

Powerful Meaning in Not Knowing the Answers

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by Rabbi Michael Strassfeld

I wanted to share with you some of my own not-so-random thoughts. In some ways I think we face the same challenges as the rest of the Jewish community in our contemporary times. The question really is, are there some ways that we as Reconstructionists can uniquely respond? Or are there tools that we bring to the table, to the discussion, that can enable us to respond in a particular way? It seems to me that we begin with the question of what are the needs and challenges of our time as we look at the Jewish halls around us, as did Kaplan respond in his time by setting forth Reconstructionism, and by saying that many Jews no longer believe in a supernatural God, and so on.

So what are those challenges? What are the pieces of the Jewish tradition, of our practice and of our communities that need reconstructing?

One of the reasons I was asked to be on the panel was to talk about spirituality, which is a word of indistinct meaning—a word that some people find troubling, or would even perhaps wonder whether it really is a part of the Reconstructionist framework. Or whether, as was said, if Kaplan were confronted with the common forms of spirituality, what would be his reaction—approving or not? I think part of the reason I was asked to talk about this is because of my own biography. So let me just share that with you a little bit.

I grew up in an Orthodox world. I went to a modern Orthodox day school, and I think the formative part after my growing up years was being part of Havurat Shalom, one of the early *havurot* of the Havurah movement. That was around the same time as Aerograms [referring to Richard Hirsh's talk], and the telephone booths that Superman could change in. This *havurah*

was greatly influenced by one of its members, Art Green, who I'm sure all of you know of, if not have heard him speak. Therefore, one of the central things that we studied in the *havurah* was Hasidism. And yet, there was a small group within Havurat Shalom—of which I was one of the three members—that called ourselves “The Sons of Lithuania.” We were the anti-Hasidic wing, and we formed after an hour-and-a-half class that someone gave about ‘Mystical Nothingness in the Lurianic Kabbalah’ and we said, “Boy, that was really the true title of that!”

So beginning somewhere there, I've come some far distance on a journey. Today, for me, the early Hasidism is the source of much of the text that I find personally meaningful. Its music is the music that my soul resonates with. And it has become for me an important source of teachings about spirituality for today. I want to read ‘spirituality’ as not something that is narcissistic or just focused on oneself, but really in the basic Hasidic teaching of spirituality through the everyday, or as it's called, *avodah sh'b'gashmiut*. That is, rather than spirituality being about the withdrawal from the world or withdrawal from other people, that really it is in the everyday. It's in the ordinary moments, not the extraordinary moments, that the spirit is engaged, that the spirit is elevated, that in fact, we can strive to practice and to be who we want to be.

So to add to the ‘B’ list of Belonging and Believing, I would suggest Being as key as well, and that what I would want to read spirituality as about is the attempt to find meaning, to convey meaning in our lives. And I think a basic challenge for Judaism is the task of bringing meaning, of conveying the richness of the Jewish tradition as something that has something to

say about the basic issues, the opportunities and challenges that each of us as individual human beings, and each of us as Jews, will face in our lives, and that if somehow we can convey to ourselves, to our communities, to people out there in the world that Judaism, in fact, has some wisdom and some teaching—not necessarily answers, but wisdom and teaching—about those things that are most critical to living our lives, then we will create vibrant communities, a vibrant Jewish life that will be filled with spirituality. And that therefore spirituality, in its most basic definition, is really a sense that there is something larger than ourselves in the world, and therefore, it cannot be narcissistic. It cannot be a withdrawal from the world. It cannot be that the world of the spirit, and not social justice, is the only thing that's central. Spirituality is really about the attempt to create meaning, to find meaning.

Therefore, we move from there to practice, which is a challenge for liberal Judaism. Why should we practice? Rabbi Toba Spitzer set forth, in part, the notion of covenant, which is one way to think about it. I want us to also think about it as practice, as spiritual practice. A practice, like any practice, is something that you do on a regular basis—not because someone has commanded you to do it, not because it's the tradition to do it, but because you want to do it. Use any example, whether it's learning to play a musical instrument or going to exercise in the gym. If you exercise once in six months, it doesn't really give you any of the benefits that exercise is supposed to give to you. I exercise on a regular basis, not because it says it in the Torah, not because Kaplan said it in any of his not-so-random thoughts, but because I want to get the benefits of exercising on a regular basis. Therefore I do it even when I don't want to do it, mostly

even when I don't want to do it, because I know that it's become my practice. It's become my self-discipline to do it.

I would suggest that one way to think about *halacha* as a path, the way that we walk in the world, is to think of it as a practice that we take upon ourselves because we find that pieces of it, or much of it, or this one piece of it, meaningful as a practice.

Quickly, I have a few other things that I think need our attention and some need our reconstruction. Toba has really set out the possibilities and the challenges of community. I don't think we can emphasize that enough. Our communities face particular challenges as my Aerogram generation of the baby boomers heads towards retirement. There are increasingly members of our community, not just baby boomers, who are who are alone. For some this is a choice; for others, this is how their life has turned out. For some of us our families are not near. For some of us, we don't have close families. In that context, the challenges to community to be there for people, and to lessen their sense of existential aloneness to face the difficulties that we all will face in our lives become ever more important. While I don't think it's realistic to think that communities can replace families. Though we often use that language, I don't think a community really is a family. It's not the same thing, we don't make that kind of commitment to each other. But community needs to evermore increase the way that we're there for other people not just in the moments of crisis at a Shiva minyan and the like, but even in the daily challenges that people face to create deeper networks of connection.

I think one thing that needs reconstruction is prayer in services. I think prayer in services is broken and that we really need to look at that and say ask the fundamental questions about what is it that we want to have happen? What is the experience that we're trying to create?

My one brief answer is that we have to find ways to more clearly connect the liturgy to the same kinds of issues I was just talking about. To connect the liturgy to issues that speak to something that I as a person who's struggling with issues, who is seeking inner growth, spiritual growth, that have something to do with something that's important in my life. Until we can do that, then I think people ask, "Okay, the sun and moon are praising God, why should I care? Why should I care?" I think that reconstructing prayer is a great challenge for us.

Lastly, in thinking about who we are and who we want to be, we often get into conversations: What do we stand for? Are we just a kind of process? It is something that the Conservative movement is really struggling over these days. But I want to suggest that talking about the process, talking about the way we approach things doesn't mean that we don't stand for anything. But that that, in and of itself, is something important that we stand for.

We are, I believe, the 'anti-fundamentalists.' And I don't mean the people in this country who have a particular political and social and religious point of view. What I mean is that there is a kind of idolatry that says, "what this position is, is the position of truth and everything else is less than that." We, as Reconstructionists, I believe, are happy to live—maybe not happy to live—but are *willing* to live with intentions of conflicting truths. We do live in two civilizations, in fact we live in multiple civilizations. I think we should enjoy, we should be willing to

celebrate the tension of living *with* that tension, of not being sure of the truth, of not being certain. Kaplan said it well, "From the cowardice that shrinks from new truths, from the laziness that is content with half-truths, from the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth, Oh God of Truth, deliver us."

So in a world that seeks the truth, wants to find truths, or where people are upholding their truth as the truth, I think we are the voice that suggests that living without truth is, in fact not just the reality—the real reality of life—but actually in and of itself, is a good—in and of itself is a value. We take very seriously the notion, which is ultimately a very challenging notion, that Judaism is an evolving religious civilization. If we believe that Judaism evolves, then that means that in its continual evolution, some of the things that I feel are so central to my Judaism, or to my notions of Reconstructionism, even those things might need to evolve. Right? It isn't picture-perfect—it is one generation has this form and then the next generation has another form that it's conveniently evolved. But that's not, in fact, of course the way the world works. And so our congregations are filled with people who are old-line Kaplanian Reconstructionists, New-Age spirituality-seeking Reconstructionists, social-justice Reconstructionists, etcetera, etcetera.

How to hold all that together, how to have a community that continues to evolve and still respect the traditions, the practices, and the approaches of the people that have come before, are a great challenge to us. But I do think it is accepting that challenge, living in two civilizations, is a way of expressing the notion that life is not simple, that meanings are complex, and that we are

engaged in a journey to find those meanings, to explore those meanings, and that we do that together as community, even as we disagree, even as we stand in tension with each other. That, in itself, is part of the important teaching of Reconstructionism for this moment, for this generation, even as things will continue to evolve in years to come.