

The Value and Meaning of Denominational Judaism

CARL A. SHEINGOLD

reconnecting

THE CENTERPIECE of this issue of *RT* is a collection of brief essays on the personal meaning and experience of “spirituality.” The subject is of intrinsic interest. It is also connected to any discussion of the contemporary meaning and, perhaps, boundaries, of the Reconstructionist movement and Reconstructionist ideology. In this column, I wish to discuss a related and broader question: What is the meaning and role of denominational movements, generally, in contemporary Jewish life? What are the implications of denominational Judaism for our movement?

These questions are of more than academic interest to me. One of the central purposes and roles of the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation is to support and build the Reconstructionist movement. This is a challenging task, in part because of the factors and sensibilities that have prompted some to argue that we are living in a post-denominational age. It is certainly true that there are numerous Jewish groups and congregations that are intentionally unaffiliated with a denomination. It is also true that in a society in which identity generally is experienced more as subjective and individual, rather than as a group matter — and is highly fluid at that — denominational identity or, indeed, any ideological identity, can be seen as countercultural or retrograde.

Our movement has an interesting and complicated relationship to denominationalism. For

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Reconstructionism Today (ISSN 1072-3250; USPS 457-140) is published quarterly by the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation (JRF), 7804 Montgomery Avenue, Suite #9, Elkins Park, PA 19027-2649. Subscriptions are \$16 per year; \$20 foreign; single copies, \$5. Individual membership in JRF (\$80 per year) includes a subscription. Manuscripts and queries should be sent with a stamped, self-addressed envelope, to:



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Editor: Lawrence Bush

Periodicals postage paid at Elkins Park, PA and additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Send change of address to JRF, 7804 Montgomery Avenue, Elkins Park, PA 19027-2649.

decades, Mordecai Kaplan resisted turning Reconstructionism from a school of thought into a denominational movement. There was a personal aspect to his resistance: As Mel Scult convincingly demonstrates in his biography of Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionism was not altogether comfortable or skilled at the political/organizational work required to start and sustain a movement. His reluctance also reflected his personal loyalty to the Jewish Theological Seminary, where he taught for more than half a century. Kaplan, however, attributed his nondenominational approach to Reconstructionism to the centrality of “peoplehood” in his understanding of Jewish life, meaning and commitment. He feared that a move toward establishing a Reconstructionist denomination would be divisive and therefore in contradiction to his commitment to peoplehood.

Insofar as a commitment to peoplehood is still central to Reconstructionism, as I believe it is and must be, we and our movement should continue to have commitments beyond ourselves — a “trans-” if not “non-” or “post-” denominational commitment. Indeed, our principle of “living in two civilizations” suggests an even broader “trans-denominational” aspect to our practice, while other Reconstructionist principles — that we are part of an evolving Jewish civilization, and that our religious tradition should have a voice but not a veto — also suggest that our movement should be less prone to rigidity and a lack of adaptiveness that can be the maladies of denominationalism.

Some believe, on the other hand, that we are too flexible, too lacking in ideological boundaries. I am less interested here, however, in engaging in boundary-marking or denominational apologetics than in exploring the positive purpose of denominationalism precisely as a countercultural commitment. To put it in personal terms, I believe in the value of this movement precisely as a denominational movement, which is why I say I’m a Reconstructionist rather than simply saying that I’m a Kaplanian.

Why belong to a distinctive, particularistic religion, much less a movement within it? The answer is that there is more wisdom and meaning to be gained in excavating and wrestling with an historically and intellectually rooted tradition than can be gained in some abstract, universal search.

Within Judaism, my quest is enhanced — and I can go even deeper by working within a particular Jewish tradition. It is even possible that because of the presumption of some shared commitments with others within a movement, we are more open to really listening to diverse opinions from fellow movement members than we would be in a more general and diffuse context. In my view, such openness to diversity is not just a key Reconstructionist value but a key condition for a serious and creative approach to complex issues and problems.

My second argument for denominational Judaism is directly connected to the value of Jewish peoplehood. Denominational movements are vehicles through which we are able to make a contribution to the Jewish people and to Jewish history — to the Jewish lives of others with whom we have no direct familial or congregational connection. In this, we become connected and make a contribution to something larger than ourselves.

The same dynamics are at play, of course, in regard to congregational membership. Why not just have tutor for your child? Why not organize a minyan of friends? There are many answers to these questions, but among them, certainly, is that by joining a community you are helping other Jews to have their Jewish needs met and to create Jewish meaning, together. You are, in short, participating in Jewish peoplehood.

For Kaplan, the commitment to Jewish peoplehood became a reason to discourage denominationalism. For me, living in a very different time that is marked by an absence of external cultural forces or political pressures that compel us to care about peoplehood, the same commitment to peoplehood becomes a reason to encourage denominationalism.

This commitment goes beyond the realm of congregations and a North American synagogue movement, for I believe the time is ripe for our movement to connect to those in Israel who are seeking to reconstruct Judaism there. I believe that we will find very important partners in Israel in our quest to make sense of the meaning of Judaism in the contemporary age. Because of their historical and cultural circumstance of living in a small, Jewish state, however, these are

mostly individuals and groups that do not see themselves creating or affiliating with a denominational movement. By accepting this difference and dialoguing to understand its meaning, we can have a deep and meaningful relationship with Israeli Jews that can be a source of strength for our movement and for Jewish peoplehood. More on this at another time.

Before concluding, I want to return to the “Minyan of Opinions” on spirituality in this issue of RT. Within the variety of ideas and experiences presented, there is a common theme: the experience of connection to (as various essayists wrote) “something greater than us all,” something “bigger than life [that] makes me part of something BIG,” “in service of something that is beyond any one of us,” “something much larger, grander and much more mysterious than I can ever fully grasp.” Some express this theme as a connection to others — “awareness of interconnection with other beings is heightened and [the]

sense of ego, of ‘bounded self,’ is diminished” —and there are associated themes of connection to history, both Jewish history and personal history.

While it is possible to see denominations as narrow and parochial, concerned only with organization and money, in the deepest sense, our denominational movement should aspire to be and to be seen as a vehicle of connection to forces larger than oneself or one’s congrega-

tion: to Jewish history and the Jewish people, and thus to deep spiritual meaning of the kind captured in the essays. Insofar as some fear that the contemporary search for spirituality is too self-absorbing and internal to the individual, efforts to provide spiritual experience and meaning within a denominational context may provide the kind of holistic balance —between the individual and the community, between the private and the social, between a spirituality of the self and a spirituality of more than the self — that itself is an essential mark of Jewish authenticity. ✚

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