

Chaverim,

Welcome to the Adat Shalom 2015 Retreat. We are looking forward to a welcoming, meaningful, community-based weekend.

We have put together this booklet to help you in your planning and enjoyment. It contains

- The program for the entire weekend, including Room numbers for each event
- Map of the 4H grounds
- Handouts for each of the sessions (excluding some which will be handed out at the session itself)

While we certainly hope no one needs them, Anne Mazonson and John Togut are our medical “go-to” team in case of medical emergency. They are both MD’s and have graciously offered to be available. Please contact either one of us if you need them and have trouble locating where they are. For that matter, contact either one of us with any questions, needs or concerns that arise over the weekend.

Have a wonderful time. Enjoy yourself and our amazing community!

Fran and Ruth

## **2015 RETREAT PROGRAM**

### **Friday**

3:30-5:30 Registration & get settled

**5:30 Kabbalat Shabbat Musical Service  
Fairfax Picnic Shelter**

6:30-7:30 Dinner

**7:30 Learning/ Singing Hebrew Songs** (or putting young kids to bed)  
**Conference Center Auditorium**

**8:15 Session 1: "What, When and Where is Torah?"**  
Text study and small group discussions- Rabbi Fred  
**Conference Center Auditorium**

**Concurrent youth program: "Hang out in the desert with Moses and the 12 tribes"-** Rabbi Julie and Marilyn Price, master teacher, storyteller and puppeteer  
**Conference Center Library (lower level)**

9:30 Good night to all

### **Saturday**

**7:00 Yoga– Sue Dorfman**  
In yoga, the most difficult pose is not the most twisty, bendy posture. It is Tadasana - the mountain pose, the Hineni pose, the "here I am" pose. While on the outside it looks like simple standing, it requires being fully present on all levels. On Shavuot, we are called as a people and individually to say "Hineni" - "here I am." Saturday morning's yoga will explore ways of translating Shavuot's Hineni into yoga postures and becoming more present through movement and breath. No previous yoga experience required. Bring a mat and sense of adventure.  
**Conference Center Rooms 2/3 (lower level)**

8:00-9:00 Breakfast

**9:15 Shabbat services  
Fairfax Picnic Shelter**

**9:15 Young children's services and activities – Lauren Katz/Ellie Schuchman -join adult service at 10:45  
Robinson Conference Room B (lower level)**

**9:15 Youth services and activities: Blessings for our families and the world-- Rabbi Julie/Marilyn Price -join adult services at 10:45  
Robinson East Conference Room (lower level)**

**11:30 Session 2: "Recon Revelation"**

**2A - "The Big Three: Torah – what does it reveal for us? God – how does divinity reveal itself to us? Israel/Community – how do our people and tradition reveal themselves to us? –(aka Reconstructionism in 60 minutes) -- Rabbi Fred  
Conference Center Rooms 2/3 (lower level)**

**OR**

**2B - Liturgical Evolution and Revelation: How Does the Reconstructionist Process Guide Our Relationship with Prayer?** The question of how we balance reverence for tradition with a commitment to a living, evolving Judaism is alive and well in the pages of our Siddur. What values and aspirations do we embody in the words and rituals of the Torah service? And a new question for our community to contemplate: How our Siddur shapes our theology and vice versa? -- Hazzan Rachel  
**Conference Center Auditorium**

**OR**

**2C - Revelation in Modern Jewish Thought: Explore the theme of revelation in the writings of Hermann Cohen, Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber, Abraham J. Heschel, Mordecai**

Kaplan and others. -- Rabbi Manny (colleague of Mordecai Kaplan; Ira Eisenstein, former vice president of the Reconstructionist Foundation and professor of Jewish Studies at Queens College; and Jack Cohen).

**Conference Center Library (lower level)**

- 11:30**      **Young children’s activities – Lauren Katz**  
**Robinson Conference Room B (lower level)**
- 11:30**      **Youth Program: Puppet making, the 12 tribes, and**  
**constructing Mt. Sinai – Rabbi Julie and Marilyn Price**  
**Robinson East Conference Room (lower level)**
- 12:30-1:30    Lunch
- 1:00-1:45**    **Youth Gaga with madrichim**  
**Lawn**
- 1:00-1:45**    **Cantata Rehearsal – Pam Sommers**  
**Conference Center Auditorium**
- 1:45**          **Free Time: Featuring Choice of 3 Hikes to Sinai (i.e.,**  
**Shenandoah); Other Choices; and the Choice of Nothing**  
**(Shabbat Menucha)**
- 5:00**          **Creative Israeli-themed Intergenerational Shavuot program**  
featuring our children, teens, Shlichah Sahar and master teacher  
Marilyn Price – *for entire community*  
**Lawn**
- 6:30-7:30    Dinner
- 7:35**          **Our Intergenerational Cantata performance, “What is**  
**Torah?” – Pam Sommers**  
(Written by Judith Kaplan Eisenstein and Ira Eisenstein)  
*for entire community*  
**Conference Center Auditorium**
- 8:15-10:00**    **Youth program: movie and popcorn**  
**Robinson East Conference Room (lower level)**

## TIKKUN L'EIL SHAVUOT

- 8:15**      **Rabbi Fred, “Introduction to Tikkun L’eil Shavuot”**  
**Conference Center Auditorium**
- 8:30-9:00**      **Rabbi Sandy, “God Is in this Place and I did not Know It”**  
**Gen 28:16. A Contemplative Approach**  
**Conference Center Library**
- 9:00-9:30**      **Hazzan Rachel, “An American Ruth”**  
Theater piece in progress. From loss to love, from poverty to plenty, from despair to faith – the story of Ruth is just calling out to be presented on stage. Come share in a staged reading of scenes from Hazzan Rachel’s draft of the timeless Ruth story, retold for our time.  
**Conference Center Library**
- 8:30-9:30**      **Rabbi Sid, “Sinai Revisited”**  
Reconstructionism really began as an effort to “reconstruct” Judaism despite the fact that Mordecai Kaplan rejected the classical Rabbinic assumption of Torah m’Sinai, that the Torah came to Israel as a Divine Revelation at Sinai. It so happens that this event—which Reconstructionists do not believe literally—is also the basis of the holiday of Shavuot. In this session, we will look at a way to re-sacrilize Sinai for progressive Jews. Our catalyst text will be an excerpt about the Ten Commandments from Arthur Green’s book, Radical Judaism.  
**Conference Center Rooms 2/3**
- 9: 30–9:50**      **Ma’ariv and Havdalah**  
**Conference Center Auditorium**
- 9:50–10:10      Cheesecake, Noshes  
**Conference Center Lobby**

- 10:15-10:45 Rabbi Leila, “What Happened at Sinai? Revelation through the Lens of Midrashim — Ancient and New”**  
Together we will explore ancient and contemporary midrashim to unpack what happened on that awesome day when, as a people, we received Torah at Mount Sinai.  
**Conference Center Rooms 2/3**
- 10:15–10:45 David Sieradzki, “What is it to be commanded?”**  
If you don’t believe in the anthropomorphic God who “commands,” can you feel “commanded” and what does that mean?  
**Conference Center Library**
- 10:45-11:15 Rabbi Julie, “You are Ruth, Naomi, or Boaz. At a crossroad: What choice would you have made?”**  
We will explore these complex relationships through text study and bibliodrama.  
**Conference Center Rooms 2/3**
- 10:45-11:15 Kevin Teichman, “Great moments in Tanakh History in One Phrase.”**  
We will explore moments in the Tanakh when our ancestors looked up for Divine inspiration. Did they receive it? –  
**Conference Center Library**
- 11:15-11:30 Break, cheesecake, slivovitz, more noshing  
**Conference Center Lobby**
- 11:30 – Tikkun Leil Shavuot After Hours – Rabbi Fred and Friends**  
**Conference Center Library**

## Sunday

**6:30**      **Bird watching – John Togut**

**7:00**      **Yoga– Shlicha Sahar/Hazzan Rachel and/or meditation – Marla Zipin**

Yoga followed by meditation - come for one or both (yoga begins at 7:00 and meditation at 7:40). The entire session will end by 8:15, allowing sufficient time for breakfast.

**Conference Center Rooms 2/3 (lower level)**

8:00-9:00    Breakfast

**9:15**      **Shavuot Text Study: The Perils of Studying Torah –**  
Now that you have stayed up for half the night studying Torah in honor of Shavuot, we will look at a strange but insightful Talmudic tractate that offers a cautionary tale of losing perspective of what is important in life – Rabbi Sid  
**Fairfax Picnic Shelter**

**10:00**      **Joyous Shavuot Service**  
**Fairfax Picnic Shelter**

**9:15**      **Youth Program: Shavuot service**  
**Post-Exodus at bottom of Mt. Sinai: “What were the people doing while Moshe was on the mountain top? What happened at the bottom of the mountain while Moshe was getting the commandments?”**  
Role playing, storytelling –Rabbi Julie and Marilyn Price  
**Robinson East Conference Room (lower level)**

**10:15**      **Scavenger Hunt**  
-Join adult services at 11:15

12:15-1:15    Lunch

**1:30-3:00**    **Session 3:**

**3A. Inter-generational Torah: Stories to send us home .... My stories, your stories, our stories.**

Following a set of stories focusing on the Torah of Shavuot, families will begin the process of telling their own stories and creating books, comic strips as they go forward into the week. -  
-Marilyn Price and Rabbi Julie

**Robinson East Conference Room (lower level)**

**OR**

**3B. The Still Small Voice at Sinai - A Revelation of the Heart: A Contemplative Workshop:**

Our tradition teaches that every Jew who has ever lived stood to receive Torah at Sinai, and that every Jew who ever will live will, one day stand at the foot of the Holy Mountain to receive Torah's revelation. Each one of us stands together with our people and alone at the same time as the great drama unfolds each year. This is an experiential workshop that weaves together Torah text, midrashim and questions about our own personal states of heart and mind so that we enter Torah and Torah enters us. – Rabbi Leila (based on her book in progress, *Listening with the Ears of the Heart: Genesis*).

Note: It is important to arrive on time, and to expect that every minute of the time allotted for this workshop will be used for a deep contemplative journey. The workshop may exceed the time parameters of the workshop by a few minutes, so if you are in a hurry to depart quickly, this workshop may not be for you.

**Conference Center Rooms 2/3**

**3:15**      **Free Time:** Continue conversations; relax; swim; stroll around the grounds.

**Be packed up with cars loaded by 5:10 PM.**

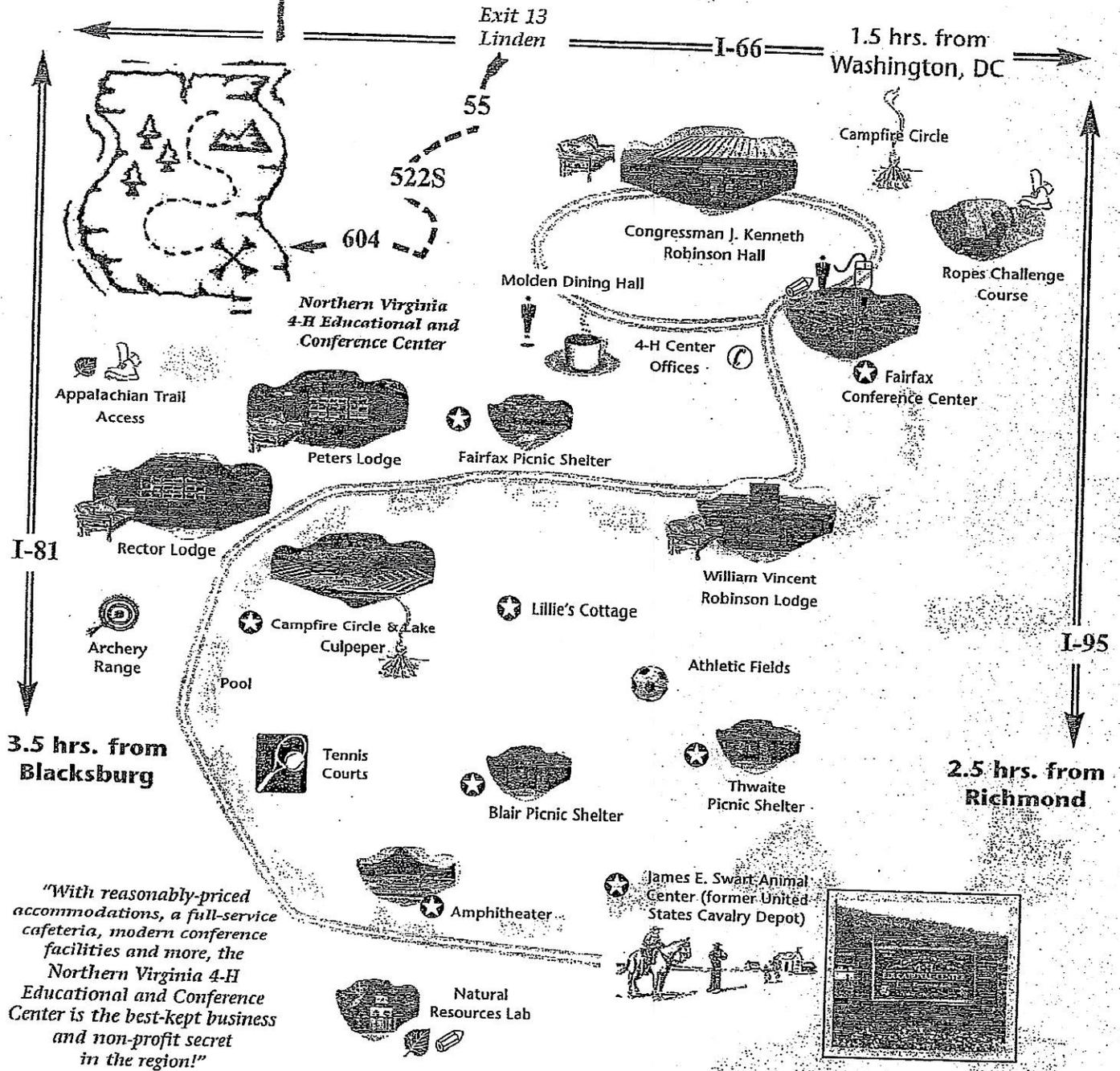
**5:15**      **Closing Ceremony**  
**Lawn**

6:00-7:00      Farewell Dinner (advanced registration required)

# Treasure Map

## Northern Virginia 4-H Educational and Conference Center

600 4-H Center Drive, Front Royal, VA 22630  
 Phone: 540 635-7171; Fax: 540 635-6876  
 Web: [www.nova4h.com](http://www.nova4h.com)



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|--|----------------------|--|-------------------|--|--------------------|
|  | Lodging/Hospitality  |  | Conferencing      |  | Special Features   |
|  | Nature               |  | Administrative    |  | Athletic Fields    |
|  | Education & Learning |  | Modern Technology |  | Fitness/Recreation |

# WHAT, WHERE, and WHEN is TORAH?

Adat Shalom Retreat 2015

ח שְׁמַע בְּנִי, מוֹסֵר אָבִיךָ ; וְאַל-תִּטּוֹשׁ, תּוֹרַת אִמְךָ.  
ד תּוֹרַה צְוָה-לָנוּ, מִשָּׁה : מוֹרָשָׁה, קִהְלַת יַעֲקֹב.

*Sh'ma, b'ni, musar avicha; v'al titosh torat imecha.* (Proverbs 1:8)

*Torah, Torah, tzivah lanu Moshe: morasha, morasha, kehilat Ya'akov.* (Deut. 33:4)

“Listen, my child, to the ethical instruction of your father; and don't turn away from the Torah of your mother.”

“The Torah, commanded to us by Moses: it's an inheritance for the community of Jacob.”

## Judith Kaplan Eisenstein

on WHAT IS TORAH? (in

*The Reconstructionist* 62:1, 1997, p. 13)

A. The first cantata, “What is Torah?” was written for the first Confirmation ceremony at the SAJ in 1942. Ira had taught these students for two years, and he asked them what they wanted to do for Confirmation. They had all gone to deadly Confirmations where everyone made speeches and they didn't want that. We didn't want that.

The kids had all heard of or sung the “Ballad for Americans,” and they wanted to do something similar. So we decided to do a piece about Torah, which would be a learning experience for them. Ira developed the idea that Torah meant more than just the five books of Moses, and I used the cantata as a vehicle to teach basic traditional Jewish music (including the *eykhab trope*) that I wanted the kids to have in their innards, as part of them. And it worked that way.



**Mordechai M. Kaplan** (in his first writings suggestive of his new ideas: *A New Approach to Jewish Life*, 1924, p. 63)

Why limit Torah to the study of texts, all-important as those texts are, when in reality Torah represents a living and continuing process rather than a final attainment? ... The duty of Torah should signify the duty of treating life as an art which it is our business to keep on perfecting.

**Judith Plaskow** (in the first full-length Jewish feminist theology, *Standing Again at Sinai*, 1990, p. 28)

Jewish feminists...must **reclaim Torah as our own**... render visible the presence, experience, and deeds of women erased in traditional sources. We must tell the stories of women's encounters with God and capture the texture of their religious experience. We must **expand the notion of Torah** to encompass not just the five books of Moses and traditional Jewish learning, but women's words, teachings, and actions hitherto unseen. To expand Torah, we must **reconstruct** Jewish history to include the history of women, and in doing so **alter the shape of Jewish memory**.

**Mordechai M. Kaplan** (in his late-career collection of insightful snippets: *Not So Random Thoughts*, 1966)

The foremost problem in Jewish religion is how to get Jews to take the Bible seriously without taking it literally.

It is a sign of childishness to accept the great religious myths as literal truths; a sign of adolescence to regard them as delusion; and a sign of maturity to appreciate their spiritual implications.

To interpret the Torah properly, we must remember that the whole of it is more than the sum of its parts.

At first men [sic] struggle to be free from nature; that gives rise to tradition.  
Then men struggle to be free from tradition, to get back to nature.

It is necessary to be rooted in a tradition in order to have not only something to live by, but also something to rebel against.

**The ancient authorities are entitled to a vote – but not to a veto.**

**Havruta Exercise:**

1. How has your conception of Torah broadened, in the course of your life?  
-- Can you recall times when it was more narrow, and when it expanded?
2. Are there places, or times, that say “Torah” to you – that are propitious for Torah?
3. What bits of Torah – from the 5 Books, and through to 2015 – most resonate for you?

**Text Study: Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 59b**

ויכוחו יצאתה בת קול ואמרה: מה לכם אצל ר'א שהלכה כמותו בכ"מ עמד רבי יהושע על רגליו ואמר: **לא בשמים הוא מאי לאיסי** בשמים היא אמר רבי ירמיה: שכבר נתנה תורה מרר סיני: אין אנו משגיחין בבית קל- שכבר כתבת בחד סיני בתורה: **אדרי רבים** להמת' אשכחיה רבי נתן לאלהו. אל מאי עכיד קיב'ה בהדא שעתא: אל קא חידך ואמר: **נצוני בני נצוני בני**

לאחרידים. אמרו לו: אין מביאין ראיה מאת המים. חזר ואמר להם: אם הלכה כמותי, כותלי בית המדרש יוכיחו. רבי יהושע: בית המדרש ליפול. גער בהם רבי יהושע: אמר להם: אם תלמדו חכמים מנצחים זה את זה בהלכה, אתם מה סיבכמ' לא נפלו מפני כבודו של רבי יהושע: ולא זקפו מפני כבודו של ר'א: ועדיין מסין ועומדין. חזר ואמר להם: אם הלכה כמותי מן השמים

זה הוא תנוד של עכנא. מאי עכנא? אמר רב יהודה אמר שמואל, שהקיפו דברים כעכנא ו, וממאהו. תנא: כבאתו היום השיב רבי אליעזר כל תשובות שבעולם, ולא קיבלו הימנו. אמר להם: אם הלכה כמותי, תרוב זה יוכיח. נעקד חרוב ממקום מאה אמה ואמרי לה, ארבע מאות אמה. אמרו לו: אין מביאין ראיה מן החרוב. חזר ואמר להם: אם הלכה כמותי, אמת המים יוכיחו. חזר אמת המים

Eleazer ruled it clean, but the Rabbis declared it unclean; this is the oven of Achnai...

On that day R. Eliezer brought forward all the arguments in the world, but [the others] did not accept them.

He said to them: 'if the halakha agrees with me, let this carob tree prove it.' A carob was uprooted from its place, moved 100 cubits (and some say 400 cubits). They [the rabbis] said to him: 'we do not accept legal proof from carobs!'

He again said to them: 'if the halakha is with me, let this stream prove it.' The stream turned around, and ran the other [uphill] way. They said: 'we do not accept proof from streams!'

He again said to them: 'if the halakha is with me, let the walls of this House of Study prove it.' The walls inclined, starting to fall. Rabbi Joshua rebuked them; saying to them, 'if the wise students argue with each other over the Halakhah, what's your role?!' They did not fall, out of respect for Rabbi Joshua, but they didn't straighten up, out of respect for Rabbi Eleazar ( -- they still stand, angled!).

He again said to them: 'if the halakha is with me, let proof come from Heaven!' A Bat Kol (Divine Voice) went forth and said, "What do you all have with Rabbi Eleazar?! The halakha is with him in all cases!"

R. Joshua rose and said, "it's not in Heaven!" [Deut. 30:12].

(What is meant by "it's not in Heaven?" Rabbi Jeremiah said: "the Torah was already given at Mt. Sinai; we don't listen to [today's] Bat Kol, since You [already] wrote at Sinai in the Torah, 'incline after the majority.'" [Ex. 23:2, also twisted out of context])

Rabbi Nathan [later] met Elijah, and asked him what God did at that moment. He replied:

"God laughed, and said, 'My children have defeated Me; my children have defeated me.'" ...

# Introduction to Reconstructionist Judaism

Adat Shalom Rabbi Fred Scherlinder Dobb [www.adatshalom.net](http://www.adatshalom.net)

*Yisrael v'Oreita v'Kudsha Brikh Hu – Khad Hu.  
Torah Orah (x2), Halleluya.*

Israel, & the Torah, & the Holy Blessed One: it's [all] one.  
The Torah is light; praise Yah! (liturgy)

יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאוֹרֵיטָא וְקוּדְשָׁא בְרִיחַ הוּא  
בְּרִיךְ הוּא סֵד הוּא.  
תּוֹרָה אוֹרָה, תּוֹרָה אוֹרָה, סֵלֵלֵקָה.

## I. Israel / Peoplehood (connection, Zionism, chosenness: Belonging)

MMK: “Judaism is the Evolving Religious Civilization of the Jewish People”

### WHAT IS RECON? (A METHOD!)

Mordechai M. Kaplan, 1956. *Questions Jews Ask*, pp. 80-81

**Reconstructionism is a *method***, rather than a series of affirmations or conclusions concerning Jewish life or thought.

Science is not the particular facts which are classified as physics, chemistry, biology, etc., but a *method* of observation, experimentation, and deduction. Likewise, Reconstructionism is not the ideas about God, ritual, community and what not, which anyone may hold. It is a ***method of dealing with Judaism***, or with **that which unites Jews in time and space**, and **differentiates** them as a group from non-Jews. The method consists in treating Judaism not as a static, or even as a dynamic, system of beliefs – but as the sum of all those **manifestations of the Jewish people**, which are the result of its will to live and to make the most of life.

Reconstructionism is a *method* which insists on viewing the problem of Judaism as three-dimensional, or from the standpoints of **Israel, God, and Torah**. That means that *all those three dimensions are equally important*. Judaism has to be understood as a way of life, in which peoplehood, religion and culture are so **interfused** as to be incapable of being dealt with separately...

### PEOPLEHOOD: ALMOST MYSTICAL

Mordechai M. Kaplan, 1955. *A New Zionism*, pp. 114-16

The **self-identification of the individual Jew with his [or her] Jewish people** is the source of the **mystical element** in Jewish religion.

What the Jewish people should mean to the individual Jew may be illustrated by the famous answer given by George Malory, one of the greatest mountain climbers, when asked why he wanted to climb Everest. He simply replied, “Because it is there.”

Likewise when we are asked, “**Why remain Jews**”, the only reason we should feel called upon to give is: “**Because the Jewish people is here, and we are part of it.**”

Unless we feel that to belong to the Jewish people is a high spiritual adventure which has intrinsic value regardless of consequences and practical ends, our Jewishness is tantamount to the interest of casual tourists in foreign countries.

Since **the Jewish people is indispensable to the Jew** as a human person, and since it has always given [us] the feeling of being in *rapport* with God, identification with the Jewish people provides Jewish religion with the indispensable dimension of **the mystical**.

...many a Jewish thinker and theologian [have] a blind spot for the mystic character of this self-identification with the Jewish people... But if they would stop to consider for one

moment the entire regimen of Jewish religious practice and ritual, and note the extraordinary fact that the individual Jew never takes part in them without **associating** himself [/ herself] with the **whole house of Israel**, they would begin to sense to the extent to which this association with the Jewish people is not merely a socio-psychological, but a definitely **mystical, experience**.

### COMMUNITY IS KEY

Mordechai M. Kaplan, 1952, in *MMK: An Evaluation*

A more immediate and more practical corollary of peoplehood as the newly recognized status of world Jewry is the establishment of **local Jewish communities of an organic character**. To be organic, those communities would have to **embrace all Jewish activities**, particularly the religious and educational, and conduct those activities in such a way as to further, both directly and indirectly, a sense of Jewish peoplehood, and the desire to strengthen it and to render it creative.

To Jews who are obsessed by the fear of being too conspicuously Jewish, or of being charged with Jewish isolationism or exclusionism, the very notion of an organic community is tabu. They hurl at everything they regard as too Jewish the epithet “ghettoism”, and expect it to have the effect of a stink bomb. There is no arguing with those who are fear-obsessed...

The organic community, far from being a means of withdrawal from the world, should have the effect of **enabling Jews to come to that world as co-partners and co-creators**, instead of as passive parasites living off the cultural achievements of others.

To emphasize this expected outcome of Jewish organic community I have had to articulate the principle that, in the Diaspora, it is henceforth **the destiny of the Jews to live in two civilizations**. That cannot come about fortuitously. It has to be carefully thought through and planned in such a way as to result in integrated personality. That should be the chief business of the rabbis, educators, scholars, literati, and all Jews of light and leading.

In the attempt to illustrate that principle in action, I have deemed it necessary to look to the **American** people and its civilization for moral and spiritual values with no less eagerness than to the **Jewish** people.

The role which *sancta* play in a civilization in giving to that civilization a religion, a consciousness of its destiny, and an awareness of its having to be a means of salvation to those who live by it, affords us American Jews an **opportunity to make an important contribution to American life**. We should single out the heroes, the events, the texts, the relationships, the significant days, that help to fashion in the American people not only a common consciousness but also a common conscience – and interpret those American *sancta* from the standpoint of democracy as [both] a way of life, and as a means to salvation...

## CHOSENNESS – What We Reconstruct

Yehuda Halevi, 11<sup>th</sup> Century Spain, *The Kuzari* I:24-26

Rabbi: “O Prince of the Khazars... I said what is convincing for me and for the whole of Israel, who knew these things, first through personal experience, and then through an uninterrupted tradition.”

The Khazari: “Then your belief is confined to yourselves?”

Rabbi: “Yes. Any Gentile who joins us sincerely shares our good fortune, but is **not equal to us**. If the Torah were binding on us as divine creations, the white and the black man would be equal. ...But the Torah is binding because God led us out of Egypt and remained attached to us. For **we are the pick of humankind**...”

Martin Buber, Germany, 1911, *On Judaism*, pp. 16-17

Neither the land [we Jews] live in... nor the language we speak... nor the way of life in which we participate which, in turn, shapes our actions, belongs to **the community of our blood**; they belong instead to another community... [Judaism] has planted something within us that does leave us at any hour of our life, that determines every tone and every hue of our life, all that we do and all that befalls us: **blood**, the deepest, most potent stratum of our being.

## ZIONISM: Rabbi Ira Eisenstein

Ira summing up, 1956, *Judaism Under Freedom*, pp. 68-69

Since the Jews in America, in order to maintain a rich and rounded life as Jews, must conceive of their Judaism in the broadest terms, **as a civilization – as the life of a people** – Israel has a significant contribution to make toward this end. For Israel is the living and growing embodiment of the idea that Jews are more than a denomination. **Israel demonstrates that there is a Jewish People**, with a history, a culture, a religious tradition and a vigorous body which houses its soul.

After the emancipation of the Jews in the various free nations, and before the establishment of the State of Israel, Jews were hard put to know just what they were: a religion, a race, a nation. Since the beginning of the new State, it is possible to say: **The Jews are a People**; their core and center, their focus lies in the Jewish community who reside **in Israel**; around this hub lies the **Jewish People of the many lands**, living as Jews in the sense that they are part of the fabric of the Jewish People, **attached to its center** by bonds of love and responsibility, of common memories and common hopes, of common culture and common destiny.

This identification with the Jewish People, which the State makes not only possible but dramatically real, can serve as an effective **antidote** to the influence of the prevailing Protestant conception of religion with which the Jews are so often identified by their neighbors and themselves. So long as the Jews have a **spiritual homeland** in Israel – so long as the ties that bind them to their fellow Jews in Israel remain firm and convey messages of **mutuality** – they will experience the sense of belonging to a People, not merely to a religious communion.

## PEOPLEHOOD – Civilizationally Sing!

*Am Yisrael Chai! -- Od Avinu [Imeinu] Chai!*

The People Israel Lives! Our Father [Mother] Still Lives!

*Yad b'yad, echad im hashaynee – am echad im lev echad, ken anu natlim – Natlim n'suat olam, nadlikah kam echad: Yad b'yad, echad echad, ken anu natlim!* (Craig Taubman)

*Im ein kemach, ein Torah; im ein Torah, ein kemach.*

Hand in hand with one another, one people with one heart, we bear the burden of the world, we ignite as one people. Hand in hand, one by one, we bear this burden. Without sustenance there's no Torah; without Torah, no sustenance.

## CHOSENNESS – What We Affirm

Mordechai Kaplan, *Future of the American Jew*, 1948, pp. 211 ff.

The idea of Israel as the chosen people must be understood [within] a thought-world which we no longer inhabit... **it can no longer help us** to understand relations, or to orient ourselves to conditions, as they exist today... Nowadays **for any people to call itself 'chosen' is to be guilty of self-infatuation**...

[why? 1. If you don't believe an interventionist God, **who chooses?** 2. Hereditary arguments “by implication assent to the most pernicious theory...to justify **racial inequality** and the right of a master race to dominate.” 3. Claiming sole credit for great global contributions “smacks of **arrogance**.” 4. **We learn** from others! 5. It's **illogical**. 6. Better: consider it **vocation** over election, **choosing** over 'chosen'.]

The very assumption of a predetermined and permanent superiority, no matter in what respect, **does not lend itself to reinterpretation**... By no kind of dialectics is it possible to remove **the odium of comparison** from any reinterpretation of an idea which makes **invidious distinctions** between one people and another.

Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai*, 1990, pp. 100-101

Chosenness has been reinterpreted in terms of mission to the nations and universal ethics; the notion of Jewish superiority has been roundly rejected... Yet **with the exception of the Reconstructionists' explicit repudiation of election**, few of these reinterpretations have eliminated the **stubborn implication of privilege** the concept of chosenness entails

... Most reinterpretations of election...[try] to reconcile chosenness with equality and participation in a pluralistic culture. Feminism, however, ... [considers it] in relation to the **internal** dynamics of the community... Chosenness, after all, is not just a statement about Jewish relations with other peoples, but a focus for Jewish self-understanding... The holiness that leads to external differentiation is lived out through observing the internal separations that mark a holy community. Since chief among these many separations is the differentiation between male and female, **chosenness becomes linked to the subordination of women and other groups** in the rhythms of Jewish existence.

It is not that one can draw a direct line from the idea of chosenness to the creation of Others within the Jewish community, or that the former provides an explicit model for the latter. But both are part of a cluster of important ideas that made graded differentiation a central model for **understanding difference**...

## ZIONISM: Various Takes

Yehuda Halevi, 11<sup>th</sup> Century Spain, *The Kuzari* V:23 “Journey to Eretz Israel”

Palestine has a special relation to the Lord of Israel. Pure life can be perfect only there... Sincere devotion and purity of life can reach perfection only in a place which is believed to have a special relation to God...

Ahad Ha'am (Asher Ginsburg), 1889: All the laws and ordinances, all the blessings and curses of the Law of Moses have but one unvarying object: the well-being of **the nation as a whole in the land** of its inheritance -- the happiness of the individual is not regarded... the actions of the individual have their reward in the good of the community. One long chain unites all the generations... The **heart of the people**: that is the foundation on which **the land** will be regenerated.

Mordechai Kaplan, *A New Zionism*, 1955, p. 42

...living in “two civilizations.” For that, the tradition has not prepared us... That is the task of the New Zionism. The New Zionism should make it possible for us to see Jewish life steadily and whole. It should **relate the Jewish people, the Jewish religion and the Jewish way of life to Eretz Yisrael as the alpha and omega of Jewish existence**. Eretz Yisrael has to be reclaimed as the only place in the world where Jewish civilization can be perfectly at home. But also other lands where Jews have taken root have to be rendered capable of harboring that civilization. The one purpose cannot be achieved without the other.

Should Jewish civilization fail to be at home in Eretz Yisrael, it will **disappear** everywhere else. Should it disappear everywhere else, it is bound to give way to some new Levantine civilization in Eretz Yisrael.

Mordechai Kaplan, *Not So Random Thoughts*, 1966, p. 218

When will the Messiah really come, or the Messianic era begin? When Reform and Conservative Rabbis are allowed to **officially** in Israel, and when the Chief Rabbi of Israel is permitted to visit the institutions that train them in the United States.

Israel has been experimenting with a new emulsion: **democracy with theocracy**. It would work if both democrats and theocrats were amenable to reason.

Let us not permit the State of **Israel** to become the **opiate of Diaspora Jewry**.

Right: early Recon 'seal' with **Eretz Yisrael at the center**; then religion-culture-ethics; next, 'the Jewish community'; outermost, America



## II. Torah -- study, action, halakha, tikkun olam: Behaving

MMK: "Tradition (halakha, the past) gets a vote, not a veto"

1a. TRADITION: Proverbs 1:8; Deut. 33:4

ח שִׁמַע בְּנִי, מוֹסֵר אָבִיךָ; וְאַל-תִּטּוֹשׁ, תּוֹרַת אִמְךָ.  
ד תּוֹרַה צְוָה-לָנוּ, מִשֶּׁה: מוֹרָשָׁה, קְהֵלֶת יַעֲקֹב.

*Sh'ma, b'ni, musar avicha; v'al titosh torat imecha.* (Proverbs 1:8)

*Torah, Torah, tzivah lanu Moshe: morasha, morasha, kehilat Ya'akov.* (Deut. 33:4)

"Listen, my child, to the ethical instruction of your father; and don't turn away from the Torah of your mother."  
"The Torah, commanded to us by Moses: it's an inheritance for the community of Jacob."

1b. TRADITION: TALMUD BAVA METZIA, 59b

יֹכִיחַ יִצְחָק בֵּית קָל וְאִמְרָה לָמָּה אֲנִי  
רָא שְׁהֵלְכָה כְמוֹתוֹ כִּכְסֵי עֵשֶׂר רַבֵּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ  
עַל רַגְלָיו וְאָמַר: לֹא בִשְׁמֵם הָיָא לְאִיִּים  
בְּשֵׁמֶם הָיָא אִמְרֵי רַבֵּי יִצְחָק: שִׁכְבֵר נִתְנָה  
תּוֹרָה מִדֵּר סִינִי: אִין אַנְּ מִשְׁנִיחֵן בֵּית קָל-  
שִׁכְבֵר כְּתַבְתָּ כֹּדֵר סִינִי בְּתוֹרָה: אִיִּדֵי רַבֵּיִים  
לְהַשְׁתִּי אֲשַׁכְּחָה רַבֵּי נֶחֱן לְאִלְהוֹ. אִילֵּי מֵא  
עֵבֵד קִבְּיָהּ בְּהוֹדָא שְׁעָתָא: אִיל: קָא חֲדָן  
וְאִמְרֵי: נִצְעֻנֵי בְּנֵי נִצְעֻנֵי בְּנֵי

לְאִתְרוּדֵיהֶם. אִמְרוּ לוֹ: אִין מְבִיאֵן רְאִיָּה סְאֵמַת  
הַמִּים. חֲזוּר וְאִמְרוּ לֵהֶם: אִם הֵלְכָה כְמוֹתוֹ  
נִתְלִי בֵּית הַמִּדְּשׁ יֹכִיחוּ. הַמִּי כֹחֵל  
בֵּית הַמִּדְּשׁ לִפְּלֵל. גַּעַר בְּרַם רַבֵּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ:  
אִמְרוּ לֵהֶם: אִם תִּלְמִדֵי חֲכָמִים מְנַעֲזִים זֶה  
אֵת זֶה בְּהֵלְכָה, אֲתָם מַה שִׁיכְבְּמֵלֵא נִפְלוּ  
מִפְּנֵי כְבוֹדוֹ שֶׁל רַבֵּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ: וְלֹא זָקְפוּ מִפְּנֵי  
כְבוֹדוֹ שֶׁל רַבֵּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ: וְעַדִּין מִסְּפִין וְעוֹמְדִין. חֲזוּר  
וְאִמְרוּ לֵהֶם: אִם הֵלְכָה כְמוֹתוֹ מִן הַשְּׁמַיִם

זֶה הוּא תַנְדֵּר שֶׁל עֲכָנָא: מֵא עֲכָנָא: אִמְרוּ רַב  
יְהוּדָה אִמְרוּ שְׂמוּאֵל שְׂדֵקִיפּוּ דְבֵרִים כְּעֲכָנָא  
זוּ, וְסִמְאֵרוּ, תְּנֵא: כְּבִירוֹת הַיּוֹם הַשֵּׁבֶר רַבֵּי  
אִלְעִזָּר כָּל תְּשׁוּבוֹת שְׁבַעֲוֵלִים, וְלֹא קִיבְלוּ  
הִימְנָא: אִמְרוּ לֵהֶם: אִם הֵלְכָה כְמוֹתוֹ, חֲזוּב זֶה  
יֹכִיחַ. נִעְקֵר חֲזוּב מִמִּקְדָּם מֵאָה אִמְרוּ וְאִמְרוּ  
לֵה, אִרְבַּע מֵאוֹת אִמְרוּ. אִמְרוּ לוֹ: אִין מְבִיאֵן  
רְאִיָּה מִן הַחֲרוּבִים, חֲזוּר וְאִמְרוּ לֵהֶם: אִם הֵלְכָה  
כְמוֹתוֹ, אִמְרוּ אִמְרוּ יֹכִיחוּ. חֲזוּר אִמְרוּ הַמִּים

1c. TRADITION: TALMUD BAVA METZIA, 59b

Rabbi Eleazar ruled it clean, but the Rabbis declared it unclean; this is the oven of Achnai ... On that day R. Eliezer brought forward all the arguments in the world, but [the others] did not accept them.

He said to them: 'if the halakha agrees with me, let this carob tree prove it.' A carob was uprooted from its place, moved 100 cubits (and some say 400 cubits). They [the rabbis] said to him: 'we do not accept legal proof from carobs!'

He again said to them: 'if the halakha is with me, let this stream prove it.' The stream turned around, and ran the other [uphill] way. They said: 'we do not accept proof from streams!'

He again said to them: 'if the halakha is with me, let the walls of this House of Study prove it.' The walls inclined, starting to fall. Rabbi Joshua rebuked them; saying to them, 'if the wise students argue with each other over the Halakhah, what's your role?!' They did not fall, out of respect for Rabbi Joshua, but they didn't straighten up, out of respect for Rabbi Eleazar ( -- they still stand, angled!).

He again said to them: 'if the halakha is with me, let proof come from Heaven!' A Bat Kol (Divine

Voice) went forth and said, "What do you all have with Rabbi Eleazar?! The halakha is with him in all cases!"

R. Joshua rose and said, "it's not in Heaven!" [Deut. 30:12]. What is meant by "it's not in Heaven?" Rabbi Jeremiah said: "the Torah was already given at Mt. Sinai; we don't listen to [today's] Bat Kol, since You [already] wrote at Sinai in the Torah, 'incline after the majority'." [Ex. 23:2, also twisted out of context]

Rabbi Nathan [later] met Elijah, and asked him what God did at that moment. He responded: "God laughed, and said, 'My children have defeated Me; my children have defeated me.'" ...

### 2. WHY, AND WHAT IS, TORAH?: M.M.K.

A Torah-less Judaism may hang on to life for a generation or two, but its end is inevitable. Hence, our problem is what to do to **reinstate the Torah** in the life of the Jew... Why limit Torah to the study of texts, all-important as those texts are, when in reality Torah represents a living and continuing process rather than a final attainment? ... The duty of **Torah** should signify the duty of treating **life as an art** which it is our business to keep on perfecting. (M. Kaplan, *A New Approach to Jewish Life*, 1924, p. 63)

### 3. THE HALAKHIC (LEGAL) IMPULSE: M.M.K.

Discussion of the legal aspects of Jewish civilization, known as the *halakha*, looms large in the literature of Torah. The Torah seeks to translate righteousness into law. All modern efforts at social reconstruction prove Paul to have been wrong in maintaining the primacy of faith-righteousness, and are a vindication of the Jewish religion which insists on the primacy of **law-righteousness**. (M. M. Kaplan, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion*, 1956, p. 315)

### 4. RECONSTRUCTING HALAKAH: M.M.K.

Our first task is to identify the pragmatic implications of Torah, or the specific ways in which it has functioned hitherto in the Jewish consciousness. The next step is to **ignore those implications which have become obsolete**, and to **elaborate and implement the rest**. There are, in fact, only two implications which have become obsolete: (1) that the [Torah] is a **supernaturally** dictated text, and (2) that it alone is the **final source** of whatever is authoritative in Jewish life...

The very existence of an 'oral Torah' alongside the 'written Torah' implies the need for **conceiving Torah not as a static code but as an expression of the dynamic process of spiritual growth**, through adjustment to new realms of thought and action.

(M. M. Kaplan, *A New Zionism*, 1955, pp. 153-54)

### 5. HOW TO PROCEED WITH TORAH: M.M.K.

Even if the standard we choose to live by deviates from the one prescribed in the Torah, so long as [our] standard is in keeping with the fundamental purpose of the Torah, it is as much **entitled to be considered Torah** as the rabbinic and philosophic interpretations which read into the Torah a great deal that was not there [eisegesis rather than exegesis].

The only alternatives...are either no Torah, or some new Torah. The first alternative is unthinkable because it would put an end to the Jewish people. The second alternative is unthinkable because it would destroy the spiritual continuity of the Jewish people. We must therefore resort to the **evolutionary conception of the Torah as an ongoing process**.

That conception, however, is bound to appear labored and artificial, unless we take into account one of the fundamental principles on which the Torah is based – namely, that God is to be sought in the history of [humanity]'s effort to learn the meaning of salvation [fulfillment of potential] ... (M. M. Kaplan, *The Greater Judaism in the Making*, 1960, p. 510)

### 6. HOW WE MIGHT PROCEED: VBDM, per D.A.T.

\* Kaplan: The Past / Halacha / Tradition gets a **Vote**, but **not a Veto**

\* **What else** gets a Vote, then?

\* **Who** Votes?

\* Role of the **community**, vs. the role of each of us an individual?

\* Values-Based Decision-Making, as outlined by Rabbi David Teutsch (Reconstructionist Rabbinical College):

"What can we do to increase our capacity to pass on Jewish ethics? We can strengthen culture by creating **vigorous communities**. We can attempt to create **shared moral vocabulary** in our communities. We can foster **strong relationships** among people in our communities..."

Congregation-based communities can only have substantial influence on the moral lives of their members if they develop a shared ethos and intensive relationships. VBDM is designed to create a moral dialogue that reinforces values, creates consensus, and builds community.

VBDM is a **multi-step process** that requires fact-finding, **exploration** of Jewish tradition, determination of actions **excluded** by norms, and **discovery of relevant values and ideals**... This process is one of self-education and not just decision-making..."

(D.A.T. in *The Reconstructionist*, Spring 2005, p. 10-11)

### 7. FEMINIST TAKES ON HALAKHAH: J. PLASKOW

Halakhah may represent a response to profound religious experience, but the law itself is not divine; it is formulated by men in a patriarchal culture. Halakhah is thoroughly androcentric. It envisions and supports a patriarchal order. Those whom the law benefits may see it as God-given, but the outsider, the Other, knows it differently...

Feminist Jews are ourselves **creating new norms** to govern our communities. The 'law' that Jewish women should be counted in a minyan is as deeply held a religious principle for feminists, as [is] its contrary for traditional Jews. The convictions that women should study and read Torah, serve as witnesses, and have equal legal rights in marriage are fundamental to feminism. Are these principles and convictions 'halakhah' or are they not? Perhaps what distinguishes feminist Judaism from traditional rabbinic Judaism is not so much the absence of law in the former, as *a conception of rule-making as a shared communal process...* [italics not in original]

Jewish feminists... must **reclaim Torah as our own**... render visible the presence, experience, and deeds of women erased in traditional sources. We must tell the stories of women's encounters with God and capture the texture of their religious experience. We must **expand the notion of Torah** to encompass not just the five books of Moses and traditional Jewish learning, but women's words, teachings, and actions hitherto unseen. To expand Torah, we must **reconstruct** Jewish history to include the history of women, and in doing so **alter the shape of Jewish memory**. (Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai*, 1990, pp. 71, 70, 28)

### 8. A USEFUL DISTINCTION: ARI ELON

Ari [Elon, then of RRC, now leading liberal learning initiatives in Israel] sees a central conflict examined in the Talmud: between the commanding Torah of the law – the temporal life within boundaries

– and that of the learned Torah, emphasizing the boundless, the eternal, the seductive.

“The commanding Torah,” he writes, “defines for her observers each and every minute of their temporal lives. The learned Torah provides her learners with eternal life. The commanding Torah deals with the minuteness of every possible minutia of the here and now. The learned Torah bears her learners on the wings of inspiration and carries them to the heights far above the here and now.” (Ari Elon in Sherry Shulewitz, *Reconstructionism Today*, Summer 1994)

### 9. TIKKUN OLAM – REPAIRING THE WORLD

\* Tikkun Olam is clearly a central focus of “Recon Torah” – but how much so?

\* Palliative vs. Preventative: a case study in VBDM

\* And *Tikkun Nefesh*

\* Sustainability – see Mordechai Kaplan, 1945, we are all one organism, ala the Gaia hypothesis...

### 10. NOT SO RANDOM THOUGHTS: M.M.K. (1966)

The foremost problem in Jewish religion is how to get Jews to take the Bible seriously without taking it literally.

It is a sign of childishness to accept the great religious myths as literal truths; a sign of adolescence to regard them as delusion; and a sign of maturity to appreciate their spiritual implications.

To interpret the Torah properly, we must remember that the whole of it is more than the sum of its parts.

At first men [sic] struggle to be free from nature; that gives rise to tradition. Then men struggle to be free from tradition, to get back to nature.

It is necessary to be rooted in a tradition in order to have not only something to live by, but also something to rebel against.

**The ancient authorities are entitled to a vote – but not to a veto.**

## **III. God (Process, attributes, gender, images: Believing)**

MMK: “God is the Power (Process, Force) that Makes for Salvation”

### 1. WELCOME; NAMES (OURS & THE ONE’S)

#### 2. KEY CAVEAT: JUDITH PLASKOW

**Criticism of received images of God is not, of course, criticism of God.** It is criticism of ways of speaking about a reality that, in its full reality, is finally unknowable... Everything we say about God represents our human efforts to create, recapture, and evoke experiences of God sustained within linguistic and cultural frameworks that already color our experience and interpretation. All our images have an “as if” or “as it were” [*kivay’khol*] in front of them....

(Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai*, 1990, p. 134)

### 3. OVERVIEW & DISCLAIMER: M. M. Kaplan.

(it bears repeating, in its full context, which was theological!): **Reconstructionism is a method**, rather than a series of affirmations or conclusions concerning Jewish life or thought.

Whatever I am about to state concerning my conception of God is Reconstructionist, only in the sense that I have arrived at it **through the application of the Reconstructionist method**. I do not, by any means, claim that it is the only legitimate conception, even from a Reconstructionist point of view. Nor should it be regarded as a Reconstructionist conception of God. **It is not within the province of the movement to pronounce any one theology as truer than another.**

*All that Reconstructionism stresses is that a Jew, to be a Jew in the full sense of the term, should have a theology in which he [sic] believes with all his heart, soul and mind....*

In restating my position, I wish to do nothing more than to indicate why and wherein I personally find the

conception of God, as the Power that makes for salvation, **compelling, revealing and comforting**.

*The fact that the cosmos possesses the resources and man [sic] the abilities – which are themselves part of those resources – to enable him to fulfill his destiny as a human being, or to achieve salvation – is **the Godhood of the cosmos**....*

*As far as Jewish religion, with its teachings and rituals, is concerned, it matters very little **how** we conceive God, as long as we **so** believe in God that belief in Him [sic] makes a tremendous difference in our lives.*

(Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Questions Jews Ask: Reconstructionist Answers*, 1956, pp. 81-86)

### 4. KAPLANIAN THEOLOGY: M.M.K.

a. [God is] the **sum of the animating, organizing forces and relationships** which are forever making a **cosmos out of chaos**.

b. To believe in God is to reckon with life’s **creative forces, tendencies, and potentialities** as **forming an organic unity, and as giving meaning** to life by virtue of that unity.

c. What are life, knowledge, goodness, if not processes? They are certainly not beings or entities. Since God is life, knowledge, goodness, **what else can He be but Process?**

Modern scientific and philosophic thought regards all reality not as something static but as **energy in action**. When we say that **God is Process**, we select, out of the infinite processes in the universe, that **complex of forces and relationships which makes for the highest fulfillment** of man as a human being, and identify it by the term “God.”

(a - *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion*, 1937, p. 76. b - *Ibid*, p. 27. c - *Questions Jews Ask*, 1956, p. 103.)

5. PREDICATE THEOLOGY: HAROLD SCHULWEIS

Not the attribute of the Divinity but the **divinity of the attribute** requires our attention... Predicate liturgy would invert the [traditional blessing] formula so that religious attention and appreciation is directed to the givenness of earth and seed and sun and water, to the...baking of the dough and the equitable distribution of bread to those in need. 'Brukhah Elohut hamotziah lehem min ha-aretz.' Blessed is **Elohut / Godliness** which brings forth bread from the earth."

(Schulweis, *The Reconstructionist* 41:1, Feb. 1975. i.e.: We can relate more easily to a statement like "justice and mercy are **godly**" than "God is just and merciful.")

6. TALMUDIC BASIS: MEGILLAH 25a

A certain [reader] went before the ark, by Rabbi Hanina; he said "God: great, mighty, awesome, majestic, strong, courageous."

**פרק שליש מגילה כה**  
והוא  
ועוד קמה דבי דנינא אמר האל הנודע  
הנבחר הערוד הארז והרוק והאמץ אמר  
ליה סימניו לשבחה דמך! והשוא דני  
הלחא, אי לא דכתבינו משה באורייתא  
וארו (ו) בנסת וגדולה ותקנינו. אגן לא  
האי! משל לאדם שהיו לו אלף אלפי אלפים דינרי זהב והיו מקלסין  
אורו (באלף) דינרי כסף. לא ינא הוא לוי?

He [Hanina] said to him: "Are you done praising your master?! Even the first three, if Moses had not written them in the Torah and the Great Assembly not come and enacted them [as liturgy], we would not say them. Yet you say all this! It's like a person who had millions of gold dinari, and in 'praise,' people would say he had thousands of silver dinari. Wouldn't that be an insult?!"

7. KAPLAN & RAMBAM'S BLIND SPOT: PLASKOW

God's maleness has been so completely taken for granted that it is even **exempted** from the philosophical injunction against ascribing positive attributes to God. Maimonides [1140-1204], for example, considers it illegitimate ever to characterize God in positive terms, for this might imply that God is similar to other existing things. Yet throughout his discussion of negative and positive attributes, Maimonides continually refers to God as **He and Him** without ever taking note of the fact that maleness is a positive trait, or applying to this attribute his doctrine of negation...

[It becomes a ] powerful circular argument: ...When God is pictured as male in a community that understands "man" to have been created in God's image, it only makes sense that **maleness** functions as **the norm** of Jewish humanity. When maleness becomes normative, **women are necessarily Other**, excluded from Torah and subordinated in the community of Israel. And when women are Other, it seems only fitting and appropriate to **speak of God** in language drawn from the **male norm**....

(Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai*, 1990, p. 127)

8. RECONSTRUCTING LITURGY: MARCIA FALK

The problem...is not the oneness of divinity, but the otherness of divinity. The problem is in our imagery

of **transcendence**, through which we **disempower** ourselves as we portray God as power over us. As a feminist Jew, then, I seek a return to the fundamental insight of the religion – the perception of **unity** in the world. Unity of all elements of creation, unity of creation with creative source and power. This perception can be restored only through **radical re-visioning, re-imaging** that brings us back to the root of the monotheistic idea.

\* \* \*

My own journey as a poet to enact this feminist Jewish vision has led me to write new Hebrew *b'rakh-ot* (blessings) [in Reconstructionist *Kol Haneshemah* in 1989] to substitute for the traditional, formulaic ones that have idolized the image of a male lord/God/ king ruling over the world. I begin with the traditional formulations... instead of using the traditional opening, the passive form which states God's "blessedness," I **take back the power of blessing**. Instead of *barukh atah*, "blessed are you [masculine]," or even *b'rukhhah at*, "blessed are you [feminine], I say *n'varekh*, "let us bless," active and gender-inclusive.

...I hope to help construct a *theology of immanence* that will both **affirm the sanctity of the world** and **shatter the idolatrous reign** of the lord/God/king. (Marcia Falk, *Tikkun* 4:4, 1990)

9. ANOTHER RECON VIEW: RICHARD HIRSH

Reconstructionism, like Orthodoxy, Conservatism, and Reform, can absorb a variety of conceptions of God: mystical, feminist, meditative, even personal. But Reconstructionism alone has been willing to endorse, validate, and promote a **non-supernatural and non-personal** theological vocabulary for those Jews who seek it.

For the sake of Jewish continuity, out of a respect for the **sancta** of tradition, and in the interests of *klal Yisrael*, I would also argue that it is imperative to retain the admittedly male-oriented formula, *barukh ata Adonay* in contrast to the experimental *nevarekh et eyn ha-hayyim* ("Let us bless the well of life") or other formulations suggested by Marcia Falk.

When we *davven* in Hebrew, we are [...per Rabbi Alan Miller] offering quotations, declaiming the words of our ancestors to fulfill the **need to belong**. However, what we pray in English ought to reflect, as the preface to the 1945 prayerbook suggested, **what we as modern Jews can affirm**. There is nothing wrong with using the word "God..." But the primary function of English in our prayerbook should be to **paraphrase in non-personal and non-supernatural terms** the theme, insight, or feeling of the corresponding Hebrew prayer – not to offer a translation that obscures the **uniqueness of the Reconstructionist conception of God**. (Rabbi Richard Hirsh, *The Reconstructionist*, Spring 1994, p.25)

10. A "NEW" RECON THEOLOGY: MYSTICISM

**Divinity pervades the universe:** sparks in every single thing, energy latent in each subatomic particle. We can raise the sparks, restoring the world to God. We become aware that whatever we do or see or

12. RECON LITURGY: ALL OF THE ABOVE

touch or imagine is part of the oneness, a pattern of energy. Religion is transformed from a list of do's and don'ts into a spiritual adventure. The simplest, most mundane activity becomes an opportunity to expand awareness, to exercise compassion.

God is not some separate being up there. **She is right here**, in the bark of a tree, in a friend's voice, in a stranger's eye. The world is teeming with God. Since God is in everything, one can serve God through everything, by raising the sparks. In looking for the spark, we discover that what is ordinary is spectacular. ... God is not somewhere else, hidden from us, but rather, right here, hidden from us. Enslaved by our routines, we rush from one chore to the next, from event to event, rarely allowing ourselves to pause and open. Our **sense of wonder** has shriveled, victimized by our pace of life. How, then, can we find God?

A clue is provided by one of the many names of *Shekhinah*. She is called ocean, well, garden, apple orchard. She is also called **zot**, which means simply "this." God is right here, in this very moment, fresh and unexpected, taking you by surprise. **God is this.**

(Daniel Matt, *The Reconstructionist*, Spring 1994, p. 45)

11a. LIBERATION THEOLOGY: M.M.K.

During the last two thousand years Jews have never wearied of referring to the Exodus...

Jews are still the victims of oppression. But they have entered into such intimate relationship with the life of the world about them that they can no longer envisage their own deliverance except as a phase of general human deliverance...

The new redemption to which Jews look forward involves the **redemption of society in general** from present ills. It implies the transformation of human nature and social institutions through the divine power of intelligence and good-will... There can be no question that in the Torah the story of the Exodus has the connotation that **to help the oppressed** is an essential attribute of godhood.

(M. M. Kaplan, *Meaning of God*, 1937, p. 266. See Gustavo Gutteriez' "fundamental option for the poor," circa 1967; and Sallie McFague's "include the well-being of all life," 1987.)

11b. LIBERATION THEOLOGY: The Next Step

All forms of liberation theology insist on the 'deprivatizing' of theology, but to date this has been for the most part **limited to human beings** and has not included the destiny of the cosmos. The principal insight of liberation theologies – that redemption is not the rescue of certain individuals for eternal life in another world but the **fulfillment of all humanity** in the political and social realities of this world – must be further deprivatized to **include the well-being of all life.** (Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*, 1997, p.7)

"elements of a creation-centered spirituality – wonder, renewal, a sense of beauty, and a capacity to rejoice..."

(Dorothee Soelle with Shirley Cloyes, *To Work and To Love: A A Theology of Creation*, 1984)

Many contemporary Jews are reciting *berakhot*/blessings in ways that reflect their theological outlooks and ethical concerns. At any place where a blessing occurs in the liturgy, the following elements can be combined to create alternative formulas for *berakhot*. This can be done by selecting one phrase from each group to form the introductory clause.

I *Baruh atah adonay*

ברוך אתה יהוה  
Blessed are you Adonay

*Brubah at yah*  
ברוכה את יהוה  
Blessed are you Yah

*Nevarah et*  
נברך את  
Let us bless

II *eloheynu*

אלהינו  
our God

*hashehinah*  
השכינה  
Shehinah

*eyn hahayim*  
עין החיים  
Source of Life

III *meleh ha'olam*

מלך העולם  
Sovereign of all worlds

*hay ha'olamim*  
יה העולמים  
Life of all the worlds

*ru'ah ha'olam*  
רוח העולם  
Spirit of the world

Judith Plaskow and Marcia Falk state the problems vividly and move us toward provisional solutions. In some congregations and havurot, **experimentation** with alternatives is under way. Yet clearly, this is a **transitional period**... [Some] argue that while many changes are possible, this one is simply too basic and sweeping, too discontinuous.

The Prayerbook Commission lacks a crystal ball that can predict what *berakhah* formula will ultimately triumph. Yet the Commission wants to validate and encourage the effort to find new formulas... The provisional *Erev Shabbat* volume of *Kol Haneshamah* included Marcia Falk's Interpretive *Amidah* as one step in that direction. In the full *Shabbat Vehagim* volume, the traditional formula was left in place in the main Hebrew text, but [these, see at left] instructions for **constructing substitutes** appear at regular intervals...

Over time, an agreement about which new formulations are normative will emerge. That norm might consist of some combination of the elements above. It just as easily might not. In any case, the debate engendered by these issues will be important for the moral and theological development of this generation.

(Rabbi David Teutsch, *The Reconstructionist*, Spring 1994, p. 16)

13. BEYOND WORDS: ART / CIV / PRAYER

(Betsy Platkir Teutsch in *Kol Haneshamah*, 1994)



## IV. Putting It All Together (The Fun Part, Time Permitting)

**Reconstructionist Judaism and Coffee: Discuss!** **First, Community:** When do we serve what kind of coffee, and what alternatives do we offer? Strong or light? Individual cups, French-press, pot, or kum-kum?

**Second, Torah/Practice:** Is it kosher without: a hashgacha? Being fair-trade? Shade-grown? Organic? Does the answer change at home, in synagogue, or out in the world? How many cups (max/min)? Quality? Etc...

**Finally, Theology:** What blessing/s might or should or must we say over coffee? Blessed is the One who... Opens the eyes of the blind? Removes sleep from my eyes and slumber from my eyelids? Is good and does good? Inspired the Psalm "taste, and see that God is good"? Extends beneficence to all? Revives the dead?! Add here...

## V. Tachlis (Brass Tacks, The Practical Part)

### **What is Reconstructionism, Anyway?...**

Three 99-Word 'Elevator Speeches' – Read, Practice, Mix 'n Match, Use  
Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation from Yom Kippur 2007 / 5768 [www.adatshalom.net](http://www.adatshalom.net)

Theoretical, Historical, Big-Picture

1. Mordecai Kaplan, who founded Reconstructionism a couple generations ago, saw it as an approach to Judaism – as the "Evolving Religious Civilization of the Jewish People." Each word there says a lot. *Evolving*: Judaism always has changed, and always will; our innovations (feminist or democratic or whatever) are sacred too. *Religious*: tradition, ritual, Hebrew; it's all important. But Judaism transcends 'religion.' It's a *Civilization*: how we live – encompassing food, art, culture/s, language/s, history, sociology – the whole *schmeer*. And finally: *of (and by and for) the Jewish People* – in practice, it all boils down to peoplehood, to community. Does that help?

Comparative, Relational, Like-Them-But-Different

2. Depends on where you're coming from. We're often called "between Reform & Conservative," which is largely true: at least in how a service feels, views of Jewish law and tradition, etc. But there's way more to it. Like Reform, we emphasize *tikkun olam* (world repair) and accommodating modernity; we're often even more 'out there,' from inclusiveness to theology to universalism. Like Conservative, we emphasize tradition, ritual, and study; sometimes we resurrect traditions even they've overlooked. But then add experimentation, ala Renewal; intensity, ala Orthodoxy; and above all, a unique focus on building meaningful, organic, local community. Does that help?

Practical, Personal, On-the-Ground

3. Not sure about theory, but I can tell you about our community, Adat Shalom. The *dvar Torah* (sermon) usually becomes a discussion – all voices are welcome, since everyone has contributions to make. Intermarried families, LGBT folks, singles, and other 'non-traditional' householders feel right at home – we value inclusiveness very highly. Our shul is hopping – social action, education, Israel, arts, community life, supporting each other at life cycle moments – we prize pitching in, and getting involved. And members provide huge *onegs* (lunches) after every service to facilitate schmoozing, as important as praying – the key, really, is 'community.' Does that help?

And to Help You Explain It (and Learn More!):

- \* Consider what's behind the question -- what's their frame of reference? Tailor your answer accordingly.
- \* Be anecdotal, textured, colorful – what do you like; what's personally salient? God? Process? Stories?
- \* Stay in your comfort zone; avoid what you may not know well -- but you know more than you think you do!
- \* Invite your petitioner to join you one Saturday, at Adat Shalom or another community, to see this in action.
- \* Read Exploring Judaism: A Reconstructionist Approach, by Rabbis Rebecca Alpert & Jacob Staub.
- \* Go to [www.JewishRecon.org](http://www.JewishRecon.org) for more; or [www.adatshalom.net](http://www.adatshalom.net) for our community; or [www.rrc.edu](http://www.rrc.edu)...

Tikkun Leil Shavuot  
Rabbi Sandy Rubenstein  
Genesis 28:16 A Contemplative Reading

Surely  
God  
Is  
In  
This  
Place  
And  
I,  
I  
Did  
Not  
Know  
It

Genesis:28:16

אֲכַן  
יֵשׁ  
הָיָה?  
בַּמָּקוֹם  
הַזֶּה  
וְאֲנֹכִי  
לֹא  
יָדַעְתִּי

yours.'<sup>49</sup> I turn to the myth of the call to Adam precisely because that is a universal myth, one that will be inclusive of all humanity. In journeying from that myth to the account of Sinai, my intent is to read the latter as well in an open and universalizing way. Once "Egypt" is read symbolically, the religion of the first two commandments of Sinai, "I am Y-H-W-H your God" and "Worship nothing else," is not limited to Judaism or Jews. Fully cognizant of myth and its powers, including its dangers, I am suggesting that the moral test for the legitimate use of myth is its universality or our ability to read it in a universalizing way. A myth that explains something about the universal human situation, that deepens our understanding of some aspect of what it means to be a human being, is indeed enriching to human experience and may be worthy of embracing. But a myth that divides, that tells us why Jews or blacks or women or Gypsies or Canaanites — or any other particular group — are cursed, are excluded from the camp of the Lord, or anything of that order, is a myth to be treated with suspicion, whether it exists within our tradition or any other. The universality of the Creation tale (especially in its Genesis 1 version) sets the standard. The possibility that idolatry, with all the worst of its implications, can lie within the myth-making center of the human mind, should come as no surprise.

### *Sinai and Covenant*

When we approach Sinai, however, we stand directly in the face of Israel's myth: its faith in its uniqueness and its singular covenant with God. How can a religious universalist live with these, and how can one imagine a Judaism without them? I remain an affirmer of both Sinai and covenant, but in very carefully defined ways, including both restriction and expansion of their meaning.

We Jews began our life together as a sacred community by an act of covenantal engagement. That is the original community of Israel, gathered at the base of Mount Sinai, a gathering that takes place throughout all eternity, one at which each of us (including all who choose to join the people Israel) is ever present. This is when we

become "a kingdom of priests, a holy nation" (Ex. 19:6). Priesthood makes no sense without a laity, in this case one that includes the entire human family. The task of the priest is to teach and to serve in such ways as to help others come close to God. The teaching this family of nations is to receive (not only from us) needs to be a universal one, applicable to them all. Its most basic principles are two: *all of being is one in Y-H-W-H, and every person is the image of God*. This is our message, the reason we continue to exist. All the rest is commentary. As a religious Jew, I remain fully committed to this priesthood. I understand, in the language of tradition, that "Israel stand under oath since Mount Sinai."<sup>50</sup> The covenant is one of joy as well as burden. Sinai is the moment in which each heart leaps forward and says *na'aseh ve-nishma* ("Let us do! Let us hear!" [Ex. 24:7]), committing us to live in response to the Word even before it is fully uttered. Because that covenantal moment is so central to the life of Judaism, I need to offer some clear statement as to how I understand it in the context of the theology I am proposing.

First I need to remind us that we are living within the story, dwelling in the land of myth. I make no claim for the literal historicity of Sinai. Like the seven-day Creation, it is a sacred tale around which our lives are woven, representing a truth that resides in the realm of myth and symbol, a deeper truth than that of history, but one that should not be confused with it. Even though we are talking within the story, however, some distinctions can be made as to how we understand it and are committed to it. The key chapter that describes Sinai as covenant is Exodus 24, where the covenantal ritual is described in a few verses inserted within the account of Moses' and the elders' ascent and vision at the top of the mount. Moses creates a very powerful ritual of binding, in which he takes the blood-offering of sacrificial bullocks and sprinkles it half on the altar, representing God, and half on the assembled throng of Israel. God and the people have thus "shared blood" and are bound together as one. This is the covenantal moment, that by which we are bound forever, since we were all there.

Interestingly, the Torah does not claim that Moses is *commanded* to perform this rite. It seems to be his innovation, a humanly conceived



ritual with which to impress the people, perhaps even a bold human act that attempts to bind God. I take this obvious “lack” in the text as a hint, telling us that covenant is indeed a human idea. No, I do not know a God who makes a covenant with Israel, One who from the heavens, or even from those “heavens” deep within the heart, chooses this people from among all nations to be His own. Even in the internalized version, I would find such a formulation both too personally-ing and unduly particularistic. I believe that the One is revealed in all hearts, to all people, in much the same way. The variation comes from our end, from the cultural settings and responses we offer to that universal call. Israel is unique among the nations in the way we have heard and responded, not in the fact that we are called. The covenant is our act of choosing; our response to Sinai, creating the religious civilization that begins at the base of the mountain and evolves through history.<sup>51</sup> I thus do accept the covenant, but understand it as quite human in origin and affirm it as such. In response to the unfolding event at Sinai—a Sinai of mind and heart, to be sure—we Israelites said “Yes!” in a firm and committed way. We agreed to respond to the inner call by means of *Torah* and *mizvot*, by accepting a sacred text, the basis and font of eternal reinterpretation, and by committing ourselves to the commandments that were revealed to us at Sinai, those engraved on the tablets and within our hearts. To stand in covenant with God is accept a challenge to regard one’s entire life as a channel for bringing divine presence and blessing into the world. We as a Jewish people, the people of Sinai, made such a commitment, one to which we remain bound forever. To understand us Jews is to realize that we are eternally devoted to that vision. No matter how secular we may declare ourselves to be, something within us remains priest at that altar.

Does my claim that covenant is a human initiative serve to exclude God from it? Am I saying that it is *merely* human? Hardly! As God is present within the human heart, God is there within us as we say “Yes” to Sinai. (Indeed, God is also present in that part of us that says “No.”) *Semolo tabat le-roshi vi-yemino tehabbeveni*: “His left hand is

beneath my head as his right embraces me” (Song of Songs 2:6). God is present to us from more angles than we can see.

But is the covenant *mutual*? Are we promised anything? Is God “bound” by the covenant as well? Does God give to us, open to us, in response to our loyalty to that covenant? As long as we keep our expectations on the spiritual plane, I can answer with a wholehearted “Yes!” Here is the great lesson of love: the more you give, the more you receive. To open yourself to serve others as a channel of divine grace, to bring light and blessing into their lives, is endlessly rewarding. The more light you shine forth, the more comes pouring through. The inner Wellspring is one whose “waters do not betray” and never run dry. This is all I have by way of faith in reward. *And it is plenty.*

From that pre-Sinai moment of *na'aseh ve-nishma* (“we will do and we will listen”), when commitment is made and we become fully engaged to it, all of our accounts of what actually took place at Sinai, both in the Torah text and in millennia of ensuing Midrash, become wholly subjective. They are statements of the committed heart, hardly to be taken as objective truth. We would not have got that close to God’s mountain had we been concerned with maintaining critical distance. There is thus no *evidence* for Sinai, either in the historical or the philosophical realm. There is rather *only testimony*, which I take to be quite different. Evidence is impersonal, betokening impartiality; an objective claim that no rational mind could deny. Testimony is all about engagement; it is wholly personal, indeed can only be spoken with the entire self.<sup>52</sup> It does not exist for the sake of argument, in order to convince others. It exists for itself, though others may be impressed by it and their hearts may be turned. We Israelites as a faith-community are those who see ourselves as having stood, as still standing, at the base of that mountain. “My soul went forth as He spoke” (Song of Songs 5:6) is the watchword of that experience. We indeed fainted, as the Talmud interprets that phrase,<sup>53</sup> as God began to speak. All the rest that we heard was in a swoon.

How do we go about creating a society where the message of Sinai is universally upheld and revered? At the mountain the people of Israel committed themselves to seeking an answer to that question. It

is the answer to which we said: "We will do and we will listen!" affirming our commitment even before the words were spoken. It is the answer we then received engraved on the tablets. Those first tablets, the story tells us, were more than we could bear. They are described as "made by God and written by God" (Ex. 32:16). They had to be smashed because (contrary to our first outcry) we were not really ready to receive them. The second tablets were said to be fashioned by Moses, in his own human way, and inscribed by God. These we were ready to receive; the wording on them was essentially the same.

Those ten "words" form the constitution of the Republic of the Hebrews, to borrow a phrase from Spinoza. We also designate it as "the Kingdom of Heaven" here on earth, refusing to make any distinction between those two. But it is a constitution made not for us alone, defining the life of this particular people. It is also the curriculum or the catechism that we as "a kingdom of priests" are to teach and give to the world. It is time for us to return to these ten, to explore them deeply and to ask what it would mean to make them the basis of all that we seek to teach and give.

The essential principles, as I have suggested, are contained in the first two commandments, "Know the One!" and "Worship nothing less!" The remaining eight are there to define and shape the way we do this, to help that transcendent message enter safely into the lives of real, fallible human beings and societies. I offer just a few words of comment on each, interpreting them in this way as themselves refining, exemplifying, and commenting on those first two commandments that contain them and all the rest. I understand these latter eight commandments as embodying Moses' first attempt to take the two, those all Israel heard directly (or, in my language, those that proceed directly from this respoiken "Where are you?"), and I try to embody them in the reality of human life and community. Because Moses is known to us as *Moshe Rabbenu* ("Moses our teacher") and, not incidentally, since I have spent my life as a teacher, I understand them mostly as admonitions to teachers, though they would apply to other sorts of leaders as well. Israel's priesthood is one mainly devoted

to teaching. Here are some things we as *teachers of humanity* need to remember along the way. Let us turn first to the remaining three commandments on the first tablet:

*Do not raise up the name of Y-H-W-H your God in vain.* Honesty is an essential virtue in religious teaching. Hypocrisy is the "sin crouching at the door," as God says to Cain, of every would-be teacher. Do not speak glibly. Do not preach things you do not believe. Do not lie, even to yourself. At the same time, do not be unduly certain of yourself. Certainty too often allows us to neglect the experience of others, keeping us from acknowledging their part of truth. If you are sure, you are probably wrong. It is in moments of self-assurance that you are most likely to betray God by taking the part for the whole, and thus taking the divine name in vain.

*Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy.* Maintain the ability to cease your labors, even those you consider the most holy. Stop the train; get off the treadmill, even if you think your treadmill is a "righteous" one. The ability to breathe deeply, reflect, and even be inspired to change course may be more important than anything else you have to say. For this we were given the great gift of sharing in God's own Sabbath. Use it well. "Remember" the Sabbath means to have it in mind always, even on Monday and Tuesday. Do not become so involved in your work, whatever it is, that you do not also long for the possibility of letting it go, of "being" rather than "doing."

*Honor your father and your mother.* You are not the font of all wisdom. Recognize the gifts of prior generations, the evolution of their thinking that has helped to shape your own. This may have begun with your childhood education, shaped on your parents' knee, but it includes much more. Both intellectually and spiritually, we are the products of all that came before us. Be humbled by this, and grateful.

The five commandments on the second tablet need some further words of introduction. They are all about interpersonal relations, the ways one human being acts and feels in the course of interacting with others. I pause before these because there is a misreading of mystical religion that sees it as wanting to sweep over the distinction between self and other, sinking it in the depths of the oneness that underlies us all. Nothing could be farther from the truth about mysticism, as

taught and practiced by the enlightened of our tradition and others. This misperception derives from a spiritual impatience in taking on mystical teachings, one that confuses levels of reality with one another. Granted, there is a level on which nothing but the One exists, Y-H-W-H that underlies and animates all of being. But we come to know that One, and to manifest our devotion to it, only by embracing its manifestation in the infinite variety and diversity of beings, those into which it continues to pour its Presence. Insight into Y-H-W-H comes through appreciating the fullness of this Presence (*shekhinah*), not through a premature attempt to dissolve it into Nothingness. We live in *this* world, one in which the distinction between self and other, and the need to respect the other, is bedrock. Yes, hovering over (or buried within) this world is *olam ha-ba'*, the "World to Come," at the deepest level of which there is only One. But Moses is not giving us a Torah to be lived there, a "place" where there is no need for Torah. Torah is for this world, where self and other meet with all their differences revealed and yet have to find a way to live in peace. The subsequent five commandments are all about our grounding in the real world of humanity.

*Do not murder:* Each human being has a right to live. Every human life is sacred. The shedding of blood is always tragic, always a diminishing of God's image. There may be circumstances in which taking a life is justified or necessary, but there are no circumstances in which the taking of life is less than tragic. Make sure your teachings do nothing that encourages the tragic taking of human life. Our fate as Jews has forced us to learn how to defend ourselves, even by talking life. But we may never let our Jewish teaching be used in a way that lessens the humanity of others, making it easier to kill them. This transgression has already occurred in our day and we need to be especially vigilant and courageous in standing up to it. The same applies to teaching that diminishes any person's right to live a full, productive, and self-respecting life. To lessen another human being in his or her own eyes can also be a form of murder.

*Do not commit adultery.* Would-be spiritual teachers, "priests" of Sinai and its powerful message, always need to be aware of human weakness, their own before that of all others. Sexual energies are always

there when we flesh-and-blood humans interact with one another, anywhere this side of Eden. Check yourself always. Be aware, know your boundaries. Precisely because good teaching is an act of love, the teacher is always in danger. Make sure that all your giving is for the sake of those who seek to receive it, not just fulfilling your own unspoken needs, sexual and other.

*Do not steal.* Do not use your teachings or your cleverness to diminish another or to take away what belongs to another. This may be something as subtle as a person's pride or self-definition, or as concrete as relationship, home, land, or property. Even if you think you are right, think again before you take, claim, or demand. The more you are in a position of power, the more you need to question yourself. This applies to nations as it does to individuals.

*Do not bear false witness against your neighbor.* Here we return to the question of honesty. It is not only God whose name we may take in vain. Do not betray others by bearing false witness, by not acknowledging what they have to offer. Do not define others in ways that are comfortable to you but may not fit who they really are. Do not caricature the views of others, avoiding confrontation with the real truth they may speak.

*You shall not covet.* How much beauty and wisdom there is in other peoples' teachings and traditions! "If only we had the Christians' ability to speak of God's love! The silence and patience of the Buddhists! The body-soul integration of the yogis!" Learn from others, appreciate what they have to give, but do not covet. Be satisfied with your lot, content with your own heritage and its message. We have plenty to offer. So does each of the great traditions.

The ten commandments need to stand as the basis of a reinvented Judaism.<sup>54</sup> Ritual life, observances, the sacred calendar, are all part of our response to the first commandment, Sinai's restatement of the original "Where are you?" As such they are no longer absolutes but rather our tradition's means toward the end of becoming and remaining aware. "Between man and God" the only absolutes are the great call to be aware and our need to respond. In the "between person and person" realm there indeed are moral absolutes. The last six of the commandments are a good starting point for such a list. These too, of course, need to be redefined in each age, but their

## Ruth Chapter 1 רות

**1** And it came to pass in the days when the judges judged, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Beth-lehem in Judah went to sojourn in the field of Moab, he, and his wife, and his two sons.

**א** ויהי, בימי שפט השפטים, ויהי רעב, בארץ; וילך איש מבית לחם יהודה, לגור בשדי מואב-הוא ואשתו, ושני בָּנָיו.

**2** And the name of the man was Elimelech, and the name of his wife Naomi, and the name of his two sons Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites of Beth-lehem in Judah. And they came into the field of Moab, and continued there.

**ב** ושם האיש אלימלך ושם אשתו נעמי ושם שני-בָּנָיו מחלון וכליון, אֶפְרַתִּים--מבית לחם, יהודה; ויבאו שדי-מואב, ויהיו-שם.

**3** And Elimelech Naomi's husband died; and she was left, and her two sons.

**ג** וימת אלימלך, איש נעמי; ותשארה היא, ושני בָּנָיהָ.

**4** And they took them wives of the women of Moab: the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth; and they dwelt there about ten years.

**ד** וישאו להם, נשים מאביות--שם האחת ערפה, ושם השנית רות; וישבו שם, כעשר שנים.

**5** And Mahlon and Chilion died both of them; and the woman was left of her two children and of her husband.

**ה** וימתו גם-שניהם, מחלון וכליון; ותשארה האשה, משני ילדיה, ומאישה.

**6** Then she arose with her daughters-in-law, that she might return from the field of Moab; for she had heard in the field of Moab how that the LORD had remembered His people in giving them bread.

**ו** ותקם היא וכלתייה, ותשב משדי מואב: כי שמעה, בשדה מואב--כי-פקד יהוה את-עמו, לתת להם לחם.

**7** And she went forth out of the place where she was, and her two daughters-in-law with her; and they went on the way to return unto the land of Judah.

**ז** ותצא, מן-המקום אשר היתה-שמה, ושתי כלותיה, עמה; ותלכנה בדרך, לשוב אל-ארץ יהודה.

**8** And Naomi said unto her two daughters-in-law: 'Go, return each of

**ח** ותאמר נעמי, לשתי כלתייה, לכנה שבנה, אשה לבית אמה; יעשה (יעש) יהוה עמכם

חֶסֶד, כַּאֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתֶם עִם-הַמֵּתִים וְעִמָּדִי. you to her mother's house; the LORD deal kindly with you, as ye have dealt with the dead, and with me.

ט 9 The LORD grant you that ye may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband.' Then she kissed them; and they lifted up their voice, and wept.

י 10 And they said unto her: 'Nay, but we will return with thee unto thy people.'

יא 11 And Naomi said: 'Turn back, my daughters; why will ye go with me? have I yet sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands?'

יב 12 Turn back, my daughters, go your way; for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say: I have hope, should I even have an husband to-night, and also bear sons;

יג 13 would ye tarry for them till they were grown? would ye shut yourselves off for them and have no husbands? nay, my daughters; for it grieveth me much for your sakes, for the hand of the LORD is gone forth against me.'

יד 14 And they lifted up their voice, and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law; but Ruth cleaved unto her.

טו 15 And she said: 'Behold, thy sister-in-law is gone back unto her people, and unto her god; return thou after thy sister-in-law.'

טז 16 And Ruth said: 'Entreat me not to leave thee, and to return from following after thee; for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge;

thy people shall be my people, and thy  
God my God;

**17** **יז** בְּאֲשֶׁר תָּמוּתִי אָמוּת, וְשָׁם אֶקָּבֵר; כֹּה יַעֲשֶׂה  
יְהוָה לִי, וְכֹה יוֹסִיף--כִּי הַמָּוֹת, יִפְרִיד בֵּינִי  
וּבֵינְךָ. **17** where thou diest, will I die, and there  
will I be buried; the LORD do so to me,  
and more also, if aught but death part  
thee and me.'

**18** **יח** וַתֵּרָא, כִּי-מִתְאַמְצֶת הִיא לֵלְכֶת אַתָּה;  
וַתִּחְדַּל, לְדַבֵּר אֵלֶיהָ. **18** And when she saw that she was  
stedfastly minded to go with her, she left  
off speaking unto her.

**19** **יט** וַתֵּלְכֶנָּה שְׁתֵּייהֶם, עַד-בּוֹאֲנָה בַּיִת לְחָם;  
וַיְהִי, כְּבּוֹאֲנָה בַּיִת לְחָם, וַתִּהְיֶה כָּל-הָעִיר עֲלֵיהֶן,  
וַתֹּאמְרֶנָּה הַזֹּאת נַעֲמִי. **19** So they two went until they came to  
Beth-lehem. And it came to pass, when  
they were come to Beth-lehem, that all  
the city was astir concerning them, and  
the women said: 'Is this Naomi?'

**20** **כ** וַתֹּאמֶר אֲלֵיהֶן, אֶל-תִּקְרָאנִי לִי נַעֲמִי: קְרָאנִי  
לִי מָרָא, כִּי-הִמַּר שְׂדֵי לִי מְאֹד. **20** And she said unto them: 'Call me not  
Naomi, call me Marah; for the Almighty  
hath dealt very bitterly with me.'

**21** **כא** אָנֹכִי מָלְאָה הִלְכָתִי, וְרִיקִם הֵשִׁיבֵנִי יְהוָה;  
לָמָּה תִקְרָאנִי לִי, נַעֲמִי, וַיְהִי עֲנָה בִּי, וְשְׂדֵי  
הִרְעֵ לִי. **21** I went out full, and the LORD hath  
brought me back home empty; why call  
ye me Naomi, seeing the LORD hath  
testified against me, and the Almighty  
hath afflicted me?'

**22** **כב** וַתָּשָׁב נַעֲמִי, וְרוּת הַמּוֹאֲבִיָּה כְלָתָהּ עִמָּה,  
הַשֹּׁבָה, מִשְׂדֵי מוֹאָב; וַהֲמָה, בָּאוּ בַּיִת לְחָם,  
בְּתַחֲלַת, קִצִּיר שְׁעָרִים. **22** So Naomi returned, and Ruth the  
Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, with  
her, who returned out of the field of  
Moab--and they came to Beth-lehem in  
the beginning of barley harvest.

**וַיִּשָׂא עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא**  
**And he lifted his eyes and saw**

**בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ לְעֲסוֹק בְּדַבְּרֵי תוֹרָה.**

Barukh attah Adonai Eloheinu melekh ha'olam asher kiddeshanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu  
la'asok b'deevray Torah.

Blessed are you, L-rd our G-d, ruler of the universe, who has sanctified us with your commandments  
and commanded us to engross ourselves in the words of Torah.

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**וַיִּשָׂא לֹוט אֶת־עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא אֶת־כָּל־כַּפְּר הַיַּרְדֵּן כִּי כָלָה מִשְׁקָהּ לִפְנֵי | שַׁחַת יְהוָה אֶת־סֹדֶם וְאֶת־עֲמֹרָה**

**And Lot raised his eyes and saw the entire plain of the Jordan that it was well watered everywhere --  
before G-d destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah**

Genesis 13:10

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**וַיִּשָׂא עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא וְהִנֵּה שְׁלֹשָׁה אַנְשִׁים נֹצְבִים עָלָיו וַיִּרְא וַיֵּרָץ לִקְרַאתָם מִפֶּתַח הָאֹהֶל וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ אֶרְצָה:**

**And he [Abraham] lifted his eyes and saw, and behold three men were standing over him.**

**And he perceived, and he ran to meet them from the entrance to the tent, and bowed toward the ground.**

Genesis 18:2

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**בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי וַיִּשָׂא אַבְרָהָם אֶת־עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא אֶת־הַמָּקוֹם מֵרָחֵק:**

On the third day, **and Abraham raised his eyes and perceived the place from afar.**

Genesis 22:4

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**וַיִּשָׂא אַבְרָהָם אֶת־עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא וְהִנֵּה־אֵיל אַחֵר נֹאֲחָז בְּסֶבֶךְ בְּקִרְנָיו וַיִּלְדֹּ אַבְרָהָם וַיִּקַּח אֶת־הָאֵיל  
וַיַּעֲלֶהוּ לְעֹלָה תַּחַת בְּנוֹ:**

**And Abraham raised his eyes and saw, and behold a ram was caught in the thicket by its horns;**

**and Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as an offering instead of his son.**

Genesis 22:13

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**וַיֵּצֵא יִצְחָק לְשׁוֹחַ בְּשָׂדֵה לַפְּנוֹת עָרֵב וַיִּשָׂא עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא וְהִנֵּה גַמְלִים בָּאִים:  
וַתִּשָּׂא רִבְקָה אֶת־עֵינֶיהָ וַתִּרְא אֶת־יִצְחָק וַתִּפֹּל מֵעַל הַגָּמֵל:**

Issac went out to supplicate in the field towards evening **and he raised his eyes and saw, and behold  
camels were coming. And Rebecca raised her eyes and saw Issac;** and she inclined while on the  
camel.

Genesis 24:63-64

וַיְהִי בַעַת יַחַם הַצֹּאן וְאִשָּׁא עֵינָיו וַאֲרָא בַחֲלוֹם וְהִנֵּה הַעֲתָדִים הָעֵלִים עַל-הַצֹּאן עֹקְדִים נֹקְדִים  
וּבְרָדִים: וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלַי מַלְאָךְ הָאֱלֹהִים בַּחֲלוֹם יַעֲקֹב וַאֲמַר הֲנִנִּי:  
וַיֹּאמֶר שָׂא-נָא עֵינֶיךָ וּרְאֵה... כִּי רָאִיתִי אֶת כָּל-אֲשֶׁר לָבֵן עֹשֶׂה לָּךְ:

It happened once at the mating time of the flock and I [Jacob] raised my eyes and saw in a dream, and behold the he-goats that mated with the flock were ringed, speckled, and checkered. And an angel of G-d said to me in a dream, "Jacob!" and I said, "Here I am." And he said, "Please raise you eyes and see...because I have seen all that Laban is doing to you."

Genesis 31:10-12

וַיִּשָּׂא יַעֲקֹב עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא וְהִנֵּה עֹשֶׂו בָּא וְעִמּוֹ אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת אִישׁ  
וַיֵּרָץ עֹשֶׂו לִקְרֹאתוֹ וַיַּחְבְּקֵהוּ וַיִּפֹּל עַל-צוּאָרוֹ וַיִּשְׁקֵהוּ וַיִּבְכּוּ:  
וַיִּשָּׂא אֶת-עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא אֶת-הַנְּשִׁים וְאֶת-הַיְלָדִים

And Jacob raised his eyes and saw, and behold Esau was coming and with him four hundred men  
And Esau ran to meet him, embraced him, fell upon his neck, and kissed him, and they wept.  
And he [Esau] raised his eyes and saw the women and children

Genesis 33:1, 4-5

וַיֵּשְׁבוּ לֶאֱכֹל-לֶחֶם וַיִּשְׂאוּ עֵינֵיהֶם וַיִּרְאוּ וְהִנֵּה אַרְחַת יִשְׁמַעֲאֵלִים

They [Joseph's brothers] sat to eat food; and they raised their eyes and saw behold -- a caravan of Ishmaelites

Genesis 37:25

וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַתִּשָּׂא אִשְׁת־אֲדֹנָיו אֶת-עֵינֶיהָ אֶל-יוֹסֵף וַתִּשְׁכַּב עִמּוֹ: וַיִּמָּאן

After these things, and his [Joseph's] master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph and she said, "Lie with me." And he refused

Genesis 39:7-8

וַיִּשָּׂא עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא אֶת-בְּנֵימִין אָחִיו בֶּן-אִמּוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר הֲזֵה אַחֲיִכֶם הַקְּטָן אֲשֶׁר אָמַרְתֶּם אֵלַי  
וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יַחַנֵּךְ בְּנִי:

And he [Joseph] lifted his eyes and saw his brother Benjamin, his mother's son, and said, "Is this your little brother of whom you spoke to me?" And he said, "G-d be gracious to you, my son."

Genesis 43:29

וּפָרְעָה הִקְרִיב וַיִּשְׂאוּ בְנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת-עֵינֵיהֶם וְהִנֵּה מִצְרַיִם | נֹסַע אַחֲרֵיהֶם וַיִּירָאוּ מְאֹד וַיִּצְעֲקוּ  
בְנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל-יְהוָה:

Pharaoh approached; and the Children of Israel raised their eyes and behold Egypt was journeying after them; and they were very frightened; and the Children of Israel cried out to G-d.

Exodus 14:10

וַיִּשָׂא בַלְעָם אֶת-עֵינָיו וַיַּרְא אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל שֹׁכֵן לְשִׁבְטָיו וַתְּהִי עָלָיו רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים:

And Balaam raised his eyes and saw Israel dwelling according to its tribes,  
and the spirit of G-d was upon him.

Numbers 24:2

וּפְתֹתֶיךָ עֵינֶיךָ הַשְׁמִימָה וְרְאִיתָ אֶת-הַשָּׁמַשׁ וְאֶת-הַיָּרֵחַ וְאֶת-הַכּוֹכָבִים כֹּל צִבְאַת הַשָּׁמַיִם  
וַנְּדַחֲתָ וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוִיתָ לָהֶם וַעֲבַדְתָּם

And lest you raise your eyes to heaven and you see the sun, and the moon, and the stars --  
the entire legion of heaven -- and you be drawn away and bow to them and worship them

Deuteronomy 4:19

וַיְהִי בַּהֲיִיזוֹת יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בִּירִיחוֹ וַיִּשָׂא עֵינָיו וַיַּרְא וְהִנֵּה אִישׁ עֹמֵד לִנְגֹדוֹ וְחַרְבּוֹ שְׁלוּפָה בְּיָדוֹ וַיִּלָּךְ יְהוֹשֻׁעַ  
אֵלָיו וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ הֲלָנוּ אַתָּה אִם-לְצָרֵינוּ: וַיֹּאמֶר | לֹא כִי אֲנִי שָׂר-צִבְאָה יְהוָה עִתָּה בְּאֵתִי וַיִּפֹּל יְהוֹשֻׁעַ  
אֶל-פָּנָיו אֶרְצָה וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּ

And it came to pass, when Joshua was by Jericho, and he lifted his eyes and saw, and behold a man  
was standing opposite him with his sword drawn in his hand; and Joshua went to him and said to him,  
“Are you for us or for our adversaries?” And he said, “No, I am captain of the host of G-d; I have now  
come.” And Joshua fell on his face to the ground and bowed down

Joshua 5:13-14

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלַי בְּנֵי-אָדָם שָׂא-נָא עֵינֶיךָ דָרֶךְ צְפוֹנָה וְאִשָּׁא עֵינַי דָרֶךְ צְפוֹנָה וְהִנֵּה מִצְפּוֹן לְשַׁעַר הַמִּזְבֵּחַ  
סֶמֶל הַקְּנָאָה הַזֶּה בְּבֹאֵה: וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלַי בְּנֵי-אָדָם הֲרֵאָה אַתָּה מֶה הֵם עֹשִׂים תּוֹעֵבוֹת גְּדֹלוֹת אֲשֶׁר  
בֵּית-יִשְׂרָאֵל עֹשִׂים פֶּה לְרַחֲקָה מֵעַל מִקְדָּשִׁי

And He (G-d) said to me, “Son of man, please lift up your eyes toward the north.” And I lifted up my  
eyes northward, and behold northward of the gate of the altar, I saw this image of jealousy at the  
entry. And He said to me, “Son of man, do you see what they do? The great abominations that the house  
of Israel commits here, that I must distance myself from my sanctuary?”

Ezekiel 8:5-6

וַיִּשְׁלַח הָאֱלֹהִים | מִלְאָךְ | לִירוּשָׁלַם לְהַשְׁחִיתָהּ...  
וַיִּשָׂא דָוִד אֶת-עֵינָיו וַיַּרְא אֶת-מִלְאָךְ יְהוָה עֹמֵד בֵּין הָאָרֶץ וּבֵין הַשָּׁמַיִם וְחַרְבּוֹ שְׁלוּפָה בְּיָדוֹ נְטוּיָה  
עַל-יְרוּשָׁלַם וַיִּפֹּל דָּוִד וְהַזְּקֵנִים מְכַסִּים בְּשָׂקִים עַל-פְּנֵיהֶם:  
וַיָּבֹר שֵׁם דָּוִד מִזִּבְחֹ לַיהוָה...  
וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה לְמִלְאָךְ וַיָּשֶׁב חַרְבּוֹ אֶל-נִדְנָה:

And G-d sent an angel to Jerusalem to destroy it...And David lifted up his eyes and saw the angel of  
G-d standing between the land and the heavens with his drawn sword in his hand stretched out  
over Jerusalem; and David and the elders, clothed in sackcloth, fell upon their faces. And David built  
there an altar unto G-d...And G-d commanded the angel; and he put his sword back into its sheath.

Chronicles I 21:15-16, 26-27

אֲשָׂא עֵינַי אֶל־הַהָרִים מֵאֵין יָבֵא עֲזָרִי: עֲזָרִי מֵעַם יְהוָה עֲשֵׂה שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ:

I will lift up my eyes unto the mountains; from where shall my help come?  
My help comes from G-d, who made heaven and earth.

Psalms 121:1-2

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שִׁמְעֵ בְנֵי מוּסָר אָבִיךָ וְאַל־תִּטֹּשׁ תּוֹרַת אִמְךָ:  
תּוֹרַה צִוָּה לָנוּ מֹשֶׁה מוֹרָשָׁה קְהֵלֶת יַעֲקֹב:

Sh'ma beni mussar aveekha, v'al tetosh Torat eemekha.  
Torah tziva lanu Mosheh morasha k'hilat Yaacov.

Hear my child, the instruction of your father, and do not forsake the teaching of your mother.  
Moses commanded us the Torah, the inheritance of the Congregation of Jacob.

Proverbs 1:8, Deuteronomy 33:4

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מִן הַמִּצָּר קָרָאתִי יְהוָה, עָנְנִי בְמַרְחָב יְהוָה:

Min hametzar karati yah, anani vamerchav yah.

In distress, I called to G-d, who answered by setting me free.

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אֲשָׂא עֵינַי אֶל־הַהָרִים מֵאֵין יָבֵא עֲזָרִי:  
עֲזָרִי מֵעַם יְהוָה עֲשֵׂה שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ:

Esa eynay el heharim, me'ayin yavo ezri.  
Ezri me'im adonay, oseh shamayim va'aretz.

I will lift up my eyes unto the mountains: from where shall my help come?  
My help comes from G-d, who made heaven and earth.

Our Rabbis have taught: A man should always be gentle as the reed and never unyielding as the cedar. Once R. Eleazar son of R. Simeon was coming from *Migdal Gedor*, (lit. Guarded Tower) from the house of his teacher, and he was riding leisurely on his donkey by the riverside and was feeling happy and elated because he had studied much Torah. There chanced to meet him an exceedingly ugly man who greeted him, 'Peace be upon you, Sir'. He, however, did not return his salutation but instead said to him, 'Empty Vessel! How ugly you are. Are all your fellow citizens as ugly as you are?' The man replied: 'I do not know, but go and tell the craftsman who made me, "How Ugly is the vessel which you have made"'. When R. Eleazar realized that he had done wrong he dismounted from the donkey and prostrated himself before the man and said to him, 'I submit myself to you, forgive me'. The man replied: 'I will not forgive you until you go to the craftsman who made me and say to him, "How ugly is the vessel which you have made"'. He [R. Eleazar] walked behind him until he reached his native city. When his fellow citizens came out to meet him greeting him with the words, 'Peace be upon you O Teacher, O Master,' the man asked them, 'Whom are you addressing thus?' They replied, 'The man who is walking behind you.' Thereupon he exclaimed: 'If this man is a teacher, may there not be any more like him in Israel!' The people then asked him: 'Why?' He replied: 'Such and such a thing has he done to me. They said to him: 'Nevertheless, forgive him, for he is a man greatly learned in the Torah.' The man replied: 'For your sakes I will forgive him, but only on the condition that he does not act in the same manner in the future.' Soon after this R. Eleazar son of R. Simeon entered [the Beth Hamidrash] and expounded thus, A man should always be gentle as the reed and let him never be unyielding as the cedar. And for this reason the reed merited that of it should be made a pen for the writing of the Law, Phylacteries and Mezuzoth.

## Tractate Chullin 89a

R. Isaac said: What is the meaning of the verse: *Indeed in silence speak righteousness; judge uprightly the sons of men?* (Psalms 58:2) What should be a man's

תלמוד בבלי מסכת תענית דף כ עמוד א  
- עמוד ב

תנו רבנן: לעולם יהא אדם רך כקנה ואל יהא קשה כארז. מעשה שבא רבי אלעזר (בן רבי) + מסורת הש"ס: ברבי+ שמעון ממגדל גדור מבית רבו, והיה רכוב על חמור ומטייל על שפת נהר, ושמח שמחה גדולה, והיתה דעתו גסה עליו מפני שלמד תורה הרבה. מזדמן לו אדם אחד שהיה מכוער ביותר. אמר לו: שלום עליך רבי! ולא החזיר לו. אמר לו: ריקה, כמה מכוער אותו האישי! שמא כל בני עירך מכוערין כמותך? אמר לו: איני יודע, אלא לך ואמור לאומן שעשאני כמה מכוער כלי זה שעשית. כיון שידע בעצמו שחטא ירד מן החמור ונשתטח לפניו, ואמר לו: בעניתי לך, מחול לי! - אמר לו: איני מוחל לך עד שתלך לאומן שעשאני ואמור לו כמה מכוער כלי זה שעשית. היה מטייל אחריו עד שהגיע לעירו. יצאו בני עירו לקראתו, והיו אומרים לו: שלום עליך רבי רבי, מורי מורי! אמר להם: למי אתם קורין רבי רבי? - אמרו לו: לזה שמטייל אחריו. אמר להם: אם זה רבי - אל ירבו כמותו בישראל. - אמרו לו: מפני מה? - אמר להם: כך וכך עשה לי. - אמרו לו: אף על פי כן, מחול לו, שאדם גדול בתורה הוא. אמר להם: בשבילכם הריני מוחל לו. ובלבד שלא יהא רגיל לעשות כן. מיד נכנס רבי אלעזר בן רבי שמעון ודרש: לעולם יהא אדם רך כקנה ואל יהא קשה כארז, ולפיכך זכה קנה ליטול הימנה קולמוס לכתוב בו ספר תורה תפילין ומזוזות.

## תלמוד בבלי מסכת חולין דף פט עמוד א

אמר רבי יצחק: מאי דכתיב +תהלים נ"ח+ האמנם אלם צדק תדברון מישרים תשפטו ממותו של אדם בעולם

# RECONSTRUCTIONIST JUDAISM ON ONE FOOT: AN INTRODUCTION

## Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation

([www.adatshalom.net](http://www.adatshalom.net), from Rabbi Fred Scherlinder Dobb)

Judaism classically divides its thought into three central categories: God (theology), Torah (teaching / doing), and Israel (community). Reconstructionist founder Mordecai Kaplan (1881-1983) used these same categories to approach the Jewish world in his 1934 classic work which laid out Reconstructionist thought, *Judaism as a Civilization* -- as did Judith Plaskow in her vital 1990 *Standing Again at Sinai* (a great, if not specifically Reconstructionist, example of "post-Kaplanianism").

Below is a summation of Reconstructionist ideas, drawing heavily on these and other writings. While most thinkers speak of these categories in the order suggested above (God-Torah-Israel), Kaplan returns to Jewish roots -- as we sing in the Torah service, "*Yisrael v'Oreita v'Kudsha Brikh Hu; Khad Hu! Torah Orah: Halleluyah!*" -- treating them in the opposite order. We too begin with community:

### ISRAEL / COMMUNITY

The first Jewish thinker to critically reconsider Judaism from a sociological perspective (which makes him a key figure in Jewish scholarship), Mordecai Kaplan's approach was often derided as "social workers' Judaism" -- today, a compliment to many of us! Let's break down Kaplan's ultimate one-liner that "**Judaism is the evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people.**" Evolving: it always has changed and always will; we continue to help it along (feminism, equality for LGBTIQ [lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender-queer], etc). Religious: the tradition (Hebrew, ritual, etc) remains central. Civilization: Judaism is much more than "religion" only (arts, culture, food, mores, etc). And the key is that it's all "of (and by and for) the Jewish People."

At its heart, this definition is pluralistic, as Kaplan wrote: "Judaism may be conceived variously. Being a civilization, Judaism should be recognized as having room for various religious and non-religious interpretations" (*FAJ*, 1948, p. 113). Our civilization includes religion, law, and theology, yes - - but also cuisine, dance, song, art, history, land (Zionism) language (Hebrew, Ladino, Yiddish)... And, broad as this definition of Jewish civilization may be, Reconstructionists also value "**living in two [today, multiple] civilizations**" -- letting the best of Judaism and the best of Americanism inform one another.

Another critical idea is of "**peoplehood**," a.k.a. *klal Yisrael* or 'Jewish unity.' Atomized as we are, our individual happiness (or 'salvation') can come only through contact with our larger culture, society, and heritage. Sociology helps us understand "affiliation" through the "**Three B's**" -- **Belonging**, **Behaving**, and **Believing** -- and (against the Protestant West's emphasis on Belief, or traditional Judaism's preference for Behavior) to place Belonging first. Kaplan thus spoke about creating local "**organic Jewish communities**" which "embrace all Jewish activities" and "further...a sense of Jewish peoplehood" (*MMK: An Evaluation*, 1956, p. 316).

Kaplan's Reconstructionist method treats Judaism "as the sum of all those manifestations of the Jewish People, which are the result of its will to live and to make the most of life" (*Questions*, 1956, p. 81). It's bigger than any one ideology or movement. Kaplan influenced the growth of **communal institutions** like Federations and JCC's, defending them as "sacred" and "authentic" elements of the community. Peoplehood also explains the early and continuing **Zionist commitment** that undergirds Reconstructionist ideology (a map of pre-state Palestine sits at the very center of the suggested "Reconstructionist seal" of the 1930's, even as today's movement advocates co-existence & pluralism).

For Judith Plaskow, "the central issue in the feminist redefinition of Israel is the place of **difference** in community." 'Peoplehood' must be further expanded, and Judaism reconstructed: "we must incorporate the reality of women's presence into the understanding and practice of the Jewish people, so that women's contributions to Jewish community are not driven underground, thwarted, or distorted... women as individual Jews should not just demand equal participation in the male tradition, but... should insist on equality *as Jewish women*, as the class that has up until now been seen as Other..." (*Standing Again at Sinai*, 1990, pp. 87-89, slightly adapted).

*Am Yisrael Chai – Od Avinu (Imeinu) Chai!* The People of Israel, and our Parent, live!

## TORAH -- LAW, LEARNING, AND LIVING

"Torah:" just the Five Books; the content of all of Judaism's great texts; all of *halakhah* (Jewish law) and its practice; all 4000 years of Jewishly-informed study and action; or all of the above? Kaplan's famous sound-bite on Torah is that "**Halakhah [the past] gets a vote, not a veto.**" When choosing how we live our lives, we ought to consult Halakhah, and be instructed by it – though it lacks the authority which would give it the final word. Instead, it shares authority with *aggadah*, the rich Jewish legacy of extra-legal thought, literature, stories, and so on -- and also with insights from contemporary society, such as feminism, pluralism, environmentalism, modern philosophy, etc. All of these, ancient and modern, comprise Reconstructionist "Torah." Determining the specifics, worked through as a community, is known as "**Reconstructionist Decision-Making**" or "**Values-Based Decision-Making.**"

Kaplan saw all Jewish practices as "**folkways**," quite simply the ways in which our folks act, which blurs the line between custom (*minhag*) and law (*halakhah*), and lets us think more broadly about Jewish practice. There can be no Reconstructionist canon or dogma -- what works for one generation may not work for another. So even as today we re-focus on traditional rituals (a late 1990's study shows a higher proportion of Reconstructionists observing some form of kashrut than any other non-Orthodox denomination), Reconstructionism is at the forefront of creating **new ritual**. The "*Brit Bat*" ceremony for instance, to bring baby girls into the covenant with equal fanfare to boys' brit milah, gained early currency in the Reconstructionist movement. And of course, the first **Bat Mitzvah** in history, in 1922, was of Kaplan's daughter, Judith (who many of us knew, by the end of her life, as an Adat Shalomer).

Is there a "Reconstructionist Halakhah?" Answers vary. But any such notion must surely emphasize (a) Torah study and (b) inclusive communal participation as "requirements" – along with (c) ethical and moral action. Call this *menschlichkeit*, or *mitzvot*, or ***tikkun olam***. Widely known as politically, socially, and religiously progressive, our movement has long been at the forefront of Jewish **inclusivity** -- above all in egalitarianism and Jewish **feminism**, and in providing a truly welcome and affirming place for **LGBTQ Jews**, Jews of color, intermarried couples, and other internal minority or historically marginalized Jews. Our small movement helped to establish Jewish groups working on **peace** (the Shalom Center) and **ecology** (Shomrei Adamah); alliances with groups doing large-scale *tikkun olam* (COEJL, AJWS, JFSJ, Mazon, etc.) remain vital.

Judith Plaskow expands on the value of inclusive peoplehood, when she calls our received Torah "the partial record of the '**Godwrestling**' of part of the Jewish people... because the experience and interpretation found there are for the most part those of men... We must **expand the notion of Torah** to encompass not just the five books of Moses and traditional Jewish learning, but women's words, teachings, and actions, hitherto unseen. To expand Torah, we must **reconstruct Jewish history** to

include the history of women, and in doing so, alter the shape of Jewish memory." (33, 28)

*Torah (x7) tziva lanu Moshe (Miriam!).* Torah: given/commanded us by Moses/Miriam.

## Finally, and indefinably, GOD

The old joke says that Reconstructionists pray "To Whom It May Concern!" But most Reconstructionists do embrace God -- though our specific theologies vary widely. Early on, Kaplan articulated that "it is not within the province of the movement to pronounce any one theology as truer than another. All that Reconstructionism stresses is that a Jew... should have a theology in which [they] believe with all [their] heart, soul, and mind... it matters very little how we conceive God, as long as we so believe in God that [such belief] makes a tremendous difference in our lives" (*Questions*, 1956, pp. 82, 87).

Kaplan's own theology, often called **religious naturalism** (ala Paul Tillich and others) and still popular among Reconstructionists, rejects a personal, supernatural God in favor of "**God as the creative life of the universe.**" Kaplan calls God "the sum of the animating, organizing forces and relationships which are forever making a cosmos out of chaos." (MG 76) He also says that to believe in God is "to reckon with life's creative forces, tendencies and potentialities as forming an **organic unity**, and as **giving meaning to life** by virtue of that unity." (MG 26) Most famously, he calls **God the Power that makes for salvation**: "The fact that the cosmos possesses the resources and [we] the abilities...to enable [us] to fulfill [our] destiny... is the Godhood of the cosmos" (Q 85).

Despite Kaplan's rationalism, Kabbalah and Hasidut are also valid and vital parts of Reconstructionist thought on God. Many of us relate to a personal God, though our communal language still tries to be inclusive of those for whom God remains more a "**Process**" or "**Force.**" Whenever we say "God," we mean by that whatever we want -- Kaplan suggests that we can **transvalue** the name/s of God, preserving the poetry of the tradition but mentally placing into the prayers our own understanding of Divinity.

One of Kaplan's disciples, Harold Schulweis, offers "**Predicate Theology**:" emphasizing the predicate (Divine attributes and actions), rather than God as subject or being. He asks rhetorically if we should "endorse faith in the 'who' or in the 'what' of divinity?" So instead of saying "God is just," which focuses us on the divisive question of the nature of God, try "justice is Godly" -- then, across divergent theologies, we can agree that the Divine call involves us creating a more just world, here and now.

RRC's Rabbi Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer says that "for Kaplan, theology was a handmaiden to peoplehood" -- i.e., issues about God were always secondary to those about Israel/community. Consider the Reconstructionist attitude toward Israel's **chosenness**. The traditional formula "God, who has chosen us from all the peoples," is not consciously jingoist. Yet in a post-Holocaust post-9/11 world, perhaps no group should assert that it has been "chosen by God." Moreover, if we question a supernatural and interventionist understanding of God, who is even out there to choose? And, would we *want* to pray to a God who plays favorites among His/Her children? So, instead of "election", try "**vocation**:" we are the **choosing** people, not the chosen. Still grateful for our Judaism, we thank God for giving that which is best *for us*, not claiming that it is best in general. Since 1945 our siddur has **changed the language** in prayers like the Torah blessings and the Aleinu, deleting all references to Jews' chosenness.

Broadening the God-conversation yet further, Judith Plaskow adds: "Just as the feminist rethinking of Torah involves broadening Jewish memory, and the reconceptualization of Israel involves acknowledging and respecting the diversity of Jewish community, so the feminist **reimaging of God** entails reclaiming and shaping sufficient metaphors for God that the diversity of Jewish community is

reflected in its naming of divinity." (154) In that spirit, the Reconstructionist siddur was the first national prayer book to offer **gender-neutral** English; it went even further in beginning to offer feminine and other **new names and images** for the Imageless One. And as Rachel Adler adds of God-images: "Sacred need not mean Inerrant; it is enough for the sacred to be Inexhaustible."

*V'chayei Olam nata b'tocheinu – l'taken olam (x3) b'Malkhut Shaddai.* (from our *Aleinu*)

## **HISTORY, AND CONTEMPORARY RECONSTRUCTIONISM**

Reconstructionism was 'born' numerous times. Mordechai Kaplan – once Yeshiva University's oldest living graduate, and renowned teacher at the Conservative Jewish Theological Seminary for well over a half-century – had unorthodox ideas long before founding the Society for the Advancement of Judaism in 1922. His magnum opus was written in 1934, and *The Reconstructionist* began disseminating Kaplan's (and Ira Eisenstein's and Eugene Kohn's) ideas in 1935. But a Reconstructionist prayer book was not issued until 1945, and the synagogue body did not coalesce until 1955. The seminary, RRC ([www.rrc.edu](http://www.rrc.edu)), only opened 1968.

In these years, Reconstructionism racked up innumerable "firsts:" bat mitzvah, lesbian/gay inclusion, patrilineal descent, art in a siddur, feminist innovation, lay-professional cooperation, etc.

Today some 100 communities affiliate Reconstructionist (perhaps 60,000 people), as the movement continues its ground-breaking work. Reconstructionism is at last widely regarded as a 'main' movement in American Judaism. With a history as a school of thought rather than a denomination, and a seriously avant-garde approach, our influence remains disproportionate to our size.

Until 2012, the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation offered curricula and conventions, policies and resources aplenty from siddurim to support. Now there's a new alignment, fleet on our feet for emerging 21<sup>st</sup> century Judaism: a unified movement. The Reconstructionist Rabbinical College ([www.RRC.edu](http://www.RRC.edu)) provides congregational services, while remaining at the cutting edge of seminary education in every regard: from 'Kolot: the Center for Jewish Women's and Gender Studies' to 'Hadar: the Center on Jewish Aging'; from Spiritual Direction to Jewish Ethics.

The Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association (**RRA**) offers resources and collegiality for professionals, pioneering new liturgy and ideas, joined by networks for educators, administrators, and musicians. **Adat Shalomers** have, since our 1988 founding, loomed large in each arena.

**Get involved!** Your voice and presence count in our participatory, evolving movement.

## **BRIEF BIBLIOGRAPHY ON KAPLAN AND RECONSTRUCTIONISM**

Follow-up with the brief, readable *Exploring Judaism: A Reconstructionist Approach*, by Rabbis Rebecca Alpert and Jacob Staub (2000, JRF). Our prayer book series *Kol Haneshamah (Shabbat V'Hagim* is from 1994) is also a vital resource, as is the Haggadah *A Night of Questions* (2002). For feminist reconstruction: *Standing Again at Sinai*, by Judith Plaskow, 1990.

The web offers great resources, at [www.rrc.edu](http://www.rrc.edu) & [www.JewishRecon.org](http://www.JewishRecon.org) – from theory to practice to links to the websites of various congregations (including our beloved [www.adatshalom.net](http://www.adatshalom.net)!) where the theory *becomes* practice. Past articles from *The Reconstructionist* are endlessly fascinating.

For Mordecai Kaplan's original writings, start with the anthology edited by Mel Scult & (our own) Emanuel Goldsmith, *Dynamic Judaism* (1985), which organizes by topic Kaplan's clearest statements from his many works. Then for flavor, try *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* (1937), where he develops his ideas in relation to the Jewish calendar (top highlights include pp. 1-39, reinterpreting the God idea, and pp. 188-201, with God in nature and history as seen in the pilgrimage festivals).

Kaplan's most practical book is *Questions Jews Ask: Reconstructionist Answers* (1956); his most prophetic is the 1948 *Future of the American Jew* (see Chosenness [pp. 211-30], Jewish Women [402-12], Program of Recon. [34-57], Living in Two Civilizations [94-105], Jewish Continuity and Change [372-86], and Epilogue). His most radical is *The Religion of Ethical Nationhood* (1970); his most witty is *Not So Random Thoughts* (1966). His first and most famous, 1934's *Judaism as a Civilization* (skip to Part 3 and Ch. 29), was digested by his successor Ira Eisenstein into the slimmer *Creative Judaism* (later in life, Ira was Adat Shalom's Senior Scholar; *zichrono livracha*). **Zil ul'mad -- Go and Learn!**