

The Reconstructionist
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Letters

On Negotiating Boundaries

Don't Fear the Melting Pot

To the Editor:

This particular topic was of great interest to me, as I administer and teach a family education program of intermarried families. I teach Judaica to the children. Our “boundaries” are well defined—they have all bought into my expectations. Will it work? I am assured that my “kids” know what is Jewish, have a Jewish role model in me and my staff. Their grip on Judaism is quite amazing. Do they sneak out for pepperoni pizza with their non-Jewish mom or dad—undoubtedly. Will they marry out of the faith (chances are they will marry out of one of the faiths of their mom or dad)? Do they think Judaism is all fun—pretty pictures and games like many synagogues I teach in emphasize? No. They are learning that Judaism is built on boundaries—laws—do’s and do not’s. Children accept this.

I may be the wrong person to talk to about boundaries—my mother and father told me that in order to cross the street I had to be damn sure I knew where I was going AND that I would be committed to staying there. I also believe that the melting pot is not such a terrible thing as long as you know who you are before you melt. The carrot in the stew still tastes like a carrot, looks like a carrot, and has all the properties of a carrot.

In reading this issue, some of the time I felt that I was being yelled at. “American Jews going to hell in a multi-ethnic handbasket—get your ticket now!” Perhaps I am oversensitive. I visit at least a hundred synagogues a year and see lots of Jews who are connected, involved and participating in their Judaism. This includes hundreds of teen leaders and non-professional volunteers. We are not dead.

Marilyn Price
Evanston, IL

Back to the Ghetto?

To the Editor:

“It is true that increased social contact with the Gentiles will prove a challenge to Judaism’s inherent strength,” wrote Mordecai Kaplan in his magnum opus, “but that challenge cannot be met by a defensive retreat.” Some sixty years later, Rabbi Kaplan’s successor as editor of the venerable *Reconstructionist* seems determined to prove the great man wrong, and has issued a call for renewed segregation of Jew from non-Jew in America (Herb Levine, “Jewish Boundaries and American Openness,” Fall, 1994). Although he never explicitly describes how or why, Dr. Levine views the current state of American life—its apparently limitless possibilities, or “boundarilessness,” specifically—as highly threatening and dangerous to the Jewish people.

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FROM THE EDITOR

About This Issue

In contemporary American discourse, the term “community” occupies a unique place. Invoked from all parts of the political spectrum, it is everywhere presented as a magic bullet for what ails us. Rarely do those who offer sound-bites take the time, however, to tell us what they mean by the term that supposedly represents our salvation. This is what we have asked our writers to do in this issue of *The Reconstructionist*. We asked them, as individuals, to think for us collectively: Why do we need to emphasize the value of building community? What kinds of communities ought we North American Jews to build? What do we need to build them? And, finally, what stands in the way of our building them?

In answering these questions, all our writers chose in a variety of ways to explore what Barry Schwartz in the subtitle to his piece calls “the uneasy tension between freedom and community.” On one side are words like freedom, individualism, voluntarism, mobility, choice, which define an important part of who we are and who we want to be. On the other—connection, commitment, conversation, commandment, covenant, and the many personal qualities that it takes to stay in relationship to one another over a long period of time. These too define who we are and want to be. Though probably an oversimplification to say that the one set of values represents Americanism and the other Judaism, it is quite striking that our writers feel the tug of each as polar opposites. Their essays take the values of these two civilizations as conflicting goods, and put them, as it were, into a laboratory centrifuge in order to clarify for all of us those forces and strategies that can draw us together and those that can pull us apart.

The issue is divided between pieces on “Envisioning Community,” and pieces on “Practicing Community.” The first group sets the stage by asking sociological, political, economic, organizational, and theological questions that have a bearing on how we constitute ourselves in community. The second group offers testimony about different kinds of institutions, each with its own story to tell. Several of these stories are from havurot, small, intimate Jewish communities. It is our conviction that havurot and synagogues have a great deal to teach one another, as they experiment with building face-to-face communities that are intentional and intensive, responsive and responsible. We look forward in future issues of this journal to sharing stories from a wide variety of settings as part of the evolving Torah of community-building in Reconstructionism.

Beginning with the current issue, we are creating an accompanying study guide, available from FRCH. We have also established special rates for bulk orders of the journal (see inside cover). We urge you to study these issues in community—whether in havurot, adult study-groups, congregational boards and committees, with or without professional leadership—as part of your own community-building process. Reconstructionist congregations have begun to use our previous issue on “Negotiating Boundaries” as a theme for community-wide retreat and, in a more targeted way, to help in decision-making processes about the role of non-Jews in Jewish worship. Please use our “Letters” column to keep us informed about your reactions to the issues we raise here.

About Future Issues

In the next issue, Fall, 1995, we celebrate the completion of this magazine’s sixtieth year by looking at “Kaplan and Our Contemporary Agenda.” Essays will explore Kaplan’s continuing relevance for our theory and practice in the fields of arts, civil religion, community, education, ethics, interfaith dialogue, the interface between philosophy and religion, and more. The essays will not be dusty Kaplan scholarship, but, rather, vital contemporary reflections of his continuing legacy for our movement and the American Jewish scene.

The Spring, 1996 issue will be titled “Towards Healing and Justice,” and will feature different sides of our continuing quest for *tikkun olam*, the repair of the world’s brokenness. The Fall, 1996 issue is scheduled to treat “New Intellectual Currents” and their impact on how we view Judaism and the religious enterprise. Potential writers should know that essays are assigned approximately 12-14 months in advance of the publication date.

Reimagining Jewish Community in America

BY ARNOLD EISEN

For the vast majority of Jews in this country community is by and large a fiction, a rhetoric, a mythic notion like “peoplehood” or “covenant.” It may well express some of their deepest (though inchoate) longings. It reminds them of what, at the surface or in the depths of awareness, they know: that this century has witnessed awful and amazing history that directly involves them. But this knowledge and this fiction are of little practical consequence, and have no actual presence in what lies before their eyes except at rare moments of peak experience. We have all probably shared in at least one such moment. Our federations and other organizations rely upon them to generate the dollars and energies required to sustain the common projects through which our people tries to live up to the ideas of social justice and mutual aid we hold of ourselves. There are “missions” to Israel, life-cycle rituals shared by a wider group than family or friends, or sessions of summer camp where for a few weeks at least

the world is Jewish. There are the meetings of minds and hearts at Rosh Hodesh groups, and intense and especially meaningful observances of Shabbat or Yom Kippur. And then we go back to the real world.

My aim in this essay is to reflect on what community might mean for American Jews in coming decades—how it might be more than a buzzword, and less than a dream—with the help of some recent trends in Western social thought. I will frame the issue with the help of two pieces by liberal political philosophers. The first is a summons to community by Robert Paul Wolff which excited me twenty-five years ago, and still moves me today. The second is a recent article by Michael Walzer which suggests that the communitarian critique of liberalism that I will echo in this essay articulates the “underside of sadness and discontent” which shadows the way we have chosen to live in America, but is unlikely to change us in any significant way and probably shouldn’t. Together, I think, the two pieces

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capture more than the difference between the 1960's and the 1990's. They suggest the hard choices American Jews must face if we are to build stronger communities in this country—connections to each other and our tradition that are compelling enough to hold us fast and profound enough to help us grow.

Two Views on Community

Wolff's chapter on "Community" in *The Poverty of Liberalism*¹ probably appealed to me so much in those late-night dorm sessions devoted to planning the community we would surely build together after graduation, because it raised the specter of totalitarianism and numbing conformity that haunts all imaginings of "organic" societies—and then banished that specter, assured us that we need not worry about it overmuch, if we kept the dignity and autonomy of rational individuals firmly in view. The argument, simply put, was that human beings are "by nature purposive beings." We pursue values. Among these are "social values" which are neither the same as "private values," nor compounded of private values or in any way reducible to them. Social values make "essential reference to reciprocal states of awareness among two or more persons." Community is one such value (and perhaps, though Wolff does not say so) the highest among them. It is, he writes, "the key to the discovery of the general good."

Wolff then assisted our imagining of community by enumerating three of its possible forms. There was, first

affective community—"the reciprocal consciousness of a shared culture." [One thinks in this connection of the sociologist Emile Durkheim.] The second was the community of labor, in which not only the product but the collective effort to bring it into being is a source of satisfaction and self-fulfillment. [Here one thinks of Marx's early writings on alienation.] Third, there was rational community, constituted by reflection among equals "who discourse together publicly for the specific purpose of social decision and action." [This parallels Jurgen Habermas's call for a "public sphere" characterized by precisely such discussion.]²

All three forms call to my mind, particularly as I write just before and just after Shabbat *Terumah*, the Israelites' building of the Tabernacle in the wilderness. Recall the scene. Immediately following the covenant at Sinai that has made them a people, the children of Israel embark on the task of becoming a people in fact and not merely in name, and do so first of all by joining together in a common labor. The work is full to overflowing with affective community. It is intended to create the space that will house the embodied presence of God; that space will be their center, the symbol of all that defines them as a nation and sets them apart from others. Moreover, in this community of labor each person must contribute something—and, we are told, in fact contributes far more than is required. Only the third form of community, rational discourse among equals, is

absent. Revelation has established hierarchy and a sort of reflection that is not only rational. And yet the Israelites' discourse, after Exodus and Sinai, was likely widely-shared—and rational planning and calculation, here as elsewhere in the text, are clearly evident. I will return to this narrative and its import for our concerns in a moment.

Before doing so, however, it is best to deflate both rhetoric and expectations a bit by considering Walzer's analysis of "The Communitarian Critique of Liberalism."³ Walzer first argues that two of the points made by communitarians (a group whose approach will become apparent in what follows) cancel each other out. One holds that we late twentieth-century Americans *really are* "radically isolated individuals, rational egotists, and existential agents, men and women protected and divided by their inalienable rights." We stand, if so, in dire need of the healthy dose of real togetherness for which books like Robert Bellah's *Habits of the Heart* have called. The other point, however, holds that we are not like that, and know it; rhetoric exaggerates reality; we do after all have parents, friends, relatives, neighbors, comrades at work, co-religionists, fellow-citizens, etc.—to all of whom we are connected and to some degree obligated. Liberal theory, when it speaks as if this is not so, denies reality, and thereby denies us the language we need to make reality more like this. Communitarians, then, need not radically change the status quo, but only

enhance its communal character by giving that character voice.

Both arguments are partly correct, Walzer writes, and he then names four sorts of "mobility" utterly taken for granted by contemporary Americans, liberals and conservatives alike, communitarians and their opponents alike. These mobilities constitute a sort of liberalism in fact, if not in name, one so basic to the way we live that we are unlikely to surrender it for greater connectedness. These are: 1) the *geographic mobility* that uproots us from family and friends; 2) the *social mobility* that takes us far from the commitments and pursuits of our parents; 3) the *marital mobility*, that not only permits divorce and remarriage, but allows for unions across ethnic and religious lines; and 4) the *political mobility* that has meant loss of reliable loyalties to leaders, movements or parties. And yet, Walzer argues, we do hold to certain truths as a society despite these four mobilities—can unite as a society around core ideals (such as those articulated by Martin Luther King). We do retain communal loyalties, even if these are ever-fragile, and at times even use our government to reinforce them. Things will likely remain this way, Walzer argues, no matter what we say about community, because "there is no strong or permanent remedy for communal attenuation short of an anti-liberal curtailment of the four mobilities and the rights of rupture and divorce on which they rest."

This challenge, I think, must be faced honestly by Jews like me who

believe that our tradition and our commitments can thrive in this country, and do thrive, only to the degree that Judaism—my shorthand term for that tradition and those commitments—offers people ultimate meaning and serious community not readily available elsewhere. The question Walzer poses for us seems to me twofold. What do we really want when we talk about community? And what if anything are we willing to sacrifice to attain it?

Obstacles on the Path to Jewish Community

Answering these two questions is made difficult by several factors that, however obvious, should be mentioned before proceeding.

Most important is the fact that we Jews have lacked in the modern West what the sociologist Peter Berger has called “plausibility structures”: institutions and other aspects of daily reality that confer *prima facie* plausibility on certain ways of being in the world or even encourage one to take those ways for granted.⁴ Modernity at its best has proceeded on rationalist and individualist assumptions that banished Jewish religiosity and ethnic particularism to the sidelines of the private sphere, far from the centers of government, culture, or business, where the real action of modernity was transpiring and where Jews have naturally wanted to be. In most cases, of course, modernity has not achieved anything like its best—and Jews have in that case enjoyed even less of the public space and freedom of action that any com-

munity requires, if it is to maintain and transmit living ideals to its members.

Mordecai Kaplan’s analysis on this matter at the start of *Judaism as a Civilization* (1934) is keen. One can also learn about it from the immense pathos of Moses Mendelssohn’s evocation in *Jerusalem* (1783) of a situation in which every gate and doorpost was imprinted with Jewish messages and so could be depended upon to provoke the sorts of questioning and behavior that confirmed identity. Without gates and doorposts, Kaplan taught, there could be no flourishing civilization. Both the community and its tradition would require reconstruction in America, probably the most open and so the “purest” modern society Jews have known. Kaplan had the honesty and clarity to concede that Judaism in this country would remain a minority tradition at best—because it would never have the wherewithal to compete with dominant trends on anything resembling equal footing.

It is thus no surprise that in America and Western Europe Jewish life now involves only relatively small segments of the Jewish population—individuals who can be induced to defy the conventions of their cultures and societies sufficiently to construct alternative public spaces and pursue alternative ideals. Most Jews see no need of doing so, at least not very often. And why should they? They are no longer educated for very long, if they are educated at all, in Jewish schools. They move to economic and social rhythms set to someone else’s norms and calendars. The media,

despite its many Jews, rarely serves as a forum in which Jewish commitments are treated as anything more than nostalgia. We cannot even engage many of our people in the sort of exercises and debates spelled out by Wolff and Walzer. Their argument concerns the shape of a society that *actually exists*—America. Their debate presumes a reality which propagates its sense of itself through schools and shopping malls and countless other “plausibility structures,” and which engages its citizens’ loyalty not least because it can coerce their adherence to its laws.

Voluntarist Judaism

Jewish modernity began with the dissolution of a community bound together by law. It has reached its fulfillment in America with the advent of purely voluntarist associations that most Jews do not choose to join. No one can tell us that we have to live as Jews or with Jews, let alone how we, as Jews, must live.

This set of conditions seems to me unalterable. It is a given of modern Diaspora life, and a severe constraint on the imagination of community. We can and do provide periodic peak experiences for Jews, described by Durkheim as a necessary building block of community, the mystic stuff that enables a self, primitive or modern, to identify itself with a larger group. “Solidarity,” even in a modern rather than a primitive society, depends on us knowing, really knowing, that we *are* a we. But to accomplish this, Durkheim taught, a group needs more than peak experiences. It

needs *activities* that it performs together, and a defining *idea* of itself.

Jews are faced with the problem of formulating such an idea, let alone of inculcating and acting on it, without continuing experiences, day by day and week after week, of shared activities and discourse. We conduct all too few common conversations, possess no fixed bounds inside which our diversity can be safely contained and fostered, involve less than half of American Jewry in our common labors, persuade only about a third to contribute to our federation appeals, educate still fewer seriously in our shared affections, and never ever see ourselves or even a representative sample of ourselves, live or on TV, gathered together in one place—as Israelis do, say, or Lubavitcher Hasidim do in Brooklyn. In *Terumah’s* language: we are organized around no central *mikdash*, i.e. that which we as a group hold sacred. We are therefore ever in danger of losing people to the wilderness of options outside our most amorphous of encampments. No bond, in this situation, could be anything other than precarious.

How then, given this situation, does one begin to imagine Jewish community, let alone to build it? Once again: what do we want, and what are we willing to sacrifice to attain it? I hope the following suggestions will prove useful.

Building Blocks of Jewish Community

All Jewish community in our situation will be voluntary. This is its principal weakness—but it can offer a cer-

tain strength. Jewish community will either speak to actual needs, articulate obligations which people recognize, provide fulfillment for which people yearn—or it will not elicit their energies or shape their lives. One dare not presume the existence of a “we” until that existence is established. Fictions of the sort one still finds in pious accounts of Jewish life—“We rise in the morning and say the prayer that...” or “On the Sabbath the Jew recalls...”—will get us nowhere. Official rhetoric that tries to impose Holocaust guilt or preaches loyalty to Israel or presumes belief in a God most Jewish adults have never seriously considered will be no more successful. Our efforts must begin with what American Jews actually want, indeed, need.

My assumption, after countless conversations with Jews around the country, is that I am not alone in wanting and needing more abiding connection with others and more ultimate meaning than our society and culture ordinarily provide. I treasure my options, my autonomy, my freedom to move in the four ways Walzer described. Yet I want—and believe many American Jews want—Jewish community in this stronger sense: for my life to be bound up with that of other Jews in ties of tangible obligation, as we engage in serious dialogue with Jewish history and traditions.

This formulation suggests three starting points or primary building-blocks for the definition and construction of Jewish community. (1. *It must be local*: face-to-face, as near as the *re'a* or neighbor whom Leviticus

19 commands me to treat in a manner befitting love. (2. *It must also be le'olam*: unbounded by time or space, grounded in the unique Jewish situation that is writ large in the world today as much as ever, and dedicated to a *tikkun* that is commensurably all-embracing. (3. *Finally, on each of those levels, the “words” we speak as Jews must conform to the grammar of Jewish life*, underlying and flowing from the conversation begun at Sinai. It must be founded on the Torah, that is to say, based on *narrative* or resulting in *just action*. It must include both study and deed—study as deed, deed as study, both of them arising out of community, constituting community and reinforcing community. We will be a community defined by our conversation and our activities.

Community that is local begins where and as we are: in diverse places like Palo Alto and Philadelphia, St. Louis and Manhattan, among diverse individuals of varying temper and commitment who take Walzer's four mobilities for granted, and yet share something of Wolff's aspiration for affect, labor and discourse that take them beyond and above themselves. The havurah movement grew on the strength of face-to-face community, and that success has been repeated in hundreds of havurot since. The women's movement did the same. Jewish summer camps, day schools and “Israel experiences” work their magic in large measure because they provide the gifts of public Jewish time and space combined with immediate and tangible emotional and intellectual

connection to other Jews. More Jews would feel a part of their people in a way that substantively mattered if they too were surrounded on a regular basis by other Jews on whom they could depend, who shared their fundamental commitments, whose faces they were happy to see over the years, who knew and were known well by them. Such groups would also provide the “plausibility structures” required for Judaism to maintain its hold on Jewish individuals—despite the regnant mobilities—and help to convince the next generation to choose this commitment in turn.

These communities can take many forms: synagogues, havurot which meet for study and ritual celebration, chapters of Hadassah or the American Jewish Committee, JCC’s or Rosh Hodesh groups. The form is not crucial in the short run (though in the long run, I believe, the survival and thriving of synagogues are crucial to the communities I hope we build). Any such group, over time, can become a framework of abiding personal connection and of norms. In this way—rather than by preaching or by legal curtailment of autonomy—Jewish community has already come for many of us to influence our marriages, our choices of residence and profession, our politics. The key is to present and develop real alternatives to the often vacuous options generally available. This happens through living connection to others, which is inseparable from serious involvement with Jewish history and traditions, the contemporary version of the “vertical”

and “horizontal” covenants that have constituted Jewish life since Sinai.

Jewish Community is Global

Jewish community can and does have a great effect on Jewish lives because it is not merely local. I think that awareness of what Rabbi Soloveitchik has called the “covenants of fate and destiny”⁵ extends far beyond actual affiliation with Jewish institutions. Every Jew with eyes open to the history of this century, and even basic knowledge of previous centuries, knows that Holocaust and Israel, medieval persecutions and achievements touch them. Hitler’s reach extends to psyches that are never exposed to Rashi or the siddur. So does the State of Israel’s. And though I suspect that many Jews are in flight from the weight of this history and the awful questions it imposes, it is true in this case too that what has undoubtedly weakened us can also be a source of strength.

For the global character of Jewish community not only unites Jews, willingly or not, in the “covenant of fate.” It also lends support—precious plausibility—to the conviction that the ideals expressed in our texts, rituals, prayers and fund-raising appeals are not mere rhetoric or self-important puffery. Our ideals still matter in the world—and have broad resonance in Jewish minds and hearts. The “covenant of destiny,” phrased in general but not meaningless terms, is one to which even many unaffiliated Jews feel obligated. In joining a local community, a Jew joins as well this global

project. That association can provide as much meaning as a person could wish for in this life—and sometimes more than one can handle.

The communities on both local and global levels must be immersed in the texts and history and rituals of our people, and active in the causes of “righteousness and justice and mercy” that have always normatively defined us. For this legacy to be compelling, it is not necessary that Jews who tell the story of Hanukkah be Maccabees, any more than it is necessary that Jews at a Passover Seder literally believe the Red Sea split. It is necessary that we gather around a menorah or the Seder table and retell those stories, enlivening tradition with our own vital insights and experience. And it is equally necessary that we act on the basis of this telling and see ourselves, and have our children and students see us, so acting. Jacob becomes Israel, we recall, by wrestling with an angel. Jews who speak their people’s common discourse not only retell that story every year and ponder its relevance. Many also act according to it—by not eating the sinew that the text forbids us, because it recalls Jacob’s struggle and the wound to his thigh.

The philosopher Lawrence Thomas has put this connection between text and practice beautifully in his recent book, *Vessels of Evil*.⁶ “Only a people with a narrative can flourish in a hostile society, because only a people with a narrative can engage in affirmative cooperation,” that is, can “identify both with one another and with shared positive

goals,” taking delight in the activity of working for the realization of those goals together. They experience what Thomas called “contributory pride,” knowing that their life has walked a path that is not merely subjective or even consensual but in touch with eternity, and has touched the lives of others for the good.

Challenges for our Creativity

That is a tall order—but not beyond our capabilities. We have put a host of institutions on the ground in North America in the century now concluding, in an attempt to respond to unprecedented conditions and opportunities. We can do the same in the next century. There is and can be no recipe from on high (pulpit, ivory tower, Federation executive suite) as to what form these institutions should take. One can, however, suggest on the basis of experience that if community is to be created and not merely agencies, if we are going to foster human connection to other Jews and to tradition and not merely planning and allocation processes, then certain features, which I have tried to describe, must be in place. The two levels of community and their twin foci of “study” and “practice” should be linked and strengthened by a web of intermediate communities. Numerous examples come to mind, some of which exist and others of which could be created: regional networks of professionals, activists or “laypeople”; yearly conventions such as the General Assembly where “peak experiences” and increased “social density” can energize

participants, not least through common learning; use of media—a national Jewish newspaper; Jewish cable television; Jewish cyberspace; travelling Jewish performances and art exhibits; works of fiction, history and philosophy—to join us in conversation over the proper direction of our communities and the ways we should be living in and working on the world.

If we are creative in imagining community on all three levels, the conversation will engage us no matter where we have moved in Walzer's terms. Not all American Jews will respond to the opportunity thereby made available, but many will—and so will trade a degree of autonomy for a degree of fulfillment, precisely as we already do all the time in the commit-

ments we make, the covenants we not only sign, but keep. ♦

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1. Robert Paul Wolff, *The Poverty of Liberalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968).
 2. See Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).
 3. *Political Theory* 18 (Feb., 1990), 6-23.
 4. Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967).
 5. Joseph Soloveitchik, "Kol Dodi Dofek: It is the Voice of My Beloved that Knocketh," trans. Lawrence Kaplan, in Bernard H. Rosenberg and Fred Heuman, eds., *Theological and Halakhic Reflections on the Holocaust* (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV, 1992), 80-92.
 6. Lawrence M. Thomas, *Vessels of Evil: American Slavery and the Holocaust* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1993).

Ethnicity, Geography and Jewish Community

BY SHERRY ISRAEL

In any discussion of community and contemporary American Jewry, it is essential that we pay attention to the wider context in which we live. Too often, we seem to forget that the complex realities of Jewish life today did not arise in a vacuum, that we are profoundly influenced by the currents of modern American culture.

Twenty years ago, Daniel Elazar characterized the American Jewish community as a series of concentric circles of participation, ranging from the “Integrals” at the center (those for whom Jewishness is the central factor of their lives, whether as religion, nationalism, or involvement in Jewish affairs) all the way out to “Peripherals,” “Repudiators,” and “Quasi-Jews”. In this voluntary society, boundaries between categories are fluid, with considerable movement in and out of the categories. More to the point, he noted that “what characterizes a society composed of concentric circles is precisely the fact that there are no [imposed] boundaries; what

holds people within it is the pull of its central core..”

Elazar likened the action of that core to a magnet. How strongly the magnet can maintain the system, can pull individuals in toward the core of Jewish participation, depends on the magnetic strength of the core itself and on the degree of the “iron filings of Judaism” in each individual.¹ What Elazar did not much discuss was the competing forces pulling individuals away from the core, but even as he wrote, these were intensifying.

For most of the twentieth century, America’s Jews concentrated on becoming Americans. It was a Jew, after all—Israel Zangwill—whose play “The Melting Pot” introduced that term into the vocabulary of American ethnic discussion. Our parents and grandparents, and the institutions of the Jewish community devoted to helping them learn the ways of American life, did not worry much about also staying Jewish. That was a given, enforced by the ethnic divisions and religious separation

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taken for granted by the rest of America. There may not have been any formal external boundaries, but there were strong exit barriers.

By now, we have succeeded terrifically in becoming Americanized. At the same time, the externally-imposed walls of separation have come down completely. What of community under these circumstances?

Ethnic Options

What we must take note of is that the walls have come down not just for Jews, but for white Americans in general. In 1990, Mary Waters published a fascinating book about the changing patterns of ethnicity in America.² It is a study of the patterns of transmission and expression of ethnic identity among white Americans today. To be blunt, if the Italians or Irish or Scotch were Jews, they would be wailing about Italian or Irish or Scottish continuity. The weakening of communal ties, in the form of group distinctiveness, is not just a Jewish phenomenon.

The title of Waters' book, *Ethnic Options*, should strike us as ironic. How can ethnicity be an *option*? Isn't it a *given*, like the year you were born? The short answer is, no. Using data from the 1980 US census question on ethnic ancestry and following up with extensive personal interviews, Waters found that today's Americans of white, European ancestry pick and choose their ethnic identities—taking on, giving up, combining. The operative principle is personal preference, not inheritance.

Here is the flavor:

Q. 'What about your husband's ancestry?'

A. "He would have answered Russian Jew and English and Scottish on the census form. He really likes his Russian Jew part. We have a *mezuzah* on the front door. He converted to Catholicism when he married me. He grew up with his mother, and she was Baptist, so he was kind of raised in that tradition. But he likes his Russian Jew part more, he feels closer to being Catholic, and that part goes together more. They are kind of similar.³

I won't go into the details here, but as this excerpt suggests, religion has also participated in this transformation, with individual choice now very much the norm.

Waters' respondents did not disavow their ethnicity. They wanted to have an ethnic identity. But it is identity without obligations. It functions in what I would call a decorative way. It gives a sense of belonging to something besides the great mass American culture, but in a way that does not violate the principle of individual choice. The cultural practices associated with this new kind of ethnicity are *selective*, *intermittent*, and, largely, *symbolic*.⁴ They make little claim on the person's basic American life style.

We can hear in these words the echo of Marshall Sklare's work on the Jews of Lakeville in the 1950's, who chose to maintain the forms of Jewish expression that were capable of redefinition in modern terms, not demand-

ing of social isolation, and intermittent (and also child-centered).⁵ Jews are now, as then, reflecting the larger trends of American culture. And any responses we make must reckon with this reality.

Weakened Bonds

The trend to symbolic, or, as I prefer to think of it, decorative ethnicity, already visible in the Jewish life of the 50's, is even clearer now. In response to a question in the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey about how they define being Jewish, more Jews said the meaning of being Jewish in America is "ethnic" or "cultural" than agreed to "religious." Subsequent analyses of the NJPS data by age cohorts show that the "cultural" label is even stronger for the younger groups. "Culture" provides a much more open, less binding parameter for defining a group than does religion, or even ethnicity. *The bond it offers is not mutually exclusive.* In this respect, these Jews are just like Waters' respondents. This is a new kind of ethnicity—not the kind that emphasizes the separation between Jews and non-Jews, but one having to do with cultural variety.

We know what follows. Given this approach to ethnicity, intermarriage is not a rejection of one's original heritage. It is just the meeting of two individuals, who can make a perfectly compatible home involving the blending of their respective cultural heritages. Indeed, they now have a wider playing field, more lovely customs and ideas from which to choose.

They can keep being Catholic, and Scottish...and Russian Jewish.

Ethnic borrowing and recombination are not what happens only to Jews raised by Baptists. We served East African groundnut stew in our *sukkah* this year, and Thai noodles at last Shabbat lunch. For us, they were just interesting food. But is the young man at Kripalu who chants Buddhist mantras regularly, but calls himself a Jew, also just borrowing? The line between the incorporation of elements from others' heritages and the blurring of one's own identity is not always so clear.

Jewish ethnicity in this new American version gives us Jews who feel themselves part of the community, but who cannot distinguish between attitudes, activities and rituals that are Jewishly grounded and those that are not—and who do not even know they are failing to make such distinctions; and Jews who slide imperceptibly out of the Jewish and into the majority community, or whose children do. If the Jewishness of large numbers of our Jewish people (whose religious civilization defines Judaism) is merely decorative, I submit that we have a problem.

Core and Periphery Today

So the forces operating against the magnetic pull of the core have increased. What of the core itself? Here, there is countervailing good news. As I read it, all the evidence suggests that we have a very vital core these days. It comprises some 20 to 25% of Jews who are deeply involved

in some variety of Jewish life, usually religiously, but in other ways as well. These are our current “Integral Jews” and “Participants.” They include the readers of this journal. In this core, Jewish life is thriving, and there is, as Elazar submits, a magnetic effect. But the survival of a viable Jewish community must also include the other 75 to 80%. Is it possible, given the new facts of American ethnicity?

There is a piece of Waters’ work that may be helpful here. Some cultural markers of identity seem to have special appeal—especially language, food, life cycle celebrations, and some values. And there is particular susceptibility to engaging in ethnic choice at times of the threshold life-cycle events. I suggest that all of these represent opportunities, all of very different sorts. They fit the American pattern, so we can use them, and they can be entry points for connecting Jews more authentically to Jewishness.

There is another piece of information we need to pay attention to, one that is also working to weaken the sense of actuality of Jewish community: the break-up of Jewish population concentrations. America’s Jews are increasingly mobile. They have been leaving the cities of the Northeast and the Midwest for the Sunbelt, moving away from families, kin, and early friends. They are also scattering, leaving the cities for the far suburbs and what Elazar has dubbed “rurban” America. When they arrive where they are going, they are likely to live far apart from other Jews. The organic Jewish neighborhood which can

serve as a source of Jewish awareness, values, and connections—that is, as a grounds for Jewish cohesion—is as far from the experience of most Jews today as the shtetlach of Eastern Europe.

What we now have instead is Jews who are all over the place, religiously, culturally, ethnically, and geographically. Most Jews now live *low-density Jewish lives*.

The Institutional Aspect of Community

Up until now, I have been using the term “community” in its social-psychological or affective sense, referring to groups of people connected by interpersonal bonds and shared perspectives. But “Jewish community” has another set of meanings. It refers not just to people, but also to the complex of organizations that represent, serve, and offer avenues of participation to those people. The ability of these organizations to do their job well is another factor in the vitality and meaningfulness of Jewish life. One kind of community needs the other. Or, as the jargon would have it, the expression of Jewishness is a function of both identity and opportunity, both personal and institutional factors.

Here there is a problem. Our institutional framework and cultures presume high-density Jewish lives. Most of the institutional structure of contemporary American Jewish life evolved at a time when the Jewish population was concentrated in the urban and near-suburban areas of the great American cities. Jewish Centers

were at the center of some large number of Jews, who would come to socialize or do recreational or cultural activities there. The social service institutions were accessible to people who needed their help. The American synagogue redefined itself as a large institution, with a staff of functionaries and large memberships who lived nearby and would come to its activities; and the training of the rabbinical seminaries, if it responded at all to the new needs of the pulpit, began to reflect a corresponding vision of the rabbi's role.

But Jews now live scattered all over the landscape. Large and growing numbers are concentrated neither near central cores nor near each other, so this kind of institutional structure doesn't work universally any more. Our institutions have not yet acknowledged these facts, but their doing so is crucial to a viable Jewish future.

To put these ideas together: The power of the magnetic core does not exert itself magically. Jews who are choosing some Jewish options for decorative reasons may be brought to find deeper meaning and connection, to help shape and become part of Jewishly authentic communities—but there have to be institutional frameworks to help this happen and to support and nourish it.

Strategies of Response

One strategy of response to all these changes has been an appeal to exclusivity as the best strategy for maintaining a viable Jewish commu-

nity. Various authors have advocated swimming against the tide with respect to intermarriage, or concentrating our efforts on those already unequivocally in the fold, to deepen their connections.

I have two problems with this tack as a universal strategy. First, I have observed that such approaches tend to be formulated by deeply-embedded Jews. By this token, I think they are likely to be limited in their impact to those already within the inner circles of Jewish participation or very close to them. By way of illustration, consider this: If I were asked to guess, I would bet that most of the people reading this journal gave tzedakah to one or more Jewish causes in the past year, belong to a synagogue or havurah, are currently engaged in some kind of Jewish study, whether formal or informal, and celebrated Shabbat in some way this past week, just to take a few indicators of Jewish connection. You—we—are a group of insiders, not typical of American Jewry at large. That something seems self-evident to us is no guarantee of wider applicability or success.

I also believe—perhaps a heresy in a journal like this one—that few Jews outside of those who are already denominationally or politically committed drive their lives by ideology or will change their lives because of it. Rather, for most people, ideology comes later, if at all. It articulates and justifies life choices already made. But for Jews whose ethnicity is only symbolic and who live outside the orbits of Jewish neighborhoods and Jewish

institutions, the lived experience of their identity is not compelling, so ideology doesn't (yet) make sense.

I suggest instead a strategy of multiplicity. Institutions and individuals located in different sectors of Jewish life need to approach the Jews they know and can connect with in different ways. I may prefer Torah study, or lively *davvening* with communal singing, or social action projects with an underlay of prophetic teaching, but I don't believe the evidence is there to support any approach exclusively. And our Jews certainly aren't in any one place, psychologically or sociologically, to be so approached. New patterns of communal participation must be nurtured, and we don't yet know what all of them are, so I am betting on variety: strategies to continue to nourish the core, yes, but also much more.

This is a double-barrelled effort, aimed at both kinds of community—of experience and of institutions—at the same time. For this to work, the American Jewish polity must develop different institutional structures. Given the new geographic scatter, they will need to be *localized* and/or *decentralized*. The synagogue, given its historically local focus, can play a key role. But it must be a synagogue different from the old large-suburban culture-mall variety, a synagogue that can foster the sense of community, in its micro-meaning, among its members. Our Jewish communal professionals, including but not limited to rabbis, will need to understand life-cycle development, adult learning the-

ory and practice, community organizing, and group facilitation, along with Torah and Jewish practice. And all our institutions will have to support each other in all this variety, and stop seeing difference as threat.

The old melting-pot antagonism between universalism and particularism is passé in this climate of ethnic options. The choice is no longer between being a "normal American" and a "committed Jew." The new American opposite of "totally committed" is not "normal," but "normal enough." American life, reflecting these new American conceptions of ethnicity, allows Jews to be different in important ways from other Americans—and still be in the mainstream.

Most Jews are going to stay in that mainstream. The organized Jewish community needs to meet them where they are, in authentic ways. It remains to be seen if we can create a powerful enough sense—and expressed reality—of Jewish connectedness for Jewish identity to have more than a decorative claim on the lives of most American Jews. ♦

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1. Daniel J. Elazar, *Community and Polity: The Organizational Dynamics of American Jewry* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1976), 71-77
 2. Mary C. Waters, *Ethnic Options* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).
 3. Waters, 90-91.
 4. For a full discussion of the concept of symbolic ethnicity, see Herbert Gans, "Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups in America," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 2, no. 1 (1979).
 5. Summarized in Marshall Sklare, *America's Jews* (New York, Random House, 1971), 114-117.

An Outreach Vision

BY SHERYL LEWART SHULEWITZ

Alarmed that Jews are leaving Judaism at a soaring rate, much of the contemporary American Jewish world is focused on finding ways to change this reality. At the most recent session of the General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations, an 88-member commission presented a draft report emphasizing “Jewish identity” as central to the solution. Leaving undefined the nature of Jewish identity, the report urged a combination of formative and transformative experiences. I believe that Jewish identity is not the issue; rather, building meaningful Jewish communal life is. The connection between Jewish identity and Jewish community deserves close attention. To us awash in the myths of American culture emphasizing individualism and personal autonomy, the traditional Jewish value of community offers firm ground from which to address the dilemma of Jewish continuity.

Our Jewish identity—our moral and religious life, exists between and among people with whom we interact and share parts of our daily life. As the noted philosopher, Alasdair MacIn-

tyre writes, “The story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity.”¹ Jewish identity is formed and transformed in community, and outreach can only be done successfully in community.

Only through community, can many of our basic human needs be met. Peer nurturing provides for our emotional needs. We nurture each other because we need each other. Interpersonal connections give our lives purpose. We desire companionship. We seek communities of shared meaning where we can find validation, sense competence, and experience growth. The noted sociologist Robert Bellah shows in *Habits of the Heart* how connectedness to others in community is essential to happiness, self-esteem and self-worth.

It should be clear that our Jewish identities cannot deliver their goods to us, if we live in isolation. Jewish communal life enjoys a long and laudatory history. Community has been celebrated in our tradition as the place where Jews and the Divine dwell together. We read in midrash: “From the first day of

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Creation the Holy One of Blessing longed to enter into partnership with the terrestrial world, to dwell with God's creatures within the terrestrial world."² Jewish communal life in Europe transmitted shared sacred history through the structures and practices of the community. In America, early waves of immigration continued the pattern of communal living. As technological advances made population dispersion possible and the "American Dream" made it seem desirable, third and fourth generation Jews no longer find themselves as connected to distinctive, tradition-sustaining and identity-nurturing Jewish neighborhoods. The enormous wave of synagogue building during the migration to suburbia has all but ended. The synagogue, as an imposing edifice providing centralized professional services, no longer speaks to the needs and wants of many contemporary Jews.

Communities used to form naturally, but they no longer do. We need to reconstruct our inherited model of structured synagogue life into a new communal vision. My vision of outreach invites both under-involved and deeply committed Jews to voluntarily join a community that is intentional and responsive. In this essay I discuss why we need communities to be both intentional and responsive, what are some criteria for successful intentional responsive communities, and what is necessary to create and maintain them.

The Intentional Community

We do not, as the powerful American culture suggests, make up our

deepest beliefs in the isolation of our private lives. We are governed by our stories told in community. Yet we do not, as Jewish tradition teaches, find ourselves living in naturally forming Jewish communities. As we search for the story in which our lives make sense, we need intentional communities.

Communities serve our needs for companionship and validation, for comfort and safety, for personal growth and self-expression. In community, we create culture and civilization. We speak our stories and share our values. Our social needs are met in community. We seek communities of shared meaning. An intentional community raises its moral voice, rather than relying on individual consciences. In community, people have the chance to see others' behaviors and informally "call them" on those behaviors. An intentional community has the ability to generate values and enforce those values through the interrelationships of its members, each taking responsibility for the other.³

An intentional community is clear about its mission, which gives direction and purpose in a meaningful context. We create intentional communities when we develop mission statements that clearly and succinctly explain what makes our congregations communities of value and meaning. Mishkan Shalom in Philadelphia, and Adat Shalom in Washington D.C. are examples of intentional communities within the Reconstructionist movement.

A shared vision about why we exist energizes and powers our commit-

ment to the mission of our community. An intentional community consciously chooses the goal of encouraging an ever-deepening Jewish life. Convinced that Judaism has something incredibly valuable and worthwhile to offer, we can reach, teach and touch both under-involved and committed Jews to join our quest for meaning, purpose and joy in community.

The Responsive Community

A responsive community meets the needs of those it serves, asking people what their needs and wants are and helping them shape a community to meet them. People join a community to meet a wide variety of needs, as this story Harry Golden used to tell, illustrates:

“Everyone knows my father was never a shul-goer—all of a sudden, in his old age, he starts going to shul every Shabbat.

So I asked him, ‘Pop, what are you doing, going to shul every week?’

Pop asked me, ‘You know my friend Goldberg?’

‘Sure,’ I said, ‘Goldberg is a real religious guy, a regular shul-goer.’

‘Right,’ said Pop. ‘Goldberg goes to shul to talk to God, and I go to shul to talk to Goldberg.’”

The effectiveness of a responsive community requires many entry points, with low barriers and warm welcome. We need to think hard about such questions as: In what are we involving under-involved Jews? What are committed Jews looking for? How will both groups feel that they belong? How can we move them

to levels of greater commitment and intensity? In a vibrant responsive community, people can forgo the temptations of me-ness because their individual needs are being met in community. Individual needs are met through a variety of experiences. Responsive communities encourage and manage networked small group experiences.

Responsive communities are committed to making informed specific decisions about what the congregation is going to do (and not do) to achieve its goals. We find carefully prepared programs to achieve desired responses in these communities. The desire to bring about mutually beneficial responses is much in evidence.

Responsive communities understand that efforts to impose a good or service on people will fail, if the people perceive that the good or service is not matched to its needs or wants. When a center-city Philadelphia synagogue planned potluck Shabbat dinners for young singles and professionals working and living in the city, the program failed. When dinner was provided for these young single professionals at a nominal charge, they were oversubscribed. In the second case, the needs of this group were being met. Young professionals had no interest in preparing a potluck dish; they wanted simply to go, and paying for their dinner suited them just fine.

Being responsive requires “outside-in” thinking. Rabbi and leaders gather and consider information from the persons the community intends to

serve. A balance is sought between the needs and wants of the committed core, the newly committed and the under-involved. The congregation systematically studies the needs, preferences and satisfactions of its members and others whom it is trying to reach.

How Communities Succeed

A successful intentional responsive community fulfills the following criteria: provides spirituality as the ground of its meaning and existence; creates culture by transmitting social and artistic expression; presents a moral vision to help realize social justice; meets the needs of its members through careful planning and programming; does outreach to remain self-sustaining and involving; and creates and maintains radiant centers. The last criterion requires some explanation.

A successful community's radiant centers include: spiritual, cultural, social, celebratory, social justice, and education centers. Each radiant center functions somewhat as a small group within the synagogue community as a whole. Communities may emphasize one of these centers more than others. The social justice radiant center might include a number of smaller group experiences: a group intent on influencing national policy, a group studying Jewish values and traditions informing a particular concern, and a group actively involved in a local community project. All are part of the social justice radiant center, coming together for overlapping events and activities that bridge their individual interests and promote interrelation-

ships and new connections.

These centers need connection to one another. Careful attention must be given to overlapping and interlocking the various centers within a given community. Spiritual growth takes place as members move from the periphery towards the core of a radiant center. As they move towards the core, people are encouraged to become involved in a different radiant center through shared experiences promoted by planned overlapping and interconnecting two or more radiant centers.

A radiant center model demands an awareness that the heart of the community, the core of each radiant center, is rooted in a very valuable place. The rabbi, professionals and committed laity constantly travel from the core of a radiant center to the periphery. Their energy and commitment to this interlocking vision brings people into the life of the community, while stimulating and recharging the people who are already in the group. Care must be taken to nurture the leaders and the committed core members. Their intensity and depth of purpose radiates out to the most distant edges of each center.

One way to visualize a community of interlocked radiant centers might be to picture the traditional Lurianic sefirotic model of concentric spheres increasing in intensity as one approaches the innermost core, and then to multiply and overlap the image. Areas of overlap become points of new intensity, providing a place for people to move from one radiant cen-

ter to another. Everyone needs to be moving within the communal system. As people move through this system, all of them will grow and change. The circles through which they move will also grow and change, as will the congregation as a whole.

Radiant centers need managing and planning. For example, the success of a social action center's project might be celebrated by a ritual planned with the spiritual radiant center. A program of the education center might take place at a retreat weekend planned with the cooperation and participation of the single parents' social center. The overlapping areas between and among the radiant centers establish a network of connection and commitment to the life of the community as a shared value.

Responsibilities of Leadership

The source of the radiating energy pulsing through this complex of overlapping radiant centers in an intentional responsive community is the rabbi and committed leadership of the congregation. The rabbi and others closest to him constantly shuttle between the rim and the core of the radiant centers. The process needs to be revitalizing and energizing for the rabbi as well as for those fellow travelers brought in by the rabbi. The rabbi plays a critical role in the community. Responsive and resourceful, the rabbi in this model is challenged to encourage the creation of self-sustaining interlocking groups. Multiple vibrant radiant centers require decentralized leadership. A flexible approach

enables the rabbi to be sensitive to maintaining a balance between empowerment and leadership.

Different models of leadership support the rabbi as she goes about the work of maintaining this vibrant and vigorous community. A visionary leader inspires others to take responsibility for leadership in the radiant centers, encouraging others to move from membership to active participation and ultimately to leadership within the community. A team leadership approach recognizes empowerment as more than delegating tasks. Empowering others to lead means truly decentralizing programming. Newly empowered leaders need prestige, power and space in which to exercise leadership. The rabbi and the core leadership can foster real empowerment when they feel secure and confident in their own roles. When the excitement about a new program or idea becomes compelling and one feels confident in one's own abilities to see the plan to fulfillment, while sensing support and encouragement from existing leadership, empowerment takes place.

Becoming an intentional responsive community means breaking with past models. Whether creating a congregation from scratch or transforming an existing community, change is required. We need to self-consciously manage change because people who have not experienced this kind of community will not naturally create it. Coping with external forces, with the mind-numbing rate at which socio-technological change is happen-

ing at the close of the twentieth century, also requires us to manage change. Creating and maintaining this model of community means effectively dealing with ongoing change. For these communities to thrive they must truly become committed to existing in a constant state of renewal and change.

Congregants, however, need help in coping with the psychological dislocations of change. We all tend to prefer the status quo. We drive to work on the same roads, shop at familiar stores. People depend on continuity for their sense of safety. Change needs to be introduced slowly. If introduced too fast, people will resist change. Effective leadership of an intentional responsive outreach community involves helping people to feel good about the past and comfortable about new expectations, preserving a balance between safety and change. Though specific discrete changes may be institutionalized, the idea of constant change never will be.

The Role of Outreach

Outreach is an orientation, a way for a community to understand itself. Outreach requires a world-view, a sense of passion about creating and maintaining vibrant viable Jewish communities. Mordecai Kaplan would have called this model of intentional responsive communities “extrovert synagogues.” Writing in 1955, Kaplan envisioned “...that Reconstructionist congregations must become ‘extrovert synagogues’—synagogues interested in the totality of

Jewish life and dedicated to fostering the organization of democratic organic communities...”⁴

The Reconstructionist movement can provide the resources for supporting the kind of community I have described. The course of study at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College reflects an understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing rabbis and communities today. The Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Havurot sustains and inspires intentional responsive communities. Policies and position papers supporting inclusivity encourage congregations to be responsive to the changing demographics of the American Jewish community. Serious commitment to intellectual honesty and ongoing Jewish learning nurtures the hearts of FRCH communities dedicated to intensive enriched Jewish living.

As Director of Outreach for the Reconstructionist movement, I have had the opportunity to visit Jewish communities throughout the United States—young groups beginning to create themselves, aged congregations dreaming of revitalizing themselves, and communities that have conflicting senses of who they are and what they are about. Each community has its own life, its own personality. Each of them have in common the belief that they are unique, unlike any other. All of them want to continue to exist. If I ask them why, often they stumble over the answers, or pause at the forbidding threshold of “Jewish continuity.” I believe that Jewish continuity

will be assured as we go about the work of forming and transforming Jewish identity in intentional responsive communities of interlocking radiant centers. ♦

1. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 221.

2. Numbers Rabbah 13:6

3. On this aspect of community, see Robert Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 357: "At its best, it consists of members holding each other accountable, stepping in when personal discipline weakens, providing mentoring and nurturing each other toward greater insight and mutual responsibility."

4. *The Reconstructionist*, 21 (June 1955), 20-22.

Money and Class: Dealing with Difference in Jewish Communities¹

BY MARTHA ACKELSBURG

Despite or perhaps because of the prevailing view in the United States that we are a society in which virtually everyone identifies as “middle class,” class and money are threatening topics to discuss. Many believe that to focus on, or even to acknowledge, such differences within a community is divisive, and undermines the spirit of unity necessary for people to work together. I will argue, on the contrary, that talk about differences among ourselves is not only not threatening to the existence of community and collective action, but that such talk is positively essential to it.

Why should we focus on differences? Because, as Jews should know well, it is when differences between people exist and are not acknowledged that people are hurt, and working together is made more difficult. Whether we speak of the so-called

“Judeo-Christian tradition” or of “universal man,” Jews have come to know that the failure to acknowledge difference, the assumption that we are all alike in all relevant ways, makes our actual experiences irrelevant and our differences invisible to one another.

To speak of differences and make them visible, then, is not to say that we ought to treat people *simply* and *totally* in virtue of their differences (whether from “us” or from some presumed “norm”). But it is to say that we cannot act as if significant differences do not exist. As the African American poet, Gwendolyn Brooks, once put it, “The juice of tomatoes is never called simply, ‘juice;’ it is always called ‘tomato juice.’”² Pat Parker expressed this tension slightly differently in a poem entitled, “For the white person who wants to know how to be my friend” The first thing you do is to forget that i’m Black./ Second,

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you must never forget that i'm Black."³ The purpose of opening talk about differences, whether differences of class, of race/ethnic background, of gender, of sexual orientation, of age, or anything else, is not to blame those who differ from us. It is, rather, the first step toward understanding ourselves and one another, and making more meaningful exchange possible. My starting point is a simple one: class differences do exist, both in the United States in general, and in the Jewish community, in particular. These differences affect how we think and feel—both about ourselves and one another—as well as how we act. And just as we need to explore differences of race, gender, and sexuality in order to be able to work together, so we must attend to class differences as well.⁴

My aim in this essay is to develop a brief analysis of what class *is*, and how it works in the contemporary United States. I take that as a starting-point for thinking about how we can work together more effectively to create more inclusive Jewish communities.

Class in U.S. Society

Two aspects of the functioning of class in the United States deserve mention at the outset, as they affect both how we act and how we feel in virtually all contexts.

(1) Class serves to divide people from one another, and to disempower us. Obviously, the impact varies with one's place in the class spectrum; but everyone is, in some respects, disempowered by class relations. To the

extent that class divides us, it interferes with our experiencing our spirituality, which, as I understand it, means being in touch with the sources of power, integrity, and capacity within each of us, and in connection with each other.

(2) No matter what class we were raised in, it always feels "wrong." This is true for almost everyone in the society. And it is not simply an individual psychological problem; rather, it is created and maintained by the institutional structures which keep class relations in place. Virtually no one in U.S. society feels completely and securely "in control" of his or her class position.

Making Distinctions

"Class" is about distinctions among people or groups that are created and reinforced through institutional structures. Class structures create *rankings* which, in the U.S., are supposedly based on merit. Of course, when we think about it rationally, most of us are quite aware that class position has little to do with individual merit. Nonetheless, the prevalence of the "American Dream" (the belief that anyone who is truly committed to achievement can "make it" is reinforced by our school system, politics, and public ideology. All this means that our class position has massive implications not only for the distribution of power in society, but also for individual feelings of self-worth and competence.

Class is not simply about the amount of money we have access to—whether in the form of income from

wages or of “wealth”—although access to money is surely part of what class is. Class is also a matter of *status*, of the value placed on who we are and, more importantly, on what we do. Class thus functions to legitimize vast inequalities of income, wealth, and respect.

Definition. What do we mean by class? According to Karl Marx, who developed one of the earliest, and most complex analyses of the nature and function of class, one’s class is defined by one’s relationship to the “means of production.” For Marx, virtually all societies ultimately sort themselves into two groups—those who own/control the means of production (whether those be agricultural implements, agricultural land, or industrial plant, for example) and those who do not—i.e. who are dependent on others (employers, in a capitalist context) for their livelihood. While Marx’s analysis may now seem quaint, if not simplistic (not least because capitalism proved considerably more resilient than he had anticipated), nevertheless, his basic approach—that class relations are an aspect of the fundamental structure of a society, and that the *feelings* they generate are structural at root, and not the product of individual neuroses—are surely of continuing validity.

More recently, Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb have argued that class is fundamentally a system for limiting freedom.⁵ None of us *chooses* our class position; we are born into it. But the class we are born into affects

all of our so-called “life-choices.” Those who are born wealthy are constrained in their ability to deal with others, because they are, willy-nilly, part of a system designed to maintain their wealth. Those who are born poor or working-class are constrained and constricted in their “life-choices” because they are dependent on the ready availability of wage work for their basic subsistence.⁶

How Does Class “Work”?

As Sennett and Cobb emphasize, U.S. society places a high value on freedom, autonomy, and independence. More to the point, we achieve freedom and independence by differentiating ourselves from others (i.e. by being the best student in the class, the most obedient, the most outrageous, etc.). This creates a basic paradox: We feel good (or, at least, are supposed to feel good) about ourselves when we demonstrate that we are different from, better than, or at least independent of others. This perspective is reinforced clearly in many of our school systems; it is also present in the ideal of the independent entrepreneur.⁷ In this context, as Sennett and Cobb make clear, class becomes a contest for dignity. Our society accords dignity and respect to individuals to the degree that they achieve middle- or owning-class status.

But there is another side to this process: any situation where dignity and (self-)respect are achieved through differentiation effectively denies people ties of community and connectedness. Or, to put it another

way, our society accords respect and dignity at the cost of isolation from peers; many people are put in the situation of having to choose between loyalty to peers and family, on the one hand, and “making it,” on the other. Thus, even when working-class or immigrant families put great pressures on their children to “escape” and to make it—to get an education or a different sort of job, to buy a home, for example—they are often also resentful of what appears as the children’s abandonment of home and community if they do succeed.⁸

Obviously, these patterns operate somewhat differently for people of different class backgrounds, but the overall consequences for many people are similar. As Sennett and Cobb point out, it is difficult not to play the game of contest for dignity, not to try to distinguish oneself from one’s peers, because not to do so leaves one with feelings of self doubt and a sense of inadequacy. On the other hand, playing the game—striving to achieve mobility and/or distinction—also opens one to pain and hurt. If one is not successful, one feels the failure personally (especially since our dominant social myth is of equal opportunity). But to be successful (especially if we define success as moving up to another class) often means cutting oneself off from peers and family, at least to some extent. We are damned if we do, and damned if we don’t. Most basically, the class system generates feelings of isolation, powerlessness, and inadequacy for virtually everyone.⁹

Feeling “Wrong”

What is the process of feeling “wrong”? As I have suggested, it is related to the goal of independence, autonomy, and self-direction which society sets out as the ideal for everyone. But, it is also the case that people in different class positions are differentially able to meet that goal.

For members of the working-class. A variety of institutions and practices in society function to deny independence and autonomy to those who are identified as working-class. Many studies have pointed out that schools oriented primarily to working-class students tend to be structured along relatively authoritarian lines, to focus on rote learning, and not to value autonomy and/or independent thinking among their students.¹⁰ Most working-class jobs also allow very little autonomy—the quintessential example being the assembly line, although that has how been eclipsed by work in fast-food and similar jobs. Even when working-class people do have jobs that allow autonomy and self-direction (as is the case with skilled craftspeople such as plumbers, electricians, carpenters, and painters), the jobs, themselves, are not socially valued. Those who perform such jobs—while generally feeling “better” than those who work in more traditional working-class jobs—nevertheless still receive societal messages of their own inadequacy.

In societies or sub-groups characterized by a strong sense of class-consciousness, group loyalty, or pride in a specific cultural heritage, members of

the working-class may be able to derive support from one another, and from their common membership in the group and, consequently, to overcome some of the negative messages from the broader society. This was the case for many Jewish immigrant workers in the early years of this century, for example, especially those who joined unions that offered both sources of solidarity and an analysis of their situation. But this sort of class pride is particularly difficult in the contemporary U.S. Why? Because the decline of unions, coupled with the possibility of mobility—the supposed openness of U.S. society, the pervasiveness of the American Dream that anyone can “make it” if he or she tries hard enough and is sufficiently talented—makes people take personal responsibility for failure when they *don't* make it, or, on the other hand, feel guilty if they *do* make it, and thereby “abandon” family and friends. Politically, these contradictions often lead to paralysis. To protest the structure and functioning of the class system is to question the so-called meritocracy, and is too easily dismissed as “sour grapes.”

For middle-class people. Both families and schools tend to foster a sense of independence and autonomy for middle-class people, although many jobs increasingly deny that independence. This emphasis on autonomy in the middle class creates considerable confusion about the role and importance of community and support. It becomes difficult for those who are born and brought up middle-

class to ask for help from others—or, sometimes, even to give it—because, ideally, each one is supposed to be able to manage on his or her own. To ask for help seems to call into question one's autonomy—and, therefore, one's dignity and worth as a person. This constellation also leads to guilt and paralysis in a social/political context. Middle class people do not, after all, have enough money either to change things dramatically in the society as a whole, or to feel completely secure in their own position. They are also aware of the arbitrariness of it all. Consequently, they may feel guilty about their own success, even at the same time that they are unable to take full responsibility for it. Thus, middle-class people, too, suffer from a sense of alienation, isolation and powerlessness. And these feelings probably help explain why so many middle-class people prefer not to have to think about class, or about their financial situation, at all.

For the wealthy/owning-class. Although, in general, access to money and wealth is taken to be one of the signs of independence and autonomy, this is not always the case. In fact, since many owning-class people did not themselves earn the money to which they have access, their relationship to it may often be a source of guilt and embarrassment. They live with the recognition that—compared to most others in the society—they have enormous resources. They are subject to constant demands on them to donate their funds to one cause or

another. Yet, regardless of how much wealth they have, none has enough to alleviate poverty in general, or even to begin to make a “dent” in any of the major social problems confronting the larger community. As a consequence, many owning-class people live in fear of the anger of those who do not have money and status; often, particularly in mixed-class groups, they are afraid to share their lives, concerns and hopes, for fear that they will be misunderstood or attacked. Thus, the dynamics of the class system can generate a sense of alienation, isolation, and powerlessness even among those who seemingly control and benefit from that system.

In sum, what class does is divide people from one another, and then legitimize the decisions by making it virtually impossible for anyone to challenge them.

Implications for Building Jewish Communities

Class differences exist within U.S. society and among Jews specifically, even though—because of the relative economic success of Jews as a group over the past fifty years—class differences among Jews are often largely invisible.¹¹ If we are to work together to build strong communities (whether in synagogues, havurot, JCC's, or other communal organizations), we must both acknowledge those differences and begin to bridge them. We cannot simply hope that if we ignore them, they will just disappear or not be of any consequence to our work together.

What, then, can we do?

In small and large groups, we can begin to explore our own class backgrounds, and think about the messages we received from our families and communities about money and wealth. Once we have become aware of the “baggage” we carry around with us, we can begin talking with those from backgrounds other than our own, sharing our differences in the context of our common goals. We can then think more clearly and creatively about what it means to build communities of people with different backgrounds and approaches; and how it is that we might really treat people—as Jeffrey Dekro, founder and director of the Shefa Fund, has put it—“as *menschen*, and not just as pocketbooks.”

Since most of our communal institutions are supported by “voluntary” financial contributions, differences of both ability, and of willingness to contribute to the maintenance of these organizations are often significant. There are many stories of individuals and/or families who do not affiliate with Jewish communal institutions either because they lack money for dues, or because they fear the humiliation and/or shame of having to ask for special arrangements. We may wish we did not have to “deal with” money in our communities; but we do. And how we do so will be the measure not only of our *menschlichkeit*, but also of the sorts of communities we wish to create.

Some years ago, Rabbi Hershel Matt drew up principles to guide an “ideal congregation.” Among these were provisions that “there shall be no

discrimination, whether in membership status or ritual privilege-and-obligation, on grounds of financial means or support...There shall be no required dues [or] tuition...except perhaps a token membership registration fee. All income shall be derived from voluntary pledges of support...with no public announcement or other publicity of the names of any supporters or contributors. There shall be no sales, raffles...no fund raising.¹²

I suspect that very few Jewish communities took those suggestions very seriously, nor would many do so now. Instituting such policies in our communities would certainly mark and necessitate a major transformation of communal self concept and methods of financing. Yet, to take class seriously in Jewish communities means that we *should* take seriously this and other proposals that will enable us to rethink the ways we share and assign financial responsibilities in our communities. If our communities are to reflect the values in which we believe, then we must be able to support them financially in ways that do not shame or humiliate those whose means are very limited, and which, at the same time, draw effectively on those whose resources are greater.

Expressing Our Values in Action

These *takhlis* concerns are significant because Jewish tradition is clear that values are expressed in actions: we are not commanded simply to be kind to the stranger, but to leave the corners of our fields, and the gleanings of our harvests, to the poor; to set aside a substantial part of our income (10 to

20%) for *tzedakah*. We are no longer living in small agricultural communities where wealth, and some minimal levels of security, can be shared so directly. Instead, we live in an American society characterized by anger and mean-spiritedness, particularly as concerns the treatment of the poor and the stranger. How we organize our own communities, how we address differences of class among ourselves, becomes an important statement both to our young people and to the larger society of how to think about inequalities and about our responsibilities toward one another.

I said earlier that to the extent that class divides us it also interferes with our experiencing our integrity, our spirituality. This claim has its roots in both the feminist insight that “the personal is political” and in the Jewish imperative of *tikkun olam* (making the world whole). The feminist claim is two-fold: (a) our “personal” problems have a social/political context and (b) our political commitments ought to be reflected in our lives. From the imperative of *tikkun olam*, we come to recognize that politics and spirituality are intimately connected: *tikkun olam* demands that we act politically in the world with the aim of making the world such that we can *all* experience our integrity.

If we understand spirituality as achieving a sense of integrity, being able to be fully present in our lives, we can recognize that to experience our spirituality, we must live in communities that validate the multiple dimensions of ourselves. But if we are divided from one another—and, even, from our-

selves—by class differences, then we are unable to experience that integrity. Further, if those same divisions block our ability to act—and, in particular, to act in concert with others—then they disempower us and undermine our ability to do the work of *tikkun olam*.

Thus, addressing differences of class within Jewish communities can be seen as critically important work. Most obviously, it will enable us to work together more openly and honestly, acknowledging our differences and, potentially, using them as resources for the community. On a more intimate level, it will enable us each to work toward the attainment of a deeper sense of integrity and spirituality, drawing on our own deepest sources of power and, therefore, reaching toward the Divine. ♦

1. This paper began as a workshop I presented (together with Betsy Cohen) to Bnot Esh in May 1987, and, later, to the Shefa Fund retreat, March 31-April 2, 1989. I am grateful to Betsy and to the participants at both events for their feedback, and for help in thinking through a number of these issues.

2. My thanks to Vicky Spelman for the quotation. See Elizabeth V. Spelman, *Inessential Woman* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).

3. from *Movement in Black*, reprinted in *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women of Color*, ed. Gloria Anzaldua (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1990), 297.

4. I explored some of these differences, and their importance to the creation and maintenance of a Jewish feminist community, in "Spirituality, Community, and Politics: Bnot Esh and the Feminist Reconstruction of Judaism," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2, 2 (Fall 1986), 109-120.

5. Richard Sennet and Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (New York: Pantheon, 1970).

6. For purposes of this discussion, I will be using the following working definitions of class positions: (1) Working-class: those who work for an hourly wage, and/or who work at manual labor; (2) Owning-class: those who have enough property (wealth) that they could live without working if they so desired; (3) Middle-class: salaried and/or professional people. It should be noted, nevertheless, that for many, if not most, people, class location is complex and confusing, whether because of mobility, "intermarriage," or a difference between wealth/income and social status.

7. On education, see Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America* (New York: Basic Books, 1977) and Michael B. Katz, *Class, Bureaucracy, and the Schools: The Illusion of Educational Change in America* (New York: Praeger, 1971); on the ideal of entrepreneurship, Eli Chinoy, *Automobile Workers and the American Dream* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992).

8. See the poignant evocation of these and related tensions in R. Todd Erkel, "The Mighty Wedge of Class," *Urne Reader*, no. 66 (Nov./Dec. 1994), 100-103. The article originally appeared in *Family Therapy Networker* (July/August 1994).

9. Again, see Erkel.

10. See Katz, and Bowles and Gintis.

11. See Paul Cowan, *An Orphan in History*, also Irena Klepfisz, "The Distances Between Us: Feminism, Consciousness and the Girls at the Office," in *Dreams of an Insomniac: Jewish Feminist Essays, Speeches and Diatribes* (Portland, OR: Eighth Mountain Press, 1990), 15-49; and Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, "Class, Feminism, and the 'Black-Jewish Question,'" and "Jews, Class, Color and the Cost of Whiteness," both in *The Issue is Power: Essays on Women, Jews, Violence and Resistance* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1992), especially 117-126, 141-147.

12. Hershel Jonah Matt, "Principles and Policies for the Ideal Congregation," in *Walking Humbly with God: The Life and Writings of Rabbi Hershel Jonah Matt*, ed. Daniel C. Matt (Hoboken: KTAV Publishing House, 1993), 192, 194

On Being Commanded

BY MICHAEL M. COHEN

For almost all of us, the love we share with our families is sustained by a sense of mutual obligation. But our relations with our extended family circle—the Jewish community we create and enter into with one another—rarely feels obligatory. Rather, we come to those communities when it feels good to us to do so; we perform only those religious acts that we are certain add meaning to our lives. Such free choice flies in the face of what we affirm whenever we say traditional Jewish blessings, in which we praise and acknowledge God as “Ruler of the Universe who makes us holy through God’s commandments and commands us...” For many Jews this familiar wording raises a fundamental question, “In what way am I commanded?”

When most people are commanded they follow through with their orders. For example, in the army, a commander gives an order to his or her troops, or in baseball, the manager sends a signal to the batter telling him or her whether to bunt or to hit a sacrifice fly. In both cases, the individuals usually do what they are told to do. The ballplayer and the soldier personally know and see the individual

who is commanding them. They understand that these authority figures can enforce their orders if they are not followed, sending them to military prison, or, in baseball, benching, fining, or throwing them off the team. But when it comes to the Torah, we are not soldiers or ballplayers: we don’t feel the weight of being commanded. Most of us liberal Jews feel that there are no adverse consequences for not complying with the *mitzvot*. Furthermore, we don’t see the *mitzvot* as they have been traditionally seen—as a chance to encounter God.

How, then, can we say *asher kidshanu bemitzvotav vetzevanu*, “who makes us holy through God’s commandments and commands us” and mean it? Should we perhaps be saying something else? For also implied within this formula is the understanding that we have been chosen to be commanded. If we feel neither chosen nor commanded, what can motivate us to do what the voice of our tradition requires of us? One of our fundamental challenges as liberal Jews is to reconstruct a sense of holy obligation for the many Jews who do not approach the *mitzvot* from an orthodox perspective.

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Why Bother?

Before we can begin to talk about reconstructing that system, we need to first answer the question, "Why bother?" Czech President and playwright Vaclav Havel's description of our age helps frame the question:

We may know immeasurably more about the universe than our ancestors did, and yet it increasingly seems they knew more about it than we do, something that escapes us. But our inner self continues to have a life of its own. And the fewer answers the era of rational knowledge provides to the basic questions of human beings, the more deeply it would seem that people...cling to the ancient certainties of their tribe... [This] brings us to an idea, perhaps as old as humanity itself, that we are not at all just an accidental anomaly, the microscopic caprice of a tiny particle whirling in the endless depths of the universe. Instead, we are mysteriously connected to the universe, we are mirrored in it, just as the entire evolution of the universe is mirrored in us... This awareness endows us with the capacity for self-transcendence.¹

We need to remember that the *mitzvot* are not ends unto themselves, but rather a means for making the world we live in and experience more whole, more holy and more meaningful. This need for transcendent meaning is what Havel is addressing as he

looks at the contemporary world. In Judaism, the *mitzvot* are the framework that provides a greater depth to our lives and gives them greater purpose and significance, transforming our finite actions as they touch and are touched by the Infinite. A blessing said before drinking a glass of water turns that simple act into part of the unfolding of creation and the cosmos. For this and other reasons, liberal Jews need to find a way once again to access the call of the *mitzvot*.

Responding to the Call

Many of us are familiar with the midrash that when God held Mt. Sinai over our ancestors' heads and said, "If you accept the Torah, all is well; if not, this mountain will be your gravestone." The Talmud does not lose sight of the coercive element here, as Rabbi Aha ben Jacob observed: "This furnishes a strong protest against the Torah, as an excuse for non-observance, since it was forcibly imposed in the first place." "Yet even so," said Raba, "they reaccepted in the days of Ahasuerus, for it is written 'the Jews confirmed and irrevocably obligated themselves and their descendants and all who might join them' (Esther 9:27). Thus, they confirmed what they had accepted long before."² Raba's comment reminds us that each generation, community, and individual must confirm and reaccept the voice of Torah so that one can truly say *bemitzvotav vetzevanu*. It is a model that we should not lose sight of today.

Moses tells us similarly, "I make this covenant, with its sanctions, not with you alone, but with those who are standing here with us this day before the Lord our God and with those who are not with us here this day" (Deut. 29:13). Beginning immediately with Joshua and his generation the Jewish people needed to feel obligated on their own—not solely because a previous generation had taken on that responsibility. Thus we read: "The people replied to Joshua, 'No, we will serve the Lord! Thereupon Joshua said to the people, 'You are witnesses against yourselves that you have *by your own act chosen* to serve the Lord.' 'Yes, we are!' they responded (Josh. 24:21-22).

Each generation has felt the need to carry on in this spirit for at least two reasons: the tradition has power in its own right as an inheritance *and* it gains a new power as the individuals and community inheriting it make it their own. The implied tension of approaching the *mitzvot* from these two perspectives is beautifully illustrated in a teaching of the Baal Shem Tov:

"Why do we say 'Our God and God of our ancestors?'" he asks. "There are two kinds of people who believe in God. One believes by virtue of taking over the faith of parents; the other has arrived at faith through thinking and studying. The difference between them is this: the advantage of the first is that, no matter what arguments may be brought against it, the faith cannot be shaken; it is firm because it was taken from one's par-

ents. But there is one flaw in it: it is a faith only in response to a human command, acquired without study and thinking for one's self. The advantage of the second is that, because God has been found through much thinking, the believer has arrived at a personal faith, independently. But here, too, there is a flaw: it is easy to shake this faith by refuting it through evidence.

"But the person who unites both kinds of faith is invincible. And so we say 'Our God' with reference to our studies, and 'God of our ancestors' with an eye to tradition. The same interpretation has been given to our saying, 'God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob,' for this indicates that Isaac and Jacob did not merely take over the tradition of Abraham; they themselves searched for God."³

The quotations I have brought from Torah, Talmud, and Hasidism all suggest that doing the *mitzvot* solely because we inherited them has not always been a compelling enough reason to do them. Rather in each generation, there has been the need to claim the tradition not only *for* ourselves, but also *by* ourselves. We might say that the tradition chose each of us, and each of us decides whether or not to choose it back.

For many Jews today, however, that process is not always so easy. The reconciling of liberty with service is, as Abraham Joshua Heschel liked to point out, the great question and challenge to a meaningful life.⁴ We who cherish freedom sometimes forget one

of the great lessons of the Exodus story, which shows the Jewish people two contrasting paths out of slavery: Sinai and the Golden Calf. Freedom without responsibilities will not only lead to a meaningless life, but will in the end lead to new forms of slavery and idolatry.

Examining and Deciding

So how do we, like our ancestors at the end of the Book of Joshua, having just arrived, as it were, in the Promised Land of Torah, take on Torah's responsibilities?

Being commanded is about obligation—in our case, holy obligation. Obligation is the act of binding oneself through a social, legal, or moral tie. Until the Jewish encounter with modernity within the last two centuries, that sense of duty came from a belief that Torah, written and oral, was the word of God; in our day, when most Jews do not share that traditional view of Torah, it becomes imperative for us to claim that sense of duty and responsibility for ourselves. In the *mitzvah* system, the emphasis is not about being told what to do; rather, it is about binding oneself to that call and connecting oneself to the Life-force of the Universe. A call from beyond ourselves invites us to take part in this important and enriching task.

We have a vast sea of possibilities that our tradition lays before us. Examining and deciding what our tradition has to offer is the doorway through which many Jews can walk. This process will not, nor should

not lead to following all 613 commandments of the Torah. There are certainly some that will not be followed for ethical or moral reasons; others will not be chosen for personal reasons. Some *mitzvot* have fallen out of favor or have been circumvented throughout the centuries (for example, the death penalty). Others have been added, including two of the most popular blessings that Jews do, the blessings over the candles of Shabbat and Hanukkah; though neither is commanded in the Torah, we say “who has commanded us” when we do them! These two actions were raised by the rabbis to the status of *mitzvah* with all the binding responsibilities of the 613 commandments. The process of bringing *mitzvot* into our lives can be compared to composting or recycling, as we glean wisdom from Torah and re-use it in new and innovative ways in our lives.

Martin Luther King talked about living “a committed life.”⁵ When an action is claimed as a *mitzvah*, the question is no longer “should I do this?”, but rather, “now that I am bound, and thus commanded to do it, how shall I do it?” With many *mitzvot*, the question, based upon the concept of *hidur*, or adornment of the *mitzvah*, will also be, “how can I make this action (and, in turn, my life and the world we live in) more beautiful?”

In the pamphlet *Who is a Reconstructionist Jew?* it is noted that, “Orthodox Judaism has about it a seriousness and level of devotion that

are truly admirable. We seek to retain that seriousness.” We can indeed bring that seriousness to our practice of Judaism through the concept of *mitzvah* that I have been elaborating. How different our communities would look if we regarded the words of Shimon Ha-Tzadik as implying obligatory *mitzvah*: “The world rests on three things—on Torah, on worship, and on deeds of lovingkindness.”⁶

The Benefits for Community

If we truly embodied the seriousness we claim to seek, our communities would not need rabbis constantly looking for and asking for members to study Torah, or come to services, or visit the sick and other homebound. Rather, our communities would run on a kind of internal combustion engine, whose energy would be generated through the encounter with the *mitzvot*. In such communities, strangers would always be invited to someone’s home on Shabbat; members would want to lead services and give sermons; Jewish learning as a lifelong pursuit would be a given. Personal commitment would be backed by a deeper understanding of the importance of the *mitzvot* we do. Living a committed Jewish life would become more organic, transforming not only our individual lives, but also the communities we live in.

The Sefat Emet teaches in his commentary on the first line of *Parashat Tetzaveh* that this process, in addition to being innovative, is also one of self-transformation:

“Now you shall command” (Exod. 27:20): Bring the *mitzvah* into the souls of Israel so that they themselves become *mitzvot*!...It is the remaking (*tikkun*) of the person that takes place through *mitzvot*, forming a person into one dedicated to God...That person has become a *mitzvah*. This is the meaning of *asher kidshanu bemitzvotav*—“Who has made us holy through God’s commandments” *vetzevanu*—“and made us into a *mitzvah*!”

Our actions are our offerings to God and to each other. As Rabbi Daniel I. Kamesar לר׳ taught, “in biblical times, people brought the best of the herds, flocks or produce to the Temple as a fine offering to God. These gifts were brought to give thanks, to pay for an indiscretion, or *to make a contribution to the system.*”⁷ A great contribution we can make to the system of Judaism is to once again allow ourselves to hear the call of the *mitzvot* and to open ourselves to the challenging possibilities they present to us.

Living a Jewish life is about living a life of commitment and service. It is about binding oneself to certain ideals and actions. It is about leading a commanded life through our response to that call as expressed in the words *asher kidshanu bemitzvotav vetzevanu*. It is also about transforming our finite actions, and in so doing transforming not only our actions, but also our lives, the people we come into contact with, our families, our communities and our world. Through the perfor-

mance of *mitzvot*, we can once again touch that basic truth and mystery—that we are all connected to and mirrored in the universe and in the Infinite. ♦

1. Vaclav Havel, "A Time for Transcendence," *Urne Reader*, no. 67 (Jan.-Feb., 1995), 53, 112-13.

2. *B. Shabbat* 88a

3. As quoted by Martin Buber in *Hasidism and Modern Man* (New York: Horizon Press, 1958), 183-84.

4. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1951), 296.

5. Martin Luther King, February 4, 1968.

6. *M. Avot* 1:2.

7. Daniel I. Kamesar, class paper at RRC, Spring, 1990.

Bridging Self and Society: A Theological Proposal

BY SETH DANIEL RIEMER

While I was explaining Reconstructionism to an adult education class sponsored by my synagogue, people asked me about our movement's "definition" of God. Faithful to our doctrines, I presented the typical Reconstructionist response with its objections to the personal deity. Far from being an identifiable personality, I dutifully argued, God must be sought in the human search for purpose. One questioner, a highly intelligent man who works in the junk metal business and knows how to sort out and quickly dispense with the useless garbage, suddenly interjected: "Does that mean we're praying to ourselves?" Impatient with my attempt to sell him on our social-utilitarian ethos, and seeing through its hyperbole, he seemed bent on getting right down to theological brass tacks: Do we believe in God? If so, how do we address God—to whom must we direct our prayers? And what is our *religious motivation*?

The Reconstructionist movement has invested almost exclusively in the

conception of godliness as a social function. That conception leaves little room for—or means to examine—questions of personal belief, such as those my congregant raised. To be sure, Reconstructionists consider respect for personal autonomy a sacred touchstone of ethics.¹ The tenets of Reconstructionist Judaism encourage us to assert our individuality and to celebrate our personhood. But, ironically, they discourage us from asserting the individuality or celebrating the personhood of God.

I will argue that this inconsistency (or oversight) of Reconstructionist faith has its origins, and is best understood, within a context of modern ambivalence—a sense of uncertainty afflicting not only Reconstructionist Jews but all of contemporary society—about the proper relation between individual prerogatives and communal norms. Before attempting to explain the theological problem, it will be helpful to say something about the wider social framework within which that problem has arisen.

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The Social Background: Community and Individuality in Tension

Reconstructionism exhibits a sometimes unsettling tension between the claims of community and those of individuality, between an emphasis on social process and an insistence on human freedom. We emphasize the need to make decisions together and take responsibility for each other's welfare, yet we also insist upon respect for personal autonomy and private decisions. These two principles do not necessarily operate in harmony. Indeed, the program to build Jewish community and consensus does not always sit well with an equally strong commitment to honor unconventional outlooks and innovative or unique approaches toward religious life: when we try to accomplish both things, inevitably, divisions and conflicts arise.

Can we have it both ways, for example, when we seek to simultaneously honor the traditional precept of *kelal yisra'el* and the contemporary principle of patrilineal descent? And, however ethically sound my conviction, can I, as a Reconstructionist rabbi, assert that I am acting "according to the religion/principles of Moses and Israel" (*kedat mosheh veyisra'el*) when I officiate at weddings between gay men or lesbians?

Reconstructionists have endeavored to articulate a liturgical norm, establish consistent communal standards, define rabbinic policies, and work out a coherent view toward national and global politics; at the

same time we acknowledge the diversity of Jewish religious attitudes, cultural perceptions and personal experience. While the systematic approach toward movement-building has succeeded in dramatically increasing our numbers, our pursuit of unity with diversity has occasioned friction and conflicts.

Such clashes of outlook should come as no surprise since we find them everywhere in contemporary life. Public/private tensions and dichotomies typically mark discussions about religion in the schools and workplace, disputes concerning freedom of expression and public morals, the now renascent debate over abortion, the definition of marriage. Communities, families, and even the individual judgment divide over the proper definition of a social contract that grants freedom of conscience and religious liberty. Reconstructionists' concern with how to affirm the principle of individual freedom in light of community claims (or vice versa) merely echoes a familiar theme of dissonance played out in the larger culture. And it serves as a reminder of how the same split cultural consciousness impinges on Jewish reality.

Theological Implications of Social Conflict

Conflict over the proper relation between self and society or concern about the inability to reconcile them has deep implications for religious life. Unless religion can both satisfy our selfish or personal needs and also respond to society's urgent demands,

it too will be plagued by irresolution and strife. Religion must speak to us, therefore, at the deepest emotional level and on the most lucid rational plane. It must appeal to our emotions in order to address us as private individuals. Yet it must subject itself to norms of scientific scrutiny and give objective testimony in order to hold public credibility. But how can religion today be expected to do both these things?

In the traditional Jewish concept of Revelation, these two modes of theological perception—the social and the personal, the scientific and the emotional—worked together; but modern consciousness has divided them. Consider the well-known scandals over some of today's evangelical sects and messianic or new-age cults, whose followers declare their personal allegiance without summoning proof of their leaders' credentials or their god's abilities. Such cases dramatically exemplify modern society's confusion about the respective roles of reason and emotion in public discourse. By the same token, practitioners of science pursue their aims unfettered by any personal religious scruple. Where, in the search for a perfectly engineered human embryo, have the technologists performing this feat located a DNA band for any God-given trait such as lovingkindness or mercy, *hesed* or *rahamim*?

Ideological Self-Contradiction as a Premise of Modern Religion

From the sixteenth century on, traditional moralists, enemies of Church

Reformation and devotees of the *ancien régime* in Christian as well as Jewish society, regarded human autonomy as a dangerous new notion. At the same time, the old order's critics, the vanguard of Enlightenment or *haskalah*, began to fashion a creed of individualism and self-determination. Both the traditionalists and the modernists, the conservatives and the liberals, have been at odds with themselves, however, whenever they tried to invent a seamless religious design of theory and praxis—a theological foundation that supported their moral edifice.

Thus, dogmatic religious traditionalists (the so-called "fundamentalists") deny that a human being possesses autonomous rights or personal prerogatives; they refuse to allow this, even while they profess that the human being is made in the image of a willful, personal God, whose greatest gift to humankind is, presumably, each person's ability to act with free will. On the other hand, dogmatic religious modernists (the so-called "religious humanists") claim divine sanction for self-determination in human affairs and hence insist on the God-given rights of the individual;² this too seems like a moral contradiction, given that most of them have come to dismiss as superstition the idea of a personal God possessed of a will to think or do anything, including actively influencing human affairs. While traditionalists and modernists take potshots at each other, each side reserves its strongest ammunition for the war it is waging with itself!

What has produced such inconsistency? A telling historical factor is that the principle of religious disestablishment—a principle perhaps most finely articulated in the United States Bill of Rights—never fully resolved the problem of how to accommodate differing religious views in the public sphere. By disestablishing religion, a modern democratic government signals its wish to deflate the kinds of social and religious conflict that exploded in fearful strife during the rise of the modern European nation-states. Yet, although disestablishment is intended to separate church from state, it was never meant to remove religion from public life.

The Retreat from Public Religion

In the absence of an official mode of public discourse on religion, many religious concerns that belong in public remain there in shadowy, unarticulated form. Without a neutral framework for the discussion of religious beliefs, much of what belongs under the rubric of “public” religion is kept under wraps, banished into the exile of silence, necessarily (though artificially) relegated to a “private” realm. For instance, the media look askance at those who, like Jimmy Carter or Pat Robertson, openly give a religious accounting of their political views or actions.

Under these circumstances it is perfectly natural, indeed inevitable, that many a believer in the personal God will try to overcompensate for the public repression of this belief. Because such a believer has no way to

bring that belief into a publicly acceptable framework or address it in “secular” terms, religious expression is recast into a form of semi-private ritual. By the same token, a responsive, liberally attuned individual who recognizes the traditional public functions of religion will feel compelled to attenuate, or deny altogether, the “religious” aspect of this commitment, for fear that it might be misread as an offensive effort to impose on others or the public at large—or one’s fellow Jews, for that matter—a given religious viewpoint. Hence, Jews engaged in *tzedakah* and *tikkun olam* are likely to camouflage the religious motivation behind these commitments, that is, if they themselves even recognize their motivations as religious in nature.

If it is dangerous to bring religion into public life, it is impossible to neatly divide religion’s private and public characteristics, its selfish and sociable attributes, or its emotional and rational content. In the absence of an impartial public setting that would enable us to express—without fear of censure—the full depth of our religious feelings, we merely perpetuate a specious public-vs.-private dichotomy that compromises our integrity as religious and human beings.

We face what looks like an insoluble problem: civil society will not permit self and society—the communal and the individual consciousness, and the corresponding influences of reason and emotion—to work in smooth harmony. They conflict. An explosive

combination, they foment strife if brought together. But keeping them separate is only a stopgap remedy. Deliberately suppressing theological biases in public (typical of “conservatives”), or denying that there is a religious element in one’s social or moral outlook (typical of “liberals”), does appear necessary to maintain a stable civil existence. But we need to recognize that this deformation of religion has prevented a coherent dialogue between our communal and our individual consciousness.

Consequences for Reconstructionism, and a Proposal

In building a movement, Reconstructionists have generally recognized, but never smoothly resolved, the potential for conflict between the respective, legitimate roles of communal and individual consciousness. Only recently have we begun to deliberately address the presence of that conflict in our theology. But the mehitzah erected to separate “rational” and “emotional” facets of our being or belief is finally collapsing in a whirlwind of speculation stirred up by the turbulent, unresolved clash of beliefs sweeping through society as a whole. All of this disorientation has created an opening for Reconstructionists to experiment with theology of a personalist bias—despite our Kaplanian aversion to it.³

Accordingly, some are voicing a wish to investigate religious faith’s existential and subjective bases. They are speaking up to challenge the hegemony (and adequacy) of Mordecai

Kaplan’s scientific criteria for and socially applicable definitions of the “God-idea”—for instance, his interpretation of God as a theoretical “power that makes for cooperation.”⁴ Indeed, they are questioning its validity as rationalist dogma. Thus, within the Reconstructionist movement as well as in society as a whole, the issue is joined between traditionalists, who revisit a “personal” (and emotionally-charged, frequently mystical) approach toward God, and modernists, who wish to stick with a more “impersonal” (and objectively plausible, scientifically palatable) understanding of the divine.

Here, too, the arguments will grow predictable and the outcomes will founder in tiresome futility, as long as we continue to entertain a strict distinction between public and private outlooks. Without a continuum of religious-social awareness and discourse, society as a whole cannot move beyond the frustrating polarities and polemics—the false alternatives—of secularism and theocentrism. Within the Reconstructionist movement as well, the persistent recapitulation of weak dichotomies, such as that of “rationalist” and “emotionalist” theology, will accomplish nothing.

A better approach is to span and embrace extremes of moral attitude and theological belief: from what is labelled “puritanism” to what is labelled “hedonism”; from the catchall of “theism” to the label of “atheism.” The spiritual wholeness of a cultural system requires self and society,

emotion and reason, to be fully interactive. One side depends on the other—like *din* and *rahamim* (judgment and compassion), or yin and yang. Reconstructionists who note inconsistency between the demands of community (acknowledged in the movement's group-oriented, publicly determined, socially-conscious approach toward religion) and freedom of individuality (shown in the movement's firm commitment to autonomy in decision-making and matters of private conscience) can most effectively bridge these concerns by addressing more frankly the neglected personal God in relation to Reconstructionism's conventional theological posture—which, to the detriment of our movement and the Jewish people, has tended to brand the personal God as a taboo.

The criticism that Reconstructionism dwells too much on intellectual abstractions and ignores the emotional side of religious experience applies here. This is not to say that Reconstructionists should succumb to hazy religious emotionalism and narrowly sectarian, parochial attitudes that have played such a harmful role in the formation of traditional Judaism. Yet, critics from within the movement who charge that a preoccupation with mysticism and personalist theology is retrograde and reactionary have themselves yielded to a kind of rationalist Manicheanism! In order to fully realize the potential for group orientation and social activism, Reconstructionists need to articulate a sense of public commitment—indeed, a moralism—

rooted in the spirit of scientific inquiry and social conscience that reaches across to embrace personal religious conviction and a religious anthropology of spiritual depth.

As my congregant—the supremely rational junk metal dealer—easily recognized, to have a personal or even a mystical belief in God is not a relapse into narrow sectarianism. Nor is it a denial of Jewish tradition's historic mission to clear away superstition and to shed genuine light on reality. As surely as private and public concerns naturally overlap and mesh in human life, so too any true religious conception must bridge emotional and scientific aspects of faith. We, as Reconstructionist Jews, should not commit the error of assuming that modernity carries for us a sentence of spiritual denial or even of lasting spiritual ambivalence. Rather, to fulfill the Enlightenment legacy that will shed light anew upon Zion, we are challenged to locate a new public foundation for our personal faith, and so bring our religious passion out from the shadows where it has gone into hiding and waits to be redeemed. ♦

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1. "Human beings are entitled to experience the dignity of selfhood or personality...To experience the dignity of selfhood means that every individual must be able to feel that the society in which he lives regards him not merely as a means to an end, but recognizes him as an end in himself." Mordecai M. Kaplan, *The Future of the American Jew* (New York: Reconstructionist Press, 1961), 324.
 2. Consider the populist Deism of Thomas Jefferson, who envisioned humankind as being "endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable rights."

3. Marcia Prager ("Beyond Lordship: Personalizing Adonay," *The Reconstructionist*, 59, No. 1, Spring, 1994, 36), for example, comes close to making the transition into personalist theology: "And so, when we call out to God as Adonay, we can experience ourselves as being ushered to the doorway, the threshold of our capacity for intimacy with the Divine Presence." Arthur Green in *Seek My Face, Speak My Name* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1992), 28-35, offers a yet more circum-spect approach toward the subject. Green states: "We attempt to seek out the One through images of a person, through encoun-

tering God as another 'person'" (28). "If God has a face, we tend to believe, surely it is a projection of the human face" (30). While positioning himself as a psychologist of religion, Green betrays his fascination with, and emotional susceptibility to, personal theology's influence.

4. "Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1981), 317; and *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* (New York: Reconstructionist Press, 1962), 202.

Forming a New Congregation: The Uneasy Tension Between Freedom and Community

BY BARRY SCHWARTZ

Sure a bird could marry a fish. But where would they live?

—Traditional Yiddish saying

When a group of people to which I belonged set out to start a new kind of Jewish community, we were faced, though we didn't know it, with the problem of the fish and the bird. Each of us was both a Jew and an American, and we wanted to create an institution that incorporated what was good about each of those identities. Judaism, it is said, is a religion of laws. What this means is that Jews are told by their traditional teachings what to do in almost every aspect of daily life—secular or religious, significant or mundane. And America is the culture of freedom, a culture in which individuals are empowered to decide for themselves how to live their lives. So

when a group of very American Jews gets together to form a congregation, it is faced with the task of marrying a fish and a bird, of marrying traditional constraint and regulation to unfettered freedom. As my congregation discovered, figuring out how to do this—figuring out where and how the “married couple” should live—is no simple matter. We performed the marriage six years ago, and we're still not sure that the bird and the fish have a place to call home.

It all began over politics. My family belonged to a small Jewish congregation that operated out of a plain, old, converted three story house in a Philadelphia suburb. My participation in the congregation was at first quite

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minimal. Membership in an organized Jewish community had never been especially important to me. Indeed, for many years I found the prospect of participation in an organized Jewish community almost unthinkable. Then I fell into what has been disparagingly referred to by some as “pediatric Judaism.” A pediatric Jew is someone who becomes Jewish or “remembers” that he’s Jewish at the time that his children are old enough for a Jewish education. Most pediatric Jews maintain some involvement with the congregations they join until their children reach middle adolescence, at which point their involvement begins to diminish, or even disappear altogether. I fully intended to conform to this pattern.

But then something unexpected happened. Our congregation hired a new rabbi who was committed to the view that religious involvement demanded social and political activism. For this rabbi, being a “good Jew” required more than attending services and participating in rituals. It required more than giving charity to the needy. It also required engaging in political activity in pursuit of justice—social justice, economic justice, and political justice—for non-Jews as well as for Jews. This commitment to linking spiritual observance with political and social action got me interested and engaged. Unfortunately, it got many of my fellow congregants nervous—even angry, with the result that after a year of conflict, the rabbi and a group of like-minded congregants split off to form a new congregation.

I had become thoroughly embroiled in the community conflict. Pediatric Jew or not, the vision of a religious community committed to political and social activism was one I found wholly appropriate and deeply appealing. And so I became immersed in the effort to create a new institution. At meetings in people’s livingrooms on sweltering summer nights, the forty or so families that had supported the rabbi gathered to plan and to create a new institution. Many of us were the religious “walking wounded.” We had left organized Judaism as young adults—consciously and deliberately—because we had found aspects of its doctrines and its practices hurtful, offensive and unjust.

A New Kind of Community

This new institution was going to be different, and it was going to be different not just in matters of practice, but in matters of principle. Indeed, this new institution was going to start with a statement of principles, so that people would know, explicitly and unequivocally, what it stood for—what made it different from other Jewish congregations.

And so, while some planners worried about finding a place for the congregation to meet, and some planners worried about finding money for the rent and for the rabbi’s salary, and some planners worried about setting up a school for the children, others set out to write the principles that would define our community. They set about adapting or reconstructing the long-standing traditions and teachings of Judaism to the particular cir-

cumstances that faced people in a contemporary America that was dominated by materialism and the language of self-interest. And it was in the course of this process of community definition that the bird and the fish got together and tried to figure out where to live.

For the traditions we had to work with, as Jews, were traditions of commandment, law, and regulation. The traditional community of Jews has something to tell its members about what they eat, what they wear, what kind of work they do and how they do it, who they marry, how they engage in sex, and how they should behave with their children, their parents, their spouses, their friends, other Jews, and even non-Jews who live among them. Traditional Judaism has little use for a distinction that most Americans take for granted—the distinction between public life and private life. For traditional Judaism, basically all aspects of life are public.

On the other hand, the expectations we had to work with as modern Americans were expectations that all decisions about how to live and what to do were up to the individual. Individual freedom and empowerment are deeply valued by Americans, and they were deeply valued by the members of my Jewish community. Indeed much of their commitment to the pursuit of social justice was a commitment to help make the kind of personal freedom that they enjoyed as well-educated, middle-class Americans available to the millions in their culture, and around the world, who didn't possess it.

These two commitments—to individual freedom and community obligation—established conflicts between rights and duties, between pleasure and virtue. What we were trying to do was eliminate the conflict. We were trying to invent or discover a way to meld freedom and obligation. Rather than allow the fish and the bird to fight it out for our allegiance, we were trying to develop a new creature—neither fish nor fowl—that respected individual freedom and privacy at the same time that it established community standards and obligations. And we discovered that the task was extremely difficult, perhaps even impossible.

Rejecting the Extremes

We considered the extreme of Jewish orthodoxy, of taking all the commandments that were meant to regulate our lives seriously, as community imperatives. It was immediately apparent that orthodoxy was not a viable candidate. Not only was it extremely impractical to try to live an orthodox Jewish life in a non-Jewish world. Even worse, many aspects of Jewish orthodoxy were explicitly incompatible with some of the commitments that had brought us together.

The extreme of complete individual autonomy seemed much more attractive, much more in keeping with the language of individual freedom that is virtually every American's first language. The language of freedom could embrace gender equality, toleration of spiritual and sexual differences, and respect for privacy. The

problem was that in its extreme form, individual autonomy offers no community-defining principles at all. Each free-flying bird is entitled to make of her community commitments whatever she wishes—to observe what and when and how she wants to observe, to participate when and how she wants to participate. A community of birds is no community. It's just a collection, one that may, at times, happen to fly together, but cannot be counted upon to do so. So the extreme of complete individual freedom also wouldn't do.

Carried to its logical extreme, a commitment to individual freedom of expression and observance meant giving freedom of expression and observance to people who thought men and women should have radically different roles in a Jewish community, who thought homosexuality was an abomination, and who thought politics had no place in a religious organization. And so we came to realize that our commitment was not really to individual expression and observance. Instead, it was a commitment to some forms of expression and observance—including some that had been excluded from traditional Jewish practice—and a rejection of others, many of which had been embraced in traditional Jewish practice.

When we came to this understanding, we realized that we could not avoid producing a statement of principles that excluded some Jews (by making them feel unwelcome) and rejected some practices. And we realized that our statement of principles

had, to some degree, to tell people how we thought they should be living their lives. None of this sat well with people who had themselves abandoned Jewish practice years before precisely because the things it told them about how to live their lives were unacceptable. But any community worthy of the name is a community of some but not all people, that celebrates some but not all ways of life.

Stating Our Principles

Faced with the daunting task of melding freedom and obligation, we drafted a statement of principles. It identified our community as **“committed to the integration of the three primary areas of Jewish life: prayer, study, and acts of care and repair of the world.”**

With this statement, we not only made clear our commitment to political and social activism, but by focusing on integration, we made clear that activism was integral to what we believed and did. It was informed and guided by our prayer and study; it was not merely added on. On this general statement, there was broad community support and agreement. The problems came when we began to specify more concretely what kind of prayer, study, and repair of the world we were committed to.

With regard to prayer, we faced two significant problems. First, different members of our congregation had very different conceptions of God. At the extremes, some members held rather traditional, supernatural views

of God, while others believed that "God" was a human invention. Second, while everyone agreed that the exclusion of women from the language and the content of the traditional liturgy was unacceptable, people differed as to what might be done about it. Many of our members found it difficult or impossible to say prayers that in effect were institutionalizing the insignificance of women. They argued that the content of the liturgy should be changed. But other members thought there was value in saying the same words that had been said by our ancestors for thousands of years, and that were still being said, in synagogues all over the world, every Friday night and Saturday morning. They argued that the liturgy should be retained, but supplemented with suitable commentary.

Our statement of principles resolved these disagreements by means of the word "and." We would accommodate views of God as a force of nature, *and* as a force of human agency, *and* as something transcendent and mysterious. We would change some of the content of our prayers to reflect the equal status of women *and* we would retain the original prayers in our prayerbooks so that people could experience a bond with their traditional past. All these "ands" made for prayer services that gave everybody something and nobody everything. Though these compromises by conjunction left most of us a little uncomfortable, our community accepted them with good will and in good faith, understanding that if

things got too sexist (or too feminist), too mundane (or too supernatural), too insular (or too universal) our spiritual practices would be open to continuing discussion and revision.

Study and Practice

When we turned to *study*, the second leg of our tripod, similar issues arose. We were committed to study, but study of what? Clearly, because we were Jews, our focus would be on the sacred texts of our tradition, the Torah and the Talmud. But how open should we be to other texts, including both secular texts and the sacred texts of other religious traditions? And how were we to approach our sacred texts? For traditional Jews, the Talmud was the law. It laid out, in extraordinary detail, the rules by which people were to live their lives. But many of these laws were for us either impractical or unacceptable. This meant that we would have to read the laws critically, picking and choosing from among them the ones that seemed appropriate. The trouble was that we had no principles that could govern our picking and choosing. Different members of our community found different laws unacceptable. ***Some members of our community found the very notion of a law unacceptable.*** The notion of law, as articulated and enforced by a community, deprived individuals of the freedom and autonomy that America had given them as their birthright.

In our statement of principles, we resolved some of these difficulties by again resorting to "and." We would study sacred texts *and* other sources.

And we resolved other difficulties by being silent all together about whether any of the teachings of our sacred texts would have the status of law.

But this silence as to law only postponed problems; it didn't solve them. Within the first year of our existence, several issues arose regarding matters of law. We had to struggle over deciding which if any of Judaism's traditional dietary laws (*kashrut*) to observe on occasions when food was served at one of our gatherings. Should we ignore *kashrut*, and just let individuals bring and eat whatever they wanted? Should we adhere strictly to the traditional laws of *kashrut*? Should we adhere to a modified version of *kashrut* by observing the prohibition against mixing meat and dairy and prohibiting meat from being served at community gatherings? Or should we create a new *kashrut*, one that was sensitive to issues of ecology, health, and problems of world hunger?

We also had to struggle over deciding which if any of Judaism's traditional laws governing the Shabbat to observe. Strict observance of the Shabbat was impossible. Almost none of our members could even have attended Shabbat services if they observed the prohibition against driving. So we either had to abandon Shabbat restrictions all together, or once again, pick and choose among them in the absence of any principles that would guide us. And some of our members resented any prohibitions or restrictions, arguing that what was

important about Shabbat observance was not so much *what* one did as *how* one did it. ("God loveth adverbs," the saying goes). It was up to each of us to decide what kind of activity made the Shabbat separate and holy for us. The sacredness of the Shabbat was, in other words, a private and not a public matter.

It is in matters of observing Jewish law that people are faced most directly with the choice between giving free rein to their individual tastes and preferences or submerging them in the service of a communal vision. In such matters, the fish and the bird face their problems of incompatibility most vividly. In traditional Jewish communities, picking and choosing among the laws in a way that suits individual tastes and life circumstances was and is simply not an option. In non-traditional Jewish communities, like ours, personal choice and discretion are inescapable. So are the problems for communal practice and character that they pose. At this writing, as my congregation celebrates and struggles through its sixth year of existence, we have not yet developed a way to discuss matters of Jewish law as they might apply to our community in a way that does not offend or threaten many of our members. Whether such discussion is possible in a community that gives primacy to freedom and individualism is an open question.

Too Many Good Causes

Agreeing on what our statement of principles should say about acts of

care and repair of the world, the third leg of our communal tripod, was relatively easy. We were bound together by the story of the Exodus from bondage in Egypt. We viewed the Exodus as a model of how religious commitment and commitment to the pursuit of justice go together. "Exodus morality" we called it, the morality of liberation. And there was general agreement among us about which side we were on in many of the struggles for liberation that were going on both inside and outside our national boundaries.

But here, alas, was the problem. There was no shortage of liberation struggles to get involved with. There was the struggle of blacks in South Africa. There was the struggle of homeless people in Philadelphia. There was the struggle of Jews in the Soviet Union. There was the struggle of peasants in Central America. There was the struggle of Arabs in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. There were the struggles of women and of homosexuals. There was the struggle of the disabled. There were the struggles against age, sex, and race discrimination in jobs and in housing. Many worthy projects. Much work to be done. Community support, in theory, for all of them. But not nearly enough community resources—in people, in time, or in money—to follow through.

So which ones should be chosen? And according to what principles? Different individuals in the congregation had very deep involvement with one or another of these struggles. But

what lay behind the particular struggles they had chosen usually involved idiosyncratic personal history or secular political involvement. They could appeal personally to other members of the congregation to become involved, but they could not appeal to religious principles generally, or to the particular principles that united our community, to justify our involvement in one struggle rather than another. As a community we lacked a language that might enable us to prioritize projects and choose among them. The only language we had was the language of individual preference and choice. Thus, even when our focus was on getting outside ourselves to engage in activities that would contribute to the care and repair of a broken world, the fact that we spoke to one another in America's language of individual freedom made it difficult to agree on what to care for, what to repair.

In addition to the difficulties we had in specifying our basic principles in concrete and specific detail, we also had difficulty in deciding just how seriously the members of our congregation were supposed to take their membership. Was our community supposed to become the center of our lives—spiritually, ethically, politically, and even socially and economically? Were our members supposed to treat fellow congregants differently than they treated the rest of the world? Did congregants have special responsibilities and obligations? Could they command special attention? If, by some chance, our community was able to agree about what kinds of worship, of

diet, of sexual practices, of living arrangements, of political involvement were “kosher,” and if it was to proclaim its “kosher laws,” were the members of the community expected to abide by those laws? If they didn’t, could they be publicly sanctioned, or even expelled from the community? Was it possible, in a society in which there were almost no social or economic rules, for a small community to establish its own and demand that its members follow them?

Public Commitments but Private Decisions

If you are faced with an all-encompassing religious community, you have but one question to answer, one choice to make: do you join up or not? Once you decide to join up, you simply understand and accept the fact that this decision will affect everything you do. If, in contrast, you are faced with a religious community whose scope is more modest, you are faced with a myriad of questions and choices. In addition to deciding whether or not to join up, you are also faced, again and again, with decisions about whether to allow this or that aspect of your life (your work, your hobbies, your diet, your charitable activities, your sexual preferences, your reading habits) to be influenced by your religious affiliation. And in each case, the decision is entirely up to you; it is personal and private, a matter of taste.

There was strong sentiment in our community to resist any tendency to total commitment. On the other

hand, there was a very deep longing in people to belong to something, something that was larger than any individual, would last longer than any individual, and would accept, nurture, and protect those who had made commitments to it. There was a very deep longing in people to make this congregation, this community, their “haven in a heartless world.” And it wasn’t clear that any institution that allowed each individual member to pick and choose among the principles that defined and governed it could ever develop the strength and continuity to become that haven. So over and above the conflicts that were revealed in our discussion of the various principles to which our community was committed, there was this more general conflict over how much individuals could be expected to submerge their individual autonomy in the service of building a community. What, in other words, was a person giving up, and what was she getting, if she decided to become one of us?

We grappled with all of these questions, resolving none of them, as we formulated our statement of principles, as we ratified it, and as we began to function as a community. Some people became angry while others approved when we decided that when members’ turns came to clean our communal space, they could not do it on Shabbat. Some people became angry while others approved when some women in the congregation tested our commitment to the full participation of women in congregational life by holding “alternative” Shabbat

services that were open only to women. Some people became angry while others approved when we decided that there were some roles in the Shabbat service that could not be taken by the non-Jewish partners of members, though for the most part, non-Jewish partners were welcome to full membership and participation.

Through all the disagreement, conflict, and uncertainty, what kept us together, and what continues to keep us together, was the realization that none of us alone could create a safe, just, and caring world for ourselves and our families. None of us alone could instill in our children the kind of values we thought they should have, and the kind of strength to resist corruption we thought they would need. Our hope was that by acting in the world as part of a strong and sup-

portive organization of Jews, an organization with moral force and vision, some of our burden would be eased.

What many of us did not know at first, and came slowly to realize in the course of our community's struggle for self-definition, is the extent to which the price we would have to pay for membership in a strong and supportive community was in the coin of our individualism. We simply could not, each of us, be whatever kind of Jew we wanted to be. We would surely have to sacrifice some of our individualism in our public lives, and we might even have to sacrifice it in our private lives as well. Yes a bird could marry a fish. And perhaps the bird could avoid having to develop gills. But it surely would have to be willing to give up flying, to have its wings clipped. ♦

Community as Fellowship: The Reconstructionist Havurah

BY BRANT ROSEN

"The components of fellowship are individuals coming together out of radical self involvement and isolation from one another to pursue a purpose that transcends their own individual lives."¹

—Jacob Neusner

These words, published some thirty years ago in the pages of *The Reconstructionist*, resonate even more deeply today. Social isolation is an undeniable fact of contemporary American culture. Our lives are more mobile, our relationships more transitory, our roots that much shorter. Few would disagree that the need to transcend our individualism through fellowship and community is more critical than ever before.

Sociologist Robert Bellah and others have painted intriguing portraits of Americans' attempts to create community within a largely individualistic culture.² Though the tension between individual and community values is not new, it can be argued that we are

in a new phase in our search for community. Indeed, a society where terms such as "global village" and "information superhighway" have become vernacular reflects a powerful desire to find fellowship in a rapidly changing world.

The American Jewish community has not been immune from this tension. The unprecedented growth of Jewish institutions following the Second World War has managed to undermine the simple fellowship that was the hallmark of Jewish communal life for centuries. *Jews are finding it increasingly difficult to make real and lasting connections with other Jews.* This post-modern dilemma has given rise to two important yet markedly

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divergent trends in the American Jewish community: the resurgence of fundamentalism and the growth of the havurah movement.

The Contemporary Havurah— Reconstructionist Origins

The roots of the contemporary havurah can be traced to Mordecai Kaplan's notion of democracy in religious life and his well-known concept of organic community. A generation later, the leadership of the Reconstructionist movement devoted the 1961 FRCH convention to a discussion of the fledgling havurah concept. Subsequently, *The Reconstructionist* ran a series of articles proposing the creation of Jewish "fellowships."

In an early article, Jacob Petuchowski of Hebrew Union College proposed the formation of "modern brotherhoods" modeled after the ancient Pharaic havurot.³ Jacob Neusner, in another pivotal article, offered five "Principles of Fellowship" by which burgeoning havurot could be guided:

1. *The havurah should "take its particular character from the fundamental concerns of Jewish faith and tradition."*

2. *The havurah should "seek fellowship ... rather than friendship."*

3. *The havurah should "aim at the personal involvement of each fellow in the immediate achievement of its purpose..."*

4. *The havurah should "choose mundane, tentative and austere goals."*

5. *The havurah should be "regarded under the aspect of time, as an institution that happens at the moment of its own recreation."*⁴

In contrast to large suburban synagogues, havurot would be small and intimate, meeting in members' homes. Rather than delegating Jewish responsibilities to professionals, duties pertaining to the sustenance of the group would be shared among havurah members themselves. Perhaps most crucially, the primary goal of the havurah would embody the simple ethic of Jewish fellowship.

The 1968 founding of Havurat Shalom and the growth of grass-roots davvening communities introduced an important new trend in the havurah movement, which was to have a profound influence upon the havurot of the Reconstructionist movement. Today, the majority of havurot currently affiliated with FRCH differ sharply from the fellowships originally envisioned by Petuchowski, Neusner, Eisenstein, et al. Most could more accurately be termed "proto-synagogues"—namely, smaller congregations that are not formally served by a full-time rabbi.

Another notable variation is the synagogue havurah, pioneered largely by Rabbi Harold Schulweis at Valley Beth Shalom in Encino CA. While closer to the initial havurah idea, synagogue havurot are ultimately dependent upon and bound to a larger institutional structure. In the end, somewhat ironically, the ultimate goal of the synagogue havurah is to serve the congregation itself.

B'nai Havurah - A Case Study

Perhaps the purest realization of the original Reconstructionist havurah ideal is the havurah federation—a concept that was introduced in 1963 by B'nai Havurah: The Colorado Jewish Reconstructionist Federation. Located throughout the Denver metro area, B'nai Havurah is a network of twenty independent havurot that constitute a larger havurah community. While each group is unique and autonomous, they all receive access to resources provided by B'nai Havurah: a religious school for members' children, regular Shabbat and holiday celebrations, and the services of a full-time rabbi who serves as a spiritual leader and resource for havurah members.

This model, though not widespread, continues to be explored throughout the Reconstructionist movement—most prominently at Dor Hadash in San Diego and at the Los Angeles Reconstructionist Community of Havurot. Notable variations of this approach include the Havurah of South Florida and Kehila Chadasha, located in Bethesda, MD.

B'nai Havurah, founded shortly after the havurah idea was introduced, is the oldest havurah-based community in the Reconstructionist movement. It is, in many ways, a direct outgrowth of the original havurah ethic of the early 1960's. Many of its original founders—who were present when Mordecai Kaplan and Ira Eisenstein first came to Denver—continue to be active members of their havurot and leaders in the greater B'nai Havu-

rah community. Now over thirty years old, the evolution of B'nai Havurah offers a unique insight into the evolution of the Reconstructionist havurah idea. In what follows, we will re-examine Neusner's original havurah guidelines against the experience of the Denver havurot.

Take shape from the fundamental concerns of Jewish faith and tradition.

In Neusner's original formulation, "a Jewish social group or fellowship ought to bear witness to an intrinsic sociological idea within Judaism," representing the sociological effect of the religion of Israel.⁵ For Neusner, this rule is so self-evident as to be less a principle than an assumption. Thirty years later, however, there is nothing self-evident about the "intrinsic sociological idea within Judaism." Just as the Jewish identity of the individual can no longer be taken for granted, so neither can the Jewish character of contemporary havurot.

B'nai Havurah was founded largely by Jews from traditional backgrounds who were familiar with the particulars of Jewish ritual and community-building. The newer generations, by contrast, include Jews with little to no Jewish background and non-Jews who are part of interfaith households. By definition, havurot are led by laypeople, but today, many laypeople find themselves unaccustomed to and uncomfortable with roles of Jewish leadership.

As a result, it is natural for havurot today to fall back on a model that

defines a havurah as simply a group of Jews that meet regularly—and whose ultimate goals may or may not be grounded in anything particularly Jewish. Unlike thirty years ago, the Judaic component of havurot can no longer be considered a foregone conclusion, but must be consciously nurtured.

At B'nai Havurah, the most successful place to start infusing a Judaic context into group life is with Jewish life-cycle events. Baby namings, B'nai Mitzvah, weddings and funerals all resonate with common Jewish experience. They address the universal feelings that are present at all life transitions, regardless of one's Jewish background or training. Moreover, when a havurah takes responsibility for organizing, facilitating, and/or celebrating Jewish life rituals, they often become not simply community celebrations, but rather celebrations of community.

Havurot should also be encouraged to schedule their meetings according to rhythms of the Jewish calendar. Pesah sederim and Sukkah parties are ideal venues for observance in a havurah setting. Rather than habitually planning programs on Sunday evenings or weeknights, havurot can make a habit of meeting on Friday or Saturday nights, in conjunction with a Shabbat potluck dinner or Havdalah ceremony.

There are additional ways for havurot to create a Jewish context for their programs. One group in B'nai Havurah, for example, has decided to begin every meeting with a short *devar torah*. Another option is to start off by reciting the *shehechyanu* bless-

ing together. Such group rituals, done on a regular basis, can eventually become important to the group's sense of Jewish purpose.

Rabbis, Jewish educators, and other community professionals involved in building havurot must not assume that their independent, autonomous nature means that they do not require outside guidance. More often than not, havurot need and desire assistance in charting their course—especially when it comes to Judaic content. Havurah members should be consistently encouraged to utilize existing resources in the Jewish community whenever possible.

Seek fellowship...rather than friendship.

According to Neusner, "friendship rests on abiding affection, it is entirely an emotional relationship of two people, totally focused on those two people. Fellowship on the other hand, may very well be achieved without friendship at all, for it is predicated on a common goal or ideal shared among two or more people, drawing them together despite, not because of, their particularities and uniqueness."⁶

Neusner's distinction between friendship and fellowship is an important one. Many B'nai Havurah members point out that they did not join simply because they were interested in making new friends—they crave real connections with other Jews. In an age where there are groups for virtually every interest imaginable—book groups, self-help groups, Lamaze groups, fitness groups, etc.—the

strength of the havurah still resides in its ability to provide a locus where Jews can come together in fellowship.

Nevertheless, it is natural for havurah members to place friendship expectations on their relationship with each other. It is not unusual for B'nai Havurah members to report that they feel that their havurah is something of a failure if they don't often see most of the members outside of havurah meetings. Disagreements between members are sometimes viewed as a fundamental weakness in the havurah.

Members often need to be reminded that the diversity of the havurah is its very strength. Different *haverim* bring different backgrounds, talents and areas of knowledge to bear on the life of the group. The only real common criteria members share is the ethic of Jewish fellowship—that is, *shared Jewish experience*. In this respect, a havurah could be more accurately compared to an extended family unit. A havurah, like a family, finds its strength not in the fact that its members are homogeneous, have common interests, or are necessarily friends with one another. Rather, members are strengthened by the shared experience of being part of the group.

Many members of B'nai Havurah have moved to Colorado from out-of-state, and thus look to their havurah as their local family. Havurot become invaluable when they rally around members who are going through important life transitions. After the death of a loved one, for example,

havurot will often mobilize to cook food, make phone calls and help with funeral arrangements. When one member recently broke up with her spouse, she looked to her havurah to help her find a temporary residence. When another member was in dire need of an immediate blood transfusion, his havurah coordinated a federation-wide blood drive.

Aim at the involvement of each fellow in achieving the havurah's purpose.

"I have found," wrote Neusner, "that money is easier to collect than minds, and that intellect and commitment are more precious because they are rarer." The havurah was thus envisioned as a kind of antidote to the growing obsession with fund-raising within the Jewish community. In contrast to synagogues, leadership in the havurah would be based on the intellectual and spiritual contribution of its membership.

The havurah is an important alternative for a generation of Jews disenchanting with the exclusivist nature of Jewish communal leadership. Over the past few decades, as the Jewish community has become increasingly dependent on the philanthropy of a tiny elite, the participatory, self-run nature of the havurah has grown in its appeal.

This is not to say, however, that there is no internal leadership within any given havurah, or that havurot typically boast active participation by all members. As in any group environment, it is natural that some members

will emerge as group leaders. The emergence of a strong leadership core is, in fact, essential to the vitality of the havurah.

At B'nai Havurah, leaders emerge in different ways. Some tend to be good group organizers by nature and bring their skills to bear on the life of their havurah. Others may develop a strong sense of purpose for the havurah and are skillful advocates for their specific vision. Members who have strong Judaic backgrounds naturally tend to guide the Jewish content of havurah activities.

As the needs and life experiences of havurah members change, so will the nature of the group. One member may have been extremely active during the formative years of a havurah, and now prefers to take a back seat while others take on more responsibility. Another may become more involved in the life of the group now that their children have reached school age. Empty-nesters will often withdraw from leadership of the havurah—especially if they feel that their group has become too child-centered.

Individuals view their havurah as a greater or lesser priority in their own life for a myriad of reasons. *Members must learn to respect each other's decisions as they evolve over time, lest they become a source of tension within the group.* It is not uncommon for havurah members to harbor resentment toward those whom they feel do not pull their weight. The opposite may be true as well: members may disapprove of others who are perceived to

be calling all the shots in the life of the havurah. In truth, there will always be active and passive members within any given group. Members must learn to treat one another, in the words of Genesis 21:17, *ba'asher hu sham*—"where one is."

When a havurah goes through a period of inertia, it is often because the group itself has failed to keep pace with the changes of its individual members. When this has occurred at B'nai Havurah, *it has been extremely useful for havurot to hold evaluative check-in sessions.* At such meetings, members share their own personal needs with each other and discuss ways that the havurah could be more sensitive to those needs. In some cases, the group will be able to adjust accordingly; in other instances, members may need to accept that certain needs could and should be addressed outside the havurah.

Choose mundane, tentative and austere goals.

Neusner cautioned against viewing the havurah as a panacea for the socio-spiritual ills of the American Jewish community. "If the havurah means anything at all," he wrote, "its meaning must emerge in the life of the fellows themselves, for, otherwise, fellowship may *stand* for great goals, but *move* no where and no one. The Jews have always responded cautiously to messiahs, and in modern days, when social institutions assume the messianic or eschatological pose, Jews would do well to maintain their caution and detachment."⁸

Though the havurah has clearly emerged as a major force in the contemporary Jewish community, the idea itself was not considered revolutionary in its time. In the Reconstructionist movement at least, the havurah was envisioned as a modest attempt to reintroduce the concept of fellowship into Jewish life. The originators of the Reconstructionist havurah idea intended it to be a supplement—not substitute—for the synagogue and other Jewish communal institutions.

The experience of B'nai Havurah is instructive in this regard. In 1963, when the original havurah was formed, members did not envision the havurah as a surrogate for their own synagogues. Though the new havurot held their own services on occasion, members still retained their affiliation with other area congregations. As more havurot were created, however, the havurah federation gradually provided members with more typical congregational resources. While children of havurah members originally received their education from local synagogue schools, when the number of school-age children reached a critical mass, B'nai Havurah organized its own religious school, run by havurah members who educated students according to Reconstructionist principles. Today, the B'nai Havurah religious school has over 80 students and is staffed by a professional principal and salaried teachers.

B'nai Havurah's decision to hire its first rabbi emerged much in the same way. For nearly twenty years, members resisted the hiring of a profes-

sional spiritual leader, because of their deeply held havurah ethic of participatory community. Religious services were written, organized and led exclusively by the members themselves. When the services of a rabbi were required—for purposes of life cycle events and/or religious counsel—various local rabbis were recruited as needed. The difficult decision to hire a rabbi came as B'nai Havurah expanded to ten havurot. Although many members felt that the presence of a rabbi would compromise the havurah ethic of member-led community and others saw the concept of a "havurah rabbi" as a contradiction in terms, the majority understood that the community had grown to the point where the services of a rabbi were sorely needed.

Since the hiring of their first rabbi in 1983, the concept of havurah rabbi has evolved considerably. At first, members were so devoted to the principle of lay participation that even the idea of a rabbi delivering sermons on the High Holidays was considered anathema to many. Since that time, B'nai Havurah has gradually come to depend upon their rabbi to provide an overall spiritual vision for the havurah community. It is safe to assume that as B'nai Havurah continues to mature, it will continue to explore the delicate dynamic between rabbinic assertion and group process.

With the addition of a religious school and a rabbi, some observers have justifiably asked what makes B'nai Havurah different from any other congregation that has havurot.

The simple answer is that the havurah has always and will continue to be the central focus of the community. Entry into the community takes place at a havurah level, and membership is defined primarily by one's attachment to a particular havurah. (Members who do not belong to a havurah are known as "Members Seeking," reflecting an important expectation on the part of the community).

Over the years, then, B'nai Havurah has been faced with numerous challenges to its original havurah vision. Still, the expanding of the federation has not fundamentally affected the participatory, autonomous nature of its havurot. Growth has only enabled B'nai Havurah to offer members more Jewish resources and services—while the havurot continue to function the way they have since the community was founded.

An institution that happens at the moment of its own recreation

Neusner: "Fellowship has no substance. It is not a social continuum. It manifests no existence independent from that of its communicants. Fellowship is a dimension of time: one cannot say fellowship *is*, but rather, fellowship *happens*."⁹

There is no goal more central to the havurah than shared Jewish experience. This goal is often lost on havurah members, precisely because it is so obvious. As Neusner pointed out, the havurah is defined the moment members come together in fellowship. They need nothing else in common at

that very moment than the fact that they are experiencing each other as an extended Jewish family.

Still there is a tendency to assume this simple ideal needs to be filled with more "substance." Many mistakenly assume that a havurah is the equivalent of a Jewish special interest group. Over the past several years, the Jewish community has witnessed a proliferation of "singles havurot," "gourmet havurot," "youth havurot," et al. This points to a popularization and cheapening of the havurah idea. Havurot may also have the tendency to replace fellowship with intellectualism. Over the years, some havurot in B'nai Havurah have unconsciously become *de facto* study groups—structuring their meetings exclusively around members or invited experts who speak to the havurah about a particular topic. While study can and should be important to the group life of a havurah, members need to take care lest it become an exclusive focus.¹⁰

The ethic of Jewish fellowship, then, remains somewhat elusive, and its temporal character is easily misunderstood. As Neusner so aptly put it, "I cannot reveal the mystery of fellowship, for I do not know it. I can suggest, however, that we seek it not in mechanisms and artifices, but in the magic of a moment, in the miracle that occurs when men and women transcend themselves, their personal wants, and subjective needs, in pursuit of an end, however petty, that lies beyond the horizons of their private place in life."¹¹

To that end, we continue to explore the mystery of fellowship. Newer generations joining havurot today may differ in many respects from the early founders, but the search to transcend personal wants and subjective needs is perhaps even more urgent than it was thirty years ago. The evolution and growth of B'nai Havurah demonstrates that the Reconstructionist havurah ethic can create a sense of lasting Jewish fellowship in an increasingly isolated age. As these havurot continue to explore the legacy of that early ethic, they serve as a living model for our movement to follow. ♦

1. Jacob Neusner, "Fellowship and the Crisis of Community," *The Reconstructionist* 26

(No. 19), Jan. 27, 1961, reprinted as "Five Principles of Fellowship," in *The Havurah Idea* (N.Y.: Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation), 7.

2. See Robert J. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1985).

3. Jacob J. Petuchowski, "Toward a Modern Brotherhood," *The Reconstructionist* 26, no. 16 (December 16, 1960).

4. Neusner, 8-9.

5. Neusner, 2.

6. Neusner, 4.

7. Neusner, 6-7.

8. Neusner, 7.

9. Neusner, 7.

10. Not surprisingly, Ira Eisenstein predicted the danger of this very phenomenon thirty years ago; see his article, "The Havurah in Action," in *The Havurah Idea* (N.Y.: Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation), 12-13.

11. Neusner, 8.

Jewish Support Groups as Model

BY SAUL RUBIN

These opening paragraphs will provide context. In the late 1970's and early 1980's, I embraced the havurah movement as a participant and leader. I led an experiment in my synagogue that replicated and expanded the Temple Valley Beth Shalom model (Encino, CA). I participated directly as a havurah member despite the cautions of my colleagues. My need for intimacy and honest relating exceeded my fear of unleashing chaos. Havurah became the central organizing principle of the congregation.

My hunger for authentic spiritual community accentuated with retirement. Our local synagogue havurot dissolved, as my successor dedicated his energy to other endeavors. The National Havurah Committee was focused on exciting and innovative educational experiences; its offerings were "left-brain," but my need was spiritual. The Jewish spirituality conferences I attended offered food for thought, but God-talk is no antidote

for spiritual neediness. In general, what was out there for a Jew on a spiritual quest was insufficient—at least for me.

In 1987 I read Dr. M. Scott Peck's *The Different Drum*. His design for community-building intrigued me. I have since experienced (and facilitated) the process more than twenty times. It is a four-stage process (Peck describes it as a "technology") that lasts two to three days. It works with groups of ten to twenty, or clusters of sixty to a hundred. At its core, the process requires "being present," "sharing one's story," "listening with full energy," "respecting diversity," "welcoming healthy silence," and "hanging in through times of chaos." The final stage, "community," is experienced by many as a time of incredible spirituality, peacefulness and awe.

Peck has defined the four stages from a psychological perspective. Because the model is experiential, allow me to redefine it, stage by stage, on a feeling level.

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The Stages of Community

Stage One—Pseudocommunity: The group sits in a circle. A story, “The Rabbi’s Gift,” is read by one of the two facilitators.¹ Three minutes of silence is requested. Then, whoever wishes to speak declares, “I am X” or “My name is Y,” and continues with the comment. This formality is a way of owning one’s statements. The flow of words may be energetic or constrained, punctuated by periods of silence. The members are taking measure of one another. Words are shaped to please or impress. Occasionally comments are made that wound inadvertently, but they yield no confrontation. The injured party reflects no pain, swallows the affront, but stews inside. The dynamic resembles the “dancing” one is accustomed to in a cocktail party setting. Boundaries are protected, defenses are in place, and conformity (in terms of what are acceptable comments) abounds. Everyone avoids expressions of genuine feeling; anger and disapproval are repressed.

Stage Two—Chaos: Depending on the group, pseudocommunity may last for an hour to a day. Eventually the dance mutates into a contest. Sides are drawn. Members make judgments, verbalized or not. Attempts at “conversion” are undertaken openly or subtly. “If only X would change his view, we would be able to come into community.” Or, “how are we to form a supportive group with a bigot like Y!” Chaos is the stage in which projections of unresolved shadow elements are hurled forth. Conflict surfaces: group

members are irritated, express annoyance with the confrontation, and, as a result, destabilization occurs—within the group and within individuals. Since the human organism cannot easily endure destabilization, attempts are made to “calm the storm,” but these generally fail—until a courageous soul speaks out from a place of honest pain. The members resonate to that person and move from attack to empathy. This is the beginning of what Peck calls “emptying.”

Stage Three—Emptying: In chaos, the members sit on the edge of their seats. In emptying, they tune into their own woundedness. Whatever residue of pain we have is stored up in organs of the body. Pain has a way of blocking channels. They may be viewed as emotional choke points. In stage three, group members begin to tell their stories, thereby revealing their blocking issues. Often it surprises them that they have shared aloud. What follows is an outpouring of emotional energy. It feels as though that outpouring has created a vacuum inside. One feels unblocked. Love energy surges to fill the hollow channel. It is not uncommon for a person who experiences emptiness to speak of this flooding of love—some even hug themselves. Voices in the circle become softer, more empathetic. Males struggle to contain tears. A rhythmic pattern modulates the process—bursts of powerful stories followed by times of supreme silence, a silence so deep one can hear one’s own breathing. Some of the sharing touches a raw place; the heart pounds rapidly. That is the sig-

nal that one must speak. I know I am in the emptying stage when my critic shuts down. Everyone in the circle becomes my brother and my sister. Transformation and resolution thus occur in stage three.

Stage Four—Community: Mysterious, esoteric, ecstatic, ethereal—these adjectives hint at the essence of stage four, which can be called, simply, “community.” Community unfolds in an unexpected way. Often someone in the group will name it—“this circle feels holy.” An acknowledging ummm signals consensus. Silence ensues—a silence tranquil and deep. One feels safe, serene and full of awe. Looking at the faces in the circle, one sees gentleness in the eyes and benignity in the smiles. Inner tensions evaporate. The body is at ease and whole. This circle of strangers is now bonded mystically. Each has the potential for becoming a metaphor to every other. Someone will remind you of a parent, a deceased loved one, a friend that distanced him/herself long ago, an identified enemy or a child whom you lost. In stage four, you relate to all group members in a loving way, and find closure for relationships that ended abruptly. In the group process, I can work out whatever conflict I have without fear of fatally wounding or being fatally wounded. The group members with their diversity and flaws are now one, and function in unity without uniformity.

Ongoing Groups

Once a group has experienced the four stages, it may elect to become a

continuing entity. Then the struggle for group vision, purpose and goals begins, either intentionally through an envisioning process, or spontaneously by allowing these elements to evolve as the members meet. Questions arise. Does the group wish to build community each time it gathers? Is there consensus on performing a task? Does the group simply wish to meet to provide support for the journey? What rituals and rules shall be adopted? Shall the opening and closing process be traditional or innovative? Shall meetings commence with Hasidic stories, a time of silence, the sharing of dreams, or kindling Shabbat/Havdalah candles (depending on the meeting night)? Shall there be a prayer component at each meeting?

I participate in four ongoing communities—a men’s group, a dream group, a community-building group and a task-oriented group. Not all are flourishing. Not all function in a manner pleasing to the majority. Groups that meet faithfully with all members present have an atmosphere of safety, commitment and support. At the end of such sessions, group members confirm that they have experienced growth, spiritual nurture, and a heightened awareness of life’s issues.

But when members are absent, or get caught up in mental gymnastics, individuals leave frustrated and unfulfilled. Some of the “enemies” of community-building are inappropriate humor, the bandying about of psychological interpretations, left-brain discussion (persons who argue for the joy of argumentation are not cut out for this endeavor), and avoidance of con-

flict and chaos. The magic of the group is that it provides a secure setting for conflict resolution. My most powerful memories of community-building center around confrontations with persons I perceived as hostile. In working out the conflict in a controlled environment, we were able to pass through the antagonism and emerge on the other side—respecting, even loving each other. Support group interaction can be heady and liberating.

Havurot vs. Support Groups

Havurot organize around *function*; support groups organize around process. The havurah's agenda is primarily to foster Jewish education, celebration, life-cycle activities, social interaction, davvening and, in some instances, service to the Jewish community. Authentic human relating may occur, but it is not the primary focus.

Support groups encourage members to "get real", to be honest, to learn communication skills, to listen in a non-judgmental way, and to mirror back truthfully. Support groups are not therapeutic. They are not modern variations of the old "T" groups. When trained counselors dominate a group, it is possible that their specialized knowledge will bleed into the group process. In the process I am describing, that is neither appropriate nor helpful. Support groups are there to sustain us in our earthly pilgrimage. Life is lonely, even when one interacts with multitudes of friends, and companionship is no substitute for intimacy. A case in point: rabbis are surrounded by people, yet many of

my rabbinic colleagues voice feelings of isolation and ennui.

At the National Havurah Conferences I attended in the late 1970's and early 1980's, I experienced moments of vulnerability and transformation. I remember witnessing a woman in her golden years being called to the Torah for the first time. The davvening group was transfixed by her powerful emotional release. Time was suspended as we beheld sacred healing. In a support group, such moments are essential. When individuals come to grips with blocking events in their histories, the community is caught up in a life-altering event.

Jewish support groups that elect to function on community-building principles are advised to consider the following cautions:

Caveats

Watch out for secret agendas. They will sabotage the primary agenda. Several years ago I was the lead facilitator for a synagogue group in a community-building workshop. The members agreed that their sole agenda was to create a close and cordial circle of Jews. The majority had been alienated by the Temple leadership and had not resolved their woundedness. A secondary and concealed goal of the organizers was to depose the leaders. Even when I informed them that I was there to facilitate community-building and nothing else, they could not suppress their rage. It would burst through, even in stage four—a quiet, serene time. Two weeks after the workshop, the group convened on

their own. The dominant issue was how to arrange a coup. A month later the group disbanded. *For a support group to survive, its raison d'être must be to build community.* If any other issue predominates, prepare for a worst case scenario!

Avoid fixing. The critical skill in community-building is listening with full energy. The flow of group life gets short-circuited when some of the members insist on giving advice—and it matters not if the advice is direct or subtle. The temptation to fix is always present because we think of ourselves as helpful human beings. Fixing implies that the “fixer” is stronger, wiser or superior to the “fixee.” It is a form of up-down relating.

In 1990, I was invited to be a part of a task force on community-building and religion. One of my responsibilities was to visit a church in the Boston area which had an ongoing group that was functioning with community-building dynamics. I observed the group process for a week. Of the twelve participants, only one didn't “get” it. She insisted on healing everyone in pain. Perhaps her own wounds were so raw that any expression of discomfort resonated inside her. She had to offer soothing balm. The members were conflicted. They knew her sensitivity, but felt that she was perverting the process. A cycle of guilt and forgiveness marked each meeting. They would attack her, hurt her, and then she would pardon them for the injury. The group was frozen into this dynamic until she opted to leave. At last report, the participants

are experiencing spiritually energizing community. Growth abounds. The group still survives after eight years.

Limit Intellectualizing, Honor Silence

That's right, *limit intellectualizing.* In Judaism, cerebration is esteemed. Eloquent speech and adroitness of mind are viewed as precious gifts. In community-building they may be barriers. The vibrancy of a support community depends on the capacity of the members to tap into the right brain and to be comfortable with expressing feelings. Therefore a support group is not the proper mechanism for a livingroom discussion or a devar Torah session. There is indeed an educational component to community-building, but it is experiential: one gains wisdom about “being.” The learning has to do with living life wholly and holy—and communicating in an I-Thou mode.

Honor Silence. Silence may be threatening. Observe a congregation during silent prayer. In less than a passing minute, people are coughing, whispering, dropping siddurim. Silence intimates.

In group process, silence is the tool for tapping inwardness, a mechanism for taking in what is external and letting it resonate at the center of self. For me, moments of transformation occur when I remove myself from group chatter and explore caves within. Participants who prefer to ignore troubling issues or unhealed wounds tend to eschew silence and fill it with distracting speech. This will throw any group into chaos.

Silence may also be a mask to hide behind. People who do not trust the group may “zip the lip.” How to distinguish this response from the response of a person who is processing actively yet silently is tricky. The key is to notice the degree of emotional involvement. It can be sensed if one is aware of energy flow. Support groups flourish or shrivel based on the way they deal with silence.

A Potent Resource

Ram Dass once related an experience at the unveiling of his mother’s tombstone. The officiating rabbi noticed his flowing Indian robe and inquired, “What have you been up to?” Ram Dass explained the spiritual quest that enthralled him. The rabbi was surprised and took the opportunity to share an awesome moment. He had been studying late at night for his rabbinic finals, popping No-Doz tablets. Suddenly a vision invaded his waking state. He felt himself being projected back to the time of the wilderness wanderings and was present as the events at Sinai unfolded. Ram Dass felt the power of his words and blurted out: “Did you share that experience with your congregation?” To which the Rabbi retorted: “Judaism is a folk religion and I am an interpreter of the Law. Now let’s return to the group.”

If the truth be told, there are many Jews like Ram Dass who are seeking to live life on a spiritually enlightened plane. In larger metropolitan centers they connect with alternative groups and charismatic teachers. In hinterland USA, such alternatives are not

easily accessed. Jewish support groups functioning on community-building principles may be an answer. As of this time, no such groups exist. In other faith communities, according to demographic studies, they do. I suggest that the need is so palpable that if the organized Jewish community continues to operate on the notion that what is out there is sufficient, some of our best and brightest will move on. Perhaps the place to start is a comprehensive needs assessment. Then we could identify how extensive this population is, and where they are centered. The Torah of support groups that I have presented here is a new “technology” now available to Jewry, one with spiritually transformative potential. When the process is practiced routinely in an ongoing support group or community, it may radically alter religious expression.

My concluding words are an invitation. If this model is of interest to you, I urge you to contact me directly. My passion for community-building, and my concern for the continuity of our faith propel this work. I do not judge the course that modern Jewish life has taken. I only know for a certainty that there is an instrument for nurturing Jewish spirituality. The question is whether Jews whose souls are on fire and who don’t have a way of interfacing can network to form support communities. Perhaps this article is the place to begin that all-important work. ♦

1. See M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987, pp. 13-15)

Brigadoon, a Place for Dreams to Grow

BY MERLE FELD

Bnot Esh is a Jewish feminist community established in 1981. Consisting of 30 members, 24 of whom can be present in any given year, we gather for a five day retreat over the Memorial Day weekend and together explore issues of spirituality, social change and the feminist transformation of Judaism.

In the beginning

I first came to Bnot Esh in May 1984. I was 36 years old, the mother of a five year old, an almost two year old. Although I had already by then written my first play, it sat in a drawer—I knew enough to know it lacked sufficient merit to be “sent out” and in any case I had not the vaguest notion of where I might have sent it. Nonetheless, I was hard at work on a second play and had a recurring fantasy that the finished product would be so incredible that Joe Papp himself would drive down to Princeton to meet me: on a bright sunny day, he’d ring the doorbell, I’d open my front door and he would embrace me. But that was a fantasy.

The reality was that I spent most of my waking hours schlepping groceries, struggling with snowsuits, lying on the floor with two kids reading Dr. Seuss. I knew in my heart of hearts I was nothing more than a mother.

What brought me to Bnot Esh? What did I know of them? I had a cordial but rather distant acquaintance with two or three group members, others were friends of friends. So it wasn’t personal ties that made me say yes when they called to invite me to come on a five day retreat. It was rather my understanding of what they were about, what they did there. I sensed without knowing that these were women who, like me, cared too much about being Jewish, that the dual identity of Jew and feminist had

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caused them as much angst as it had me, that they were as unable or as unwilling as I to give up the fullness of one identity for the other, to compromise even for the sake of inner peace, sanity. I knew without knowing them that they were dangerous women. And I was very curious. And very hungry.

The Grail is a rambling old house in Cornwall-on-Hudson, run by a community of Catholic laywomen devoted to social activism and religious search. Opening their house for retreats to groups like Bnot Esh is a part of their work in the world. The rooms are pleasantly Spartan, the food simple tasty vegetarian fare. Plenary sessions, small group meetings and Shabbat davvenings range through the common rooms of the house itself and across the fields surrounding the house.

When I arrived that first time it was already the third retreat for the group; additionally, I was unable to get there until lunchtime on Friday, though the retreat had started the evening before. I felt like an outsider, I was an outsider. There was little in the way of "orientation" for me over lunch. The morning session had been particularly intense, difficult to recapitulate for someone in the know, impossible for a stranger not yet trusted. I was left more or less to fend for myself. Twenty-three women, ranging in age from their mid-twenties to late fifties sat in animated conversation as they ate their tabouleh and salad. They seemed to be enjoying each other immensely, laughing, arguing,

gesticulating, interrupting the way comfortable friends will do. They were rabbis (by definition, pioneers), scholars, published authors, therapists, artists, social activists. They were articulate, accomplished women in the world. People paid them to speak. I thought, Merle, you're out of your league here, they're professionals, what are you—a mother. The afternoon wore on and as time for candle-lighting approached, the five year old and the almost two year old, the children who often felt like lead weights around my neck, my time, my creativity, were suddenly distant jewels. This first Shabbos away from them stretched out before me.

Coming out

Friday night rituals, Shabbos morning davvening, some of it I like, some makes me uncomfortable. For moments I am drawn in, I speak now and then, I am beginning to connect names with faces, but still I feel unknown, unseen in this group. Will the whole weekend pass without my seizing the moment, some moment, to express my uniqueness, my inner turmoil, the joys and pains which define me? The tension becomes unbearable—did I need to come here and pay good money to experience my worthlessness, my invisibility? Finally, in a slot designated "free time," meant in part to be used for impromptu offerings, I ask to read some poetry I've written over the past year. I hesitate even to call it poetry, I genuinely don't know what to call it—words which have tumbled out of me,

words about my children, about being a mother. Words which frighten me. Not the sentimental stuff of greeting cards, not the warm and cuddly pieties, but the dark side. Suddenly I realize that this is why I've come here, I've been looking for people who are strong enough to hear my dark words. I read, finally I look up. The women who are mothers look at me warmly, gratefully, I have spoken truth. The women who are not mothers look sober, stunned. So that's the truth, they say.¹

The first lesson of building community is that everyone needs to be able to speak their truth, to come out. What do you need to enter community, to be a part of community? You need the courage to come out, to say, these are my truths, this is who I am. As one member recently remarked in a conversation about Bnot Esh and community, ironically it is taking risks which creates safety, not the other way around. Often individuals will complain that this space or that doesn't feel safe to them, so they can't be authentically who they are there. But it is precisely by jumping into the void, by taking risks, that you can reestablish the group norms and find yourself at ease inside them.

To be sure, the community plays a vital role in this process—how hard or easy do we make it for you to be who you are here? Maybe we never give you a slot to read your poems, maybe once you've read them, we turn on you and say, your truth is too big for us, we are too fragile to contain your truth. That's a tragedy, for the indi-

vidual and for the community. The community grows hard, rigid, ugly, shrivelled. It looks nothing at all like a flower. And the individual, the poet—we are all poets after all, writing the poem which is our life—the poet despairs, keeps the torments and the truths inside where they can be of use to no one, where they fester, causing disease and death.²

The go-around

Each year we come to Cornwall anew. People straggle in over the course of the day, having travelled from LA, from Philly, from Northampton, from New Mexico. We do cost-sharing for transportation, also for childcare. Hugs and kisses, dragging luggage up to your room, settling in with a baby (children under one year are welcome.) Most of us are present by dinnertime. But the retreat doesn't officially begin until Thursday evening when we share the welcoming ritual of a go-around. We sit in a circle in the living room and pass a watch. Each woman has two minutes to bring the community up to date on her life over the past year; your neighbor times you and when the two minutes are up, she passes the watch to you and you mark time for the next speaker. The go-around is a particularly meaningful moment in the year for each of us, a marker in the year not unlike Yom Kippur and birthdays. Where am I in the world, you ask yourself. What has this year added up to for me, what do I most want to share about that with these sisters? The obvious—I gave birth to a book

this year, I'm getting married, my mother died, we've moved. But crucial facts are easy in a way. What's harder to pin down are the feelings, the deep realities of the psyche. There will be time in the next few days at breakfast, during a walk on the quiet country roads, late at night standing around in the kitchen, to share details of the year that's passed, but when my turn comes in the go-around, I will hear myself articulating the essence of what my life is about.

The blessings of rejecting hierarchy

Very early on in Bnot Esh (and for some time after that) we needed to deal with the question of structure: by temperament and philosophical commitment we were non-hierarchical, but none of us believed in chaos as a beneficial state. How to proceed? On every level, leadership roles are rotating—rotating and minimal.

Each year a different geographic area of the country is responsible for planning the retreat. The planning committee coordinates volunteers to be responsible for davening, to make presentations, run workshops or sit on panels to discuss the previously agreed upon agenda, the topics we have chosen to focus on for that year. Topics are wide-ranging: theology, sexuality, tzedakah, class, competition, body image, Israel, racism, commitment, diversity, money...Some topics are revisited in later years—we build on the progress in understanding we've made as a group, we see sometimes that a topic we discussed in 1988

needs to be approached anew in 1995. A simple metaphor captures the style: when you are done speaking in a plenary, you are the one to call on the next person to speak and so forth.

Clearly each of us has her strengths and comfort level in somewhat different arenas—one person makes fantastic music, another is a whiz at keeping the business meeting civil and on track, a third is at ease responding on a panel, a fourth has a gift for creating astonishing ritual. On the one hand, you don't want to lose the best of what each woman has to offer; on the other hand, one of the great values of the group is to push your boundaries and allow you to try something you don't feel so competent with. (One of my proudest Bnot Esh accomplishments was recently to help create the Shabbos morning davening, though it took me ten years to get up the nerve to do it and I've rarely felt such dizzying terror.)

The benefit of this approach is to hopefully stretch everyone, to avoid stagnant ways of seeing others and yourself, and to circumvent the danger of reinforcing a caste system, since some skills may be "higher status" than others. For me, the significance of rejecting hierarchy is to experience the true fluidity of the world. In a fluid universe, holiness has a better chance of breaking through.

The value of going to the edge of your boundaries

We've learned through experience the value of going to the edge of our individual boundaries. We are always

at the edge. Often it means a very high level of discomfort, anxiety, both for the person(s) presenting and for the group as a whole. You don't come to Cornwall to do the Shabbos morning service you perfected last fall in your havurah, that Shabbos morning service that was so wonderful that everyone got high on; you come to Cornwall to do a Shabbos morning service you've never done before, one you aren't sure will work but one you've been wanting to experiment with. It's scary. Because you're offering it up to women who seem so competent to you, so accomplished, so powerful—what if it stinks, what if you fall flat on your face in front of these wonderful peers?

And sometimes it doesn't work. But the tone of the group is supportive, we try as hard as we can to enter into each other's reality, each other's creativity, we try to be non-judgmental, gentle. Not only is it frightening to be the one presenting, sometimes it's frightening to be the one receiving—I can't enter into that reality, this workshop crosses my boundaries too profoundly. But we each work hard at trying and often, we soar. There have been years when we felt over-stretched and chose the next time around to take the safer road. It doesn't work. A group which cannot tolerate tension will sooner or later bore everyone to death. It's not enough to come together, have a pleasant time, a lovely service, some good laughs and go home. To give in to the yearning to be comfortable, to give in to a failure of nerve, is a kind of death. We come to

be challenged, to be disrupted, in order to be most fully alive, in order to grow.

Powerful need vs. neediness

Finding a sister. In August 1969 I found a sister, the first Jewish woman I had ever known who cared so much about being a Jewish woman, who hurt so badly over the exclusion and second-class status of that identity in those days that she cried over it. She cried over it.

I didn't know anyone back then besides me who cared that much. The fact of her existence, and the companionship of her spirit, gave me courage to push forward myself. Right and left young Jewish women (and older ones too) were jumping ship, saying, if this is the way the tradition is going to treat me, then fuck the tradition. But my sister had a need to stick it out, to be seen, to be heard, to be understood, to be valued. To contribute the unique voice which is hers. And so did I.

I've watched as over the years she engaged the texts, did battle with the tradition—see me, count me, let me sit at the table, I have a right to be here, I have something to say. Her journey has been different from mine—she has become a formidable Jewish scholar, a teacher of our sacred texts, a theologian. She happens not to be a part of the community of Bnot Esh. I speak of her in the context of this discussion because she exemplifies for me the powerful women who are in Bnot Esh, because she was the first for me, because knowing her taught me to be on the lookout for such women.

Sisters. Powerful women with powerful needs. It turns out there are a lot of us in the world. We actually can be found all over the place. Sitting right next to you in shul, I wouldn't be surprised if there's a powerful woman, waiting to find a community of soul-mates. Sometimes when people hear of Bnot Esh they say, well yes, you have something very precious there, but that's because those women are so exceptional. No. Wrong. We have dared together and trusted together and worked together and cried together and celebrated together and each of us allowed the other to see herself as powerful. We have strength as a community in large measure because we have given each other strength. We have been respectful of our own needs, responsive to each other's needs.

But the reality of living in community is multifaceted, not only a taste of the world to come. Sometimes—inevitably?—living in community raises primal demons for us—do I fit in, am I indeed a part of this group, a valued part of the group, am I loved here, how much am I loved, would anyone care if I disappeared? This is not the powerful voice within us speaking, it is not the voice of a powerful need. A powerful need pushes us always forward, to greater self-realization, to greater capacities for caring, helping, sharing, achieving. No. This is the voice of the wounded child inside of us, the child who is insecure, needy. There's a world of difference between the powerful need and neediness.

One Saturday night at Cornwall (not my first year, not even the second, maybe it was my fourth or fifth year) the evening's program had ended and people were scattered in the living room, hanging out in the kitchen, sitting on the darkened porch. In small groups, in twos, in threes. And I couldn't seem to find a conversation. Everyone seemed absorbed, mid-conversation; it felt as if there was no comfortable place for me. Though I wasn't all that tired, the hour was late, so I went upstairs and put myself to bed. I lay there in the dark, alone in a triple (my roommates for that year were still out and about), sounds of talking and laughter drifted upstairs to me and I began to cry. I felt so alone, alone only as you can feel in the midst of people who are supposed to care for you, whose caring you yearn for. And I thought, what am I doing here, I'm an outsider, why did I come back? Oh, I suppose I could go downstairs and find someone and say I'm miserable, take pity on me, but I want to be wanted, I want to be chosen.

This is not a powerful need, this is neediness, that black hole somewhere in each of us, the hole which cannot be filled, the hole which is poison for community. Some time the next day, I swallowed my pride and shared my pain. My confidant said, Merle, stop thinking about who is and isn't interested in you and how much. Think about who you'd like to have lunch with because you care about how she is, because you're interested in what she's up to and want to hear about

her...She was right, it's an important lesson. I guess I disagree with the Wizard when he tells the Tin Man, "Remember, the heart is not judged by how much you love, but by how much you are loved by others." No. In community or one-on-one, to focus on "how much am I loved by others" is a sure way to grief. The needy hole.

The healing power of ritual

I remember it happening my first year at Cornwall, before we lit Shabbos candles. One of the people leading Friday night davvening asked us to gather in groups of four and to take turns giving each other an "aura brush" before Shabbat. In each small group, three of us encircled a fourth and, using our hands, made sweeping motions in the air, moving carefully from head to toe of the woman whose "aura" was being brushed. (She had her eyes closed, and felt only the motion of air.) Once you reached her feet and had fully swept away the cares and troubles of her week, you reversed the process and moved the air around her upward with your hands, this time whispering softly her name, beckoning her refreshed Shabbos soul. Each of us in turn had our aura brushed, stood with eyes closed as our Shabbos soul was called forth. It was playful, sweet, loving. A gift.

Another year, Shabbos morning. The California women were leading davvening. We were instructed not to come down to the davvening space as usual, but rather each to wait in her own room, the door open. The five *ba'alot tefilah* start at the top of the

rambling old retreat house, singing. Debbie Friedman's *Lekhi Lakh* was new; again and again we heard the verses as floor by floor, room by room, each woman in turn was invited to prayer. "To a place that I will show you...*lekhi lakh*...to a place you do not know..." If you were amenable, they anointed you with perfume, they gave you flowers..."on your journey I will bless you...And you shall be a blessing...you shall be a blessing...*lekhi lakh*..." Finally, all together in the davening room, sumptuous baskets of dates and figs, cashews and almonds, flowers, singing...my heart is bursting. California davvening, encircled by love, I am ready to pray...

It's Saturday night and our faithful popcorn maker is hard at work in the kitchen. Hot topics for discussion come and go, forms for doing *mishberakh's* come and go, even group members come and go, everything changes, but her Saturday night popcorn is a constant. Even in a community this intense, especially in a community this intense, you need to be ordinary together, whimsical, you need to share all the pieces of the secular culture you grew up with and still live in day to day. It's Saturday night and three of us wind up singing show tunes together. "I got the horse right here, his name is Paul Revere."...Sometimes others listen, sometimes others join in, it doesn't really matter to us if there's an interested audience or not: somehow this is one of our powerful needs. Girls growing up in a certain era in Brooklyn, in Queens, they know the lyrics to every song Rodgers

and Hammerstein ever wrote, they are surer of Lerner and Loew than the order of the morning service, and at least once a year there's deep pleasure in "If ever I would leave you"...big finish, girls—"you'll neever waaalk alone..." Saturday night, popcorn, *Guys and Dolls*. These too are rituals.

Coming out again

It's 1988 and a major issue we have chosen to focus on this year is spirituality and class. Using one of the formats which works well for us, three or four women have volunteered (or been volunteered) to begin the plenary by presenting their thoughts on the topic. This panel will be followed by a general discussion, after which we will continue to explore the issues in small groups, giving everyone a chance to think out loud at greater length and listen to the others at greater length. Then we'll come together for a final half hour of plenary to share insights, questions.

Any time you teach or give a talk, the preparation forces upon you the need to contemplate, research, organize your amorphous thoughts. But presenting for a panel at Cornwall provides a unique opportunity, for the audience is not only known to you but intimate. And you are seekers of truth together. So I can't just speak the truth I want to speak, the truth I'm comfortable with, and let it go at that; I also feel honor-bound to speak the truth which is hard to speak, the truth I find it painful to speak, even to myself.

Like any random group, we in Bnot Esh have a complex sociological mix of class at any developmental point in time. Which is to say, class status is probably more fluid than one might initially imagine: when you were a child, what did your parent(s) do for a living? what was their level of education and the expectations of that for you? for your brothers? Did the family situation change in your growing up years? suddenly a lot more money? a lot less? What effect did all of that have on your self-perception and on the self-perception of the family? What has your own education been? What have been your occupations as an adult? What status and income has resulted from those factors over the years? What is the class and economic privilege or lack thereof of your partner? Of previous partners? Are you a divorced or single mother? Are you the sole provider in your household...

So just on an objective level, it's not unlikely that the average woman has traversed several class categories in her lifetime. And has some very strong feelings about what her class status is and about what it once was. To make my presentation I agreed to reflect on such questions and then to filter them through once again and share what impact I thought class had had on my spiritual life.

I agreed to take this on because I knew that my class origins were a central factor in my identity formation and I'd never before forced myself to examine the impact of that. It seemed like time I did. This was a part of

myself I rarely shared with others, or looked at squarely for myself, or experienced in the context of others who struggle with their own stories. I could not have predicted the pain or the power of the work of preparation, or presentation. It represented a profound “coming out” for me. I came to understand that we don’t come out just once in a group, but over and over—pain, vulnerability, new growth in self-understanding. And there isn’t always a happy ending, a neat resolution. But community, when it’s working well, provides the challenge, the context and the support to explore dangerous questions. And the work goes on all our lives.

Telling you what I told you

When Herb Levine asked me to write for this issue of *The Reconstructionist*, he posed the question: “What kinds of communities do we want to build?” My answer? Communities in which we can most authentically be ourselves. “And what is it we need to create those communities?” Courage, Herbie, courage. ♦

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1. The poems I read that weekend were published a year later in an issue of *Response* devoted to the family (Spring 1985). They were my first published work.
 2. I think of Buber’s *The Knowledge of Man*—how we each wait for the “yes,” the heavenly bread which can only be passed from one person to another.

continued from page 2

To meet this danger, Dr. Levine provides a convincing account of the central role that traditional dietary restrictions have played over the millennia in maintaining Jewish separateness. Accordingly, he commends *kashrut* observance to contemporary American Jews for two broad purposes: (1) to maintain the integrity and ultimate survival of the Jewish people in the face of an increased rate of exogamy; and (2) “to anchor (Jews) outside the mainstream culture,” which Dr. Levine rather casually characterizes as “suburban homogenization” and “McDonaldization.”

While the first of these goals may be both timely and inherently worthwhile, I would suggest that a totalistic form of *kashrut* observance, such as Dr. Levine desires, is an inappropriate vehicle for its attainment. If *kashrut* observance is to become the standard “that defines who or what is inside and who or what is outside” the boundaries of Jewish life, the great majority of American Jews, Reconstructionists included, will almost certainly remain outside. The delicate balance that Mordecai Kaplan advocated, and that Dr. Levine rejects—*kashrut* at home and American eating standards while out—is a more realistic objective for the masses whose struggle is to integrate Jewish identity and commitment with their full participation in American life, and not the reverse.

Similarly, Dr. Levine asserts his second goal in opposition to the overwhelming preference of American

Jews to live much like their non-Jewish friends and neighbors. It may be a sign of how radicalized Reconstructionism has become that Dr. Levine feels no need to explain to his readers just what it is about mainstream American culture that is so objectionable, instead preferring buzzwords such as “suburban homogenization” and “McDonaldization.” I suspect that Dr. Levine shares the view, as I do, that Judaism is an excellent source of correction for the materialism, rootlessness, and vulgarity that have emerged in recent years as prominent features on the American landscape.

But Dr. Levine evinces no concern for American society and culture. Rather, he advises Jews to abandon a sinking ship and at least save themselves. It is significant that he prescribes *kashrut* precisely as the best means to re-alienate Jews who have long since found their home within the mainstream of American life. In our age of aggressive multiculturalism, when Americans are increasingly divided by gender, sexual orientation, and especially race and ethnicity, I feel this is a bad idea whose time has come. How very American it is, ironically, that Dr. Levine today advocates a separatist Jewish counterculture, which will act as one more antagonist in the effort to disunite our nation.

Such an idea is not only bad for America, but, I would argue, bad for Judaism as well. One need look no further than Brooklyn’s Williamsburg or Crown Heights, or the State of Israel for that matter, to understand that a monocivilizational Judaism is

inherently static, smug, and dreadfully boring. Dr. Levine's proposal surely deserves rejection by all liberal Jews, meaning those who find any merit or success in the two hundred year effort to make sense of Jewish life in an environment of freedom and opportunity.

David Osachy
Philadelphia, PA

The editor replies. I suppose that time will tell whether my call for a renewed attention among liberal Jews to questions of boundaries will be seen as honest self-criticism from within a culturally endangered community, justly intent on its own self-preservation within an open society, or rather as self-deluding separatism that threatens to destroy both liberal Judaism and American civilization as we know it.

—H.L.

Tzitzit and Boundaries

To the Editor:

The issue focused on “boundaries” was exciting and instructive. For me, the crucial question is how to tackle the new fuzziness of the boundaries between ourselves and other communities—fuzziness where there used to be sharp clarity, and where biblical and rabbinic Judaism welcomed sharp clarity—and make this fuzziness into a Jewishly affirmable fringe.

For me a useful way to think about this problem has been to draw on the metaphors of *pe'ot*, the corners of the field, and *tzitziot*, the fringes of a garment, as serious and powerful teachings about how to deal with boundaries precisely when they become fuzzy and problematic.

Pe'ot, the corners whose produce belonged not to the “owner” of the field, but to the poor and the foreigner, were a way of saying: within this community, my property does not end, ZAPP, at a fence where your property begins. Instead, my property fades away into communal space. At the corners, the land is mine (as much as any land can be, subject to God's ownership), but what grows there is not mine.

Similarly, within the community, we have for millennia practiced and symbolized the fuzziness and “fringiness” rather than wall-and-fence-ness of boundaries between individuals and the community through *tzitziot*. For *tzitziot* show that my own individual cultural “skin” ends not in sharp definition but in fuzzy fringes—made up partly of the cloth I'm wearing and partly of the world's air. The *tzitziot* are not chaotic fringes. They are carefully designed, shaped, tied. Through *tzitzit* I recognize that it is not good fences but good fringes that make good neighbors; I make those fringes conscious (*kavvanadik*), not merely part of reality, but an honored, celebrated part of it, by tying fringes with conscious patterns.

All this, until now, has operated between individuals within the Jewish community—not as between the Jewish community and other cultures or peoples. With other communities, high walls and fences have remained the rule. But now, something new: the boundaries between faith-communities are much fuzzier, as the participants in the “boundaries” issue said.

Most of your symposiasts saw that this new fuzziness is both an opportunity and a problem. I want to suggest a different way of thinking about the problem and the opportunity.

Tzitzit teach us precisely to take the new fuzzy boundaries and consciously shape them into something Jewish. So, for example, intermarriage is symptom, result, and (increasingly) one of the causes of the new fuzziness. Can we take this helter-skelter fringe and tie it into Jewish shapes that are different from other shapes in our tradition, but that do not leave these fringes helter-skelter? More than a decade ago, Rabbis Rebecca Alpert and Linda Holtzman and I joined in proposing an experimental shape for an intermarriage wedding ceremony rooted in the Jewish tradition of the children of Noah (See *Reconstructionist*, Nov. 1983, 24-27). As regards the unconverted partners of intermarried Jews, those who today use the language of *ger toshav* are saying similarly, "If we have these seemingly anomalous semi-citizens, what is a Jewish way of describing anomalous semi-citizens?"

As regards prayer: could we explore what kind of non-Jewish prayer might be the *tzitzit* of others, reaching out to make connection with us, and which of our own prayers might reach out to them? Can we now in truth and according to God's will affirm some rainbow spectra where before we saw only black or white? No accident that the Rainbow and the *sheva mitzvot bnai and bnot Noah* (the commandments incumbent on all humankind)

are our language for Jewishly talking about universality. The first two *parshiot* are the *tzitziot* of the Torah.

Thinking of it this way, then, is Quaker silence such a "fringe"? If Christians reminded themselves of the Jewish roots of what they now call "the Lord's prayer" as *avinu shebashamayim* could it possibly become a fringe shareable with us—or is its Christian use too deeply ingrained? What might be such shareable fringes for Muslims, Buddhists, Native Americans? Is Sufi *zikhr* such a fringe?

Among other arenas, what might it mean for us to see and use the Jewish Studies profession as the *tzitzit* of the rabbinate? In our eating and other consuming, perhaps "eco-kosher" is a fringe we can share with other peoples? In reassessing our internal boundaries embodied in traditional sexual ethics, might we sense that ethical sexuality now comes not in black and white, but in a much more "spectrumatic" sense of different sexual patterns, each with its own way of being sacredly or unsacredly practiced? What are Shabbat, *shemitah*, and Jubilee not only in their "pure" form for Eretz Yisrael, but also in some fringy form for all the earth, which badly needs some version of them?

I am struggling toward how to judaize this fuzziness: how to draw on our own symbols and practices in ways that claim and affirm and at the same time define and limit these "anomalies," rather than scorn them. This is neither easy nor automatic; I am not suggesting that we bless every

boundary breakdown as being in and of itself a Jewish fringe, but that we do the hard work of defining in each situation what it means to tie these new *tzitziot*.

Arthur Waskow
Philadelphia, PA

Reconstructionist Halakhah

To the Editor:

I read with more than passing interest the articles by Ed Feld and Neil Gillman dealing with the parameters of *halakhah* in the last issue of *The Reconstructionist*. It was not a small surprise to find the rabbi of the SAJ, the synagogue from which Mordecai Kaplan created the Reconstructionist movement, articulate a neo-traditional defense of *halakhah*, while a professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary put forth a progressive argument in the best tradition of Reconstructionism.

I found myself in sympathy with Ed Feld on two points. Recently in these pages (Spring, 1993), I also argued that the Reconstructionist movement should no longer avoid using the term *halakhah* just because we have created a different model for that system's development. I agree with Feld that not only will we create more serious Jewish communities if we restore the sense of tension with traditional standards of Jewish practice and belief, but that we must be open to the possibility that the tradition may sometimes call upon us to say "no" to our modernist sensibilities. Our wrestling with the tradition is not honest if our individual and commu-

nal voices always win out against "Sinai."

My problem with Feld's argument, however, is that he offers no methodology for creating a contemporary *halakhah*. He makes the implicit suggestion that the rabbi's interpretation of a given halakhic question becomes the "objectification of the tradition" and thus, presumably, should stand as the accepted standard of the congregation. Now there are many models of how contemporary Jewish movements should interpret the tradition, and I have offered my own for the Reconstructionist movement, but Feld offers one closer to the Orthodox model (rabbi as sole arbiter of what is halakhically permissible in his/her community) than even the rabbinic-collectivist model used in the Conservative movement!

I presume that Feld would reject my model of communities being empowered to engage in a system of halakhic decision-making, because he believes that they would never say "no." I have debated this point with Conservative colleagues ever since I published "Reconstructionism as Process" (*Reconstructionist*, June 1979). I can only speak from my own experience. Properly educated congregations will not legislate themselves out of existence. I have found that even largely non-observant Jews want to retain communal standards that convey the sensibilities of the Jewish tradition. Time and again, I have seen my communities endorse: communal standards of *kashrut* that exceed their personal practice; requirements for

conversion prior to full participation of non-Jews in Jewish worship, despite the fact that it might exclude their friends and even their spouses; requirement for religious garb in communal worship, even when they come from Reform backgrounds, which did not embrace *kipot* and *talitot*. Reconstructionist rabbis must be bold enough to trust their congregants to wrestle with the tradition and patient enough to see that such trust is not abused.

I think that the ultimate test for this model of halakhic change is whether the contemporary Jewish community can actually create standards that exceed the “no’s” of the tradition. I think here of the possibilities that a community might endorse a form of vegetarianism or eco-kashrut that prohibits use of any environmentally endangering product for any congregational functions. Imagine the day, when, at a community-wide worship service hosted by the local Orthodox shul, the Reconstructionist attendees refuse to eat at the *oneg* because the food has been placed on non-bio-degradable Styrofoam!

Similarly, going beyond the *halakhah*, I have myself held that a person who is halakhically Jewish (born of a Jewish mother) but not raised as a Jew must go through a conversion procedure in order to be accorded certain Jewish privileges. I interpret our movement’s position on patrilineality to say that the content of one’s upbringing is more central than one’s lineage. When I have made these decisions and explained my rationale,

I have been supported by the communities that I have served.

If I was distressed by Ed Feld’s piece, I was positively elated with Neil Gillman’s. I argued in a 1981 article (“Catholic Israel and Halachic Change,” in R. Brauner, ed. *Jewish Civilization: Essays and Studies*) that there was a direct line between how Solomon Schechter understood Jewish law and the way in which Mordecai Kaplan would have Jews adapt that law. Lack of clarity about legitimate modes of halakhic change has bedeviled the Conservative movement for much of this century. Gillman’s article, while not an official pronouncement of the Seminary, is a remarkable acknowledgment by a leading figure in the Conservative movement regarding the ambiguity and fluidity of the halakhic process. By recognizing the central role played by the community in creating the parameters within which any halakhic decision might be reached, Gillman has reached across the ideological divide that was the starting point for the creation of Reconstructionism as a distinct movement in American Judaism (see my “Reconstructionism and Conservative Judaism,” *Judaism*, Winter, 1984).

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Men’s Communities

To the Editor:

I was very excited to hear about your issue on community and wanted to take the opportunity to inform your readers about some of the activi-

ties taking place within the evolving Jewish Men's work. While not a formalized movement per se, there is critical thinking and activity taking place that I feel will have a profound and positive long term effect on how we relate to one another in community as Jewish men and women, and as men and women in general.

One of the key questions to understanding the movement towards new forms of expression for Jewish male spirituality and identity is, "what draws us together?" The single most important feature that has appealed to the forty-plus men who have participated in the annual Jewish Men's Retreats at the Eylat Chaim Jewish Renewal Center is the opportunity, structured and informal, for deep sharing with other men.

We have also sought at such events to address the desire for a reconnection to longstanding Jewish traditions such as *mikveh*, Torah study (either in discussions or enacted bibliodrama), *kiddush levanah* (monthly celebration of the new moon), as well as providing a place to deal with issues of concern to us as Jewish men in supportive environments (this can range from talk to prayer to play, etc.). For many men who have been active in the larger men's work scene, there is often a lack of connection with their Jewish heritage, which is made available through such Jewish men's activities. Unlike the past, where gathering as men was linked to dominance over and exclusion of women and gay men from equal participation in many facets of Judaism, our present gather-

ing comes from a shared vision with many women's groups. We create opportunities to deepen our connections separately so we can build a richer more compassionate community together. I have experienced much enthusiastic support from female colleagues and women in various communities for the work we are taking on, and this has been very encouraging in the early stages of this journey.

Along with weekly to monthly men's groups that have been in existence for a number of years, a group of us have also begun meeting in Philadelphia to celebrate the new month at *kiddush levanah* gatherings. Here a combination of an evening of study of text and/ or discussion about a particular issue is followed by a trip outside to a nearby park where we can sing, dance and exchange blessings or mark transitions (these have ranged from new fatherhood, bar mitzvah, and marriage to healing prayers for ill friends and family). This ritual adds a Jewish spiritual dimension to our connecting as men.

By highlighting and examining specific male aspects in our traditions, we can avoid the assumption that those are normative (what has been taken predominantly as normative Judaism coming historically from a male perspective), and collectively develop communities that embody tolerance, creativity, mutual support, equality and God-consciousness.

If anything, building trust between us and learning how to relate to each other as men beyond the avenues previously afforded, is allowing us oppor-

tunities to push past competition, and insecurities and fears. Forging a compassionate, relevant and authentic spiritual life deepens this dimension so that our renewed Jewish expression enhances and supports our journeys as men in an age of rapid change in roles and expectations. Guilt, feelings of shame, inadequacy and blaming others is the surest way to keep the baggage we drag along stuck in place. The assertion of identities and spiritual expression must neither be dominating and abusive, nor so passive and apologetic that it leads to a total flattening of behaviour that de-energizes and immobilizes.

As previous hierarchical power structures and roles are being challenged and transformed (albeit painfully slowly at times), men have often isolated themselves to face these changes alone. This pattern can reinforce a resistance to change and cause a backlash against the perceived and/or real agents of change. The ways in which Jewish men are seeking to deepen their connection to each other, to women, to people of all faiths and backgrounds will help to

realign relationships in community in such a way that values what is rich and meaningful in the past, and allow us to work together and support each other in creative, compassionate and insightful ways towards a healthy future.

It will be difficult, if not impossible to be effective allies for each other as men, heterosexual, bi-sexual or homosexual, and to be allies to women in this process, unless we look for ways of being, and forms of expression as men that we can take pride in, identify with, and which connect us with God, as we experience or wrestle with the divine in our lives, in our own inner life, in intimate relationships and in community. This is a path now being explored by many courageous, committed and caring Jewish men.

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