



OPERATING PRINCIPLES FOR RECONSTRUCTIONIST SYNAGOGUES

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Most successful Reconstructionist synagogues are in perpetual crisis. Reconstructionist congregations try to establish themselves on small scales in order to promote a sense of intimacy and fellowship. The founders of Reconstructionist congregations usually seek to create synagogues that are alternatives to other synagogue institutions in their area. But when they succeed in meeting the needs of many disaffected and unaffiliated Jews, they find that their membership grows. And the larger its membership, the more likely a synagogue is to revert back to the synagogue model that was initially rejected by its founders.

Here I speak not so much about ideology as about style. It is clearly Reconstructionist ideology that is the basis of our unique style. Nevertheless, it is our style that can be seen and felt most easily and that thus brings most Jews to join Reconstructionist congregations.

In addition, no synagogue can be defined as Reconstructionist on the basis of the ideological adherence of its members to Kaplanian philosophy. There will always be ideological diversity within a congregation, and that is healthy. A congregation should be judged as "Reconstructionist" based on the corporate commitments it makes to certain operating principles.

I will outline six principles of style and practice that should characterize a Reconstructionist congregation—the synagogue as community. I suggest that these principles ought to serve as the measure of how Reconstructionist a synagogue truly is. These prin-

ciples may be helpful to Reconstructionist synagogues experiencing rapid growth as they attempt to remain true to some of their founding principles.

1. Democratic Process

A Reconstructionist congregation should be committed to democratic process both in synagogue affairs as well as in ritual. In many conventional synagogues, the big givers tend to dominate the board of directors, and they control the decision-making process. In much the same way, a typical synagogue often elevates the rabbi to a level that allows him or her to make fairly unilateral decisions in the realms of ritual and the content of the religious service.

The Reconstructionist synagogue, in rejecting both of these models, is committed to allowing and encouraging the community as a whole to have input into synagogue policies. In so doing, the members of the synagogue become more fully invested in the institution. In turn, those individuals charged with the responsibility for synagogue affairs are more apt to keep in mind that they are essentially servants of the community.*

* I addressed many of the issues that rabbis confront when they operate in accordance with Reconstructionist/democratic principles in "Reconstructionism as Process" (*Reconstructionist*, 45/4 [June 1979]) and in the "Symposium on Democracy and Lay-Rabbinic Relations" (*Reconstructionist* 51/1 [Sept. 1985]). Suffice it to say here that as the rabbi seeks to share more of the decision making with regard to ritual and service content, he or she is not relinquishing power, but is rather assuming a primary role as teacher and leader.



2. Rabbi As Teacher

The Reconstructionist rabbi serves as a teacher and a resource person. She or he tries to avoid the chasm that often separates rabbis from their congregants in conventional synagogues. The Reconstructionist rabbi should abjure the priestly/clerical role that so many synagogues impose upon religious leaders. However seductive that model is to rabbis, it should be remembered that it also invites a very harmful set of perceptions and relationships be-

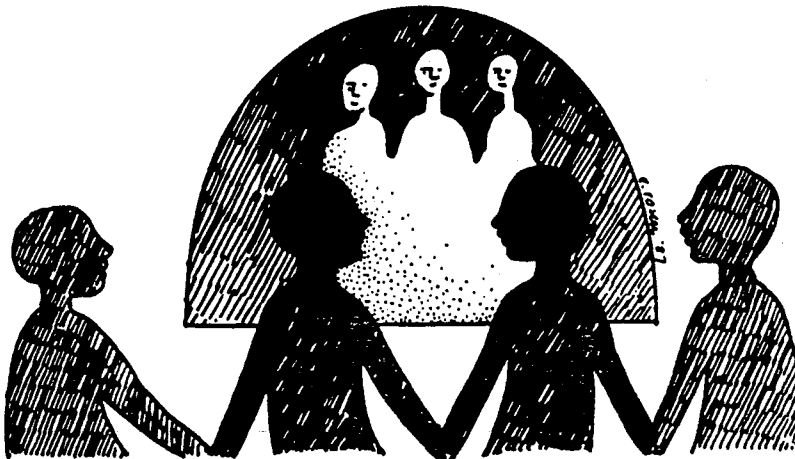
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When Reconstructionist rabbis avoid the gilded cage in which most rabbis find themselves, they become very effective molders of Jews. The thirst for Jewish knowledge and religious guidance is a need that rabbis can and should fill. It would be nice if more of this learning were *lishma*, for its own sake. However, when congregants are given responsi-

bility for making decisions with regard to observance in the synagogue realm, they also are given a reason to study. There is nothing wrong with such goal-oriented learning, which the rabbi is pre-eminently qualified to affect and guide.

A most noble goal for a rabbi is to disabuse congregants of the notion that rabbis are privy to some secret body of knowledge that gives them special rights and privileges. By being committed to the teaching of our congregants, rabbis may, on occasion, place congregants in a position of



equal or superior knowledge to them. It is an exciting challenge to a rabbi.

3. Participatory Services

A Reconstructionist synagogue should seek to develop religious services that are fully participatory.

I often enjoy attending a synagogue with a virtuoso *hazzan* (cantor) or a stirring rabbinic orator. I hope that synagogues continue to be places where these types of experiences can be found. But over the long haul, a

Reconstructionist synagogue should not promote religious services that are performances.

In the same way that congregants should be invested in the decision making in the synagogue, they also should feel that they have contributed to a service. This sometimes happens behind the scenes or prior to a service, but ideally it should result in the participation of a number of congregants during a service. This can involve a congregant leading a discussion, sharing a thought, leading a musical selection, or whatever else the abilities of respective congregants enable them to do.

To the extent that the rabbi, even in the most Reconstructionist synagogue, remains central in a religious service, the sermon-dialogue format is a crucial way of giving a sense of openness and involvement. I have attended synagogues that have been said to be committed to the sermon-dialogue format, but, in reality, only a series of monologues occurs. The rabbi speaks his or her piece, sits down, and then congregants get to speak.

To my mind, a true sermon-dialogue is one in which a rabbi poses an open-ended question after which there are responses to which people can react. The rabbi should not feel impelled to respond to every comment; that tends to suggest an exchange between an expert and people who are simply venturing an opinion. Ideally, there should be free-flowing exchange among congregants in the course of a sermon-dialogue. However, it is imperative that the rabbi listen to the comments; in summing up a sermon-dialogue, a rabbi should



take note of the various points that have been made in the course of the discussion. Most importantly, the sermon-dialogue format symbolizes not only a readiness to include congregants in a service, but also an openness to different ideas.

4. *A Caring Community*

The Reconstructionist synagogue should serve as a caring community. Increasingly the synagogue is coming to function as a surrogate family as people's mobility takes them further away from their family and roots. In addition, there are numerous non-nuclear families in our communities who tend to feel excluded by much of Judaism's family-oriented celebration cycle.

For such people, and for all Jews, the synagogue must feel like a place that cares about them. Too often, such a function has been labeled "pastoral" and left for the rabbi. It is important for the entire membership of a given synagogue to feel itself responsible for making members feel wanted, needed, and loved.

There are several ways that this can be accomplished. One possibility is to create a life-cycle committee in the synagogue charged with being at people's sides, both in times of sorrow as well as at times of celebration. Such a committee coordinates hospital visits to synagogue members, assisting people at times of mourning, including setting up a *shiva* house, and helping members to celebrate their *simhahs*. This does not take the place of a rabbi's attention to people during times of crisis and joy. However, it does signal an

entirely different level of communal involvement in the life of members.

A second dimension of a caring community is a synagogue's openness to visitors. It amazes me how often I visit synagogues for the first time and am not approached by anyone. We lose untold numbers of Jews in search of a home because synagogues simply do not extend themselves to new faces. Ideally, the membership of a synagogue should be so naturally friendly that no new face is ever ignored. However, if necessary, a committee should be appointed that is charged with greeting new people coming to worship for the first time.

It is quite clear that one of the attractions of cult and missionary groups is that they "love-bomb" new people. In a cold world where people are often in search of other people in the community to care about them, this is a primary need. If synagogues don't provide it, Jews will find that love and concern elsewhere.

5. *Ideas Matter*

Ideas and ideology matter in a Reconstructionist synagogue. Reconstructionism has often been accused of being too complicated to ever be a movement of the masses. I take that less as criticism and more as a compliment. If we believe that Judaism should be a serious life commitment for people, then membership in a synagogue should be somewhat demanding. This is not to say that membership in a synagogue should not be enjoyable. But synagogue membership can be most fulfilling when it forces Jews to become engaged in se-

rious thinking about their identity, their history, and their ongoing religious commitments.

In "A Synagogue with Principles,"** I described the process by which a synagogue can develop a statement of principles that can come to stand for what the synagogue as a community wants to represent. This statement of principles, while not coercive of individuals, clearly made demands upon our membership. Working on the statement led to much spiritual growth among those involved.

If synagogues grapple seriously with ideas and ideology, about which there can be disagreement, there is far less room for the petty politics that so often makes synagogue life intolerable. I'll never forget the first synagogue board meeting I ever attended when I was a youth director of a large Conservative synagogue. Forty-five minutes were spent on a discussion of where to find wholesale toilet paper and how many spots in the parking lot would be permanently reserved. Is it surprising that people who care deeply about Judaism become disgusted with synagogue life?

Reconstructionist synagogues, in taking ideas and ideology seriously, should see to it that discussions at board meetings, at services, and in discussions among members regularly address the challenges facing Jewish life today. That is the sign of a healthy congregation.

6. *Bigger Is Not Better*

The final principle of Recon-

** *Reconstructionist* 50/7 (June 1985).



structionist synagogues is one that is extremely hard to face. It is the principle that bigger is not better.

Synagogues often get caught up in a competitive frenzy to acquire more and more members so that they can build larger budgets and larger buildings. That in turn creates the vicious cycle of needing more members to pay the bills. Synagogues are affected by the premium that America places on size as a measure of success.

A Reconstructionist congregation, however, should have qualitative membership as its primary goal. This is not to suggest that Reconstructionist synagogues should close or cap their memberships, turning away people who want to join. That would be a tragedy. If in fact Reconstructionist synagogues are offering something new, different, and positive, then it would be a crime not to allow more Jews to become involved. Yet if growth in membership size becomes the sole goal of a synagogue, then it is bound to lose sight of the fact that membership can also grow in religious and spiritual ways, as well as in numbers.

Building Funds

Many of us who grew up taking pot shots at the established Jewish community found synagogue building funds to be one of our easiest targets. Yet when a synagogue launches a building campaign, it is often one of the few times that members are told: "We need you; become part of this communal effort." Members become involved in building campaigns because they promise a tangible communal effort with

a fixed financial goal and a tangible building as an end result. When a community is mobilized for such an effort and success is achieved after a concerted effort, it can be most gratifying.

The critical question is: Can we also mobilize congregations for *internal* building funds—the building of qualitative involvement, learning, and spirituality?

Can we also mobilize congregations for *internal* building campaigns—building involvement, learning, and spirituality?

I think that the answer is yes, although clearly it is a much harder goal to reach. The challenge is somewhat easier in a small congregation in which dedication to the communal cause is a natural outgrowth of close personal relationships.

The great challenge to successful Reconstructionist congregations is to maintain that spirit even as the membership grows. A general rule of thumb is to try to weigh the external and the internal growth of the congregation against each other. Of course, this balance is subjective and changes for each congregational situation. Energy must be devoted to insuring that new members come to be committed to some of the founding ideals of the congregation and do not remain simply names on a list and potential contributors to a building fund. Some ways to do this include the serious orientation of new members, the pairing up of new members with old members, and regular workshops and meetings with the rabbi, both for new members and for mixed groups of veterans and newcomers.

Reconstructionist congregations that care deeply about the quality of their communal life inevitably reach the point at which their growing numbers threaten to erode the founding spirit of the community. This concern is voiced by people in synagogues of 50 families, 100 families, 250 families, and 500 families. The lesson here is that there is no

magic number above which it is impossible to have intimacy, involvement, and the principles outlined above. It is true, however, that the larger a synagogue's membership becomes, the harder the leadership has to work to make the above principles a reality.

For the leadership of Reconstructionist congregations who feel that they are on the verge of a crisis and feel that closing membership is the only solution, I suggest that there is another way. Closing membership is a way of saying that we are happy with who we are and what we are, that growth is endangering something very precious. But when we consider how many Jews are spiritually dead at other congregations that don't challenge their members to grow Jewishly, when we consider how many Jews are so turned off to conventional synagogues that they simply don't affiliate, when we consider how many Jews simply don't have their needs met: it becomes clear that it would be an evasion of responsibility of the greatest magnitude for a Recon-

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structionist congregation in any community to close its membership. Reconstructionist synagogues not only cannot turn their backs on these Jews. They must reach out to them. If in doing so,

the synagogue is faced with the challenge of remaining true to Reconstructionist principles, let us remember that the epitome of the Reconstructionist challenge is to change and evolve. ■