

# **BRIT KEHILLAH A COMMUNITY COVENANT:**

The JRF Guide to  
The Process of Affiliation



JRF Department of Outreach

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### **Introduction**

Deciding to affiliate with a major Jewish movement may well be one of the most challenging, energizing and exciting processes your community undertakes. Indeed, the affiliation process is a worthwhile venture for any community that cares about its future since it provides opportunities for your community to develop a clearer understanding of its mission, identity, and role in the larger Jewish community. The process of affiliation is a valuable way to remind your community of its collective vision and the spiritual legacy it wishes to leave for generations to come.

Discussing affiliation with a movement can be enormously rewarding, allowing all involved to have a better understanding of the values and norms of their community. The Jewish Reconstructionist Federation believes that it is essential to have a carefully developed process for sensitive discussion and decision-making, and one that is deeply rooted in Jewish tradition and contemporary thinking. Judaism welcomes study, discussion, and respectful disagreement. The decision-making process provides an opportunity to strengthen a community through creating a frank and honest exchange among members of the community. When Jewish values inform decisions, the quality of life is deepened for both the community and its individual members.

The decision-making model the Reconstructionist movement has used in doing its sacred work – and the one we urge communities to use in the affiliation process – is based on the following four Jewish values-based paradigms:

- Affiliation is a covenant of Jewish life between members of a community, its communal self and the Reconstructionist Movement
- Study and research into the history of the larger Jewish community, current movements and their resources.
- Reflection on values and analysis of the impact of each possible decision on members of the community
- Democratic and inclusive process, maximizing the number of participants, with the goal of deepening and clarifying a community's identity and sense of shared mission.

The Reconstructionist movement affirms the value of local autonomy. Even when communities utilize similar decision-making models, the results may differ. Each community must make its own decisions based on their unique situation and priorities. At the same time, this need not be done in isolation, and the JRF offers support in helping your community move toward these pivotal decisions.

*“We are pouring over the Guide to Affiliation in preparation for our congregational meeting...The JRF application comes as a breath of fresh air. You actually want congregations to examine alternatives, think deeply about this decision, discuss what it means to be Jewish in the modern world, and commit to long-term plans. Whatever course Ner Tamid chooses, just reading your application packet has gone a long way towards re-kindling my faith in organizational Judaism.” Gary Singer, President Congregation Ner Tamid*

### **Ethics of Affiliation**

*(JRF Department of Outreach, Passed May 1997)*

*“The JRF recognizes that new congregations often come into existence as a result of disagreements or concerns in existing congregations. New congregations have an obligation to act ethically towards the original congregation and act with respect toward the wider Jewish community. The JRF Board will take these factors into consideration when such congregations/havurot seek affiliation with the Reconstructionist movement.”*

### **Why affiliate?**

***“Hillel said: Do not separate yourself from the community.”  
Pirkei Avot, chapter 2:5***

***“One cannot be a Jew without actively belonging to the Jewish people.”  
Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan***

Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionism, described Judaism as the evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people. As Jews, belonging to a Jewish community is a core traditional value, an inherent responsibility of being a member of the Jewish people. Supporting the institutions of the Jewish community is crucial to maintaining its vitality and strength. These organizations, such as JRF, provide prayer books, the training and placement for rabbis, educational texts, youth and camping programs, consulting services and many other resources that we often take for granted. By belonging, we move from



being passive receivers of these contributions to Jewish life, to reciprocating this effort and having a voice in their creation. The growth of Jewish communities is due in large part to the work and accumulated expertise of these organizations, but they can only thrive by the support and input of individual communities.

***Which movement is right for my community?***

In North America, the major liberal movements have a great deal in common. There is mutual respect and interaction among the movements on a national level. In the spirit of *klal yisrael* (Jewish unity) all of the movements are united in the importance of affiliation.

***“We did not know whether, in the end, we would have a preference to offer. Our judgment that Reconstructionism is the best choice is a result of (1) our study of both movements’ philosophy, practices, and current direction; (2) our dealings with both movements, their representatives, and congregations; and (3) responses of our members as they’ve learned about the movements in light of their own values and hopes for the community.”***

***Affiliation Report, Temple Beth Hatfiloh, Olympia, WA***

In examining which movement may be right for your community, it is crucial to focus on a variety of philosophical and spiritual issues regarding compatibility. Questions you should ask include:

Will this movement help my community become more vibrant and connected to the spirit of Judaism?

Given our mission, membership and goals, where would we most like to contribute to strengthen the Jewish people?

Will our potential contributions to the movement and to the larger Jewish community be welcomed?

Do the philosophy, resources and support that this movement provides reflect and sustain our mission, vision, values, size, and demographics?

Does this movement encourage and reflect the Jewish religious and cultural expression of my community?

Will we have the opportunity to meaningfully contribute and participate in the movement we join?

What is the level of responsiveness to our inquiries?

***Affiliation will be a big step for us...***

*“To be an engaged participant in a living process is to be willing to be changed by that very process.”*

*Rabbi Shawn Zevit,*

Affiliation can be emotional. Many people have strong feelings of allegiance because of their family backgrounds. People need a space to express their feelings and then move on, as old loyalties become new realities. This meaningful process is not only a matter of external affiliation, but also a profound opportunity for building and deepening our Jewish communal identity and ties to each other.

***How do we begin this process?***

The first step is to gather information and become familiar with Reconstructionism, if you are not already. There are a number of resources that we can recommend for your study. An excellent source and introduction on the history, philosophy, and values of the Reconstructionist movement is Rabbis Jacob Staub and Rebecca Alpert’s *Exploring Judaism: A Reconstructionist Approach* (Reconstructionist Press 2000). Not only is it a highly accessible and readable primer on Reconstructionism, but it also shares an exciting vision toward a vibrant Judaism for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. (See *affiliation pages* at [www.jrf.org](http://www.jrf.org))

This packet contains our application for affiliation, which will give you a good idea about the areas we think are important for individual communities to consider and address throughout the affiliation process. Also look in this document for the most frequently asked questions that communities ask about how Reconstructionist

philosophy applies to communal process, leadership, and religious practice.



**How do I bring the issue of affiliation into my community?**

In order for your community to begin to consider whether the process of affiliation with a Jewish movement is a step that your community is ready to undertake, your board or steering council should initiate a thoughtful preliminary examination and evaluation into your community's values that will underlie and guide your process. *If your community does not already have a mission statement or statement of unifying principles, now is the time to draft one.* (Please see the JRF guide on drafting a mission statement.)

The Board will also be responsible for forming an affiliation committee.

The exploration of values will continue even after the affiliation committee is formed.

**A Sample Board Process**

*Devote one Board meeting (or a large part of a meeting) to the following exercise:*

1. *Invite all the members of the Board to think about the values of the community. Members should ask themselves:*
  - *What is important to our community?*
  - *What do we care about?*
  - *What are our core Jewish values?*
  - *What are the most meaningful ways we express our Judaism?*
  - *How have we described ourselves in our publicity, bylaws and mission statement?*
2. *Encourage brainstorming techniques – informality, openness, without discussion or criticism.*
3. *List all the ideas on large sheets of paper for everyone to see.*
4. *Discuss, categorize and prioritize these values – again on a large sheet of paper so all can see.*
5. *Share the list with the community. Send the list to the Affiliation Committee. It will be an important reference for the Affiliation Committee as it goes about its work of studying affiliation.*

**STEPS OF AFFILIATION: TOWARDS A COVENANT**

**I. Your Community's Process**

*"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 as many members in the study as possible, in meaningful and non-adversarial ways, so that the outcome would truly represent the will of the community." Temple Beth Hatfiloh, Olympia, WA*

The process of affiliation depends on good values-based decision-making. For the process to be effective and meaningful, we strongly encourage the involvement of the entire community. A good decision-making process is the responsibility of the leadership of the community. As a member of the board, you are most directly involved in incorporating good decision-making strategies to guide the affiliation process.

What follows is a step-by-step guide the process of affiliation – what questions you should be asking, what pitfalls to avoid. Again, if you have any questions along the way, you are welcome to call the Director of Outreach at JRF (contact information is listed at the end of this guide).

**1) Form an Affiliation Committee.**

*"As a committee we have been committed to creating a process in which diverse opinions could be heard... our recommendation reflects the open exchange, the increase in awareness, and the growing consensus promoted by the process about our community and how we fit into the larger world of Judaism." Temple Beth Israel, Eugene, OR*

The Board should invite representatives to sit on the Committee, and charge them with presenting a considered recommendation to the Board and to the community. The Committee is also charged with presenting the process and a concrete timeline they will undertake to consider the question of affiliation. Committee membership should be based on a number of factors, including but not limited to age, gender, class, sexual orientation, Jewish background, role in the community, and level of community involvement.

**2) The Affiliation Committee begins studying issues and values and developing the kind of process and timeframe it will follow, in conjunction with the Board.**

The Affiliation Committee should set up its own study process (one to three sessions is suggested) either before or after the visits from the representatives to study the thought and approach of the various



movements. The question of affiliation should be studied in terms of philosophical/ethical values as well as concrete benefits.

While the Affiliation Committee is studying the issue, it should also present a timeframe for the process to the community. This should include:

- 1) How the Committee will do its study and share its findings,
- 2) When the Committee will hold community meeting(s),
- 3) When the Committee will make a recommendation to the Board. An appropriate date for a community meeting to vote on the recommendation should be suggested.

The time frame is very important. Six months to one year is an adequate period for an effective decision-making process. This process is galvanizing and energizing if it takes place in a reasonable amount of time. If it drags on too long, it can become enervating and counterproductive.

Several different affiliation process models exist. Your affiliation committee should choose the model (or elements of a model) that would best apply to your situation. For example, what movements are being considered in your affiliation process? Are you considering switching affiliation? If your community is currently unaffiliated what has prompted your search now, and what do you hope to accomplish by affiliating? What are the processes and existing models of decision-making in your community? What areas will be affected by and benefit from affiliating?

At all times, please feel free to consult with the Director of Outreach about any questions or concerns you may have.

Below is a sample Affiliation Committee report to the congregation's Executive Committee, adapted from an actual document used in the affiliation process of JRF affiliate Havurat Tikvah of Charlotte, North Carolina.

TO: Havurat Tikvah Executive Committee  
FROM: Co-chairs, Affiliation Committee  
RE: Report of the Affiliation Committee

#### I. Charge of the Affiliation Committee

In fall 1998, several members of Havurat Tikvah, including the co-chairs of the Religious Committee, raised the question of the Havurah affiliating formally with Jewish Reconstructionist Federation. The motivation was to join a national group whose practices are compatible with ours and to have access to their resources. The JRF seemed the appropriate national organization to contact, as our Havurah already uses Reconstructionist liturgy and has worked with Reconstructionist rabbinical students.

Between November 1998 and February 1999, three Havurah meetings were held to discuss the issues. The first was an open discussion group following a Friday night service; the second was a meeting with Rabbi Shawn Zevit, Outreach Director for the JRF; the third was a large-group meeting facilitated by the Havurah's Chair. At the third meeting, a committee was formed and charged with (a) studying what affiliation would look like for Havurat Tikvah and (b) coming up with a plan for pursuing the question of affiliation. At the third meeting, Havurah members also decided to plan a fourth meeting at which a visiting rabbi would talk about Reconstructionism, which took place in March.

The affiliation committee met three times. At the first meeting, members discussed the results of Martha Brenner's extensive research into four groups that recently affiliated with the JRF; shared their very diverse views on the question of affiliation; and agreed upon a structure for studying the question of affiliation. The structure would be to look at eight areas of concern to Havurah members. For each area, we would identify the Havurah's current ideals, practices, and conflicts, and discuss how affiliation might affect our practices.



ISSUES	WHERE WE ARE NOW	QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER	WHERE WE WANT TO GO	AFTER AFFILIATION
Education				
Finances				
Inclusivity				
Participation of Non-Jews				
Rabbi				
Religious Observance				
Space				

At the second meeting, members discussed their research into these areas, which included the thinking of committee member as well as other Havurah members interviewed by Sharon and Pam. At the third meeting, the committee drafted its report on the eight areas, and agreed upon a process for further study and decision-making.

II. Report on Eight Areas of Concern to the Havurah.

1. **Education:** There is a general interest in expanding adult education. Affiliation could provide resources for adult education from Basic Judaism to advanced subjects for Sunday schools, as well as for Bnai Mitzvah.
2. **Finances:** If we affiliate, the Havurah will have one dues level that includes JRF membership. Payment of this will be required for membership (with occasional exceptions made for hardship cases). The increase in dues due to affiliation is predictable. There may be other increases in dues related to programming and space. These may occur with or without affiliation.
3. **Inclusivity:** The Havurah has always been an inclusive organization. There was a consensus that we should continue to be inclusive. This would not change with affiliation.
4. **Participation of Non-Jews:** There is a general agreement that the Havurah wants to continue to be welcoming to non-Jews, but we do not currently have any policy on the matter. If we affiliate, we could use the Reconstructionist guidelines as a starting point for discussion and could get suggestions about the process other groups have used to resolves the issue.
5. **Rabbi:** There was interest in having continued input from a rabbi or professional Jewish educator. Affiliation would give us priority for senior students at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and as well rabbinic placement services for graduate rabbis in the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association.
6. **Religious Observance:** We need more Havurah-wide education on respect for kashrut and some observances. We need to strengthen our observances and plan our year around the holidays. Affiliation would provide resources for education and help us have more structure.
7. **Space:** This will be an issue whether or not we affiliate. Renting space will increase our dues. This issue and the involved expense are independent of affiliation.
8. **Growth:** Growth raises the question of balancing the opportunities provided by larger membership with maintaining our identity and sense of intimacy. Affiliation may cause some attrition and/or increased attractiveness; the effect is unpredictable. Affiliation could provide resources for addressing growth in a thoughtful way.



**3) Share the process and educate your community. Keep the community apprised of the situation in an ongoing, regular manner.**

Perhaps the most important element in the affiliation process is educating your membership. Findings should be shared with the Board and the community in detailed written reports, perhaps published in the newsletter. Members of the community should be kept informed of the affiliation process and be provided with ample opportunities for education and explanation. Keep the process as accessible as possible.

While the Affiliation Committee establishes the steps of the affiliation process, it must look to the broader community for direction at various stages of the process. Therefore, it is essential for the committee to apprise the community of its plans regularly and routinely. The greater community must be involved at each stage of the affiliation process and know that it will make the final decision (usually at a community meeting). Allowance for input and reaction should be built into the process (often this happens at a community town meeting, where information is shared and opinions aired, but no voting takes place).

Below is a sample letter to the larger community from the Affiliation Committee, which details both its process and clearly communicates to the community how it may become involved in this process.

*Dear Havurat Tikvah member,*

*As you all know, for the last seven months our Havurah has been involved in discussion about the possibility of affiliating with Jewish Reconstructionist Federation.*

*As part of the process, the Executive Committee appointed a committee to study what affiliation might mean for Havurah Tikvah. The committee has completed its report, and submitted it to the Executive Committee, which voted to accept the report. A copy of the report, along with some information about the JRF, will be sent in snail mail later this week.*

*The committee report recommends the Havurah members participate in a structured forum discussion, and vote soon after on the motion to affiliate. (Please see the report for more detail on the process.)*

*The meeting has been set for Sunday May 23 from 4:00 to 6:00 pm in Luski Hall at the JCC. A forum that begins with affiliation committee members discussing the issues, and will continue with comments and questions from all Havurah members.*

*If at all possible, please read the materials and join us at the meeting. If you have any questions please feel free to call us.*

*B'Shalom,*

*Affiliation Committee Co-Chairs*

**4) Keep the JRF apprised of where you are throughout your entire process.**

Ongoing contact with the Department of Outreach will not only keep the JRF apprised of your process but also enable your community to access support and consultation. To reach us by phone, call 1-215-782-8500. In addition, please visit our website at [www.jrf.org](http://www.jrf.org)

**5) The Affiliation Committee invites representatives from the movement**

The Affiliation Committee should study the movements that are most closely aligned with your community's values and needs. It should then present the community with a broad overview of its findings that would enable the community to make an informed recommendation.

The Affiliation Committee then has the option of inviting representatives of the movements under consideration to make separate visits to your community. Each visit might include a presentation or meeting with the Board followed by a presentation or meeting with the congregation at another time or directly after the leadership meeting.

***\*It is not a good idea to invite two or more representatives to speak on a panel. This has the potential to pit movements against one another.***

***\*It is not a good idea to schedule one long day of representative visits, as information overload can result.***



### **6) Recommending a movement**

If the Committee decides to eliminate any movement(s) from consideration, a detailed report explaining the reasoning should be made available to the community prior to visits from movement representatives.

Based upon the Committee's consideration of the issue, it may be appropriate for a community to consider one movement. In that case, only that movement's representative should be invited to the community.

Below is the recommendation of Havurat Tikvah's Affiliation Committee its Board:

The Affiliation Committee presents a written report to the Board explaining its recommendations. If the Board rejects the report, it is sent back to the Affiliation Committee with recommendations. If the Board approves the report, the community receives the report in advance of a scheduled community-wide meeting. If your community ratifies the recommended affiliation (your bylaws should specify what a majority consists of in such matters), immediately inform the movement's representative and sign and send in the application for affiliation to JRF.

*The Affiliation Committee recommends that:*

1. *The Board accept our report.*
2. *The report be mailed to the membership, along with some basic information about the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation.*
3. *A meeting of the membership be held.*
4. *A ballot be mailed. We recommend that the vote require 2/3 of paid-up adult Havurah members to vote and be decided by a simple majority,*
5. *The vote be taken by early June.*

## **II. The JRF Process**

***“JRF will be thrilled if we decide to affiliate with them. As they see it, each new congregation affects the entire movement.”***

***Temple Beth Israel, Eugene, OR***

Once you have filled out your application for affiliation to the JRF, agree to the financial commitments and educational guidelines, and send it to our office, an extensive process is set in motion on our end, which is outlined below. It is important for you to know step by step what happens to your application once it is received, step-by-step, and to be aware of our timeframe.

- 1) The Outreach Committee of the JRF Board (composed of lay leaders, rabbis and JRF staff) receives a copy of the application and meets to discuss it. In concert with the Committee, the Director of Outreach follows up with any questions about the application. If there are none, the proposal is put forward at the next JRF Board meeting. Special meetings are convened on occasion.
- 2) Before the meeting, each member of the JRF Board reviews a summary of the application. The Board then votes on the application.
- 3) If approved, the new affiliate is notified immediately.
- 4) The new affiliate will receive the following JRF documents and resources in a timely manner: an official certificate of affiliation, the JRF Resource Binder, a database form request for the congregational membership list (so that members can receive JRF publications and publicity), referrals to the departments of Education, Communications, Congregational Resources, Liturgy and Music, Tikkun Olam, Youth and Camping.
- 5) The community is connected to the regional staff person and/or regional lay leadership. Regional or central staff will then welcome the affiliate into the JRF.
- 6) The congregation receives the JRF logo as part of their identification with the Reconstructionist movement. Congregational bylaws should be examined for any changes necessitated by affiliation with the JRF.



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- 7) If the congregation does not have Reconstructionist liturgy, an arrangement for a sample weekend or two is made in the first year.
- 8) New affiliates will be billed September 1<sup>st</sup> of each year for JRF dues, or on a prorated basis if they join during the calendar year (based on the community's membership list and the arrangement as listed in the application for affiliation.).

***...I want to emphasize again how important it is that...we affiliate with someone. It's important because of the support we'll receive from a national movement in developing our programs for both children and adults. It's important because of the support we'll receive in our governance and in raising the money it takes to run the shul fairly and effectively. It's important because it will recharge our batteries and help us develop and maintain leadership. It's important because it will recharge our batteries and help us develop and maintain leadership. It's important because without it we are too isolated. It's important because without affiliation it will be much harder to get a good rabbi when the time comes...And finally, it's important because it's the right thing to do: to contribute to wider Jewish life by supporting those activities that we can't do on our own: training rabbis, developing curricula and teaching materials, being involved in the political arena, and so much more." Rabbi Jeremy Schwartz, Bnai Israel, Willimantic (JRF 2002)***

We hope that our guide enriches the soul and spirit of your community, that it deepens your community's Jewish identity, and perhaps most importantly, that it rekindles the pride and joy that initially drove your community to join together in sacred service.

L'Shalom and B'Hatzlachah,  
***Shawn***

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# **APPENDICES TO BRIT KEHILLAH A COMMUNITY COVENANT:**

## **The JRF Guide to The Process of Affiliation**

**THE FOLLOWING APPENDICES CONTAIN ADDITIONAL INFORMATION  
ABOUT RECONSTRUCTIONISM AND THE RECONSTRUCTIONIST MOVEMENT,  
AS WELL AS REFLECTIONS ON THE AFFILIATIONS PROCESS FROM CURRENT  
JRF AFFILIATES**



## **Reconstructionist Judaism Is...**

a progressive, contemporary approach to Jewish life which integrates a deep respect for traditional Judaism with the insights and ideas of contemporary social, intellectual and spiritual life.

### **Judaism as the Culture of the Jewish People**

For Reconstructionists, Judaism is more than Jewish religion; Judaism is the entire cultural legacy of the Jewish people. Religion is central; Jewish spiritual insights and religious teachings give meaning and purpose to our lives. Yet our creativity as expressed through art, music and drama, languages and literature, and our relationship with the land of Israel itself are also integral parts of Jewish culture. Each of these aspects provides a gateway into the Jewish experience that can enrich and inspire us.

### **Community as Cornerstone**

While deeply connected to the historical experience of the Jewish people, we find a profound sense of belonging in our contemporary communities as well. This connection often leads to increased ritual observance and experimentation with the ritual rhythms of Jewish life. We find meaning in rediscovering the richness of traditional ritual and creating new observances that respond to our contemporary communal and personal cycles.

As we come to know ourselves as part of a community and create our own patterns of religious living, we create the context in which to join the spiritual quest that is so important in our time. In moments of prayer, song, social action and story we experience the reality of God, and we join in study and discussion where searching is as central as finding.

Reconstructionist communities are characterized by their respect for such core values as democratic process, pluralism, and accessibility. In this way, they create participatory, inclusive, egalitarian communities committed to exploring Jewish life with dedication, warmth and enthusiasm.

### **Finding Holiness**

Every religion tells its own story as a sacred story; Jewish tradition is no different. In its classical texts, Judaism presents itself as originating in the revelation of God to the Jewish people at Mt. Sinai. The contemporary historical study of religions and cultures teaches us that they are better understood as a natural part of the experiences of communities that seek to live by sacred values and practices.

Reconstructionist Jews thus understand Judaism to be the outcome of the religious experience of the Jewish people in their search for meaning and sacred living throughout history rather than revelation from a supernatural God. Put differently, Reconstructionists see Jewish tradition, culture, and religion as having grown "from the ground up" instead of from the "[mountain-] top down."

Understanding Judaism as having been created by the Jewish people does not make it less sacred to us. Knowing that Jewish tradition has undergone a long period of development, change and adaptation does not weaken its claim on our lives, but rather can strengthen our connection to our tradition. We hear in that tradition the voices of generations of Jews who sought to record their deepest values, most profound religious insights, and highest hopes. While Reconstructionists do not take the Torah literally, we do take it seriously as a record of our ancestors' search for moral principles and spiritual practices that can help us become fully human.

### **Patterns of Practice**

"Torah" means "teaching." In Jewish tradition, *talmud Torah*, the study of Torah, is a life-long obligation and opportunity. Reconstructionists are committed to a serious engagement with the texts and teachings, as well as the art, literature and music of tradition. But we are not passive recipients; we are instead challenged to enter the conversation of the generations and to hear voices other than our own, but to add our own voices as well.

Reconstructionist Judaism is respectful of traditional Jewish observances but also open to new interpretations and forms of religious expression. As Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan (1881-1983), the founder of Reconstructionism, taught, tradition has "a vote, but not a veto." Reconstructionists share a commitment to making Judaism their own by finding in it joy, meaning, and ideas they can believe. Unlike Orthodox and Conservative Judaism, Reconstructionism does not view inherited Jewish law (*halahah*) as binding. We continue to turn to Jewish law for guidance, if not always for governance. We recognize that in the contemporary world, individuals and communities make their own choices with regard to religious practice and ritual observance.



But where Reform Judaism emphasizes individual autonomy, Reconstructionism emphasizes the importance of religious community in shaping individual patterns of observance. Belonging to a community leads us to take the patterns of observance within that community seriously; our choices do not exist independently, but are made in response to our community as part of our participating in it. Reconstructionism thus retains a warmly traditional (and fully egalitarian) approach to Jewish religious practice.

We encourage individual Jews through study and exploration of Jewish tradition to find their own place along the spectrum of observance. This approach is woven through the Guide to Mourning earlier in this volume. Explanations, options and recommendations are presented so that the resources of Jewish tradition can provide support and meaning to mourners, even as it is acknowledged that differing individual and family circumstances will shape different patterns of observance.

### **Spiritual Seeking**

We live in an age of spiritual seeking, a time in which the search for transcendent values and deeper meanings invites many of us back to our own religious traditions, to rediscover the rich insights of those who came before us on the spiritual journey. Reconstructionist Judaism has always been open to new approaches to thinking about God, to alternative ways of experiencing the Divine in our lives, and to honest wrestling with the inherited insights of our ancestors.

Reconstructionists hold diverse ideas about God, but we share an emphasis on Godliness --those hopes, beliefs, and values within us that impel us to work for a better world, that give us strength and solace in times of need, that challenge us to grow, and that deepen our joy in moments of celebration.

Reconstructionist prayerbooks such as this one speak of God beyond the gender concepts of male/female, and beyond the traditional metaphor of “king of the universe.” For example, in our prayerbooks God is addressed as, among other things, “The Healer,” “The Teacher,” “The Comforter,” and “The Presence.” We are engaged in the spiritual adventure of discovering the many attributes of the one God.

### **Ethics and Values**

In a time of wide debate about values, morals and ethics, religion is often assumed to have answers for any and every situation. But as we come to know the variety of cultures and religions that exist on our small planet, we come to know that the discovery of eternal teachings arises from the respectful exchange of perspectives and ideas among people — not from authoritarian assertions of the truth or the primacy of one religion or one religious community over another. It is in this context that we see ourselves as having an obligation to social justice and doing the work of *tikkun olam*, improving our world. Reconstructionist communities emphasize such acts of social justice alongside prayer and study as an essential part of their spiritual practice.

Reconstructionist Judaism affirms that religion can and must be a powerful force for promoting communal discussion about ethics and values. The Torah tradition itself is a deep and wide resource for this project. Yet we know that generations of Jews have sharpened and distilled the ethical insights of Judaism as a result of their encounter with other cultures and traditions, and so it is in our time.

### **The Place of Community**

The centrality of contemporary religious community cannot be overestimated. In an age of rapid communication, personal and professional mobility, intellectual excitement and cross-cultural exchange, there is a need for connection, conviction and commitment. For Jews, the congregation or havurah provides a primary community through which we can connect to other Jews, to the inherited richness of Jewish culture, and to the religious resources of Jewish religion. To engage us as fully as possible, Reconstructionist communities emphasize participation and inclusivity.

Especially in moments of the lifecycle, such as times of death and mourning, we want to be able to count on our communities to provide connection and comfort. Reconstructionists take seriously the imperative of the Talmud, “Do not separate yourself from the community.” We strive to create covenantal communities, in which individuals faithfully support one another and respond to individual needs.



### **Building the Future**

Reconstructionist Jews have strong commitments both to tradition and to the search for contemporary meaning. We are engaged in the ongoing task of building a relationship to our Judaism that is faithful to the past and relevant to the present. We want to create a Judaism for our day that is richly traditional, spiritually alive, and intellectually honest. We encourage contemporary Jews to enhance their own Jewish lives by reclaiming our shared heritage and becoming active participants in the building of the Jewish future.

### **For More Information**

We recommend *Exploring Judaism: A Reconstructionist Approach* (revised, 2000) by Rabbis Rebecca T. Alpert and Jacob J. Staub. This book, along with other relevant materials, is available by calling the Reconstructionist Press at 877.JRF.PUBS, or online at [www.jrf.org](http://www.jrf.org).

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## **RECONSTRUCTIONIST APPROACHES TO JEWISH IDEAS AND PRACTICES**

*This series of questions addresses Reconstructionist approaches to Jewish ideas and practices. As a movement that values democratic process and full community participation, we do not issue rules and regulations in a top-down form. Even our recommendations come from Commissions that may take two or more years to study, discuss and formulate guidelines. It is up to our member communities and their leadership, in consultation with JRF, to come to their own standards and ritual practices. We see our rituals, customs, laws, sacred texts and practices coming out of the evolving religious civilization that is the Jewish people in its ongoing relationship with God. We seek practices that reveal holiness and godliness in the world. We see the tradition as having a vote, not a veto in Jewish practice and try to balance tradition with contemporary sensibilities and innovations.*

### **Exploring Judaism: Reconstructionist Approaches**

- 1) *How do Reconstructionists approach sacred texts?*
- 2) *How does Reconstructionism regard Halakah/Jewish Law?*
- 3) *What is the Reconstructionist approach to God?*
- 4) *What is the Reconstructionist approach to the idea of the Chosen People?*
- 5) *What is the role of the rabbi in the community?*
- 6) *What are Reconstructionist approaches to Kashrut?*
- 7) *How does Reconstructionism view interfaith marriages?*
- 8) *How do Reconstructionist communities involve non-Jewish family members?*
- 9) *How do Reconstructionists view conversion?*
- 10) *Where does Reconstructionism stand regarding homosexuality and same-sex marriages?*
- 11) *How do Reconstructionist communities approach life cycle passages?*
- 12) *What do Reconstructionist services look like?*
- 13) *What is the movement stance on women's role in services?*
- 14) *What place does Israel have in Reconstructionism?*

### **1. "How do Reconstructionists approach sacred texts?"**

We consider our sacred texts to be the product of inspired experience in the human search for God and holiness in our world. To us, they are neither literal transcriptions from a Supernatural Being nor anachronisms that are mere constructs and fictions. We value our dialogue with the voices of our sacred texts because of the passion, values, aspirations and wisdom they express and how they therefore inform and shape our current Jewish lives.

Torah study, or *Talmud Torah*, has been an integral part of Reconstructionism since its inception. To some degree, this is due to the fact that we study in order to understand the history and the values inherent in the ritual practices under consideration by the community. Hence, many communities form regular, ongoing *havurot* (study groups) as an essential component of adult education programming. In addition, we regard the study of our sacred texts as one path in the search for holiness in our world, inspiring many of our congregations to offer ongoing study groups "*lishma*" simply for the sake of learning.



## **2. How does Reconstructionism regard Halakah/Jewish Law and Jewish tradition?**

*Halakah* - literally 'the path' or 'the way' - serves to guide the manner in which the individual and community lives its Jewish life. In so doing, halakha relies upon our rich cultural heritage. We see *halakha* as informing Jewish practice because of its contribution to the moral and spiritual life of the Jewish people. Our decision making process reflects Mordecai Kaplan's founding philosophy that Judaism is an evolving religious civilization. Therefore, our decision making process embodies both past and present by infusing our 'path' with the ethics and values that are our legacy as well as the realities of our present cultural lives. Decision-making is a dynamic, community-driven and, perhaps most importantly, self-conscious process which reflects our philosophy of living in two civilizations.

## **3. How do Reconstructionists approach God?**

Reconstructionism, which proposes a religious humanist theology, sees God as a Power or Process working through nature and human beings. It is therefore incumbent upon us to bring divinity into the world through our actions, thereby increasing God's presence in our physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual lives, as individuals and as faith-based communities. For example, instead of speaking of a just, kind, compassionate God, we might state that justice, kindness and compassion are Godly and we commit to self-consciously live according to these values. Approaching God in this manner enables us to perceive the holy in our daily lives and to infuse our interactions with an element of the Divine. This communal understanding of God co-exists with a wide variety of personally held beliefs.

## **4. What is the Reconstructionist approach to the idea of the Chosen People?**

Rather than view ourselves as God's chosen people, we understand ourselves as being called upon to do God's work. We follow this unique path of doing God's work because the Jewish story, civilization, and culture belong to us. Part of our journey includes the formation of a special covenant, a 'brit' between God and Israel. Our covenant is a holy relationship grounded in Jewish ethics and values. This also means respecting the diversity of each religion and culture in its unique contribution to global community of which we are a part.

## **5. What is the role of the rabbi in the community?**

Reconstructionist rabbis function as community leaders, teachers, counselors and authorities. However, while the rabbi bears these as well as other functions, the rabbi is not the sole authority in a congregation's decision-making life. While the rabbi may be the leader, decision-making is a collaborative effort. It is, however, the rabbi's role as an authority to infuse the decision making process and its substance with Jewish values.

## **6. What are Reconstructionist approaches to kashrut?**

Our philosophy values *kashrut* as part of the spiritual and cultural legacy of the Jewish people. We recognize *kashrut* as one aspect of the Jewish quest to welcome the Divine presence to our tables and into our communities. We therefore embrace *kashrut* as more than an issue of appropriate foods and instead view *kashrut* as a tool for sanctifying our public and private lives within the context of Jewish civilization. With a host of options upon which to base a decision including factors ranging from traditional Jewish legal guidelines to ethical and ecological considerations, most Reconstructionist communities agree on a *kashrut* policy. Whatever a community's specific guidelines may be- the overriding value is the recognition that our communities' relationship to practicing *kashrut* is premised upon our rich cultural heritage rather than upon obeying a divine commandment.

It should therefore not be surprising that in a recent movement wide survey more than 30% of our member households kept some form of *kashrut* by choice for a variety of spiritual, cultural, ecological and ethical reasons. In addition, most feel strongly that no matter what their personal household practices may be, *kashrut* would not act as a barrier to eating with others.



### **7. How does Reconstructionism view interfaith marriages?**

We pride ourselves on having welcoming communities and often have non-Jewish spouses active in our communities who are supportive and/or committed to maintaining Jewish households. While we do not encourage interfaith marriages, we are committed to inclusivity and we certainly welcome all members of interfaith families. Some of our rabbis will officiate at interfaith unions as long as non-Jewish clergy do not co-officiate. We leave this up to the conscience of each rabbi. We have a report on the role of non-Jewish members of our community called *Boundaries and Opportunities*, which provides background information and insights to assist communities in reaching their own conclusions and developing their own standards.

### **8. How do Reconstructionist communities involve non-Jewish family members?**

Since 1968, our movement has recognized the Jewishness of a child born to a non-Jewish mother and Jewish father. Our communities are dedicated to creating an environment in which all family members feel welcome. Acknowledging the current reality that an increasingly large number of families will be intermarried, Reconstructionist communities often offer "Introduction to Judaism" courses, facilitate peer group discussions and develop communal practices for Jewish lifecycle events that include non-Jewish family members. Our aim is to bring the richness of Jewish civilization into the public and private lives of our communities and not necessarily to formally convert the non-Jewish family member. The 1996 *Boundaries and Opportunities* Report referred to above offers suggestions and recommendations for individual communities.

### **9. How do Reconstructionists view conversion?**

We value the symbolism of the conversion ritual and encourage those who were not born of Jewish parents and who wish to convert to undergo this rite of passage. The course of study for a prospective convert, which is determined by the rabbi and congregation the individual is working with, includes history, observance and beliefs, and learning how to make educated choices. The completion of the process is marked by ritual immersion for men and women; circumcision or "hatafat dam brit" (symbolic drop of blood) for men (unless there exists an extraordinary physical or emotional hazard); a Bet Din - a dialogue with three knowledgeable Jews, at least one of whom is a rabbi; and often a public welcoming ceremony.

### **10. Where does Reconstructionism stand regarding homosexuality and same-sex marriage?**

We were the first movement to publicly address this issue in our 1988 report on homosexuality. In addition we were the first movement to accept openly gay and lesbian students into the RRC. We retain an unwavering commitment to forming inclusive communities, welcoming to gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgendered Jews, as well as multicultural families, Jews of color, and other groups traditionally excluded from full participation in Jewish communal life. Issues relating to the gay and lesbian family are included in religious school curricula. Our rabbis are free to perform same-sex commitment or marriage ceremonies if it is their practice to do so.

### **11. How do Reconstructionist communities approach life cycle passages?**

We begin by affirming traditional life cycle rituals and strive to discover personal meaning within these rituals and the values they represent. We reconstruct traditional rituals to conform to a current idiom and develop new life cycle events and liturgy to mark a meaningful passage with a uniquely Jewish stamp. For example, Reconstructionist communities have created rituals for retirement, leaving home for college, weaning, and menopause. The power of a life cycle ritual inheres as much from the ritual itself as from the support of the community that joins together to embrace the occasion.

### **12. What do Reconstructionist services look like?**

Reconstructionist services are fully egalitarian, inclusive and participatory. The Kol Haneshamah prayer book series offers a full and creative liturgy, giving communities the option of using more or less Hebrew during services. For the vast majority of Reconstructionist Jews, wearing *tallit* and *kippa* is common practice for both men and women. Integrating music into the spoken service is not uncommon, encourages



participation and enhances the spirit of the day. In so doing, we sanctify all forms of Jewish expression and art.

We recognize a wide range of individual communal practices and approaches to prayer. On a practical level, some congregations focus on Friday night services while others stress Shabbat morning community worship and learning. Still others regularly hold both. Congregations often hold family services and services designed for those just entering Jewish prayer.

### **13. What is the movement stance on women's role in services?**

We have always been dedicated to being fully and consistently egalitarian. We pride ourselves in being the only movement that has always ordained women and the first Jewish community to hold a formal *Bat Mitzvah* ceremony in synagogue over 70 years ago. All our prayerbooks are gender neutral. In all areas of ritual, hiring and governance, our member communities must demonstrate a full commitment to egalitarian principles.

### **14. What place does Israel have in Reconstructionism?**

Mordecai Kaplan believed that nowhere else could Jews live so completely a Jewish life as in Israel. However, because not all Jews intend or even desire to emigrate to Israel - nor did Kaplan believe that there is an imperative to do so - he envisioned that Jewish communities around the world ought to be interdependent. Such a relationship to Israel and to Jewish communities around the world maintains Israel as central to our historical self-definition and affirms our identity as a nation within the global family.

One of the core principles as a Reconstructionist community is the support of Israel's right to exist as an independent nation, which includes both advocating on behalf of policies and needs in Israel, as well as challenging policies if they contradict other sacred values.

Over the past several years there has been an overall movement among Israelis for a more progressive approach towards Judaism leading to a grass roots interest in articulating a non-orthodox paradigm of Jewish practice and ritual. To meet this new interest, there are currently several Reconstructionist programs and missions coordinated by our Israel Program department. JRF also created an Israel Task Force that operated as a think tank on issues related to our relationship with Israel.

*"The members of our Reconstructionist synagogue work with the rabbi to create services that are meaningful for special individual occasions like baby namings and are valuable for the whole community ... Of course we use some traditional prayers and melodies, but we have found that new melodies and readings written or selected by our members add vitality to our prayers."*

*- Member, Congregation Darchei Noam, Toronto, Canada*



## **A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE JEWISH RECONSTRUCTIONIST FEDERATION**

The Jewish Reconstructionist Federation serves its affiliates by working with them to build Jewish communities that are democratic, egalitarian, spiritually and intellectually vibrant and committed to Jewish learning, ethics and social justice. The Jewish Reconstructionist Federation contributes to the Jewish people by promoting innovation rooted in Jewish tradition, and supporting meaningful Jewish life in community.

### **1935**

Movement began as a distinct ideology in 1934 when Mordecai Kaplan published the landmark book: *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American Jewish Life*. Kaplan himself stated that the Reconstructionist movement began January 1935, with the publication of the *Reconstructionist* magazine.

### **1940**

Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation was established to publish the *Reconstructionist* magazine.

### **1955**

Reconstructionist Fellowship of Congregations (RFC) was created as a branch of the Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation with four dual affiliates (New York City, Buffalo, Indianapolis, and Skokie) "At the request of congregations and as an outgrowth of the needs of the religious life of the Jewish community."

### **1961**

Reconstructionist Federation of Congregations and Fellowships replaced Reconstructionist Fellowship of Congregations (RFC). The requirement that members belong to another movement (dual affiliation) was dropped.

### **1967**

Reconstructionist movement established its own seminary (Reconstructionist Rabbinical College) to train rabbis for Reconstructionist congregations.

### **1983**

Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Havurot (FRCH) replaced Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Fellowships as the official congregational arm of the Reconstructionist movement.

### **1984**

43 affiliates            5000 household units

### **1995**

Jewish Reconstructionist Federation (JRF) replaced FRCH.

### **2007**

107 affiliates            more than 17,000 household units in Canada, the United States, Curacao and Czech Rep.

- *In the first five-year period of the existence of JRF as the official congregational arm, the Reconstructionist Movement experienced a 35% increase in the number of affiliates and almost a 50% increase in membership.*  
- *In the first decade of the movement, the number of affiliates and the number of members almost doubled.*  
- *50,000 Jews in North America identify as Reconstructionists according to the NJPS of 1990 and Jack Wertheimer's book, A People Divided.*  
- *3% (180,000) of American Jews self-identify as Reconstructionists according to an article in Newsweek magazine (September 2000)*



## **FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT JRF AND AFFILIATION**

- 1) *What is the JRF and what support does JRF offer?*
- 2) *How do I go about hiring a rabbi?*
- 3) *What is the cost of membership?*
- 4) *What are the responsibilities of membership?*

### **1) What support does JRF offer?**

The Jewish Reconstructionist Federation represents a democratic, pluralistic, inclusive, and growing movement, with over 100 member communities in North America and around the world. JRF offers both central and regional services and facilitates networks and lateral relationships among member communities. JRF services fall under a number of categories including Congregational Services, Publications, Movement-wide and Regional Community Building, Education, Youth and Camping, *Tikkun Olam*, Liturgy and Music, Israel Programming, and Web support.

### **Representation in the Larger World**

Members of JRF are represented in the larger Jewish world through work with the United Jewish Communities, the Conference of Presidents, the World Union of Progressive Judaism, ARZA, COEJL (The Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life), MAZON, local JCRC councils, Jewish Federations, Synagogue and Rabbinic councils and numerous progressive and pluralistic organizations

### **Congregational Services** (see [www.jrf.org](http://www.jrf.org))

- Regional programs, workshops, and *Shabbatonim* throughout North America;
- Individually designed, on-site consultations, workshops, training sessions for boards, rabbis, and communities in key areas of congregational life, including fundraising, budgeting, leadership development, long-range planning, membership recruitment, board dynamics, and communications;
- Leadership workshops with accompanying workbooks, curricula, and web-based resources:
  - “Kehillah Builders: Building and Growing Sacred Community”
  - “A Torah of Money: A Values Based Approach to Money in Community”
  - “Jewish Values-Based Decision Making”
  - “Rabbi and Presidents’ Training”
  - “A Sacred Trust: Synagogue Governance and Leadership.”
- **Harmoniyah: The Reconstructionist Music Network;**
- **Tikkun Olam** resources for congregations on hunger, sustainability, advocacy and a Tikkun Olam resource library; Numerous external affiliations with progressive Jewish organizations;
- JRF Department of Communications, e.g. website support and public relations;
- Online Israel programming and educational resources, and materials for planning missions to Israel.

### **Publications** (discounts 10-25% for JRF affiliates. See The Reconstructionist Press at [www.jrf.org](http://www.jrf.org))

- The newly updated and expanded **Exploring Judaism: A Reconstructionist Approach;**
- Regular publications such as **Reconstructionism Today**, our movement magazine sent to all members, and **The Reconstructionist**, a biannual journal;
- Our liturgical series, **Kol Haneshamah**, which includes daily, Shabbat and Festival, and High Holy Day prayer books, and most recently, **Tefilot Leveyt Ha’avel: Prayers for a House of Mourning;**
- A new children’s siddur, **Siddur Kol Hano’ar: The Voice of Children;**
- **A Night of Questions**, our new Haggadah with accompanying CD;
- Liturgy learning tapes for service leaders, accompanying the Reconstructionist prayer books;
- Select online audio and cassette resources from the Reconstructionist radio show **Heart, Mind, and Spirit;**
- For educators, a number of various publications and study guides (see Education below);
- A variety of books by Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan and other scholars, poets and others whose ideas have shaped Reconstructionist thought.
- Resources for congregations. The Building Sacred Community Series: **Jewish Values, Money and Your Community: A Twelve-Session Curriculum;** **Jewish Communal Leadership and Congregational Governance: A Resource Manual for Training and Developing Effective**



- **Boards and Committees; A Guide to Organizing and Growing Your Congregation or Havurah.**

#### **Regional and Movement-wide Community Building**

- Regular regional gatherings, including a roster of speakers from JRF and the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College on selected topics;
- Regional community building workshops. (see Congregational Services, above)
- Regional Councils that focus on sharing information and best practices, as well as programming.
- Our website, which features regular news and updates on publications, programs, educational initiatives, and what's happening across the movement. It also features contact information for every JRF community ([www.jrf.org](http://www.jrf.org));
- Several specialized e-mail discussion groups designed to connect members with similar roles from many congregations and to provide a forum for asking questions and offering support and information;
- Our biennial Convention, which draws hundreds of participants from across North America who gather for prayer, study, celebration, and community building activities.
- Movement-wide commissions and JRF board committees that respond to various issues of concern which emerge over time (The Role of the Non-Jew, Gay and Lesbian inclusion, Disabilities, Rabbi-Congregational Relations, etc.)

#### **Education**

We offer an extensive program of educational services for youth and adults geared to both schools and learning communities. In addition, we encourage networking between communities to maximize the effectiveness of consulting and support. Many of our member congregations exchange ideas and programs.

##### **Adult Education**

- Our popular 30-week Jewish adult education curriculum, "***Jewish, Alive & American***";
- The "***Aytz Hayim We***" adult education initiative, an ongoing text study on the Five Megillot (Ruth, Esther, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, and Song of Songs), and the Book of Samuel;
- Study modules and publications on a variety of issues available through a partnership with the RRC's Center for Jewish Ethics, Kolot: The Center for Jewish Women's and Gender Studies, and Hiddur: The Center For Aging and Judaism;
- ***Yad Mordechai Adult Education Curricula***: A study guide for our landmark *Exploring Judaism: A Reconstructionist Approach*; A study guide for the High Holy Day liturgy; and a study guide for *Modern Jewish Thought: An Introduction*.
- ***Lomdim*** - an email discussion list for planners, leaders and other stakeholders in congregational adult education programs.
- A variety of other online study programs

##### **Support for Religious Schools**

- Education curricula for grades K-8;
- A youth prayer manual and a mini-prayer book;
- Two educational e-mail listserves which collect the wisdom of hundreds of Reconstructionist educators around the country;
- Short and long-term consultation to congregations;
- Support for education directors;
- *Gesher v'Kesher* Education Journal archives;
- TorahQuest – interactive web education program;
- *RENA* – the association of Reconstructionist Educators of North America

#### **Youth and Camping**



***Brit Kehillah- A Community Covenant:  
The JRF Guide to The Process of Affiliation***

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**No'ar Hadash** (Hebrew for "New Youth") promotes and fosters creative, innovative, and fun Jewish youth programming from a uniquely Reconstructionist perspective.



As part of No'ar Hadash, Reconstructionist teens from across North America will take part in innovative, exciting, creative, fun, and engaging programs designed to meet their religious, intellectual, spiritual, and social needs. In local congregations and havurot, on

the regional level, and across the continent, Reconstructionist teens now have the opportunity to create and participate in programs that are important to them and that speak to who they are as teens and as Jews. Currently No'ar Hadash offers both an annual North American Teen Kallah, and other on-going regional events and programs. For more information about No'ar Hadash visit [www.noarhadash.org](http://www.noarhadash.org)

**Camp JRF** fills the summer with fun, friendships, and Jewish living. Our camp is a joyful, creative, and inclusive Reconstructionist community. During the camp session, campers swim, play soccer, basketball, baseball, volleyball, and other sports. They sing and explore other arts. They learn from visiting artists, scholars, and rabbis, as well from dedicated college-age counselors. Our campers make lasting friendships, experience a safe and fun summer, explore Jewish tradition, forge their own Jewish identity, and participate in creating a vibrant Jewish culture and community. The mission of Camp JRF is to blend formal and informal educational approaches to promote strong connections to Judaism, Reconstructionism, the environment, the land and people of Israel, and positive human values.



For more information about Camp JRF please visit [www.campjrf.org](http://www.campjrf.org).

**2) How do I go about hiring a rabbi?**

When seeking to hire a rabbi, our Director of Placement Services will guide you through the process. The Director of Placement Services will assist you in creating your listing, reviewing the applicants' résumés, and going through the interview process. If necessary, they can also assist with contract negotiations. There are specific processes and rules that pertain to JRF congregations, as well as non-JRF communities. The Director of Placement Services can be reached at (215) 576-5210. To hire a student rabbi, you will work with the Dean of Students at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC) (215) 576-0800 ext. 125.

**3) What is the cost of membership?**

Each community is responsible for paying dues at a rate per household set by JRF, with up to 15% of membership at half-dues in order to accommodate for member households in financial hardship. (Please see the application for affiliation for details.) Other arrangements are negotiated directly with JRF Outreach Director and committee. Dues do not cover the full cost of training rabbis, producing prayer books and publications, rabbinic placement, consultation fees, education curricula, etc. yet these and all JRF services are a benefit of membership and our understanding of shared commitment to sustaining and growing contemporary Jewish life as part of the Jewish people's present and future.

**4) What are the responsibilities of Membership?**

A JRF member community makes a commitment to the following:

- Egalitarianism,
- Democratic, participatory decision making,
- Support for the existence of the state of Israel,
- On-going Jewish education according to, but not limited by the *JRF Education Guidelines*,
- Freedom of Rabbinic Expression
- Agreement with the policies of JRF and the values of Reconstructionist Judaism.

In joining the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation, a community agrees to follow the procedures of JRF, to support and participate in the activities of the Reconstructionist movement including, but not limited to, the annual fundraising efforts and biennial conventions.



**RECONSTRUCTIONISM TODAY**  
יהדות מתחדשת היום

*a voice  
for  
creative  
Jewish  
living*

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**The Evolving Face of Reconstructionism**

By SHAWN ISRAEL ZEVIT

**IN TRAVELING THE CONTINENT** over the past several years to help Jewish communities develop and to conduct JRF leadership workshops, I have participated in numerous conversations about our mission and goals as a movement. I have heard, from self-described "classical Kaplanians" through to "neo-Hasidic" Reconstructionists, many interpretations of Reconstructionist theology, philosophy and practice. Some "classical" voices decry the new spiritual explorations occurring in some corners of the movement and claim that Kaplan, were he to reappear, would bemoan how far a field our individualistic spiritual journeying and experimentation have taken us. On the other hand, I have heard a newer generation of Reconstructionists criticize what they perceive as "nostalgia" for an intellectual approach to Jewish life that, they believe, leaves the body and spirit at the door and ignores the needs of spiritual seekers.



Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan at age 100, June, 1981.

I believe that if Mordecai Kaplan were, in fact, beamed into a Reconstructionist havurah's *Shabbat* service at one of the many Quaker, Unitarian or other church settings that often house us -- or at one of the stellar, state-of-the-art synagogue buildings that more than 25 percent of our affiliates have constructed or acquired during the past decade -- he would be disappointed if he saw an exact replica of Reconstructionist services and style from his time. If you read the inspiring first volume of Kaplan's diaries (*Communings of the Spirit*, edited by Mel Scult), you will perceive a man concerned not only with the clear, accessible articulation of his key ideas, but with a commitment to God-wrestling and a striving for authenticity and meaning. Such a soul, it seems to me, would be

disappointed by a static replication of his formulae and would feel that he had failed to transmit his ideas about reconstructing Jewish life to subsequent generations.

***We need more than replications of Reconstructionism's past formulations.*** It is through innovation that we stay true to Kaplan's drive for authenticity and for a contemporary, relevant Judaism rooted in tradition and peoplehood. By studying Kaplan's thought on the reconstruction of the Jewish people, as well as other past and present Reconstructionist perspectives, we can keep our innovation grounded in the principles that have helped us evolve and grow to this point. Using the term "Reconstructionist" to support a personal preference without study, values clarification and willingness to see the needs of the community as on a par with our individual needs is not the democracy Kaplan had in mind.

Yet for all of the diversity of personality and practice within our 100-plus affiliates, Mordecai Kaplan's core ideas of religious naturalism, egalitarianism, democratic decision-making, and



an empowered rabbinate and membership have produced dynamic, creative communities. These communities share many important characteristics: gender equality, shared leadership, a welcoming atmosphere, lifelong educational practices, liturgical and ritual creativity, a serious embrace of tradition, a commitment to *tikkun olam* and mutual support, and a conscious search for meaningful, sustainable lives as Jews and as human beings on the planet.

***The theme for this year's JRF leadership workshop, "Exploring Reconstructionism: A Leadership Approach,"*** grew out of a number of discussions the JRF has had with rabbis and lay leaders across North America, who felt a need for a movement wide exploration of the foundational ideas of Reconstructionism and how they inform our communities and our decision-making. Increasingly, our expanding membership and leadership have been struggling to articulate what the "it" is that produces the warm, inclusive, participatory, egalitarian communities that we have come to value so dearly. Our movement has a whole new generation of members who are not well versed in Kaplanian thought or Reconstructionist principles, even as they are proud and active participants in the movement. So the workshop and its accompanying 500- page resource book were developed in response to this need. The new edition of *Exploring Judaism: A Reconstructionist Approach*, by Rabbis Rebecca Alpert and Jacob Staub, was the required text. Over 200 lay leaders, rabbis, staff and members of JRF communities participated in the workshops and regional *shabbatonim* that explored these themes.

After the Palo Alto workshop (the first in this year's series), hosted by Keddem Congregation, many participants also had the opportunity to continue their learning at a three-day academic conference at Stanford. Organized by Professor Arnold Eisen, a leading Kaplan scholar, the conference featured speakers delivering papers inspired by the 70th anniversary of the publication of Kaplan's groundbreaking *Judaism as a Civilization*. Speakers included scholars, both Jewish and non-Jewish, and both new to and familiar with Kaplan's writings. Mel Scult, Kaplan's biographer, and Rabbi Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College were the two scholars representing our movement. In his opening remarks, Arnie Eisen described the mission of the conference as engagement "in a lively discussion with Kaplan's ideas and their relevance to us today." The thematic overlap between the conference and our workshop series made for a very stimulating experience.

***The diversity of opinions about Kaplan's thought, like the diversity within our movement,*** was noted by Professor Deborah Dash Moore of Vassar College at the close of the conference. Diversity, she said, is a sign of creativity, and Kaplan considered creativity to be "a function of God's presence in the world." Kaplan's notion of creativity includes a call for the reaffirmation of Jewish peoplehood and the transformation of Judaism. Thus we have entered, she said, into the "second century of Mordecai Kaplan."

Professor Eisen noted that Kaplan was insistent on a "maximalist Judaism," with Torah, interpreted in a contemporary light, providing a way of life. This maximalist approach remains central to Reconstructionism, particularly in our approach to Jewish "values-based decision-making," which has increasingly become a trademark of our congregations. Its paradigmatic model consists of:

- Study of Jewish sources, traditions and practices.
- Study of current information from the social and natural sciences.
- Reflection on personal and communal values.
- Analysis of the impact of each possible decision on each affected party.
- Democratic and inclusive processes that maximize the number of participants along the way to a final decision.

***In our workshop, we invited participants to examine decision-making*** within their congregations in one of the following areas: religious services, board governance, operating practices, money and financial resources, the rabbi-congregational relationship, education, sense of community, and the larger world within which our congregations live.

We also looked at some leading models of values-based decision-making that already exist in



our movement. The "Community Covenant" of the Jewish Reconstructionist Congregation of Evanston, Illinois, for example, is a set of twelve individual and communal mutual expectations that the entire community signed onto after a lengthy communal process. New members are now presented with this covenant to help them understand and commit to the community. Dorshei Tzedek in Newton, Massachusetts, as another example, developed an approach to dues after a long study of Jewish values about money as a spiritual tool. We looked at the many enriching guidelines for communal practice at Adat Shalom in Bethesda, Maryland; at the capital campaign of Mishkan Shalom in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; at the new kashrut policy at Agudas Achim in Attleboro, Massachusetts; at the approach to compassionate, respectful discussion of Israel practiced at Darchei Noam in Toronto, Ontario; and at the variety of excellent educational and community-development resources available through JRF.

***Kaplan spoke of God as the Process that makes for the fulfillment of our human potential.*** When we enter into discussion of an important issue in our community, therefore, we are entering The Process — we are on sacred ground. Godliness can manifest through the approach and content of our decision-making. This Process makes for "salvation," in Kaplan's terms, as we move towards an agreed-upon outcome that ideally brings us and our communities into greater self-realization. We are, in short, striving for a Process that contains Godly values and yields an outcome that fulfills the mission of our community and the spiritual growth of the participants.

Of course, we can misuse the idea of democratic participatory process to block needed action and consign decision-making to an endless process of processing. We may overuse Jewish values-based decision-making by applying it to every issue instead of saving it for key issues of community identity and policy. We can also hide behind anti-authoritarian tendencies to undermine rabbis and leaders by insisting that everyone needs to approve every decision or that consensus is required at every turn. The disempowering of leadership simply allows for influence to be exerted subtly and often implicitly, without evaluation and discussion.

That said, our movement's core Reconstructionist values and decision-making processes have very much produced dynamic and creative communities that, for all of their diversity, share a generally cohesive and familiar set of norms and policies. Our point has not been to build a Judaism where "anything goes," but one in which much is possible.

***Yale University's Jon Butler made the following observation at the Kaplan conference:*** that Kaplan viewed religion as "an active process that must be continually reengaged." Truth, said Butler, is not fixed, but always in flux. One of Kaplan's goals in reconstructing Jewish life was to create social ethics through "a process of engagement with action by men and women now," through moral action and creativity in the present, rather than through mere obedience to the past. (Butler observed, however, that supernaturally "revealed" religions have actually prospered in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, in defiance of Kaplan's critique of traditional religion as unable to navigate modernity.)

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

The hunger for meaning and purpose in our increasingly globalized world and Hubble enhanced universe has moved us beyond the discussion of Kaplan's day about theism and atheism to a discussion about how to live more Godly and religiously authentic lives in a culture that champions individualism and personal happiness over communal commitment and peoplehood. (The "sovereign self," said Arnie Eisen in his closing remarks at the conference,



"is not compatible with the future of the Jewish people," unless that sovereign self voluntarily commits to a community and a Source greater than the self. This means, he concluded, sacrificing some sovereignty for the sake of gaining a greater Self and peoplehood.)

Our embrace of egalitarianism since the founding of our movement has meant not only inclusion of women's voices and feminist concerns, but a need for Jewish men to find a meaningful role in con-temporary congregations, and a striving to support gay and lesbian Jews, interfaith families, non-Jews committed to Reconstructionist communities, and Jews of multicultural heritage, among others.

Finally, in our modern "global village," many Reconstructionist communities are responding creatively to the influence and challenges of Eastern religions and "human potential" movements. Examining how our concepts of God affect our concepts of leadership and our behavior as community-builders was a very enriching learning experience in our leadership workshops.

"When religion is grounded in supernaturalism," said Sheila Devaney of the Iliff Theological Seminary at the Kaplan conference, "special processes and intermediaries" are needed to access the inaccessible. This sets up hierarchies and beliefs such as "choseness" and miraculous Divine intervention. Mordecai Kaplan, said Devaney, rejected authoritarianism and embraced participatory democracy. Such democracy has been a hallmark of Reconstructionist communities and continues to walk hand-in-hand with our bottom-line values of egalitarianism, rabbinic freedom of expression, commitment to lifelong learning and deep wrestling with the Jewish tradition, to produce a cornucopia of sacred communities.

***As we enter "the second century of Mordecai Kaplan,"*** intellectual rigor, emotional honesty and spiritual creativity will enable us to continue to evolve with a deep relationship to our Jewish tradition, to our movement's foundational ideas, and to global issues of environmental, political, economic and spiritual sustainability. In my years serving JRF, I have been ever more inspired by our movement-wide commitment of time, resources and spirit to the ongoing creation of an authentic and meaningful Judaism that can be central to our lives and to the generations that follow us.

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Rabbi Shawn Israel Zevit is JRF Director of Outreach and External Affiliations.**



RECONSTRUCTIONISM TODAY

יהדות מתחדשת היום

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*a voice  
for  
creative  
Jewish  
living*

## Becoming a Reconstructionist Affiliate

*For Temple Beth HaTefilah, Affiliation Was a Two-Year Process  
By SAM SCHRAGER, Ritual Committee Chair, Temple Beth HaTefilah*

**FOUNDED IN 1937**, our 117-household community is in Olympia, the capital of Washington State. Rabbi Mama 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.



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

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.



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## **OTHER RECENTLY AFFILIATED JRF COMMUNITIES INCLUDE:**

- **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.

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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



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 *heykish* (warm, homey) qualities. For many in our community, Reconstructionism appears to have spoken to the heart.

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## Chapel Hill Kehillah

Dear Friend,

The Chapel Hill Kehillah Board of Trustees is considering whether the congregation should affiliate with the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation. This issue arose with the decision to purchase the Chapel Hill Bible Church. We recognized that the Kehillah needs to define its religious identity if we are to raise funds and draw new members. The Kehillah Board also felt that as Jews we need to be connected to a larger Jewish community, to become part of the educational and institutional networks that link us a people. When we approached a promising rabbinic candidate, we were told that a rabbi would likely demand affiliation before considering the position. Rabbis want the professional networking and financial security that movements provide.

The Kehillah considered the choices of affiliation. We have brought to the community the regional director of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism and the outreach director of the Reconstructionist Federation. We have had communications with the Reform movement's Union of American Hebrew Congregation. We also have the option of remaining independent.

In considering our choices of affiliation, the Board recognizes that the area already supports thriving Reform and Conservative congregations. As we all know, the Kehillah's membership is religiously diverse, and affiliation with the Reform or Conservative movements is likely to alienate or even disenfranchise certain members. More practically, the Reform movement has territorial guidelines that prevent our joining them even if we were to so choose, and the Conservative movement has doctrines on issues such as patrilineal descent that are problematic to us. We want the Kehillah to be a religious center where traditionalists and liberals can find a Jewish home, to worship together or separately. However religiously diverse our members, we can all join to educate our children, study texts, celebrate holidays, and meet other Jews socially.

The Board feels that Reconstructionist Judaism seems best able to accommodate our desire to both affirm diversity and build community. According to a recent statement,

The Reconstructionist movement defines Judaism as more than a religion. It is a civilization, encompassing history and literature, art and music, land and language, values and traditions. The Jewish people's experience of God, Torah, and peoplehood has evolved throughout history. Jewish texts provide a record of human encounters with the divine and represent the ongoing search for meaning in life.

Reconstructionist Jews celebrate the importance of creating community. Congregations and havurot in the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation (JRF) take pride in being inclusive. Our warm, diverse communities... [reflect] the many faces of contemporary Jewry. As a result, people find Reconstructionist congregations open, inviting and participatory. JRF communities are autonomous and democratic, unified by a respect for Jewish tradition and commitment to Reconstructionism, rather than uniformity of ritual or ideas.

Reconstructionism thus allows us the freedom to create the community that we want while affiliating us to a larger whole. We can maintain our traditional Shabbat services while enhancing our creative offerings. A synagogue building will open even more possibilities.

The Reconstructionist Federation offers an array of services including:

- Rabbinic placement and affiliation through the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association and Reconstructionist Rabbinical College
- Support for educational programs at all age levels including family-based educational materials, a speaker's bureau, and religious school curriculum planning and development.
- Networking with Young Judea for Zionist camps and programming and their own camp.
- Consulting services for fundraising, budgeting, leadership, programming, membership development, social action, and long-range planning.
- Publications including the quarterly *Reconstructionism Today* magazine, which is sent to all members, and a growing shelf of liturgical materials and prayer books.



***Brit Kehillah- A Community Covenant:  
The JRF Guide to The Process of Affiliation***

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“Reconstructionist Judaism encourages individuals and congregations to make informed decision about their religious practices in a democratic manner, “ according to their statement, “Tradition: A Vote, Not a Veto.” Although the Kehillah Board has discussed affiliation for some time, the Board id not want to act until the membership was educated on the issue and has an opportunity to comment. The Board wants your informed vote before making a decision. IF you have questions, please call a Kehillah officer or Board member. We also have Reconstructionist literature at Franklin Square.

We ask each membership household to cast one vote. Votes may be split in half.

\_\_\_\_ Our household recommends affiliation of the Chapel Hill Kehillah with the Reconstructionist Federation.

\_\_\_\_ Our household does not support the affiliation of the Chapel Hill Kehillah with the Reconstructionist Federation.

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



# Jewish Community of Amherst

תקהילה היחודית של אמרסט



May 2002 Iyar/Sivan 5762 Vol. No.1 Issue No. 10

## *Message From Co-President Beth Eisenberg*

I write it is a beautiful Spring day, with the scent of flowering bushes and birdsong in the air. It is difficult to believe sitting here that so much of the world is at war. The events in Israel are harrowing and it is so difficult to even imagine at this point how peace can be found. I implore you, whatever your political beliefs are about the situation, to pray for peace, and also to find a way to urge our leaders to be a constructive force for peace.

Closer to home, our community continues to prosper, and to struggle with the important issues of community life. CAS sponsored an informative and provocative afternoon last month, and continues this month with more opportunities for the community to clarify and enact our values regarding money. The Religious School offered a wonderful matzo brei brunch, which was a lot of fun and very scrumptious. Our scrip program is off to a great start, and promises to be a success. The golf tournament to benefit the Tzedakah Fund is coming up soon! Programs of all sorts are well attended; it is a pleasure to see us learn how to utilize our new space. The Rabbi Search Committee is still working hard to find us an excellent candidate for our congregation. You will shortly, if you have not already, receive your packet pertaining to the semiannual meeting, scheduled for June 2. The most major agenda item is the community vote on whether to affiliate. At our April meeting, the Board of Directors of the JCA voted unanimously to accept the recommendation of the Affiliation

Committee to affiliate with the Reconstructionist movement We did so after reviewing the results of the survey that over half of the community responded to. These results in full appear in the packet: in brief, the results were strongly in favor of affiliation with the Reconstructionists, whether or not a Rabbi is found.

I want to say clearly that while the Board has voted our recommendation, the Community vote is what decides this issue. Please come and make your wishes regarding this very important decision known. It is important that all members vote, so please make sure that you are in good standing with all your financial obligations to the JCA, and please come vote 00 June 2. Do not assume that the outcome is clear without your voice; we need to have everyone's active participation in this process.

Also, regardless of the outcome of the vote, our intention is that the community remains open to all who are interested in Judaism; and continue to be egalitarian, tolerant and vibrant. No issue can divide us if we do not choose to let it do so. My hope is that we can all continue to work together to realize this vision in whatever way the community decides to do so. This is a wonderful community; many, many people work hard in millions of small and large ways to make it so. I am so grateful to be a part of the Jewish Community of Amherst.



## **Affiliation Committee Update**

### **Bob Feldman, Chair**

The Affiliation Committee sponsored an open forum on January 8. At that time members shared their views on affiliation, discussing both the potential benefits and costs of affiliation. Because the decision to affiliate clearly relates to the rabbinic search, the Affiliation Committee is waiting for greater clarity from the search process before proceeding with its deliberations. When that occurs, we expect to poll the community and make a recommendation to the Board.

In the meantime, the Affiliation Committee continues to welcome input from the community. There are also packets of material from both the Reform and Reconstructionist movements available in the JCA office. The Committee also wanted to share the following thoughts from Rabbi Weinberg, which were distributed at the Open Forum.

#### A Few Thoughts on Affiliation from Rabbi Weinberg

I was unable to be present at the January 8 community discussion of affiliation and wanted to share a few personal reflections with the community.

- 1. I attended the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC) because I resonated with their approach toward Jewish community, practice and theology. I was especially interested in their emphasis on lay-rabbinic models of cooperation and the very strong role of the laity in leading the community. The leadership I have offered the community has been inspired by the training I received at the RRC. Certainly there have been other important influences in my life, including the havurah, Jewish feminism, Camp Ramah and the Conservative movement, experiences in Israel and what is now called Jewish renewal. However, the synagogue movement that has truly been most present in my approach has been Reconstructionist.
- 2. I believe the JCA has benefited from my affiliation with the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association and my ongoing connection with the RRC. I have had a place to turn and colleagues, and faculty to consult on a myriad of issues. I have benefited from conferences and committees, literature and on-line access. We have used the Reconstructionist Kol HaNeshamah prayer series and other resources in adult and youth education. Many graduates of the RRC have worked here for periods of time including Rabbis Ilyse Kramer, Miriam Klotz, Shawn Zevit and Kevin Hale. Other rabbis and teachers associated with the Reconstructionist movement visited the JCA and taught here including Rabbis Rebecca Alpert, Arthur Green, Marcia Prager, Rami Shapiro, Leila Berner, and Tykvah Freimer-Kensky.
- 3. It is important to consider, in my view, that if the community remains unaffiliated and hires an unaffiliated rabbi, the community will lose an important but often invisible resource, namely access to the ways the movement connects the community to the larger Jewish world.
- 4. In my view, the lay community would benefit greatly from an association with a movement such as the JRF, Jewish Reconstructionist Federation. JCA leaders would have support in personnel and materials in a huge array of common issues that confront similar congregations. Our educator would have a network of colleagues; our youth would have a cohort of like-minded youth from all over the U.S.
- 5. Joining a movement, especially the JRF, would give our members a greater opportunity to have an impact on the larger Jewish world. Many of our former presidents and board members would be a great asset as leaders of the movement involved in the spiritual and organizational development of the Jewish people in a way that transcends our own community but may also draw upon our successes and experiences.
- 6. I do not think the JCA will experience a loss of autonomy by its association with the JRF. The principles of JRF are in tune with the principles of the JCA. The JRF advocates that communities govern themselves in ways that the JCA has already learned how to govern itself. This community has a desire to meld tradition and change in ways that are highly consistent with the teachings of Mordecai Kaplan and the emergence of the Reconstructionist movement.



Dear Hevre,

I am delighted and honored to have been asked to write a column for your newsletter in advance of my seeing you again. Your President asked me to share some of my perspective on what the process of affiliation is and how being part of JRF benefits a community.

First of all, let me say a word about the "R" word. Think of Reconstructionism as a bridge between Jewish tradition of old and contemporary Jewish life. We are a grass-roots movement of people who wish to sustain the vibrant spiritual life of Judaism and to experience the richness of the treasury of Jewish tradition.

Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionism, described Judaism as the evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people. As Jews, belonging to a Jewish community is a core traditional value, an inherent responsibility of being a member of the Jewish people. Supporting the institutions of the Jewish community is crucial to maintaining its vitality and strength. These organizations, such as JRF, provide prayer books, the training and placement for rabbis, educational texts, youth and camping programs, consulting services and many other resources that we often take for granted. By belonging, we move from being passive receivers of these contributions to Jewish life, to reciprocating this effort and having a voice in their creation. The growth of Jewish communities is due in large part to the work and accumulated expertise of these organizations, but they can only thrive by the support and input of individual communities.

Reconstructionist congregations and havurot operate with a substantial degree of autonomy. We expect that every affiliate will function in a participatory and democratic way, support the full equality of men and women, seek to include groups that have been traditionally marginalized from Jewish communal life, support the freedom of rabbinic expression, show concern for the Jewish people, and be a life-long learner. It is the privilege and holy task of each congregation to determine its own policies and practices on ritual and governance issues through: study, compassionately sharing and listening to each other's viewpoints, values-based discussion and decision-making, learning from other Reconstructionist communities, and using resources and guidance from JRF where needed.

In your president, Rich Levine's words, "I think the strengths of affiliation are many: support of a seminary; academic research leading to new ideas incorporated into the liturgy and expansion of opportunities for interfaith families; support for Jews in many unsupported areas such as the former Soviet Union; a place for us to channel social action in moments of both sustained need and moments of unexpected urgency; the development of support institutions like camps for Jewish youth; educational support through religious school curriculum; leadership development for lay leaders, and others."

To this I would add the numerous listserves where people exchange information about how they are approaching congregational issues such as leadership, money and values, tikkun olam, education, ritual, communications and issues related to being a president or rabbi. Programs, such as Camp JRF, the shabbaton we put on in Colorado two years ago, and the JRF biennial convention, recently held in Portland where we celebrated our 50th anniversary as a movement. Over the years I have witnessed so many examples of unaffiliated congregations spending enormous human and financial resource re-inventing the wheel in isolation from a shared universe of like values and approaches to Jewish communal life. As Rich mentioned, being part of a movement also represents you in the larger world. We at JRF have been at the table in recent national Jewish responses to the crisis in the Sudan, Presbyterian-Jewish relations, children's poverty issues, responses to the events in the Middle East, and a host of other global concerns.

I invite all of you to visit [www.jrf.org](http://www.jrf.org) and become more informed in advance of my visit with you. You can also listen to any one or more of our audio programs on the web and have me pay a personal visit to you in your home! I look forward to sharing sacred time in prayer, song and meaningful discussion with you in the near future,

B'Vrachah, Rabbi Shawn Zevit



The Board requests the Members consider the following as an affirmation of the Board's decision to submit an application for affiliation with the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation.

### **Community Affirmation**

The Members of Congregation Beth Evergreen gratefully acknowledge the longstanding partnership and relationship between Beth Evergreen and the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation, including:

- Beth Evergreen's adoption of JRF prayer books for Sabbath services, Holidays, and mourners services;
- The opportunities for discussion and leadership of services at Beth Evergreen by JRF rabbis over the past several years;
- The support and encouragement by JRF of a values based process consistent with JRF principles, including notably the selection and hiring of our first full-time rabbi;
- Beth Evergreen's desire to develop closer relationships with other JRF affiliated communities in Colorado and beyond;
- Beth Evergreen's desire to further incorporate curriculum and educational approaches developed by JRF;
- The commitment of both JRF and Beth Evergreen to inclusive and diverse approaches to building a vibrant Jewish community, including meaningful opportunities for interfaith households in Jewish life.

The Members recognize that the Board of CBE has carefully considered the financial and budgetary aspects of membership in JRF, and; that the Board has consistently included the Members in a dialogue, including with reference to JRF and Reform materials and speakers representing those respective organizations. The Members acknowledge that the Board has, in an open meeting process, voted unanimously to submit an application for Membership in JRF, and has informed the Members that JRF has preliminarily reviewed that application and has provided positive indications that CBE would likely be warmly received as a new affiliate.

Wherefore the Members of Congregation Beth Evergreen are pleased to enthusiastically endorse and affirm the decision of the Board of Directors to submit an application for membership to the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation.

All in favor, say aye. Those opposed, say nay.

[Unanimously affirmed: On the clear voice vote of the Members present, the foregoing affirmation has been adopted.]

**The Motion for Affirmation passed with unanimity on a voice vote. There was a palpable feeling of accomplishment, and many members remarked on how pleased they were that we have found a great fit, source of institutional support, and ability to extend our sense of organized Jewish community involvement well beyond the Front Range mountain community.**

**On behalf of our community, thank you and your peers within JRF for several years of intelligent dialogue as we went through our process. We are particularly respectful and grateful toward you and JRF for your help in finding our community a wonderful new rabbi, the satisfaction we have enjoyed by using JRF prayer books and resources, and equally so for the longstanding commitment JRF has had toward creating vibrant inclusive Jewish communities.**



**RABBINIC REFLECTIONS- RABBI JEREMY SCHWARTZ,  
BNAI ISRAEL, WILLIMANTIC, CT 2002 (AFFILIATED WITH JRF, JULY 2002)**

Our congregation will be making an extremely important decision this month at the annual meeting. We will be considering and voting on the Reaffiliation Committee's (and Board's) recommendation that we affiliate with the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation. Here's what I want to clarify: I've heard that some congregants are under the impression that, because of my own Reconstructionist affiliation, this is a vote about me, or that it's a vote of confidence in me that will determine whether I stay or leave. Let me therefore state clearly, as I have at the Reaffiliation committee meeting and at the Board meeting, that I don't consider this a vote about me. At least for the short period visible in my crystal ball, the choice of Reform or Reconstructionist affiliation will not affect my tenure here. I've worked comfortably in both movements, and could do so again. I've assured the Board that I am committed to contributing to the stability and growth of this congregation and will, no matter the affiliation chosen, negotiate in good faith to stay here for a second contract.

More importantly, such an important decision should not be based on such a narrow consideration as the current rabbi. This is about what sort of rabbis we hope the next several will be over many decades. It is about who we are and who we wish to become. It's about what will allow us to grow as individuals and as a community. It's about where we can make our best contribution to the richness of Jewish life and the healing of our world.

Having said that, I also don't think it would be fair to not share my understanding of some differences between Reconstructionist and Reform Judaism and the reasons for my preference for the former. (The same differences could be your reasons for preferring Reform, and that would be important for us to know.)

**Community.** First, while Reconstructionism, like Reform, recognizes the importance of individual autonomy and rights, it places a greater emphasis than Reform on the counterbalancing need for community. Reconstructionism affirms the importance of social relationships in our spiritual lives, and our need to belong to this community and to the Jewish people. It invites us to share our Jewish paths, learning from and teaching each other, making Judaism a communal, rather than a solely private affair. To illustrate this, I remember a particular meeting of the Reform Rabbis of Greater Toronto. We were discussing Bnai Mitzvah receptions. The cause of our discussion was a rash of teenage synagogue vandalism at these affairs. The gathered Reform rabbis also bemoaned that many of the parties were in a spirit absolutely antithetical to any of the Jewish values purportedly accepted by the Bnai Mitzvah. Nonetheless, one of the senior of them stated, and they all concurred, that there was nothing to be done about that; the tone of the party is solely the individual family's choice. Reconstructionists would typically have thought this was at least a topic for communal and rabbinic teaching and learning. Individuals within a Reconstructionist congregation might still retain the right to have whatever kind of party they want, but autonomy wouldn't be emphasized to such a degree that Jewish values that actually make a difference in how we run our lives could not be discussed.

The community emphasis of Reconstructionism fits very well with the way we have been doing things here at Temple Bnai Israel. We value our shared joy and strive for mutual support. Our decision making process has been one of shared engagement, with rabbinic leadership, in the teachings of our heritage, and a mutual effort to learn from those teachings in our own context and way.

**God-talk.** I value that Reconstructionists typically talk about God a lot, and that they do so in ways that I have found to be mind-opening and spirit-opening for myself and for many of the people I've served. There is no single Reconstructionist theology, but there are some general tendencies: Reconstructionists tend to think that God's nature cannot be fully captured in human language and that, therefore, when we describe God we are at best using metaphors that we hope point in the right general direction. They often, though not universally, tend to suspect that "Father" and "King" capture some aspects of God's nature and our relationship with God, but are also misleading in other ways. In particular, they often are influenced by Jewish theologies that descend from Maimonides' (1135-1204) insistence that God does not have a body, and is not anything like physical things. In addition to Maimonides, important influences include Kabbalistic teachings about God as Infinite Source or about the universe as a manifestation of God, as well as the teachings of Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionism, who tended to speak of God as the Process of ultimate goodness and fulfillment in the universe (among many other formulations). They are committed to theologies that do not blame suffering on the misdeeds of the sufferer. Reform Judaism exhibits a rock-solid foundation of faith in God, and affirms that a wide variety of theologies are legitimate



Jewish understandings for each individual. But it's been my experience that the active searching and questioning about God that is typical of Reconstructionists helps many alienated Jews find a way to make Judaism their spiritual, God-centered path.

**Informality.** The Reconstructionists are a small and relatively informal group, and I like that.

**Chosenness or the lack thereof.** The idea of the Jews as the "Chosen People" has had a lot of different meanings to Jews throughout the ages. To some it has been a statement of our superiority to non-Jews, or an affirmation that God likes us best. To others, it's meant that we have a particular role to play in the world that's important, but not necessarily better than other roles. Or maybe the role is better, but it's not because we, the Jews, are better. The first generation of Reconstructionists felt that the idea of chosenness did more harm than good, by encouraging (consciously or not) chauvinism and insulting the non-Jews in our midst. They therefore mostly excised it from the Siddur. Some contemporary Reconstructionists disagree with that decision; most, including me, still agree. Either way, I value that Reconstructionism raises this as an important question.

- **Civilizational approach.** Reconstructionists speak of Judaism as an "evolving religious civilization." By "civilization," they mean that Judaism is more than a philosophy, more than what your average Protestant means by a "religion." While no Jewish denomination denies that Jewish arts, land, language, and literature are important or to be cherished, they are not central to other denominations in the way that they are to Reconstructionists. For Reconstructionists, hamantaschen and Israeli poetry are not nice add-ons; they are part of what makes Jewish civilization work. I like that breadth of vision.

- **Innovation and tradition.** This is one of the things I most value about Reconstructionism, but have always had trouble stating concisely. The Reconstructionists have often been the source of innovations that seem to fit into the tradition and that are later adopted by Reform and Conservative Jews. This ranges from the first Bat Mitzvah in 1922 to styles of worship now being spread by the multi-denominational synagogue revitalization effort "Synagogue 2000." I have thought that this aptitude for 'traditional innovation' stemmed from three factors. On the one hand, a recognition that Judaism has always changed over the centuries in response to new conditions and a belief that we also not only may, but must change it to pass it on with as much vigor as possible to the next generation. On the other hand, Reconstructionists have both a respect for tradition and an understanding of the importance of distinctive Jewish ritual and practices. (This combination explains, for example, why Reconstructionists have been leaders in recent efforts to invent a ritual for initiating baby girls into the Jewish covenant.) A third factor is an insistence that actions and words, even Hebrew ones, have meanings and that we should hesitate to say them if we don't mean them. Deb Savage has taught me a fourth factor: the structure of the movement and the way it encourages innovation that comes out of individual communities and not just from the seminary. Those are some of the important aspects of Reconstructionism that have attracted me to it.

Finally, though, I want to emphasize again how important it is that, whether we choose Reform or Reconstructionist, we affiliate with someone. It's important because of the support we'll receive from a national movement in developing our programs for both children and adults. It's important because of the support we'll receive in our governance and in raising the money it takes to run the shul fairly and effectively. It's important because it will recharge our batteries and help us develop and maintain leadership. It's important because without it we are too isolated. It's important because without affiliation it will be extremely difficult to get a good rabbi when the time comes that I do leave. And, finally, it's important because it's the right thing to do: to contribute to wider Jewish life by supporting those activities that we can't do on our own: training rabbis, developing curricula and teaching materials, being involved in the political arena, and so much more.

I look forward to seeing you at the annual meeting, as we determine this important piece of our congregation's future.

<p>"I like belonging to a Reconstructionist synagogue, because it means I'm a member of a warm and supportive community. I felt comfortable getting involved right from the beginning. I know that what I say and do makes a difference."</p> <p>- Member, Congregation Beth Israel, Media, Pennsylvania</p>
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If you have any further questions, please contact the JRF Department of Outreach at 215-885-5601 ext. 24, or [szevit@jrf.org](mailto:szevit@jrf.org).