

## RRA CONNECTION: PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE (MAY 2006)

In today's organized Jewish community, sometimes it's all we can do to keep up with the latest "cause de jour." Keeping all these ideas straight can be downright crazy: Jewish continuity, Jewish renaissance, outreach, inreach, synagogue transformation. . . It often seems we've just begun to understand the implications of these trends when the Jewish communal agenda shifts and we're forced to play catch-up yet again.

The latest Jewish communal buzzword seems to be "post-denominationalism." To be fair, the claim that the American Jewish community has moved past the Golden Age of Jewish denominationalism is more than just a spurious observation. Sociologists have long been pointing out that denominational affiliation is on the decline and that the traditional loyalties to Jewish movements are now largely history. Moreover, we are witnessing a marked growth of multi- or non-denominational synagogues and rabbinical seminaries.

There are many reasons for this trend, not least of which is the increasingly mobile, transitory and compartmentalized nature of our post-modern American lives. In today's complex and ever-growing spiritual marketplace, religious identity and loyalty is no longer a straightforward matter. Just compare it (*le'havdil*) to watching TV. Time was that we had three networks and a few local channels. Now we have basic cable, premium cable, digital cable, payper-view, and satellite TV (in the words of Bruce Springsteen, "57 channels and nothin' on...")

In the same way, it seems, there is a growing diversification when it comes to the spiritual tastes of American Jews. Shoshana Boyd Gelfand recently wrote as much in *Sh'ma* magazine: "(Young Jews) are less nostalgic about their attachment to a particular movement and more drawn to those venues where they can piece together a Jewish identity that speaks to their own particular spiritual, intellectual, and political sensibilities. They view their religious lives as a journey and need an environment diverse enough to allow (and even encourage!) them to continue their explorations over the course of a lifetime" (*shma.com*, November 8, 2005).

So what should we make of post-denominationalism? I'd like to offer just a few observations for your consideration:

It sometimes appears to me that some movements and institutions are a bit too quick to don the mantle of post-denominationalism. What is a denomination, anyway? The Renewal movement, which often characterizes itself as "post-denominational," has its own rabbinical program, rabbinical organization and affiliated communities. The Hebrew College's "postdenominational" rabbinical school will soon have its own cadre of rabbis - and it will be interesting to observe the direction their graduates will take once they attain critical mass. Is there such a thing as a "post-denominational denomination?" As Jonathan Sarna recently observed in the *Jerusalem Post*, "In America, if you have a rabbinical school and you have an association of rabbis and you have an association of synagogues, then you have a denomination whether you call it that or not" (*jpost.com*, February 11, 2005).

At the end of the day, we Jews, as Lawrence Kushner once put it, are a "notoriously communal people." While Jewish institutional denominations are largely the product of modernity, Jewish movements of various kinds have been an essential aspect of Jewish civilization for centuries. They have always provided fertile ground for unique and influential Jewish visions - many of which had transformative impact on the course of Jewish life.

While Jewish diversity and pluralism are undeniably important values, eventually, I believe, you have to stand for something. In today's cultural climate, there is a real danger that one's Jewish identity could become so compartmentalized, so cobbled together, that it ceases to be grounded in any truly consistent Jewish ideals. Many of us who are active in the Reconstructionist movement were attracted to it because of its very specific values, and we have joined together to collectively bear witness to these shared values. As a result, our Jewish vision has the potential to have a significant impact on us and the world around us.

Yes, the changing culture of the post-modern world is affecting the relevance of Jewish denominations - but I would like to think that there will always be room for a denomination that truly stands for something. If we have failed in any way, perhaps it is in failing to clarify, for ourselves and the outside world, what we really stand for. In the end, if any American Jewish denomination is going to succeed, it will have to articulate its vision in a compelling way, showing why it seeks to create a unique movement, and what ultimately makes it different from all other movements.

To this end, I was so encouraged by our recent convention, where we made a conscious effort to focus on the future directions of the Reconstructionist movement. I trust that the magnificent discussions we had in Deerfield Beach will help guide us long into the future. The symposium articles in the 70th anniversary issue of the *Reconstructionist* also provide a wonderful conversation in this regard as well. Could it be that the latest Jewish communal "buzz word" will lead to some productive soul-searching for us? I eagerly look forward to hearing your thoughts on denominationalism, post-denominationalism, and Reconstructionist denominationalism. In the meantime, all the best for a fulfilling and liberating Pesah.

Brant Rosen

## **RESPONSE PUBLISHED IN THE RRA CONNECTION (AUGUST 2006)**

To the Editor:

I just finished reading Brant Rosen's interesting observations on post-denominationism and, as both a Reconstructionist and current Director of Spiritual Resources for ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal, feel called to add a few words for the sake of balance.

It is true that in the movement for Jewish spiritual renewal, we have developed a rabbinic training program, begun an association of rabbis, cantors, students, and rabbinic pastors, and have a small group of associated communities. However, just because Jonathan Sarna says that this makes for a denomination, doesn't make it so.

ALEPH's rabbinic program welcomes students who are studying for ordination in other programs. In fact, when a person comes to us who intends to begin a rabbinic career only after ordination (many of our students are already engaged in local spiritual leadership before beginning to study formally), we encourage them to attend the denominational school which most closely harmonizes with their own spiritual direction. This way, they can receive the support which only the denominations can provide and become responsible members of that movement as well. Renewal communities are not obligated to interview our ordainees and we do not provide a placement service. Ohalah, the Association of Rabbis for Jewish Renewal, welcomes cantors, students, and rabbinic pastors as well as rabbis from all parts of the Jewish religious world and, unlike the denominational organizations, we welcome those who belong elsewhere as well as those who are ineligible for membership in those associations.

Personally, I am not comfortable with the term post-denominational. For me, it is weighed down by an implicit assumption that the next step is always an improvement over the previous one. What I always tell people is that my denominational home is within the Reconstructionist Movement and that I am part of its neo-Hassidic wing. My work is the spiritual renewal of Judaism in a universal context and my soul-chevre is all those who share in that work, whether they are formally a part of ALEPH or not.

I want to call your attention to one more thing. We talk a lot about democracy and the right to self determination, but only, it seems, as long as the conversation is about others. When it hits closer to home, it is harder to maintain that commitment. ALEPH is what it says it is, namely an alliance of like minded people whose primary commitment is to Jewish spiritual renewal. Our self definition is that we sit perpendicular to the denominational horizontal in a way similar to that of many other recognized and respected Jewish entities. Spiritual renewal happens in many contexts and ALEPH members and staff represent those contexts and embrace them.

In my humble opinion, what really matters is the work we all share, namely the revitalization, reconstruction, and renewal of the Jewish people and Jewish life so that we can play our part in the redemptive process.

Daniel Siegel