



Excerpts from a conference call by Rabbi Deborah Waxman, Ph.D., president elect of RRC and the Jewish Reconstructionist Communities

Many of you have read the recent Pew Study on American Jewish identity, or you've read analyses of it or critiques of the analyses. It's definitely the hot topic in the Jewish press.

I am extremely heartened by the broadest conclusions of the study, which observe that:

- ***94 percent of American Jews say they are proud to be Jewish and have a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people and***
- ***42 percent of non-religious Jews still say that belonging is very important.***

This is extraordinary when we live in such an open society with so many choices. These findings are an affirmation of our Reconstructionist approach—our focus on the Jewish people who are building up the Jewish civilization.

This Moment Holds Opportunity

We know from our experience on the ground and from reading newspapers and studies that we are living in a volatile moment in American Jewish life. It's full of challenges, and I feel strongly that for the Reconstructionist movement, it is also especially full of opportunities.

I want to help make Judaism relevant for Jews and the people who love us. I want to give us and the next generation ways and reasons to be Jewish. I want us to help Jews find what we need to connect and grow—through engagement with our rich tradition and through engagement with community.

Our Reconstructionist Roots Apply

When Mordecai Kaplan put forward the idea of understanding Judaism as a civilization, he was insisting that we recognize that there are many entry points into Jewish living beyond religion—though he thought religion was vitally important.

Kaplan and his closest followers, and we after them, are adamant that there can be no single authority saying: "This, not that." Or: "This is the only way to be Jewish." We embrace this diversity not just as a sociological reality but also as a virtue.

And we have to remember that for Reconstructionists, peoplehood has always been about means and not ends. Belonging is extremely important, and we know also that Judaism is about behaving as well. We acknowledge that there are many different ways to be Jewish—to act Jewishly.

There are a lot of different ways to believe. We are interested in fostering all of those expressions that are in the service of promoting personal and communal growth, of fostering ethical behavior, of redeeming our broken world.

The Reconstructionist movement can *and should* be a resource for Jews and for people who love us, on our journeys. So through Reconstructionism, I want to make Judaism relevant and accessible to Jews at this moment in history.

What Can We Do Together?

I want to help us foster an approach to Judaism so that when people are looking for meaning, when they are seeking and even when they're not, they encounter wisdom or action—a ritual, individual or experience—that illuminates the moment in which they are living. They encounter something that lights the way at least the next few steps and that hopefully draws them into sustaining communities.

We Reconstructionists know that these points of entry may be “religious,” the way religion is conventionally understood, and they also may be cultural or educational or through activism. And they are almost always about transformative engagement. [In leading our movement] I will work so that Judaism is at least one place that people turn to—ideally the first—but at least a viable address.

How Do We Do This?

There are many ways to accomplish this: through sustaining our vibrant communities, through seeding new ones; through the work of Camp JRF. By fostering connections among Reconstructionists across geography, and including and looping in those who don't live near Reconstructionist communities; by generating resources that people can access on their own schedule; and by creating immersive experiences.

What About the Naysayers?

The press likes to tell a tale of denominational decline. [Yet] not only has the Reconstructionist movement stayed steady with its number of affiliates from previous years, but we have welcomed three new affiliates this year... [We have] a story that goes against that narrative that's out there. It's not one that the press seems so interested in reporting, but we are growing.

Why I'm Passionate About Leading Reconstructionist Judaism

If I, Deborah Waxman, want to remain Jewish, I don't have a choice. I cannot retreat into Orthodoxy. I can't observe *halakhah* as it's currently promulgated. I need to participate in—and sometimes to create—a Jewish community that enables me to be a whole person and that enables *you* to do so. I've said to my students and I say to you: To be in your complexity, to be whole as well, it's not about one standard that works for me. It's about expansiveness with substance.

This is the only way that I can be Jewish. And I really want to be Jewish. So I said to my students and I say to you: I'm so excited. I'm so grateful that there are so very many other people who are as passionate and as committed as I am to this project, and I thank you.