

Reconstructionist Judaism

Reconstructionist Judaism is a modern American-based Jewish movement based on the ideas of Mordecai Kaplan (1881–1983). The movement views Judaism as a progressively evolving civilization.^[1] It originated as a branch of Conservative Judaism before it splintered. The movement developed from the late 1920s to 1940s, and it established a rabbinical college in 1968.

There is substantial theological diversity within the movement. Halakha is not considered binding, but is treated as a valuable cultural remnant that should be upheld unless there is reason for the contrary. The movement emphasizes positive views toward modernism, and has an approach to Jewish custom which aims toward communal decision making through a process of education and distillation of values from traditional Jewish sources.

Origin

Reconstructionism was developed by Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan (1881–1983) and his son-in-law, Rabbi Ira Eisenstein (1906–2001), over a period of time spanning from the late 1920s to the 1940s. It made its greatest stride in becoming the fourth movement in North American Judaism (Orthodox, Conservative and Reform being the other three) with the founding of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in 1968.

Reconstructionist Judaism is the first major movement of Judaism to originate in North America; the second is the Humanistic Judaism movement founded in 1963 by Rabbi Sherwin Wine.

Theology

Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan believed that in light of advances in philosophy, science and history as they existed in the 1930s and 1940s, it would be impossible for modern Jews to continue to adhere to many of Judaism's traditional theological claims. Kaplan's naturalism theology has been seen as a variant of John Dewey's philosophy. Dewey's naturalism combined atheist beliefs with religious terminology in order to construct a religiously satisfying philosophy for those who had lost faith in traditional religion.

Kaplan affirmed that God is not personal, and that all anthropomorphic descriptions of God are, at best, imperfect metaphors. Kaplan's theology went beyond this to claim that God is the sum of all natural processes that allow man to become self-fulfilled. Kaplan wrote that "to believe in God means to take for granted that it is man's destiny to rise above the brute and to eliminate all forms of violence and exploitation from human society."

Not all of Kaplan's writings on the subject were consistent; his position evolved somewhat over the years, and two distinct theologies can be discerned with a careful reading. The view more popularly associated with Kaplan is strict naturalism, *à la* Dewey, which has been criticized as using religious terminology to mask a non-theistic, if not outright atheistic, position. However, a second strand of Kaplanian theology exists, which makes clear that at times Kaplan believed that God has ontological reality, a real and absolute existence independent of human beliefs. In this latter theology, Kaplan still rejects classical forms of theism and any belief in miracles, but holds to a position that in some ways is neoplatonic.

Most "classical" Reconstructionist Jews (those agreeing with Kaplan) reject traditional forms of theism, though this is by no means universal. Many are deists; a small number accept Kabbalistic views of God, or the concept of a personal God.

Though many Reconstructionists found his ideas about God compelling, Kaplan's theology, as he explicitly stated, does not represent the only Reconstructionist understanding of theology. Theology is not the cornerstone of the Reconstructionist movement. Much more central is the idea that Judaism is a civilization, and that the Jewish people must take an active role in ensuring its future by participating in its ongoing evolution.

Consequently, a strain of Reconstructionism exists which is distinctly non-Kaplanian. In this view, Kaplan's assertions concerning belief and practice are largely rejected, while the tenets of an "evolving religious civilization" are supported. The basis for this approach is that Kaplan spoke for his generation; he also wrote that every generation would need to define itself and its civilization for itself. In the thinking of these Reconstructionists, what Kaplan said concerning belief and practice is not applicable today. This approach may include a belief in a personal God, acceptance of the concept of "chosenness", a belief in some form of "resurrection" or continued existence of the dead, and the existence of an obligatory form of halakha. In the latter, in particular, there has developed a broader concept of "Halakhah" wherein concepts such as "eco-Kashrut" are incorporated.

Jewish law and tradition

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Beliefs and practices

As in Reform Judaism, Reconstructionist Judaism holds that contemporary Western secular morality has precedence over Jewish law and theology. It does not ask that its adherents hold to any particular beliefs, nor does it ask that Jewish law be accepted as normative. Unlike classical Reform Judaism, Reconstructionism holds that a person's default position should be to incorporate Jewish laws and tradition into their lives, unless they have a specific reason to do otherwise. The most important distinction between Reconstructionist Judaism and traditional Judaism is that Reconstructionism feels that all of halakha should be categorized as "folkways", and not as law.

Reconstructionism promotes many traditional Jewish practices, while holding that contemporary Western secular morality has precedence over Jewish law. Thus, mitzvot (commandments) have been replaced with "folkways", non-binding customs that can be democratically accepted or rejected by the congregations. Folkways that are promoted include keeping Hebrew in the prayer service, studying Torah, daily prayer, wearing kipot (*yarmulkas*), tallitot and tefillin during prayer, and observance of the Jewish holidays.

Principles of belief

In practice, Rabbi Kaplan's books, especially *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* and *Judaism as a Civilization* are *de facto* statements of principles. In 1986, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association (RRA) and the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Havurot (FRCH) passed the official *Platform on Reconstructionism* (2 pages). It is not a mandatory statement of principles, but rather a consensus of current beliefs. [See the FRCH Newsletter, Sept. 1986, pages D, E.] Major points of the platform state that:

"Judaism is the result of natural human development. There is no such thing as divine intervention; Judaism is an evolving religious civilization; Zionism and aliyah (immigration to Israel) are encouraged; Reconstructionist Judaism is based on a democratic community where the laity can make decisions, not just rabbis; The Torah was not inspired by God; it only comes from the social and historical development of Jewish people; The classical view of God is rejected. God is redefined as the sum of natural powers or processes that allows mankind to gain self-fulfillment and moral improvement; The idea that God chose the Jewish people for any purpose, in any way, is "morally untenable", because anyone who has such beliefs "implies the superiority of the elect community and the rejection of others".

Most Reconstructionists do not believe in revelation (the idea that God can reveal God's will to human beings). This is dismissed as supernaturalism. Kaplan posits that revelation "consists in disengaging from the traditional context those elements in it which answer permanent postulates of human nature, and in integrating them into our own ideology ... the rest may be relegated to archaeology." (*The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion*).

Many writers have criticized the movement's most widely held theology, religious naturalism. David Ray Griffin and Louis Jacobs have objected to the redefinitions of the terms "revelation" and "God" as being intellectually dishonest, and as being a form of "conversion by definition"; in their critique, these redefinitions take non-theistic beliefs and attach theistic terms to them.

Similar critiques have been put forth by Rabbis Neil Gillman (*Sacred Fragments*, p. 200); Milton Steinberg (*Milton Steinberg: Portrait of a Rabbi*) by Simon Noveck, Ktav, 1978, p. 259-260; and Michael Samuels (*The Lord is My Shepherd: The Theology of a Caring God* 1996).

Reconstructionist Judaism is egalitarian with respect to gender roles. All positions are open to both genders; they are open to lesbians and gay men as well.

Jewish identity

Reconstructionist Judaism allows its rabbis to determine their own policy regarding officiation at intermarriages. Some congregations accept patrilineal descent as well as matrilineal, i.e., children of one Jewish parent, of either sex, are considered Jewish if raised as Jews. This is less restrictive than the traditional standard that only considers children with Jewish mothers to be Jewish, regardless of how they were raised.

The role of non-Jews in Reconstructionist congregations is a matter of ongoing debate. Practices vary widely between synagogues. Most congregations strive to strike a balance between inclusivity and integrity of boundaries. The Jewish Reconstructionist Federation (JRF) has issued a non-binding statement attempting to delineate the process by which congregations set policy on these issues, and sets forth sample recommendations. These issues are ultimately decided by local lay leadership. [*Can Halakha Live?* by Rabbi Edward Feld, *The Reconstructionist*, Vol.59(2), Fall 1994, p. 64-72]

Organizations

Over 100 synagogues and havurot, mostly in the United States and Canada, are affiliated with the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation. The Reconstructionist Rabbinical College educates rabbis and cantors. The Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association is the professional organization of Reconstructionist rabbis.

Relation to other Jewish movements

Originally an offshoot of Conservative Judaism/Masorti Judaism, Reconstructionism retains warm relations with both the Conservative/Masorti movement and Reform Judaism. Orthodox Judaism, however, considers Reconstructionism to be in violation of proper observance of Orthodox interpretation of Jewish law.^[2] The Jewish Reconstructionist Federation is a member of the World Union for Progressive Judaism.

Notes

- [1] What Are The Institutions Of The Reconstructionist Movement? (<http://www.jrf.org/showres&rid=143>)
- [2] Robinson, George. *Essential Judaism: A Complete Guide to Beliefs, Customs and Rituals*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000. ISBN 0-671-03480-4, pgs 232

References

- *Platform on Reconstructionism*, FRCH Newsletter, Sept. 1986, pages D, E
- *Exploring Judaism: A Reconstructionist Approach*, Rebecca T. Alpert and Jacob J. Staub, The Reconstructionist Press, 1988
- David Griffin's article in *Jewish Theology and Process Thought*, Ed. Sandra B. Lubarsky and David Ray Griffin, State University of New York Press, 1996
- Louis Jacobs *God, Torah, Israel: Traditionalism Without Fundamentalism* Hebrew Union College Press, Cincinnati, 1990;
- *Judaism As a Civilization* Mordecai Kaplan, The Jewish Publications Society, 1994
- Mordecai Kaplan "The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion", 1962

External links

- Jewish Reconstructionist Federation (<http://jrf.org>)
- Reconstructionist reading list (<http://www.shamash.org/lists/scj-faq/HTML/rl/jrc-index.html>)
- <http://www.shamash.org/lists/scj-faq/HTML/faq/02-06.html>
- The Reconstructionist, Fall 1994 (large pdf) includes Ed Feld article mentioned above. (<http://therra.org/Reconstructionist/Fall1994.pdf>)
- Review Published in *The Reconstructionist* of *Visions of Jewish Education* by Seymour Fox. It includes a Reconstructionist vision for Jewish education at the end of the article. (<http://therra.org/Reconstructionist/Spring2004.pdf#page=87>)
- Classical Reconstructionist Revival (<http://classicalreconstructionist.wordpress.com>)

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