

THE ADVANTAGES OF A DENOMINATION

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Shortly before I was born, my parents went shul shopping in and around Montclair, N.J. My mother was looking for a community whose ritual practice felt tied to tradition, but whose values reflected the kind of progressive liberalism with which she grew up. As she tells the story, she didn't like the Reform synagogue because it felt too much like a church. The Conservative synagogue was out of the question, because, at the time, the Conservative movement wasn't ordaining women. On the recommendation of a friend, my parents joined Bnai Keshet, the new Reconstructionist congregation in the community.

This congregation has been my home for the past twenty-seven years, from *simchat bat* through my journey to the rabbinate. Reconstructionist community has been integral to my life, not merely because it is the movement in which I happened to have grown up, but because Reconstructionist Judaism has offered me a place to wrestle deeply with life's most perplexing questions, a place to grow spiritually, and a place to grapple with how the tradition should evolve and adapt

to our changing circumstances.

Today, many of my peers and rabbinic colleagues from other movements are asking important questions about the viability of "denominational" Judaism. They turn to me and ask if I believe that, in hindsight, it was necessary to create a Reconstructionist movement at all – after all, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the father of Reconstructionist thought, initially resisted the creation of an independent Reconstructionist movement, believing he could accomplish his goals of transforming Jewish law and theology within the Conservative movement that had been his home.

TRANSDENOMINATIONAL

Kaplan believed that Reconstructionism was not a denomination, per se, but a mode that all Jews could adopt to practice Judaism. He felt confident that the best way to change the trajectory of the American Jewish future would be from within existing structures and institutions. He was convinced to change his mind only when he realized that American Jewry – and the Conservative movement in

particular – was not interested in or ready to adopt his vision.

Despite becoming a “movement,” Reconstructionism retains its commitment to Kaplan’s belief that Judaism can never be institutionalized. For Kaplan and Reconstructionists generally, Judaism is not only a religion but a civilization that is constantly evolving. As a civilization, Judaism fundamentally is the creation of the Jewish people. From that belief flows a democratic theology, in which community members are invited to experience ownership of the future of the Jewish tradition, and communal norms and practices can shift as quickly as the will of the community demands. In some sense, then, Reconstructionism is and always has been nondenominational or transdenominational.

Yet Reconstructionism has built for itself a denominational institutional structure. Whether this institutional structure is equipped to meet the needs of the changing Jewish landscape is a question that should be at the core of the Reconstructionist movement’s concerns.

This is not to say that I believe that the problem with contemporary Jewish life is institutionalism in general. Institutions allow us to leverage resources for common purposes. They connect the educational and communal experiences of Jews over our life span. In addition, movement-based institutions provide a system in which

the training of teachers, lay leaders, and rabbis can be molded in constant dialogue with the constituencies they will serve.

Most significantly for progressive Jews, institutions allow our vision to be shared across broad geographies and landscapes. This ability to organize and galvanize the power of our supporters and practitioners, no matter where they live, is what allows us to shape the future of the Jewish world. We need institutions. Thus, the question before the Reconstructionist movement today is not whether we need institutional forms of Judaism, but whether our current institutions are the best structures to meet our needs. Are these institutions properly linked with each other and with outside partners in a way that will maximize our ability to be effective in sharing our Torah with the world?

INSTITUTIONAL ISSUES

Currently, the Reconstructionist movement is made up of three distinct institutional bodies: The Jewish Reconstructionist Federation (JRF), which organizes and supports Reconstructionist congregations, publications, youth, and camping; the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC), which is the training institution for our rabbis; and the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association (RRA), the professional association for Reconstructionist rabbis.

None of these bodies is charged with the responsibility of asking the very question that prompted the birth of the movement in the first place: What is Judaism? Nor of the corollary: Are our institutions and modes of decision making fulfilling the purposes of Judaism and Jewish community in our day? No single body or board in the movement is charged with asking these questions, just as no body or board is responsible for guiding the vision of the movement as a whole. Perhaps as a result of this, or perhaps because the tasks of managing congregations, youth, camping, rabbis and rabbinic education are so large, it appeared until recently that the Reconstructionist movement was beginning to fail to live up to Mordecai Kaplan's own standard: Above all, Jewish community must be organized to meet the needs of Jews today.

Recently, however, this problematic condition has begun to change. Professional and lay leadership from the three constituent institutions of the Reconstructionist movement have been meeting regularly to envision the movement's future with these very questions in mind. In a May 2010 memorandum to the RRC community, the college president, Rabbi Dan Ehrenkrantz, announced that this visioning process is likely to result in the reorganization and consolidation of key movement services and institutions. As we consider the

viability of movement structures in the American Jewish landscape, the success of this shift must be measured by its success at responsibly deploying resources that build, sustain and support dynamic, progressive Jewish life that matches the needs articulated by the American Jewish community.

I believe that even with an institutional redesign, the movement's continued relevance for the future will depend not only on its success in the areas previously identified as a movement's core (congregations, youth, camping, rabbinic training, education, etc.), but also on the development of an Internet-based community and the establishment of extracongregational community life.

The Internet is an obvious arena for improving communications between denominational institutions and their affiliated members. Reconstructionism, as a movement that has always prized the grass roots, has a unique opportunity to take advantage of the Internet to democratize participation in Torah, prayer, and social justice – and it has seized it. In his May 2010 memo, Ehrenkrantz announced that RRC would allocate 10 percent of its budget for the coming year to a Digital Outreach Initiative designed to “create new forms of Jewish life” online.

In tandem with that initiative, I'd like to suggest that the Reconstructionist movement consider

the role of extracongregational Jewish life in its strategy for the future. The Reconstructionist movement has long touted community as one of its key governing values, but community as a category is not static. In the past, Jewish communities may have been identifiable primarily by geography or symbolic institutions like synagogues or Jewish community centers, but this is no longer exclusively true. Patterns of living in community are changing, and an exploration of the approaches of other Jewish communal organizations reacting to these changes will ultimately be important for the Reconstructionist movement. In order to determine how best to approach the future, we can learn from some of the best practices emerging from organizations like Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life, Chabad-Lubavitch, and Pursue (the new alliance of the American Jewish World Service and AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps), which are seeking to engage Jews where they are.

Over the past two years, while at RRC, I have worked for Hillel in the Philadelphia area. In recent years, Hillel has been spending an enormous amount of time and resources engaging students who, in congregational terms, would be labeled as “unaffiliated.”

Thousands of students across the country have been brought into active Jewish life through these initiatives, but – most importantly – only a relatively small percent of these students has ever actually walked through the door of a building that houses a Hillel. “In-the-building Judaism” isn’t what they need or want, but that doesn’t mean that they don’t want Judaism. They want Judaism in their dorm rooms, in their coffee shops, on their athletic fields, and in their own common spaces. Hillel has found ways to bring Judaism to students where they are. In order to be successful, movements and congregations are going to have to do the same thing.

The true test of Reconstructionism will not come by going “from strength to strength.” The true test of the Reconstructionist movement will come when we dare to take structural risks, and when we dare to create community in modes never previously imagined. As a democratically structured entity, the Reconstructionist community is well positioned to hear these clarion calls for change and to act upon them, but this is no guarantee that the response will come with the level of sophistication, creativity, and relevance that the times demand. That, only time will tell.