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Who Is A Reconstructionist Jew?

By JRF

A Reconstructionist Jew has strong commitments both to tradition and to the search for contemporary meaning. Reconstructionists encourage all Jews to enhance their own lives by reclaiming our shared heritage and becoming active participants in the building of the Jewish future.

The Evolving Religious Civilization of the Jewish People

Reconstructionists define Judaism as the evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people.

By **evolving** we mean that Judaism has changed over the centuries of its existence. The faith of the ancient Israelites in the days of Solomon's Temple was not the same as that of the early rabbis. And neither of those faiths was the same as that of our more recent European ancestors. Each generation of Jews has subtly reshaped the faith and traditions of the Jewish people. Reconstructionist Jews seek to nurture this evolution. We see it as the lifeblood of Judaism, the power that allows Judaism to continue as a dynamic tradition in every age.

By **religious** we mean that Judaism is the means by which we conduct our search for ultimate meaning in life. God is the source of meaning. We struggle, to be sure, with doubts and uncertainties.

Reconstructionists affirm that struggle; we believe it is the duty of all Jews to question and to study in order to find unique paths to the divine. We believe in a God who inhabits this world and especially the human heart. God is the source of our generosity, sensitivity and concern for the world around us. God is also the power within us that urges us toward self-fulfillment and ethical behavior. We find God when we look for meaning in the world, when we are motivated toward study and when we work to realize the goals of morality and social justice.

By **civilization** we mean that Judaism is more than a religion. The Jewish people share historical memory and historical destiny. Judaism includes a commitment to our ancient homeland and language. We share a love for Jewish culture, Jewish morality and Jewish philosophy. We are heirs to a rich legacy of literary and artistic achievement, of laughter and tears, a legacy which continues to grow in our day.

By **the Jewish people** we mean that all Jews, whether by birth or by choice, are members of the extended Jewish family. We recognize a diversity of Jewish religious ideology and practice and seek to join with other Jews in accepting that diversity while working toward a share vision of Jewish peoplehood. The Reconstructionist philosophy affirms the uniqueness of the Jewish people and its heritage among the peoples of the world. However, our affirmation of Judaism's uniqueness implies no sense of superiority over others. Reconstructionists believe that all peoples are called to the service of righteousness, and we welcome dialogue with people of good will from all traditions.

The Past Has a Vote, Not a Veto.

The starting point of Reconstructionism is our quest to understand the historical and spiritual experience of the Jewish people. We believe "the past has a vote." Therefore we struggle to hear the voices of our ancestors and listen to their claim on us. What did this custom or that idea mean to them? How did they see the presence of God in it? How can we retain or regain its importance in our own lives? We believe "the past does not have a veto." Therefore we struggle to hear our own voices as distinct from theirs. What might this custom or that idea mean to us today? what might we borrow from

this custom to create a new tradition that is more significant for us today. When a particular Jewish value or custom is found wanting, it is our obligation as Jews to find a means to reconstruct it - to find new meanings in old forms or to develop more meaningful, innovative practices.

A vital, contemporary Judaism must respond fully to the changes in modern Jewish history: the Holocaust, renewed Jewish statehood, new and different family structures, the evolving relationships of men and women, as well as the role of religion in a universe threatened by both ecological and nuclear disaster. Only a combination of searching, questioning, and self understanding within the Jewish tradition will create a Judaism that speaks convincingly to the contemporary Jew.

What Makes a Reconstructionist Jewish Community Unique?

Orthodox Judaism has about it a seriousness and level of devotion that are truly admirable. We seek to retain that seriousness. Unlike Orthodoxy, Reconstructionism does not view Judaism as a total and immutable revelation from God to Moses at Sinai that is essentially unchanged through all generations. We see Judaism as the ever-evolving product of history, an ongoing attempt to forge a society based on holy values.

Conservative Judaism has made significant contributions to Jewish life in the realms of education and scholarship. While we support this effort, Reconstructionism diverges from Conservative Judaism in terms of priorities. We believe that the basic tenets of Judaism need to be re-examined and restated for our age. We see this as a more pressing priority than the particulars of Jewish law. Jews need to know why they should be Jewish at all before they worry about how to change details of observance. Concerning observance, we differ specifically on the issue of how far one may go in amending Jewish law and who has the right to be involved in that process. We believe that rabbis and scholars should work together with committed lay members of the Jewish community formulating guides to Jewish practice for our time. These guides should reflect a desire to protect and preserve tradition as well as an openness to creativity and evolution as we face a new age in Jewish society.

Reform Judaism emphasizes the centrality of the prophetic tradition and insists that standards of ethical monotheism be applied universally. We Reconstructionists affirm this emphasis and share in its commitment. Reconstructionism differs from Reform Judaism, however, concerning how much of the tradition needs to be preserved. Reconstructionists encourage Jews to give honest consideration to a wider range of traditional practice. We believe that Judaism is more than ethical monotheism. Judaism is the historic, unique and most satisfying way by which the Jewish people can find ongoing meaning in the great moments in our history and the special moments in our individual lives. Through Judaism, we dedicate ourselves to universal spiritual values that transcend any one individual, society or nation.

Israel: The Cradle of Jewish Civilization in Partnership with the Diaspora

Reconstructionists recognize Judaism as the civilization of the Jewish people. Reconstructionists affirm the attachment of our people to the Land of Israel - the site of our origins and the focus of our hope through the millennia. From its inception, Reconstructionism has been a Zionist movement. We are firmly committed to the building of the State of Israel and the establishment of a just and humane Jewish society there. We consider the Jewish national rebirth centered in Israel to be the greater accomplishment of the Jewish people in our century and encourage all Jews to develop their ties with the State of Israel. We emphasize the importance of visiting Israel, and we commend those Jews who commit their lives, through aliyah, to the rebuilding of our people's homeland.

While our support for Israel is unconditional, a variety of opinion exists within the Reconstructionist movement with regard to specific policies of the Israeli government. We are united in supporting efforts by the World Union for Progressive Judaism (with which we are affiliated) and others who work to strengthen religious freedom in Israel and to make Israel a religious home for all Jews.

At the same time, we believe that Diaspora communities, particularly those as strong as the ones in North America, are important centers of Jewish learning and cultural growth. Israel along serves as a laboratory for the creation of a fully Jewish society. But where Jews thrive as citizens in multi-ethnic societies, Jewish ideals can be integrated with the highest values of contemporary civilization in unique and important ways. We look forward, as Israel matures as a society and achieves peace and stability, to a more properly balanced relationship between Israel and the Diaspora. We believe that through mutual respect and cultural exchange, these two forms of Jewish living can enrich one another.

Living in Two Civilizations: A Commitment to Social Justice and Personal Ethics

Jews who now find themselves in democratic societies live primarily in a secular civilization - governed by non-Jewish legislatures and courts, speaking non-Jewish languages, singing popular music, working in secular environments with non-Jews, learning in non-Jewish schools, and structuring their lives according to accepted Western values. Reconstructionists call upon Jews to embrace this open, democratic society - not only because its structural pluralism does not require the abandonment of Judaism, but also because American ideal at their best coincide with Jewish ideals as they ought to be developed and reconstructed.

We have much to gain by incorporating contemporary mores into the Jewish civilization - with regard to the role of women, respect for individual liberties, and acceptance of cultural pluralism. Just as we seek to democratize the Jewish community, so also do we recognize the need to bring the insights of Jewish tradition to bear upon the issues that secular society confronts. Religious values coupled with ethical action have always influenced the evolution of North American society. The voice of Jewish tradition has been prominent among those seeking social reform. In recent years, the role of religion in society has been enhanced by the leading role that clergy and religiously committed individuals have taken in movements for racial justice, the elimination of poverty, and the pursuit of peace.

Reconstructionists support these efforts and participate actively in using religious tradition as a positive force for social change. We believe that Jews today are heirs to the prophets as well as to many generations of rabbis. We applaud the application of prophetic values of justice and compassion to all segments of our society. At the same time, we do not maintain that authentic Jews must adopt one political view to the exclusion of all others. Rather, we suggest that both the Jewish community and secular society have much to gain when committed Jews study their tradition in order to apply its insights to contemporary issues.

Within the realm of social action, the Reconstructionist movement works actively in several areas including international conflict resolution, hunger and civil rights. It has committed itself in particular to issues concerned with the environment. As we Jews concern ourselves with the spiritual and cultural legacy that we leave to future generations, we must also commit ourselves fully to such legacies as clean air, pure water and unpolluted soil. Personal as well as social ethics are an integral feature of Reconstructionist Judaism.

We affirm the centrality of ethical behavior in our lives and insist that traditional religious behavior, when not accompanied by the highest ethical standards, becomes a desecration of Judaism. We challenge our own communities to reach for the highest application of ethical standards.

Belonging to a Democratic Jewish Community in a Post-Halakhic Age

If *halakha* is defined as the Jewish process of celebrating, creating and transmitting tradition, Reconstructionist Jewish communities would certainly fit within the framework of *halakha*.

But if *halakha* has the meaning of a rigid body of law, changeable only under very rarefied circumstances, most Jewish people, including Reconstructionists, no longer accept its binding authority. While Reconstructionists are lovers of tradition and support community celebration of the Jewish sacred year and life-cycle events, we also believe that the face of the Jewish community is changing and that individuals have the right to adapt Jewish tradition to new circumstances.

Reconstructionist communities challenge Jews to participate fully in our shared Jewish civilization. From building a *sukkah* to appreciating Jewish music, from caring for the Jewish young and old to leading Torah study - community members should experience Jewish civilization in our day as fully as they experience secular civilization.

Judaism will continue to be a dynamic civilization only if we choose to participate, create and transmit vitality to future generations. Reconstructionist rabbis work in partnership with committed lay people to formulate guidelines that serve as Jewish touchstones for our times. These guidelines are presented and democratically considered in Reconstructionist communities as standards for enhancing the Jewish life of the individual and the community rather than as binding laws.

The Reconstructionist Vision of the Jewish Future

We Reconstructionists envision a maximalist liberal Judaism. This means Jewish life that is engaged in study, worship and action and yet is completely supportive of a Jew's full participation in secular life.

We hope for a Judaism that serves as a rich source of spiritual self-expression and moral challenge in the way we conduct our lives.

We dream of a Jewish people that will overcome divisions and realize its commitment to the single goal of transforming the world into one where all people are respected as bearers of the divine image.

We picture an Israel at peace and a Jewish people, in both Israel and the Diaspora, that will have the dedication, knowledge, and prosperity to develop an ever richer tradition to hand down to future generations.

Like all Jews, Reconstructionists are firm believers in the future. It is our dedication to the future, characterized by commitment and creativity, by the faithful heart joined to the open mind, that makes us proud of the Reconstructionist contribution to the ever-evolving heritage of the Jewish people.

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