasize that enough. Our communities face particular challenges as my Aerogram generation of the baby boomers heads towards retirement. There are increasingly members of our community, not just baby boomers, who are alone. For some this is a choice; for others, this is how their life has turned out. For some of us, our families are not nearby; for others, our families are not close. In that context, the challenges to community to be there for people, and to lessen their sense of existential aloneness to face the difficulties that we all will face in our lives become ever more important.

I don't think it's realistic to think that communities can replace families. Though we often use that language, I don't think a community really is a family. It's not the same thing — we don't make that kind of commitment to each other. But community needs to evermore increase the way that we're there for other people not just in the



*At Convention: Rabbis Dayle Friedman and Steven Booth-Nadav.
Photo by Joysa Winter.*

moments of crisis at a *shiva minyan* and the like, but even in the daily challenges that people face to create deeper networks of connection.

I think one thing that needs reconstruction is prayer in services. I think prayer in services is broken and that we really need to look at that and ask the fundamental questions about what we want to have happen. What is the experience that we're trying to create?

My one brief answer is that we have to find ways to connect more clearly the liturgy and the kinds of issues I was just talking about: to connect the liturgy to issues that speak to something that I, as a person who's struggling with issues, seeking inner growth and spiritual growth, find important in my life. Until we can do that, I think people will ask, "Okay, the sun and moon are praising God, why should I care? Why should I care?" Reconstructing prayer is a great challenge for us.

Lastly, in thinking about who we are and who we want to be, we often get into conversations along such lines as: What do we stand for? Are we just a kind of process? I want to suggest that talking about the process, talking about the way we approach things, doesn't mean that we don't stand for anything — but that talking about process, in and of itself, is something important that we stand for.

We are, I believe, the "anti-fundamentalists." And I don't mean the people in this country who have a particular political and social and religious point of view. What I mean is that there is a kind

CONGREGATION-BASED COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

Today, increasing numbers of synagogues are engaging in interfaith campaigns on vital issues of local concern, from expanding health coverage for low-income workers to building affordable housing. In 2006, the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation began partnering with the Jewish Funds for Justice (JFSJ) and received a grant to help begin developing a network and resources for Reconstructionist communities in Congregation-Based Community Organizing (CBCO) work.


In addition, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College is offering training in the model of CBCO activism beginning in the winter of 2007. The CBCO model of activism 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.

A report from the second national training for Jewish leaders will appear in the Spring-Summer 2007 issue of RT. For more information go to www.jrf.org/cbco or contact Rabbi Shawn Zevit, Director of Outreach, External Relations and Tikkun Olam: SZevit@jrf.org.

of idolatry that says, “what this position is, is the position of truth and everything else is less than that.” We, as Reconstructionists, I believe, are happy to live — maybe not happy, but *willing* — to live with intentions of conflicting truths. We do live in two civilizations — in fact, we live in multiple civilizations. I think we should enjoy and be willing to celebrate living with that tension, not being sure of the truth, not being certain. Kaplan said it well: “From the cowardice that shrinks from new truths, from the laziness that is content with half-truths, from the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth, Oh God of Truth, deliver us.”

So in a world that seeks the truth, wants to find truths, or where people are upholding their truth as the truth, I think we are the voice that suggests that living without truth is, in fact, not just the

reality — the real reality of life — but actually, in and of itself, is a good, is a value. We take very seriously the notion, which is ultimately a very challenging notion, that Judaism is an evolving religious civilization. If we believe that Judaism evolves, then that means that in its continual evolution, some of the things that I feel are so central to my Judaism, or to my notions of Reconstructionism, even those things might need to evolve. Right? It isn't picture-perfect — it is one generation has this form and then the next generation has another form that it's conveniently evolved. But that's not, in fact, the way the world works. And so our congregations are filled with people who are old-line Kaplanian Reconstructionists, New-Age spirituality-seeking Reconstructionists, social-justice Reconstructionists, etcetera, etcetera.

How to hold all that together, how to have a community that continues to evolve and still respect the traditions, the practices, and the approaches of the people that have come before, are a great challenge to us. But I do think that accepting the challenge, living in two civilizations, is a way of expressing the notion that life is not simple, that meanings are complex, and that we are engaged in a journey to find those meanings, to explore those meanings, and that we do that together as community, even as we disagree, even as we stand in tension with each other. That, in itself, is part of the important teaching of Reconstructionism for this moment, for this generation, even as things will continue to evolve in years to come. 



**SPIRITUAL COMMUNITY
THE POWER TO RESTORE HOPE,
COMMITMENT AND JOY**

BY RABBI DAVID A. TEUTSCH, PHD

\$19 each

Essential reading for those who want to transform their congregation or organization into a strong spiritual community

Order online at www.jewishlights.com
or call 1-800-962-4544

Jewish Lights is offering congregations generous discounts for multiple copies

Inconvenient Truths, Committed Responses

JRF Addresses Global Warming

SHAWN ISRAEL ZEVIT
AND DEREK ROSENBAUM

JRF, in keeping with our movement's resolution on the environment, and as stewards of the health and welfare of the planet, joined as a sponsor and coalition member of The Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL) and the Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA) Climate Change Campaign this year to address the global warming crisis. This is a call to action that goes beyond a particular program and is about changing how North American Jewry responds to the daunting environmental problems confronting us and future generations.

The campaign, "A Light Among the Nations," — aka "How Many Jews Does It Take to Change a Light Bulb?" — engaged the Jewish community in education, advocacy, and concrete action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The modern day commemoration of Hanukkah was chosen to bring the issue of global climate change front and center in Jewish public life.

A significant part of the campaign was directed toward helping congregations, Jewish institutions, and individuals purchase and install energy-efficient, cost-effective compact fluorescent light (CFL) bulbs during the week of Hanukkah 2006, with the goal of moving the Jewish community and the country forward in understanding and supporting energy conservation. CFLs use 75 percent less energy than incandescent light bulbs. This means less production of greenhouse gas emissions, air pollution, and toxic waste. If every U.S. household replaced one standard incandescent bulb with a CFL, it would have the same impact as removing one million cars from the road.

Rabbi Shawn Israel Zevit is Director of Outreach and External Affairs for the JRF and author of Offerings of the Heart: Jewish Values-Based Approaches to Money in Community, available through JRF's Reconstructionist Press.

Derek Rosenbaum is the JRF Tikkun Olam intern and a first-year student at RRC.

The campaign was a tremendous success, with over 500 synagogues across the U.S. participating. Through this effort, approximately 50,000 bulbs have been sold and 18,000 tons of carbon dioxide will be kept from entering the environment in the year ahead. Along with the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association (RRA) and the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC), over 30 JRF congregations participated in the campaign.

Here are some examples of how one of our communities incorporated the initiative into its ritual and programmatic celebrations during Hanukkah. Temple Beth Shalom in Salem, Oregon, offered three days of programming. Over the first weekend of Hanukkah, on *erev* Shabbat, Rabbi Gary Ellison delivered an issue-related sermon, and the service was themed around the climate change campaign. The campaign was also integrated on Saturday night at the shul's Hanukkah party. On both nights, COEJL brochures containing a light bulb order form and energy education were distributed, and an information sheet was also made available to guide people to energy-related websites. These themes were also presented to the Sunday school, with a flyer going home to Sunday school parents alerting them to the campaign and encouraging their attendance at the *erev* Shabbat service and ordering of bulbs.

At the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, the standing Green Committee of the Reconstructionist Student Association, in collaboration with Kolot: The Center for Women's and Gender Studies, brought a guest speaker, Rabbi Jill Hammer, for the fourth day of Hannukah, to coincide with the public installation of CFL's across the country. The following report was provided by Donna Kirshbaum, Roni Handler, and Derek Rosenbaum of RRC's Greening Committee:



IF EVERY U.S. HOUSEHOLD

REPLACED ONE STANDARD
INCANDESCENT LIGHT BULB
WITH A COMPACT FLUORESCENT,
IT WOULD HAVE THE
SAME IMPACT AS REMOVING
**ONE MILLION CARS
FROM THE ROAD.**

The RRC Green Committee is now in its fifth year of existence as a standing committee of the RSA, our student government. Throughout this time we have had a two-pronged agenda. First, we work for incremental change on-site. For instance, all library printers are now automatically set to double-sided mode; paper, instead of plastic, cups are used for intra-college events. As of Hanukkah, the College is re-lighting the fixtures in the *beit midrash* (learning center) and other open lamps around the school with compact fluorescent bulbs. This Spring, as we clean out our homes and communal building for Passover, we hope to begin a project that will see the College converting to green cleaning supplies. We are also in the process of committing all constituencies within the building to a new initiative called carbon offsetting. The College administration, the RRA, the Green Committee, and a student donor have already agreed to pay a fixed amount per month to our utility company, Philadelphia Gas and Electric to offset our combined use of coal-, oil-, natural gas-, and nuclear-generated electricity. PECO then invests this surcharge (\$2.54 per kilowatt hour) directly into the wind energy industry, both to make existing wind farms more efficient and to build new sites. So far, we have commitments that will offset 400 kilowatts per month of our energy use within the building. Yes, it's a drop in the bucket — or rather, only a puff of wind. But it is a start. The Green Committee is also educating students about how to offset their entire monthly electric use at home — here in southeast Pennsylvania, this can be done for the equivalent of one large delivered pizza per month, about \$12-\$15.

The Green Committee has set as its other task the creation of opportunities to teach other Jews and learn from rabbis and others who can help us enlarge our future rabbinic toolboxes with texts, insights, and project ideas. Four RRC students took part in a greening workshop during November's JRF convention. Also, in the past five years we have hosted such 'green greats' as Michael Cohen (RRC '90) of the Arava Institute and Jeremy Benstein of the Heschel Center (both located in Israel), and Natti Passow who was sent by the Teva Learning Center, this country's

resources

To learn more about the Omer Learning Initiative or Greening Synagogues, and for a list of participating congregations, go to www4.jrf.org/climate. For more information on JRF's involvement in sustainability, contact Rabbi Shawn Zevit at SZevit@jrf.org or visit www.jrf.org. Other useful resources include: www.coejl.org/climatechange and www.jewishpublicaffairs.org.

premier Jewish environmental education program. This year, the Green committee organized a light bulb sale with the deadline being the fourth day of Hanukkah.


Guest teacher Rabbi Jill Hammer, spoke about the deep structure of the Jewish year cycle as it aligns with the natural cycles of the planet and the seasons, not only Jewish history and religious practice. This enabled participants to see how the entire Jewish calendar can be a place of connection, inspiration and learning about the world of which we are a part.

Adapting Rabbi Fred Schilinder Dobb's CFL installation ceremony from the COEJL website (<http://www.coejl.org/climatechange/cflhanukkah.pdf>), students and faculty were invited up to replace the bulbs in lamps in the *beit midrash* and in various parts of the college building.

Songs were sung and various blessings were offered.

The campaign has received enthusiastic support from all of the major denominations and numerous Jewish institutions. Over 100 influential leaders from the Jewish community, synagogues, organizations, and activist groups representing hundreds of thousands more, participated in the initial campaign launch meeting/conference call on July 31st, 2006.

This is just the beginning of our work in raising consciousness and encouraging concrete action to have every JRF community be part of the *tikkun* of the planet across the sustainability spectrum. The seven-week JRF 2007 Omer Learning Initiative (between Pesah and Shavuot) will move from last year's focus on "hunger and poverty" (in which nearly 500 people participated in a list serve discussion group on the teachings) to Judaism, environmental sustainability and "Greening Synagogue" initiatives from a variety of Reconstructionist congregations.

Congregations have been invited to apply to JRF's Department of External Affiliations and Tikkun Olam to generate the three teachings of a given week of the *omer*. Each week, the teachings are based on texts about sustainability and ecology supplied by JRF, as well as of the community's own choice, weaving in their congregational and individual environmental practices. A special study list serve and opportunities to comment online will be provided. At the end of the seven weeks, a rich tapestry of resources, practices and teaching modules will have been generated and permanently available in the Tikkun Olam section of the JRF website. 

Reconsidering Reconstructionist Liturgy

The Kaplanian Paradox

DANIEL GOLDMAN CEDARBAUM

ALMOST TWENTY 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.

Mordecai Kaplan believed that his commitment to intellectual honesty required the reconstruction of Jewish liturgy, including Hebrew liturgy. He was famous at the Jewish Theological Seminary for telling his students, “If you don’t believe it, don’t say it.” For Kaplan, this meant not affirming the chosenness of the Jewish people, which he rejected on both logical and ethical grounds. (If God is a non-supernatural force, then God can hardly have chosen Israel from among the nations as a people with a unique status and mission; for that matter, such a God is not in the business of any sort of “choosing” at all. Kaplan also argued that, even if one believes that God could have chosen Israel, the chauvinism entailed by acceptance of chosenness is ethically indefensible.)

Kaplan’s stance also meant not affirming, among other things, the concept of a personal messiah, the notion of physical resurrection of the dead, and the desirability of restoring the sacrificial service in the Temple. All of these redactions were made under Kaplan’s aegis in the first series of Reconstructionist prayer books, published in the 1940s, and almost all of them were incorporated into the current series, *Kol Haneshamah*. (To give credit where it is due,

Daniel Goldman Cedarbaum, JRF’s immediate past president, is a member of the Jewish Reconstructionist Congregation in Evanston, IL and of Ezra Habonim, the Niles Township Jewish Congregation in Skokie, IL. A version of this article appeared in the Fall 2005 issue of The Reconstructionist.

many of these changes were adopted or adapted from the earlier work of liturgists of the Reform movement.) But almost from the beginning, a very different approach to liturgy has also played an important part in Reconstructionist thinking.

Seventy years ago, in the very first volume of *The Reconstructionist*, an editorial appeared called “Praying for Peace” (Vol. I, No. 9, May 3, 1935). Signed by if not written by Kaplan, the editorial contained the following provocative observation, in the context of a call to prayer “issued by the Pope and taken up by other religious denominations” in response to the German government’s declaration that it would no longer be bound by the armaments clause of the Treaty of Versailles:

We should like . . . to submit that this emphasis laid upon prayer is an unfortunate one. Prayer, by itself, may do more harm than good, for the one who prays for a worthwhile ideal somehow gets the impression that he has done something positive to achieve that ideal. The psychological effect is a curious one; praying becomes a substitute for action. Religious leaders who have been interested in the whole problem of prayer have always maintained that people are reluctant to pray because the traditional prayers are couched in archaic language and express irrelevant aspirations. Modernize prayers, they said, make them relevant, and people will once again take to praying. The fact is that the more relevant the prayer, the more likely is the worshipper to feel he has worked for the realization of those values which he affirms.

This language prefigures what would become a familiar Reconstructionist aphorism about prayer, which states that most or all of our praying (or *davennen*), at least of Hebrew liturgy, is (or should be) “quotation rather than affirmation.” That aphorism apparently first appeared in writing in Rabbi Alan W. Miller’s excellent book, *God of Daniel S.: In Search Of The American Jew*. There Miller writes as follows:

A prime element in the act of worship is *davvening*, or the rote repetition of traditional prayers from the past. When these traditional prayers were first written they were meaningful affirmations for their authors. The author of the 23rd Psalm, for example, if not a shepherd himself, lived in a culture where shepherds and sheep were as common sights as cabs on Fifth Avenue are in New York today. In a prevailing idiom and metaphor culled from everyday life, he expressed his faith in God and the cosmos, in God conceived of as a Supreme Father. “He restoreth my soul.”

When the modern Jew recites the 23rd Psalm, or any other Psalm or combination of verses from the Psalms

or from the Bible, he does not affirm, at first hand, but rather quotes at secondhand. All the Hebrew davvened, or prayed, in the modern synagogue, save in those rare instances where modern Hebrew prayers have been introduced into the act of worship, is quotation, not affirmation. The traditional Hebrew sections of the synagogue service are all in quotation marks, whether the praying Jew is aware of this or not.

Davvening is a basic element in Jewish worship because only by identifying with his past can the Jew gain strength in the present to strive toward the future. An awareness that countless generations expressed a basic faith in the cosmos, and strove to overcome the defects in themselves and in their society through an ongoing relationship with their ethnic group, is a source of strength in present trouble. The traditional prayer book reflects the three stages through which Jewish civilization has already passed, the biblical, the ecclesiastical and the rabbinic. Strength in an age of radical and often disturbing transition is gained from an awareness that the Jewish people has undergone metamorphosis in the past but still maintained its identity in change by reconstructing its sancta. Davvening is a prime sanctum of Jewish life.

What seems to have gone largely unnoticed is the tension between the “don’t say it if you don’t believe it” strand and the “quotation rather than affirmation” strand in the Reconstructionist approach to liturgy. If we are (or should be) silently prefacing each traditional Hebrew prayer with words like, “Our ancestors prayed as follows,” and then placing quotation marks around the prayer text, then the truth,

validity, or believability of the words of that prayer text become, for us, essentially irrelevant. Two generational changes have made grappling with this tension more pressing, and I believe that both changes seriously weaken the arguments of the “don’t say it if you don’t believe it” school.

First, almost all of Kaplan’s teachings, including those about liturgy, grew out of his experience with, and were originally directed to, immigrant and immediate post-

immigrant generations of American Jews of Eastern European origin, almost all of whom were, if not Hebraically literate in an academic sense, extremely familiar with traditional Hebrew liturgy. Those for

whom the changes reflected in Reconstructionist liturgy were vitally important could still enter a traditional synagogue and participate easily (if not emotionally comfortably) in the prayer service. 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. (Here, I am simply making descriptive statements, not criticizing.)

The second generational change, which has been noted and discussed far more than the first, concerns our level of comfort with certain kinds of myths and metaphors. As we have moved from the modern into the post-modern age, our understanding of the meaning of “truth” has become different from, and frankly more subtle than, that of our Reconstructionist forebears. For Kaplan and his contemporaries, the term “myth” was essentially equivalent to “falsehood,” with a connotation about as negative as the connotation of “superstition” or “lie.” In contrast, for Reconstructionists in the 21st century, particularly for the best-educated and most knowledgeable among them, myths, particularly the foundational myths of a people, operate on an entirely different level than do, say, the propositions of natural science, thus opening up the possibility of finding a myth to be “truthful” in a powerful, if non-literal, sense. For example, the story of the Exodus from Egypt can be judged to be “true” precisely because it has for thousands of years functioned effectively in providing the Jewish people with its sense of identity, regardless of the story’s historical veracity.

Moreover, 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. In short, a fervent commitment to intellectual honesty demands far less of us today with regard to liturgy than it did of Kaplan. (To say that Kaplan had an insufficient appreciation of the power of myth and metaphor, however, would be unfair; although many of his ideas were remarkably ahead of his time, Kaplan’s fundamental intellectual framework, like that of any other thinker, could not transcend the socio-historical context of his forma-

**OUR
UNDERSTANDING
OF THE MEANING OF “TRUTH”
HAS BECOME DIFFERENT FROM,
AND FRANKLY MORE
SUBTLE THAN, THAT OF OUR
RECONSTRUCTION-
IST FOREBEARS.**

tive years, which in Kaplan's case might best be characterized as Victorian.)

The editors of the Kol Haneshamah prayer books were clearly aware of the evolution of the concept of intellectual honesty in liturgy since the creation of the first Reconstructionist prayer books, and, to a limited extent, they responded to it. Thus, for example, they reinstated the reference to the splitting of the sea in the *Mi Hamocha* prayer. They also included the traditional version of the declaration recited when the scroll is lifted after the Torah reading, "*V'zot ha-Torah*" ("This is the Torah that Moses placed before the Israelites, according to the command of Adonai, through the agency of Moses"), as an alternative to the previous Reconstructionist version ("This is the Torah. It is a Tree of Life to those who hold fast to it. Those who uphold it may be counted fortunate!"). In so doing, they recognized that a Reconstructionist today who is convinced that the Torah was written and edited by human beings over several centuries, beginning long after Moses lived (if he in fact ever lived), can or should be able to recite the traditional version of "*V'zot ha-Torah*" without feeling hypocritical or uncomfortable at all. This is so both because the words of our ancestors are being quoted rather than affirmed and because, to the extent that the content of the quotation is still of concern, those words can be understood as mythic imagery rather than as the assertion of historical facts.

Rabbi David Teutsch explicitly makes this point 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. As noted above, the *Kol Haneshamah* editors left in place the great majority of the liturgical changes contained in "Kaplan's" prayer books. In short, in deciding which portions of the traditional liturgy to restore and which to leave redacted, they were unwilling, or unable because of political pressures, to apply their sophisticated liturgical philosophy in a consistent or complete manner.

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?

Another paradoxical aspect of reconstructing a traditional prayer text is that doing so may deprive it of historical resonances that are particularly appealing to modern rationalists, and especially to Reconstructionists because of our emphasis on the historical layers of Jewish civilization. As an example, consider the "*Avodah*" blessing in the *Amidah* (the seventeenth blessing on weekdays and the fifth on Shabbat), sometimes referred to as "*Retzey*," which in the traditional *siddur* reads (other than on certain holidays) as follows:

רָצָה, יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ, בְּעַמְךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל
וּבְתַפְלָתָם, וְהִשָּׁב אֶת הָעֲבוּדָה
לְדַבֵּיר בֵּיתְךָ, וְאֲשֵׁי יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְתַפְלָתָם
בְּאֵהָבָה תִּקְבַּל בְּרָצוֹן, וְתֵהִי לְרָצוֹן
תָּמִיד עֲבוֹדַת יִשְׂרָאֵל עִמָּךְ. וְתַחֲיֶינָהּ
עֵינֵינוּ בְּשׁוּבְךָ לְרָצוֹן בְּרַחֲמִים. בְּרוּךְ
אַתָּה, יְיָ, הַמַּחְזִיר שְׂכִינָתוֹ לְרָצוֹן.

¹Find favor, Adonai our God, in your People Israel and in their prayer. ²And return the sacrifice to the Holy of Holies. ³In favor accept the fire-offerings of Israel and their prayer in love. ⁴And may the service of Israel your People always be favorable. ⁵May our eyes behold your return to Zion in mercy. ⁶Blessed are You, Adonai, who restores his divine presence to Zion. (Translation from Lawrence A. Hoffman, editor, *My People's Prayer Book: Traditional Prayers, Modern Commentaries, Vol. 2 — The Amidah*.)

Because discomfort with the sacrificial system of Biblical Judaism has been so widespread among non-Orthodox Jews, the *Avodah* blessing may be the most frequently reconstructed of all Jewish prayer texts in modern times, across denominational lines. Historically, Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist prayer book editors all simply excised the phrases "And return the sacrifice to the Holy of Holies" (clause 2) and "the fire-offerings of Israel" (in clause 3) and made no other changes to the blessing.

More recently, however, different emendations of the *Avodah* blessing have been made in both Conservative and Reconstructionist Hebrew liturgies. The current Conservative movement prayer book, *Siddur Sim Shalom*, restores "And return the sacrifice to the Holy of Holies," deleting only the words "the fire-offerings of Israel," thus basing its version of the blessing on a distinction that seems

far too subtle for almost any worshipper to appreciate. The current Reconstructionist version of the blessing, in the *Kol Haneshamah* series, does not put back any of the words previously excised but substitutes “*lahav tefilatam*” (literally, “the flame of their prayer”) for “*tefilatam*” (their prayer) in clause 3 above, apparently making a metaphorical/ Hasidic allusion to “the fire-offerings of Israel.” Again, no one can accuse the editors of being heavy-handed.

The problem with all of these linguistic reconstructions of the *Avodah* blessing is that they deprive us of the ability to appreciate Lawrence Hoffman’s historical reconstruction of the blessing (see *My People’s Prayer Book*, pp. 155, 161-163). Hoffman brilliantly argues that a close reading of the traditional text shows that it in fact has at its core an identifiable original version of the blessing, written before the destruction of the second Temple in the year 70 C.E., in which a functioning sacrificial system is assumed. Hoffman posits that amendments were made to that original blessing sometime after the year 70 so as to reflect the facts that sacrifices were no longer being offered and that, in accordance with the direction of the rabbis, prayers were being offered as sacrificial substitutes. In other words, the traditional text of the *Avodah* blessing is itself a linguistic reconstruction of an earlier version!

Perhaps the most interesting part of Hoffman’s theory concerns clause 4 of the traditional blessing above, in which, as he points out, the word “*tamid*” can function either as an adjective (“always”) or as a noun (the term of art for the daily sacrifice in the Temple). Thus, Hoffman argues, the words that ordinarily would be translated, “And may the service of Israel your People always be favorable,” or something similar, could also be translated, “And may you find favor in the *tamid*, the sacrificial service of Israel, your People.” That line in the blessing can then be seen as a sort of fulcrum on which rest the two different components of the *Avodah* blessing, one looking chronologically backwards to a time when the Temple stood, and therefore of Jewish sovereignty in the land of Israel, and the other dealing with present reality but also beginning to look forward to a messianic age.

In sum, redactions of the traditional *Avodah* blessing mask its latent beauty and obscure its reflection of the monumental achievement of Rabbinic Judaism: Preserving the appearance of continuity between the old forms of worship and the new, even in the face of the literal destruc-

tion of the foundations of the former. By making clear that we are quoting the words of the blessing rather than affirming its content, we can retain the power and elegance of the traditional form without in fact calling for the rebuilding of the Temple or the restoration of the sacrifices.

Similarly, I would argue, references in the traditional liturgy to the restoration of the Davidic monarchy, which have generally been carefully removed from Reconstructionist liturgy, should be reinstated. A prime example is the third blessing after the Haftarah reading (“Bring us joy, Adonai our God, through Elijah the prophet Your servant and the kingdom of the House of David Your anointed one . . .”), in which the messianic age is implicitly viewed as a continuation of King David’s rule. (According to mainstream tradition, of course, the messiah will be a direct descendant of David.) My premise, which I believe is uncontroversial, is that messianism must be a component of any authentic form of Rabbinic Judaism. (By “messianism,” I mean the belief that the current, fundamentally flawed state of the world will not last forever and that universal justice and peace will ultimately be established, but not necessarily belief in a personal messiah.) Through more than 2,000 years of mainstream Jewish tradition, both in liturgy and in other writings, the messianic age has been linked metaphorically to the mythic utopia of David’s monarchy. The value of maintaining that chain of archetypal imagery seems to me far greater than any theoretical benefit to be derived from breaking it.

Similar arguments can be made for “unreconstructing” various other parts of the liturgy, including some areas, such as references to the resurrection of the dead, where restoration of traditional wording would have been unthinkable for previous generations of Reconstructionists. 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 “*meḥayey hameyitim*” (“who revives the dead”) without choking on them, reinstatement of the traditional language in Reconstructionist Hebrew liturgy should be considered.

I am not, however, advocating a wholesale undoing of Reconstructionist liturgical emendations. For example, a compelling case can be made for continuing our practice of removing from the liturgy the most blatant public declarations

of the chosenness of the Jewish people — in the first paragraph of *Aleynu*, in the blessing before the Torah reading and in *Kiddush* for Shabbat and holidays, and I, for one, would not want to restore the traditional language in these instances. (One reason that I am comfortable maintaining idiosyncratic Reconstructionist language in these three prayer texts is that the changes are few enough that we can, and should, expect all Reconstructionists to be familiar with the traditional language as well.)

Also, most of the arguments for reversing previous deletions (or rearrangements) of traditional liturgical language have little or no applicability in the case of additions to traditional prayer texts, the most important of which are the inclusion of the matriarchs in places where only the patriarchs were traditionally mentioned and the inclusion of “*kol yoshvey tevel*” (“all of the inhabitants of the earth”), together with the Jewish people specifically, as the desired beneficiaries of prayers for peace. (Interestingly, the Conservative movement appears to have found this distinction between liturgical additions and other amendments to be valid as a halachic matter as well.)

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.


Preserving the sense of unity of the Jewish people to the greatest extent possible is a central value of Reconstructionism. Having a common liturgical language is a powerful unifying force for Jews across denominational and national boundaries, as well as through time. Anyone who has had the uplifting experience of going to synagogue in a foreign country and being able to participate actively and comfortably in the service understands the importance of shared prayer texts in making one feel a part of *k’lal Yisrael*, and just how moving that feeling is. Anyone who has had the depressing experience of being in such a synagogue setting with a child who is bewildered by the service because he or she is only familiar with Reconstructionist liturgy has learned the same lesson about shared language. (These experiences can, of course, take place much closer to home, such as at a friend’s non-Reconstructionist bat or bar mitzvah service.)

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. Rarely does one encounter a scholar’s footnote that is as startling and as powerful as footnote 323 in Eric Caplan’s encyclopedic study of Reconstructionist liturgy, *From Ideology To Liturgy: Reconstructionist Worship And American Liberal Judaism*:

It is interesting to note that in later life, Ira Eisenstein no longer endorsed the concept of changing the traditional Hebrew text of prayers to reflect modern belief. “I’ve become . . . less concerned with the actual language of prayer. . . . If you change this word and you change that word, it doesn’t solve the problem. For example, instead of saying *אשר בחר בנו מכל העמים* [“Who has chosen us from all the peoples”], you say *אשר קרבנו לעבודתו* [“Who has called us to his service”]. But in the meantime you say *ברוך אתה* [“Blessed are you”], and you ask yourself who is the ‘you’ you are talking about. Well, it’s really a metaphor. Well, if one’s a metaphor, the other is a metaphor. Leave it alone . . . I would treat the traditional prayerbook as an exercise in reminiscence. We come together and for a few minutes we put ourselves into the world of our ancestors, the world of our fathers, and see how it feels, how it sounds, that’s all. And now if you want to pray — there’s a difference between davening and praying, I make that distinction — pray from our own inside, how we feel, what we’d like to say, if we can use some traditional language, fine, otherwise make up your own prayers and they can be gender-free, and not supernatural and all the rest of it. But you can’t make over a text like that. It was an awful decision that I came to after all these years.” (Personal interview, June 25, 1993.)

Rabbi Eisenstein made similar comments in the Winter 1994-1995 issue of *Reconstructionism Today*. Rabbi Eisenstein and I are both essentially arguing that Kaplanian Hebrew liturgy may, to a greater or lesser extent, fail the fundamental Kaplanian test for determining whether a ritual practice should be maintained; that is, it may no longer function effectively in creating a meaningful Jewish life for the individual Reconstructionist or in helping the Reconstructionist community to realize its highest ideals.

If such a determination were made (and I am intentionally sliding over the questions of who gets to decide and exactly how), then the next series of Reconstructionist prayer books not only could, but should, look very different from either of its predecessors. 

Art Goes to Shul

Congregation Or Hadash Draws on Its Creativity

LISA KELVIN TUTTLE

CAN YOU IMAGINE your congregation being as colorful artistically as it is spiritually, intellectually, and socially? One synagogue that keeps getting more colorful is Congregation Or Hadash in Fort Washington, PA. Founded in 1983 by six families as a laboratory congregation for students at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, Or Hadash now has over 220 families and, since 1995, has had its home in a historic mansion. Congregants have created a wonderful exhibit space — the Staircase Gallery. The shul, with a commitment to promoting artistic expression built right into its mission statement, holds periodic exhibitions that are open to the community, and involves congregants of all ages in multi-media art projects throughout the year.

In 2004, the congregation's aesthetics committee had the idea to establish the gallery and to have an exhibition of religious school children's artwork. Congregant Gail Morrison-Hall, a certified art teacher who has worked with both adults and children, volunteered to work with the school and has taught every age group. Or Hadash's rabbi, Josh Waxman, was thrilled with the prospect and has been continually supportive because he believes there can never be too much art in a Reconstructionist community.

Most of the art projects are planned around topics and themes that are part of the religious school

curriculum. To launch the effort, Morrison-Hall worked with Or Hadash Education Director, Lori Rubin, and the religious school teachers to integrate art in the 2004-2005 fourth-grade class's unit on Passover. The Passover story was presented to the children in a way that emphasized the many archetypal images — the burning bush, the ten plagues, the passing over of the Angel of Death, the crossing of the Red Sea — and students were invited to create original works of art illustrating these familiar themes.

Children were presented with the works of artists with a diverse range of styles, such as the vivid social realism of Ben Shahn, the dreamlike post-impressionism of Marc Chagall, and the lush simplified abstraction of Georgia O'Keefe. "Do this any way you want," the children were told, "it doesn't have to be a realistic picture." They could use color, shape, texture and line to tell their stories. Children were asked to make preparatory pencil sketches and notes for later reference and,

following completion of the paintings, each student wrote a few sentences about his or her picture, and these were displayed alongside each painting. This inaugural Children's Art Exhibition, which attracted widespread community attention and an article in the *Philadelphia Jewish Exponent*, was a tremendous success.

Or Hadash's second Children's Art Exhibition, in 2005, featured mixed-media paintings by the sixth-grade religious school students with the theme, "The Prophets." Each child was asked to think about the prophet in his or her bar or bat mitzvah *haftarah* portion. If the *haftarah* did not contain a prophet, the

student was asked to use some aspect of the portion as subject matter. The idea for these paintings grew out of a series of stained glass windows designed by renowned Philadelphia-area artist, Jacob Landau. Landau's windows were installed in Reform Congregation Kneseth Israel's sanctuary. After looking at pictures of these windows and stained glass designed by Marc Chagall and Henri



Noah's Ark by Emily Shorin, 6th-grade show.

Lisa Kelvin Tuttle is Communications Director for the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation and edits RT. She is a member of Mishkan Shalom in Philadelphia.

Matisse, the young artists were asked to make a preparatory sketch of their images. They then proceeded to collage a glowing background of brilliantly colored tissue paper pieces for the figure or scene. The images were drawn over the collages with oil pastels and highlighted with textural glue paint for emphasis.

Two projects in 2006 that made a lasting impression on the entire synagogue were based on the shul's annual theme that year of *tikkun olam*. The first day of religious school took place at the annual Or Hadash retreat where, for an intergenerational project, congregants of all ages were provided with bright tempera paints and brushes, and preschoolers painted alongside teens and seniors to create a vibrant wall-length mural. The following December, using the same theme, the religious school's third and fifth grades created a lively tiled wall by tracing their original sketches onto tiles with crayon or oil pastel. The mural was displayed lining the synagogue entryway and welcomed the congregation's members and guests into the building. Plans are in the works to install the tiles.

Traditionally, the confirmation class of tenth graders weaves themes of social action into its curriculum and writes its own service. To weave art into the teens' curriculum and open the way to the many creative avenues available to them, Morrison-Hall intrigued the class with the idea of creating an installation: a non-traditional art form which seeks to involve the viewer in the experience. A good example of an installation is feminist artist Judy Chicago's "The Dinner Party," which premiered in San Francisco in 1979 before touring the country and Europe. Chicago's installation comprised a triangular table set for 39 notable women from history and resting on a porcelain floor inscribed with the names of 999 other women.


The teens received reading materials on installations and were told, "What you want to do is up to you — whether you want to work as a whole group, in teams, or individually." For the individual/group project they came up with, "Our Metaphorical Selves." Students traced themselves on life-sized pieces of foam core, cut these out and, using any media they wanted, artistically answered the questions: "Who are you? Where are you now in your development as a person and as a Jew?" A large percentage of the tenth-grade class had just returned from a teen synagogue trip to Israel, so many Israel-inspired images were incorporated in their artworks. Attendees at the recent 41st JRF Convention had the pleasure of "meeting" many of these whimsical life-sized fig-

ures, positioned throughout the meeting space.

Perhaps the project of which Or Hadash is most proud these days is the Torah Art Contest sponsored recently by the Union for Reform Judaism as a call for cover art for 52 booklets being published for bat and bar mitzvah kids, illuminating each *parasha*. Knowing how perfectly suited this project was to the Or Hadash middle-schoolers, Morrison-Hall put the word out for submissions; for the first go-around, of the more than 200 entries received nationally, so far five Or Hadash artists have been selected!



Elijah's Cup by Jenny Oswald, 6th-grade show.

To learn how your congregation can build an arts curriculum of its own, or find out about future exhibits at Or Hadash, contact Lori Rubin or Gail Morrison-Hall at 215-283-0276. Visit the Or Hadash website at www.orhadash.com. 



Or Hadash confirmation class of 2005-06. Top row: Alex Jacobson, Dani Noble, Brianna Freedman, and Katie Miller. Bottom row: Joshua Endter, Sarah Steinberg, Jonah Stella, Evan Orloff, Joshua McHugh, and Jeremy Lindy.



Luncheon and Program to Honor Dan Cedarbaum
 "A Conversation about Spirituality" with Rabbi Richard Hirsh and Rabbi Rachel Gartner
 Sunday, February 25, 2007, 2:30 p.m.
 Ezra Habonim
 The Niles Township Congregation
 Skokie, IL
 \$54 per person
 \$180 per person Benefactor
 Register online at <http://jrf.org> and click on the online registration icon.
 For more information, call Jennifer at (215) 782-8500, ext 20.

No'ar Hadash North American Teen Kallah
 April 27th-29th, 2007
 Get away from it all and join other Reconstructionist teens at Camp JRF on the Aaron and Marjorie Ziegelman Campus in South Sterling, PA.
 For more information, check out www.noarhadash.org, e-mail info@noarhadash.org, or call 215-782-8500, ext. 13.

JRF New York/New Jersey Evening of Celebration
Mishkan:
 Honoring those who create sacred space and make our space sacred
 March 22nd, 2007, 7-10 pm
 Bet Am Shalom Synagogue,
 White Plains, NY
 Register online at <http://jrf.org/nynj-evening>

Camp JRF Open House and Summer 2007 Information Session
 Sunday, April 29th, 2007
 at the Aaron and Marjorie Ziegelman Campus of Camp JRF.
 Though both sessions are filling up, there's still time to register!
 Visit <http://campjrf.org> or call (215) 782-8500, ext. 13 today.



JRF New York/New Jersey Region
 Many Faces of Reconstructionist Judaism:
 Rabbinic Vision for our Movement, Israel and Our Lives
 with Rabbis Amy Small, Fred Schwalb, and Elliot Skiddell
 with Dr. Carl Sheingold
 Congregation Beth Hatikvah
 in Summit, NJ. RSVP: office18@jrf.org

Save the date for the **JRF Women's Retreat**
 "Tales through Jewish Time: Stories that Shape Our Lives" led by Rabbi Leila Gal Berner
 April 27-29, 2007
 Perlstein Resort & Conference Center near Madison, WI.
 Register online at <http://jrf.org/mw-womensretreat>

JRF Chesapeake Afternoon of Honor
 March 18th, 2007,
 4:30 PM
 For more information: jljrf@aol.com



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

Presorted Standard U.S. Postage
 PAID
 Permit #5 19050