

Becoming a Reconstructionist Affiliate

For Temple Beth Hatfiloh, Affiliation Was a Two-Year Process

Sam Schrager, Ritual Committee chair at Temple Beth Hatfiloh, writes:

FOUNDED IN 1937, our 117-household community is in Olympia, the capital of Washington State. Rabbi Marna Sapsowitz (RRC '89) has been serving this community since 1989.

When the Ritual Committee of Temple Beth Hatfiloh (TBH) was asked by the Board in 1999 to engage the congregation in a study of affiliation, we had no idea what the result would be. At that time, two of our members felt strong personal affinity for Reconstructionism. Others had mixed feelings or no opinion. Some of us figured that the final outcome would be to affiliate with Reform, since it is by far the larger, more established movement.

We agreed that several principles should guide our work. First, we all pledged to keep our minds open and put personal preferences aside, to act for the common good. Second, we were determined to involve in the process as many members of the congregation as possible, in meaningful and non-adversarial ways, so that the outcome would truly represent the will of the community. Third, we were committed to keeping decisions about affiliation separate from the issue of rabbinic tenure. The Board, the rabbi, and the membership at the last annual meeting all expressed similar desires for the good of the congregation's future.

The first phase ended with a vote on whether we should affiliate with a movement, which was approved by an overwhelming majority of the congregation. The second phase reached its climax on December 10, 2000, when 40 members took part in an extraordinarily thoughtful discussion about our community's needs and the choice of movements. Based on this and previous discussions, the Ritual Committee decided to unanimously support our affiliation with the Reconstructionist movement. We presented our recommendation to the Board at the December 13 meeting. The Board went over the matter with great care and good will. They unanimously reaffirmed the value of affiliation, and a majority agreed with our judgment that Reconstructionism would be the best choice for us.



Rabbi Marna Sapsowitz (RRC '89) and Bill Cole, president, Temple Beth Hatfiloh.

Finally, on January 21, more than 80 members of TBH gathered in the sanctuary to make an affiliation decision. From 195 eligible members, 137 ballots were cast: 73 for affiliation with Reconstructionism, 56 for affiliation with Reform, three votes for "either" and five votes to remain unaffiliated. A full 70% of the voters expressed readiness to support affiliation with either movement. When the votes of those preferring Reform but willing to support Reconstructionism are added, the support for Reconstructionism was 82%.

Affiliation, at this point in the history of our congregation, is an experiment, not a marriage. Why, then, did we favor Reconstructionist affiliation?

Reconstructionism stresses inclusive decision-making, based on clarification of shared values, as a primary way to build community. This is fully in keeping with our democratic approach. For instance, we have a rule that a 60% congregational vote is required for major decisions. Likewise, the educational process we went through on affiliation was, as a number of JRF

OTHER RECENTLY AFFILIATED JRF COMMUNITIES INCLUDE:

- **Congregation Bet Tikva**, Flemington, New Jersey

Formed about 25 years ago, this community of 35 member households has its own building and has been served by both Conservative and Reconstructionist rabbis. The congregation has moved from traditional to egalitarian practice during the past seven years. They changed their bylaws and materials to reflect Reconstructionist standards. They value being a welcoming community and having strong educational programs.

- **B'nai Abraham**, Bordentown, New Jersey

A longstanding community, with nearly a decade of relationships with Reconstructionist student rabbis, B'nai Abraham applied for affiliation after a year-long communal and leadership process that reflected their existing commitment to Reconstructionist process and Jewish values. They have their own building and adjacent home for clergy, and are looking at a building and operating campaign in the near future to increase the size of their building and budgets for rabbinic and other professional staff. B'nai Abraham has 80 member households and 30 students in religious school. There is also a sisterhood of 20-30 women that operates in the synagogue for the broader community. Services are held once a week, on holidays and as needed, and *Kol Haneshamah* has been used for a few years.

Since May of 2000, five additional communities have joined the JRF: Bnai Vail in Vail, Colorado; Lev Shalem in Decatur, Georgia; The Reconstructionist Congregation of Detroit in Detroit, Michigan; String of Pearls in Princeton, New Jersey; Chapel Hill Kehillah in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Our movement continues to grow at a rate of 10 -11 percent a year in member households.

folks have commented, quintessentially Reconstructionist. Reconstructionism can give us sustained guidance about how to develop as a community through collaboration on important questions, with mindfulness to Jewish values.

Similarly, Reconstructionist rabbis are expected to work collaboratively with their congregation and lay leadership. The congregation, rather than the rabbi alone, has the final say on key issues. This partnership approach seems quite congenial to most of our members.

On ritual and spiritual matters, Reconstructionist practices are also close to ours. Our uses of Hebrew in prayer and of trope in bar/bat mitzvah training are normative in Reconstructionism. The strong concern with spiritual meaning, both personal and communal, strikes chords with many of our members. So does the

Reconstructionist emphasis on the traditional concept of *tikkun olam*. In values we hold dear as a Jewish community, we are right in the Reconstructionist mainstream.

The TBH Ritual Committee was impressed by JRF's responsiveness as we considered affiliation. For example, it took just one phone call to Congregation Havurah Shalom in Portland for them to send a delegation to speak to us about their experience as a Reconstructionist community. Similarly, Rabbi Steven Carr Reuben, a congregational rabbi from Pacific Palisades, California, came to visit and share his experiences. Rabbi Shawn Zevit, JRF's director of outreach, was always available to respond to our questions. Both rabbis gave us wise advice about how the discussion of affiliation could help us clarify our values. And JRF invited us to participate in this year's regional workshop, even though we were not yet affiliated.

These expressions of care suggest that Reconstructionists "walk their talk" of collaboration and fellowship. The movement has a compact central staff, who seem quite clued in to the concerns and the development of member congregations, most of which are in the 100-300 household range, similar in size to ours. The movement also relies extensively on community-to-community connections. Communities that have completed building campaigns, for instance, act as advisors to those who are starting them. There are listservs linking heads of committees, presidents, education directors, etc., via e-mail, so communities across the movement can easily connect.

To use a metaphor suggested by a TBH board member, Reconstructionism and Reform are a cutter and a luxury liner. Reconstructionism moves dynamically at the forefront of change in liberal Judaism. Reform moves more slowly, eventually catching up. Reconstructionism has fewer resources, but its resources are very well tailored to its members. The movement is a lot smaller, but that's also a virtue: everyone counts.

It's impossible to quantify excitement, but Reconstructionism generated it for a good number of our members who expressed themselves during the affiliation process. Some put their enthusiasm in terms of a spiritual or moral connection they feel; others, in terms of prospects for strengthening our community, including its *heymish* (warm, homey) qualities. For many in our community, Reconstructionism appears to have spoken to the heart. 