

ECOLOGY as part of RECONSTRUCTING RECONSTRUCTIONISM

For Jewish Recon Learning Network, 11/21/17, with R. Fred Scherlinder Dobb (www.AdatShalom.net)

Broad Outline [Looking Forward to Your Input/Additions/Thoughts!]

#1 -- As Rabbi Deborah Waxman said in the first session, environmental consciousness is of course a core Jewish value, but it's also part of a **larger sense of interconnectedness and interrelatedness**. We start there, discussing the centrality of this larger / universal / tikkun olam orientation to our ongoing work of reconstruction, and the timeless challenge of balancing the universal with the particular

#2 -- "**evolution**" as a biological/ecological concept which undergirds why we have to keep on "reconstructing Reconstructionism", and exploring the **implications of Kaplan's intentional borrowing of that bio/eco metaphor to Judaism** -- ala "etz chayim hi" (including reference to biomimicry and how we can actually use ecology as inspiration for our work of further reconstruction);

#3, taking **the long view** of history -- as the civilizational model does, and as ecology insists that we do -- with reference to carbon/climate, and to texts like the Thirteen Attributes and Uvacharta Ba'chayim;

#4, integrating **justice** and **sustainability** -- religion plays this role within the larger environmental movement, and Judaism [specifically filtered thru a Recon lens] amplifies it -- keeping racial and social justice ever in mind while discussing ecology; and tackling environment & climate in our justice work.

#5, **tachlis** -- initiatives of individual Recon communities, and of RRC/JewishRecon itself.

#6, crowd-sourcing -- **how else** to use or highlight **ecology** as we "**Reconstruct Reconstructionism**"?

Three Resources Already at JewishRecon.org on this:

1. <https://beta.jewishrecon.org/sites/default/files/resources/document/greening-dobb-martin.pdf>

"Greening Sustainable Synagogues: Resources for helping your congregation to become *shomrei adamah*" -- Nathan Martin & Fred Scherlinder Dobb, prepared for JRF convention circa 2004 -- excerpt:

In the introduction to the 1945 Reconstructionist Prayer Book, we learn that "**Each of us should learn to think of himself [sic] as though he were a cell in some living organism -- which, in a sense, he actually is -- in his relation to the universe or cosmos.**" Word for word, this expresses the then-unnamed „**Gaia hypothesis**“, wherein each creature is like a cell within the self-regulating organism known as Earth. Mordecai Kaplan and our framers add that **the world "is more than nature; it is nature with a soul. That soul is God."**

2. <http://www.rrc.edu/sites/default/files/legacy/reconstructionist/Fall2004.pdf>

The Reconstructionist 69:1 (Fall 2004) Fred Scherlinder Dobb, "The World As Sacred Space", excerpts:

Pantheism and Panentheism (pp. 35-36)

Pantheism, the view that all of Creation is sacred because God is in everything, has been a major concern over the generations. Where earlier Mesopotamian myths saw gods (such as Tiamat) as the stuff of existence, the God of Genesis is above the fray, the Actor Whose mere Word brings about existence. Yet even here, nature plays a key role: Earth and sea bring forth life (Genesis 1:11; 1:21), and God does nothing without counsel from heaven and earth (Genesis Rabbah to 1:26).

As Judaism's great "naturalist" theologian, Mordecai Kaplan was often mistaken for a pantheist. Yet his conception of God as the "Power that Makes for Salvation," while operating through and experienced through the world, is not limited to it. This theology, often termed panentheism, comes with a strong Jewish pedigree.⁶ Panentheism gives us permission to re-sacralize the world, so long as we never ignore that Whole which is greater than the sum of its parts.

A related theological issue is God's presence within the world (immanence) versus God's distance above and beyond it (transcendence). Immanence comes easily to our Christian friends, with God-incarnate; we can learn much from theologians like Jürgen Moltmann and Sallie McFague who link immanence with redemption. But Judaism also balances the two, even lending subtle priority — from Psalms to Hasidism — to Divine presence in our world.

Footnote 6, p. 41: See the rabbinic maxim, *hu m'komo shel ha-olam, v'ein olamo m'komo* (Genesis Rabbah 68:1) — "God is the Place of the world, but God's world is not God's [sole] place." Through panentheism, Arthur Green reconciles Kaplan's largely (though not entirely) transcendent theology with the immanent neo-hasidic theology of Martin Buber and Abraham Joshua Heschel (Ra'ayonot, 1986).

3. <https://www.jewishrecon.org/podcast/episode-2> [audio; transcript [here](#)] (May 4, 2014)

The Dialogue Podcast -- Episode 2: Acting Sustainably (Interview with Rabbi Fred Scherlinder Dobb)

Most relevant excerpts [HR is interviewer Hila Rabatzi; FD is Rabbi Fred Scherlinder Dobb]:

02:35 HR: How do you view Jewish Environmentalism specifically through a Reconstructionist lens, if you do?

02:40 FD: I certainly do. First, **it's an approach to the text, loving the tradition, but not taking it literally. Kaplan would have been alliterative -- of taking the tradition lovingly, but not literally.** As in "the past gets a vote, but not a veto." And that very much informs this. So that the specifics of halacha, of Jewish law, for example, the mitzvah or commandment of "ba'al taashchit," thou shalt not waste. The aggadah, the ideational background in our tradition, is beautiful on ba'al tashchit: [it] calls it a defining principle that separates the wicked from the righteous.

03:19 FD: But the halachic, or legal development, of the idea, begins to put a dollar figure on how much a tree could produce in the future if you don't cut it down, versus how much its products are worth when you do cut it down. And while that kind of quantifying is important, it has its limits, because you cannot possibly quantify the value of a healthy forest to the human soul or to the biosphere. So, that's just one example of where **the textual approach of Reconstructionism, walking that line of not forsaking the tradition at all, but also not being bound to the same conclusions our ancestors reached, is very helpful environmentally.**

04:00 FD: It's also a **body of work** we can draw on. Kaplan himself, along with Eugene Kohn and Ira Eisenstein, in the introduction to the Sabbath Prayerbook that was published in 1945, has a beautiful passage in that introduction that prefigures what environmentalists know as the Gaia Hypothesis,

which is really a '70s, '80s idea, that the earth is a living organism. And he makes the analogy in 1945 in the first Recon siddur that essentially, all of us are like cells in a giant organism. All interdependent and each one autonomous, but the organism as a whole has its own consciousness, beyond that of each individual cell. And that consciousness is God. So, Kaplan makes a 1940's analogy that is very similar to what atmospheric chemists come to realize only 25 years later, that we each are independent, but we are also so interdependent as to render the entire biosphere akin to something like an organism.

05:07 FD: So that idea of "we're independent, but only so much, and that **we're actually part of something bigger**" is a particularly valuable teaching from Reconstructionist tradition that jibes beautifully with environmental thought.

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21:42 HR: [having just discussed 'the Cassandra-Polyanna Dialactic] When you're talking about what it is that we have faith in, and not necessarily saying God is just gonna save us..., I wonder if faith in people, faith in ourselves, faith in community and others that we will actually have the strength and the stamina to actually do something and to continue to endure through this.

22:06 FD: Absolutely, and that comes back to your early question about what's uniquely Reconstructionist about this. I love **the Reconstructionist emphasis that sacred text never ended and that we can look at and should look at modern text with the same loving eye as the ancient ones**. So two 20th century texts that are canonical, but we haven't raised to the level of a haftarah yet, and I think we need to. One is Anne Frank's famous diary from hiding against the Nazis in the Netherlands in the early '40s, and that famous passage of, "In spite of everything, I still believe people are good at heart."

22:49 FD: For someone who is soon to be tortured and murdered, and has her life upended, to be able to say that, is one of the most remarkable affirmations of that positive outlook and it's exactly what we need. And similarly, when you say "have hope in people rather than in Hashem," that's exactly what Shaul Tchernichovsky, one of the early Hebrew pioneers wrote somewhere around 1910, 1915, the kind of early Hebrew national renaissance, this famous poem, "Sachaki, Sachaki". "Laugh at all my dreams, my dearest. Laugh and I repeat anew, that I still believe in people as I still believe in you."

23:28 FD: (That's the Debbie Friedman English singable translation.) But, "ki gam a'amin gam ba-adam, gam be-ruach, ruach bo." "Yes, I still believe in humanity and in the spirit that lies within humanity." And that is **the belief that we can change**. That we can have **that moral awakening and reckoning that will help us make the small sacrifices that are needed to get things sustainable**.

23:56 HR: Amen, thank you. I'll just close with a little bit more of a question that we are gonna be asking across these interviews about **Reconstructionist Judaism described as being on the cutting edge**, do you agree with this assertion? And if so, how would you define the cutting... [chuckle] Doing part of that cutting edge, how would you define that?

24:22 FD: **On a good day, the Reconstructionist movement and its allied institutions and its leaders and laity are in fact on the cutting edge**. It would be **ironic** of us to say that we are **always** on the cutting edge, that would make us sound chosen.

[laughter]

24:41 FD: And I often joke that there's a crazy feedback loop of, "we are so hyper-ethical and awesome that we are the first, and in some cases, still only people to take out chosenness so that must mean we are better," and we need to avoid that. **Humility** needs to be a thoroughgoing piece of the conversation, so I want to embrace that Reconstructionism and Reconstructionist Jews are at the cutting edge, but **we are only at the cutting edge when we earn it**. And we earn it when we put our good ideas into

practice, when we actually put the solar panels on the roofs, when we actually tear up grass and put in native species, when we actually bike to synagogue -- and when we don't, we don't earn it.

25:27 FD: We are on the cutting edge when we actually address the critical needs of the 21st century which is for **authenticity** and **inclusion**, and I think our communities have a lot to teach about walking that line of being thickly and seriously Jewish, while also being willing to question the traditional Jewish assumptions about who is a good Jew or what is a Jewish family, such that we can truly throw our doors open as we famously have and are continuing to expand to transgender folks, Jews of color, Jews with disabilities.

26:08 FD: Even intermarriages are still controversial enough within and beyond the movement to say that scenario we need to work on, just as we have done so much to lead the way to inclusion of LGBT folks, inclusion of folks whose Judaism manifests in more cultural rather than religious directions. We are known for that, **we've been pushing the boundaries, we need to keep pushing those boundaries**. We are at the cutting edge when we show **the power of community** in an era [with] people [for whom] it doesn't resonate the way it did for Kaplan.

26:41 FD: Millennial identity doesn't assume that you are part of something bigger than you, but smaller than humanity, and that that you must plug into that, which was really a core teaching of an earlier generation of Reconstructionists. But we still acknowledge the power of community and we still have a **unique way to approach that fine line of universal and particular**, how we can take special pride and connection in a Jewish layer of the unpeeling onion, if you will, but to recognize that the outer sphere which is all of humanity or all of creation is also part of the Jewish conversation. Those are just a handful of ways that I think, again, on a good day we are at the cutting edge and we need to keep earning it every day going forward.

27:31 HR: That's a really great message. And just before we close do you have any other projects or specific initiatives that you want it to bring attention to before we finish?

27:42 FD: Adatshalom.net or COEJL.org will show a lot of those, on the synagogue and on the environmental side. I guess I'll close with the classic-now Adat Shalom punchline, "**Shemita**." The idea that we should live a seven year cycle that plans ahead for downtimes, that gets us out of the rat race and that honors the fullness of people and community in all kinds of micro, local, sustainable ways. So, we are ending the seventh year of that traditional cycle, which means we are entering the next six years in which we have to make things better, so that the seventh year can be a little bit truer to what Moshe, Miriam, u-venay Yisrael, the ancients, had in mind when they wrote Leviticus 25 and 26 and Deuteronomy 15 and these other places where the Sabbatical cycle is invoked.

28:44 FD: So, I would love to see our communities take seriously "what does long range planning look like," not in the way just that non-profits should always do long range planning, but **long range planning around sustainability, long range planning around community**, long range planning around **living lightly on the earth** and **making room for our brothers and sisters irrespective of race, creed, color or location, or even for that matter, species**.

29:13 FD: And those are some beautiful teachings that we've only just began to think about and as we lose the focus on the Sabbatical or Shemita year, I hope that we keep that in mind every year, that we are living toward the Shemita the same way that on a Tuesday we should be thinking toward Shabbat and having Shabbat color the rest of the week. And in the same way that even when we are in our secular incarnation we should have our Jewish, our synagogue, our Reconstructionist identity carry with us, and how does that affect the workplace, how does that affect what we do on the soccer field with our kids, how does that affect how we invest and consume and purchase and vote and donate and volunteer. Those are the questions that we should be asking every minute.