

Darchei Noam D'var Torah

Parashat Vayetze

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By Mitchell Rothman

This parasha tells some of the story of Jacob. In the last parasha, he fled Beersheba because he feared revenge from Esau, and set out for Haran. On his first night, he has the nighttime vision of angels going up and down a stairway that reaches to the sky with God waiting at the top to say that God will make Jacob and his progeny prosper.

In Haran, he meets Rachel at the well and falls in love with her, agreeing to serve her father for seven years to win Rachel as his wife. But when he looks at the woman he marries, it is not Rachel but her less-desirable older sister, Leah with the “weak eyes.” He agrees to serve another seven years for Rachel.

Leah has children, but Rachel is barren. Rachel gives Jacob her handmaiden and Leah, who has stopped bearing, also gives Jacob her handmaiden. Then Rachel has a son and Leah has one more. The total is, of course, twelve sons (and at least one daughter).

Jacob prepares to leave Haran, and specifies as his wages such of the flock as are speckled. Then he uses magic to ensure the young are speckled. Eventually, he flees in some haste as Laban’s sons start to become jealous.

When Jacob wakes from his dream, he says “truly God is in this place, and I did not know of it.”

I have just returned from the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation convention in Newport Beach, California. If a Reconstructionist can be said to feel God is truly in any place, it was there. I want to report to you on what I learned at the convention.

So here we go with ten things I learned about Reconstructionism at the Reconstructionist convention.

**First, of course, Mordechai Kaplan.** The convention had three periods of breakout sessions, with about eight sessions in each period. Each group of breakouts had at least one session focused on some aspect of Kaplan's life or thought. They were well attended. There is an oral history project with a CD of Kaplan reading from Questions Jews Ask. The Reconstructionist Press had a good number of Kaplan's books or books about Kaplan for sale, and at least one of them sold out.

Kaplan's thought also figured prominently in the discussions of the Reconstructionist movement, even if the sessions were not named as relating to Kaplan. Perhaps most interestingly, I did not hear the term post-Kaplanian at all at the convention. Now, this may just reflect whose convention this was – the JRF (the organization of the congregations) and not the RRC (the college) or the RRA (the organization of the rabbis) – but the focus on Kaplan was on what Kaplan said or wrote. So, within the JRF at least, Kaplanian Reconstructionism is alive and well.

**Second, challenges to Reconstructionism.** In facing challenges, Reconstructionism is not alone, and there may be some reason to think that it is doing better than other movements. Rabbi Dan Ehrenkrantz, the President of the RRC, said that the old growth model, where the movement would grow both in number of congregations and in the size of each, no longer holds for us or other movements. He cited some statistics: the Conservative movement has gone from about 850 to about 600 congregations in the last 10 years, and the Reform movement has lost about half of its membership in the last five years. Not all of this loss can be attributed to the bad economy or Bernie Madoff; there are clearly major factors working against the movements.

However, the Reconstructionist movement has roughly held its own over that same period, which is clearly better than the other movements. But we are much smaller than they; any similar reduction in the size of the Reconstructionist movement could threaten its existence.

Among organized Jewish movements in North America, which has grown fastest? Chabad. It raises \$2 billion a year. Where Chabad has a Mitzvah Mobile, Ehrenkrantz suggested, we need a Tzedakah Tank. That is, we need to create and use the kind of enthusiasm for Reconstructionism that Chabad can generate for getting people to lay tefillin.

**Third, Post-denominationalism.** There is a real sense that the model of Jewish organization, including that of the Reconstructionist movement, is changing. While I did not hear the term

post-Kaplanian, I did several times hear the term post-Denominationalism. This is the idea that Jews don't need the organization and overhead of a movement to meet their Jewish (and often spiritual) needs, but rather that all they need is the ability to form their own communities in their own places and the ability to develop liturgy and ritual practice to support those communities.

These Jews are seeking spirituality and Jewish experience, rather than Jewish thought. The Jewish experience need not (for some may never) come in the context of a formal worship service.

This raises the question that if the model is experiential Judaism, what is the role of the synagogue? This question is, in part, the source of the challenge facing the three more liberal of the movements. The answer of the panel on the future of Reconstructionism is that the synagogue or the movement can support camps, schools and other opportunities for people, especially young people, to experience Judaism. The synagogue should link to organizations like Teva (an organization which provides outdoor Jewish education to Jewish day school students), which also provide such opportunities.

**Fourth, Judaism without Supernaturalism.** For all the talk about Post-denominationalism, people still choose a synagogue (if they do choose) based on what is most comfortable to them. Most Reconstructionist congregations offer a warm atmosphere, egalitarianism, with some but not strict adherence to tradition both in Halakah and in liturgy. So do most non-Orthodox congregations, especially in the United States where that better describes Conservative congregations than it does here.

Then what is different about Reconstructionist congregations? The clear and conscious rejection of the idea that there is a supernatural entity who has in the past and could in the future act on the physical and spiritual world. From that premise flows much that does differentiate Reconstructionism from other Jewish movements.

**Fifth: Enthusiasm and commitment.** There is a lot of enthusiasm already in the Reconstructionist movement, though no one volunteered to buy the Tzedakah Tank. Two hundred attendees made for an interesting conference and good discussions. There is a lot of diversity in the Reconstructionist movement; I met people from congregations with 80 members and those with thousands of members. I met people whose congregations had just hired

their first rabbi, those who had to go from a full-time to a part-time rabbi, and those who just had students from the RRC.

I talked to people from congregations with a lot of people who have deep knowledge of Judaism and ability to lead in liturgy, Torah study, and Jewish education and to people from congregations with almost no such resources.

Everyone at the conference is committed to Judaism. That means a concern with the future of Judaism in North America and a desire to do what they can to ensure Jewish continuity. Most believe that Reconstructionism offers the best prospect of ensuring that continuity and that is one reason for their support of it.

They also value Reconstructionism as the approach to Judaism that is most comfortable to them. I can't point to one aspect that is central for everyone, but I had no doubt that they are all Reconstructionists.

**Sixth: Learning from each other.** Perhaps in part because of that diversity, there is a lot that we in the Reconstructionist movement can teach each other. Solutions that work for one congregation may not work for another, but exchanging information on both successes and failures can prove very helpful to us all. I talked to people from Beit Havurah in Denver, whose model of a congregation that is a collection of chavurot has appealed to me. I learned how the organization works, and I learned about the problems created when growth brings in members who are not committed to the idea of chavurot.

**Seventh. Toronto takeover.** Michael Mitchell is the incoming President of the JRF and Alan Levine the incoming treasurer.

**Eighth: Israel.** There was a panel on Israel and politics with Jeremy Ben-Ami from J Street and Steve Gutow from the Jewish Council for Public Affairs. I don't want to talk about their views on the way forward in Israel itself. What I do want to talk about is their agreement that the topic of Israel is the elephant in the room that no one wants to recognize. Kaplan considered Israel central to his ideas of developing Jewish peoplehood.

But Reconstructionist congregations, like many congregations, are reluctant to talk about Israel because it can be so toxic and divisive a subject. Jeremy said that rabbis have told him that they

have donors who have threatened to pull their funding of the synagogue if certain views are expressed there. Yet any discussion of Israel will likely result in expression of some views which some people will consider objectionable.

The call was to develop a way to have a dialogue here about Israel by developing a way to listen respectfully to everyone's opinion. Steve said that those on the "left" of Israeli issues can be condescending to those on the "right." To have a dialogue, we have to listen to everyone respectfully and recognize their opinions.

Speaking from the United States, both said that now is an important time for the Jewish community to talk about Israel because the Obama administration will be formulating its policies and actions.

**Ninth: Jewish literacy.** The editor of the Forward said that we may be raising the least literate generation of Jews ever. Not that they are not literate in the broader sense; they are very literate, but not about Judaism. Others agreed that their congregations are very educated and knowledgeable people; they just are not knowledgeable about Judaism. One rabbi said that he has highly educated people, like college professors, who make excuses to decline aliyot because, he thinks, they are afraid they will be embarrassed.

Somehow, we need to get both older and younger people to see a commitment to Jewish learning as essential to their total of learning. And we need to deal with the question that, if Judaism is to be experiential, how do we deal with Jewish literacy?

In a session on Kaplan and education, some answers to this question were discussed. One of Kaplan's assertions was that teachers of Judaism avoid the hard issues and simply teach the holidays over and over. He also thought that Hebrew school teachers are not themselves well trained. Finally, the passing off of Jewish education to the synagogue and schools can remove the family as the primary locus of Jewish education and dedication, as it should be.

This session was more optimistic than Kaplan, however. Several Jewish educators there said that educators are now much better trained than they were in the 1930s and also that the amount of good and useful teaching materials is much greater than it was. While they did not deny that some teachers probably do still teach the holidays over and over, they said that there is good

reason to believe that Jewish education is improving – but the students have to come to school.

**Tenth, and finally, God.** Even though he did not believe in a supernatural God, Kaplan still talked a lot about God. Ira Eisenstein's daughter, Miriam, was at the convention and said that Kaplan's wife said all he talks about is God, God, God. Mel Scult, a biographer of Kaplan and the editor of his journals, led a session on Kaplan the pious. In it, he quoted Kaplan's views on God from several different places.

For example, in the introduction to the 1945 Reconstructionist siddur, Kaplan writes his most deist statement: "God is nature with a soul."

Kaplan himself davened every morning for many years. But Scult said that sometimes Kaplan would get up in the morning, put on his tallis and tefillin, and read John Dewey.

But it is clear that Kaplan was not an atheist and not a pantheist saying that all of nature is God. Rather, said Eric Caplan, he saw God as an aspect of nature, not all of nature.

Ok, there you have it, from Kaplan to God in ten steps.