

# Reconstructionism: Re-Digging the Wells of Our Tradition

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I want to start with a quotation from B'resheet 26:18.

וַיֵּשֶׁב יִצְחָק וַיַּחְפְּרָ | אֶת־בְּאֵרֹת  
הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר חָפְרוּ בְיַמֵּי אַבְרָהָם אָבִיו  
וַיִּסְתְּמוּם פְּלִשְׁתִּים אַחֲרֵי מוֹת אַבְרָהָם  
וַיִּקְרָא לָהֶן שֵׁמוֹת כַּשֵּׁמֹת אֲשֶׁר־קָרָא  
לָהֶן אָבִיו:

“So Isaac went back and re-dug the wells of water which had been dug in the days of his father Abraham, and which had been filled in (stopped up) by the Philistines after Abraham’s death. And he called them by names *similar to* those which his father Abraham had called them.”

When Kaplan put forth his model for a Judaism of his own time and place, he used the image of “reconstructing.” Judaism was somehow “broken” and “displaced,” and the task at hand was to “reconstruct” it; to put it back together so that it remained authentic to its original form, but sufficiently altered to work in new circumstances.

He might just as well have used the image of “wells filled in.” The ancient wells, dug by our ancestors, had over time become filled in with earth. Their life-giving waters had for many of Abraham’s descendants become inaccessible, undrinkable. How had the wells become stopped up? By centuries of exile and oppression; by migration and upheaval; most recently by the unprecedented meeting of Judaism and American democracy and modernity; and of course by the Shoah, and by the radical redefinition of Jewish history in the time of the State of Israel.

Kaplan developed a technique for unstopping the wells, or better, for “re-digging them.” He wanted the water to taste as sweet to us as it must have tasted in ancient times. He didn’t want us to create a new Judaism. Even Reform, which itself was hardly a new religion, was too different for Dr. Kaplan. He wanted old wells with new access and new names, but names *which sounded like the old names*.

Who would re-dig these wells? Who indeed but us. Only the Jewish people – and then only the few among us who felt compelled to do the work as a matter of spiritual life and death – only the Jewish people could shovel out the silt of the ages.

And who are the Jewish people? Certainly not an ethnicity, at least not any longer. The Jewish people are all those who are either born into this tribe, or who have courageously joined it, or been brought along into it one way or another, but who in any case understand that Jewishness is central to their identity, and that it will *continue* to be their central identity, *even when they are not currently inspired by the available options in Jewish life*. (Judaism can be entertaining; it is *not* entertainment.)

Early in my sojourn with the Reconstructionist movement, I would hear the following speech, over and over, at conventions and banquets: “If it weren’t for Reconstructionism, and especially for Congregation So-and-So, I simply wouldn’t be a Jew today.”

I know that some of you may resonate with that point view. My take on it is:

Really? And *why* would they not be Jews today? Who gave them permission to give themselves permission to desist from the holy task of our covenant, as in *v'lo atah ben chorine l'hibatel mimena*, “you are not free to desist from the task”? Or as in Hillel’s maxim, a central idea in Judaism, *al tifrosh min ha-tzibur*, “Don’t separate your self from the community”?

Yes, I think our movement should do all it can to attract the disaffected. It should invite everyone to drink deeply from our newly dug wells of Torah, of spirituality, of sacred celebration of our civilization’s glory. *Harkhivi m'kom oholech*, says Isaiah. “Enlarge the place of your tent,” and we should make our tent large enough to accommodate those seekers, to the extent that they really want to try doing what we’re trying to do.

But I think we should spend the majority of our temporal and financial resources on digging and re-digging those wells in the first place, and on doing so *with* those – and *by* those – and *for* those who already know that for better or worse they *must* be part of the Jewish enterprise.

I want us to attract *those* people to our program. I want them to see that we offer the very best synthesis of spirit, practice, thinking, acting, learning, literacy, *commitment* – the best synthesis of our particular Jewish selves and our universal selves - the best that is available anywhere on the Jewish scene. I want them to come to us because we are serious and demanding of ourselves and our people, *in spite of* the personal and communal autonomy that necessarily governs our lives. I want them to feel responsible for the future of the Jewish people, and I want them to see Reconstructionism as a particularly responsible group of Jewish practitioners. Right now it is that, but sometimes it is also *not* that. That's what I want us to work on.

I'm sure this sounds elitist. I'm okay with that. Re-digging the wells is not for everyone, not for most people. But we are not "most people." And Kaplan was not "most" teachers. He was a visionary, and we are his murky vision. Even *his* wells have, to a degree, been stopped up. In re-digging them, we will certainly not be replicating Kaplan's program. But we will be rediscovering his marvelous method for the renewal of Jewish life, and applying that method to today's questions.

Isaac and his men re-named the wells. The first was *'esek*, “contention.” That sounds about right for us. The second was *sitna*, “disputation.” That sounds even better. Finally, he named the third well *rechovot*, “ample room.” That’s what we have now: ample room to bring in all those who really want to do this difficult and rewarding work: rediscovering a wellspring of Jewish life, buried in the silt of time, waiting to be drunk from deeply by those want not a “new” Judaism, but an *ancient* Judaism “renewed.”