

## ZIONISM AND COMMUNAL COVENANT: A RECONSTRUCTIONIST APPROACH TO ESSENTIAL JEWISH PRINCIPLES

### A. Zionism

*This report calls for a recommitment to Zionism on the part of JRF.* The task force was asked to answer the following question: what should the nature of support for Zionism and the State of Israel mean for Reconstructionist Jews in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? This question was posed with the understanding that the task force could not address the subsequent question as to whether JRF has the right or obligation to speak out on Israel without first determining the place of Israel in Reconstructionist Judaism. Furthermore, once the task force broadened its mandate to include programmatic initiatives, it became clear that JRF cannot foster the Israel component of Reconstructionist Jewish identity without first determining what the “Israel component” means.

Our starting point is to join a century of debate on the definition of Zionism.<sup>1</sup> It should be of no surprise that Mordecai M. Kaplan, a leader among American Zionists, still stands out as the Zionist thinker most relevant to Reconstructionist Jews.<sup>2</sup> Kaplan is recognized as the developer of the ideology ‘New Zionism,’ that places Israel as the spiritual center of the Jewish people while claiming legitimacy for Diaspora Jewish communities.

*1. “According to Kaplan, Zionism is a way to reconstitute the Jewish people. It is not merely an ideology of refuge, but a long-range process of a people to rededicate itself.”<sup>3</sup>*

Our attachment to Israel as the place of our beginning, the creation of our foundational myths and focus of future hopes is powerful but insufficient in defining the role of Israel

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<sup>1</sup>For an excellent review of the Zionist idea since the establishment of the State of Israel and collection of essays by contemporary Zionist thinkers across the spectrum, see *Zionism: The Sequel*, *ibid*, note 2.

<sup>2</sup>For more extensive treatment of the Reconstructionist understanding of Zionism see “Chapter 6: Zion as a Spiritual Center” in *Exploring Judaism: A Reconstructionist Approach*, *ibid*, note 1 and Richard Hirsh, ed., *Israel at 50, The Reconstructionist*, 62/2, Spring 1998. For Kaplan on Zionism see *The Future of the American Jew*, chs. 7 and 17 (New York: MacMillan Co., 1948); *The Religion of Ethical Nationhood*, ch. 6 (New York: MacMillan Co., 1970); *A New Zionism*, (New York: Theodor Herzl Foundation, 1955); and Jack J. Cohen, “Reflections on Kaplan’s Zionism,” *The American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan*, ed. by Emanuel S. Goldsmith, Mel Scult and Robert Seltzer (New York: New York University Press, 1990).

<sup>3</sup>Richard Hirsh, lecture to the JRF Israel Task Force, “Kaplan and Zionism,” June 9, 2003, Wyncote, PA.

in Reconstructionist life today. Israel's critical role in providing refuge for Jews suffering under anti-Semitism also falls short of achieving Zionism's full potential. Given the emphasis we place on peoplehood as the central component of our Judaism, Zionism must be an ideology whose purpose is also to create a meaningful existence for the Jewish People as a whole.<sup>4</sup> According to Kaplan, "For the Jewish people to serve Jews, it must provide them with the ability to make of its tradition a civilizing and humanizing force. For that, the core of the Jewish people must be situated in its homeland, Eretz Yisrael and the tradition has to be relevant to the very ideologies, cultural, economic and sociological, which challenge it."<sup>5</sup>

Kaplan understood Reconstructionism and Zionism as organically united. For both, Jewish peoplehood, emerging from a common past, present and future, is central. For both, according to Kaplan, democracy is a religious value.<sup>6</sup> Following Kaplan's teaching, JRF by-laws require that Reconstructionist communities be egalitarian and use democratic decision making processes. Similarly, we believe that the Jewish state must be a democracy granting full equality and justice to all her citizens. Furthermore, democracy in our communities and in the Jewish state is essential to achievement of salvation of the Jewish soul and spirit. Under these conditions, Kaplan always hoped that Jewish civilization in Israel would lead the way in revitalizing Jewish religious practice, radiating to the Diaspora.

## *2. Equality and mutual connectedness of the Diaspora and Israeli communities.*

Kaplan rejected the assertion by some Zionist thinkers of *shlilat ha-golah*, the negation of the Diaspora. Kaplan understood that the vast majority of North American Jews were unlikely to make aliyah. He also believed that thriving Jewish centers could be

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<sup>4</sup> Kaplan was influenced by Ahad Ha'am, the spokesperson for cultural Zionism, whose ideology emphasized the need to return to Israel so that Jewish culture and values could develop in a Jewish environment. He was also a supporter of the Political Zionism of Herzl that emphasized the immediate need to establish a nation-state that would be the physical salvation of the Jewish people.

<sup>5</sup> Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Judaism Without Supernaturalism* (New York: The Reconstructionist Press, 1967), p. 167.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Hirsh, *ibid* note 9.

established outside of Israel and that these centers would stand in mutual commitment and influence with the center in Israel.

Currently, 5 million Jews live in Israel and 5 million live in the United States, with another 3 million dispersed in communities throughout the globe, including a large center of 360,000 in Canada. In 20 years, Israel will have the largest Jewish community in the world. Today, despite growing cultural similarity due to the Americanization of Israel, North American and Israeli Jews do not always understand each other's realities. We don't speak the same language and Israeli culture, largely influenced by Middle-Eastern and European culture, is still very different from American culture. Nevertheless, the continued evolution of these two unique Jewish centers will enrich Jewish civilization as a whole. We must build stronger ties between people, share our cultures, intellectual ideas and new traditions and be mutually responsible for each other, to ensure a common future for the Jewish people across the globe.<sup>7</sup>

While Kaplan had hoped that Israel would be the center for Jewish revitalization, North America, where diverse Jewish communities and practices flourish, has been that center for decades. In contrast, orthodox hegemony in Israel has stifled pluralistic practices for years. In the past decade, however, there has been a tremendous increase in secular Israeli Jewish organizations experimenting with Jewish learning and new forms of Jewish practice. The result is both a process and product with much in common with Reconstructionist Judaism. North American and Israeli Jews can gain much by developing partnership programs involving different aspects of Jewish civilization. The fruits of our sharing would result in richer and more connected centers of the Jewish people.

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<sup>7</sup> "The Israel that the Jewish people is trying to build must take into account what is happening in other communities. We therefore have a responsibility for what is happening in the Caucasus the same as in Boston and as in Tel-Aviv and Sderot. If Israel had the responsibility to support the vitality of the Diaspora communities, the same responsibility falls on the North-American Jewish community. It is no longer the 'Israel-Diaspora' debate but one of the Jewish People. What is the reality of 13 million people and not what is Israel?" Paul Liptz, Tel-Aviv University Dept. of Middle East and African History and HUC-JIR Jerusalem, personal communication.

The task of reconstituting the Jewish people is urgent. What is at stake is the richness and continuity of our civilizational heritage, including 3000 years of Jewish learning, and furtherance of the values of peace, justice and equality. Redefining and recommitting to Zionism is a first step in that task. As Kaplan reflected, “Each time our ancestors, in formal assembly, knowingly and deliberately accepted certain principles and duties as governing them as a People, Judaism entered upon a new stage in its career. Whether those principles or duties were of long standing and self-evident or of recent origin, the very act of deliberate acceptance transformed them as a People and had the effect of a spiritual metamorphosis. We should, therefore, not be surprised, if as a result of a fully developed Zionist ideology that would be generally accepted by the Jewish People, it would experience a genuine renaissance.”<sup>8</sup>

In this spirit, the task force calls for a recommitment to Zionism on the part of JRF with the following statement:

**A New Zionism\***

**Statement by the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation  
Rosh Hashana 5765/September 2004**

The definition of Zionism below is based on a Reconstructionist understanding of Jewish peoplehood at the dawn of the 21st century. Its purpose is to reconstruct, in contemporary terms, an ideology that yielded one of the greatest achievements in all of Jewish history – the re-establishment of a sovereign Jewish homeland in Eretz Yisrael after 2000 years of wandering and to reaffirm the potential of Zionism as the national liberation movement of the Jewish people. The definition, crafted in the spirit of Mordecai Kaplan’s *A New Zionism*, first published in 1959, is offered with the conviction that Zionist ideology and commitments are essential for any maximalist Jewish identity in the contemporary era.

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<sup>8</sup> Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Judaism Without Supernaturalism*, *ibid* note 11, pp. 154-5.

A New Zionism affirms:

1. The unity of the Jewish people around the world, who consider Israel the birthplace of their heritage and the state of Israel the national home of the Jewish People.
2. The right to a sovereign state in the land of Israel that serves not only as a refuge for Jews facing oppression and persecution but also as a place where any Jew can create a national life more in harmony with Jewish history, culture and religion than any other place in the world.
3. A state of Israel that is founded on and governed by the prophetic ideals of equality, justice and peace.
4. A commitment to strengthen mutual ties and support between Jewish communities around the world and to preserve and enrich Jewish civilization through the fostering of lifelong Jewish and Hebrew education and of Jewish spiritual and cultural values.
5. A state of Israel that represents the Biblical promise of redemption and liberation to a Jewish people that has suffered historic persecution and is, as such, viewed by Jews, as a national homeland with sacred spiritual and religious significance.
6. The right of all Jews to live in accordance with their own beliefs and religious and cultural observances and obligations.
7. That, as important as is the creation of a Jewish homeland and society which utilizes all of the symbols, language and culture of the Jewish tradition, the state of Israel must also be committed to uphold equal rights and opportunities for all of its citizens, regardless of race, religion, nationality, gender and sexual orientation.
8. That Zionism represents a consciousness that can be actualized outside, as well as inside, the land of Israel and that aliyah is encouraged because only in the State of Israel are Jews fully autonomous and responsible for the physical and moral fate of the Jewish People.

\*The tenets above are based on the Jerusalem Program of 1968 adopted by the 27th World Zionist Congress

## **B. Communal Covenant**

The Reconstructionist statement on Zionism affirms a commitment to strengthen mutual ties and support between Jewish communities. If the purpose of such a commitment not only arises from the value of unity but also exists in order to reinvigorate the Jewish People, then this commitment must be made specific through the delineation of rights and obligations. Kaplan advocated continuing to convene the World Zionist Congress even after 1948, when Israel was established, in order to develop a code or constitution of general principles that would help Jews maintain their unity, status and high purpose. In this spirit, we propose the following covenantal set of rights and obligations in which the rights of each community is limited by its own obligations on the one hand, and the rights of the partner communities on the other.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Obligations of the Reconstructionist Community to the Jewish People:***

- To support the continued existence of the State of Israel as a democratic and Jewish state, and to promote the welfare and security of all communities of the Jewish People.
- To heighten the centrality of Israel, defining and implementing an agenda for our active engagement with its land and people that includes: facilitating opportunities for member communities to deal with Israel issues and concerns; creating Israel-related educational materials, ritual and liturgy; visiting Israel; increasing the study of Hebrew among all our members; encouraging aliyah; and advocacy on behalf of Israel consistent with Reconstructionist values.
- To support and advocate for implementation of a just and lasting peace between Israel and her neighbors, including the Palestinian people based on mutual self-determination and the preservation of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state. This obligation carries with it the right to exert influence, using democratic means, on the United States and Israel, and to support or dissent from official policies, publicly and privately, in a manner consistent with Reconstructionist values and

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<sup>9</sup> We acknowledge the tremendous efforts of individuals and organizations that have been working to achieve these goals for many years. See Jack J. Cohen, "Living in the Diaspora: Reconstructionists' Responsibilities," *The Reconstructionist*, 54:4, January-February 1989, p. 16.

the Israeli Declaration of Independence and Basic Laws, and in keeping with the Jewish value “*makhloket le-shem shamayim*” (dispute for the sake of heaven) as proper, given our position as a member community of the Jewish People.

- To assist in dialogue and reconciliation efforts between Jewish Israelis and Palestinian citizens of Israel and between Jews and Palestinians living outside of Israel.
- To advocate for equality for all of Israel’s citizens, Jewish and non-Jewish, and to support efforts to implement social change aimed at building a more just society.
- To support religious pluralism and equality in all communities of the Jewish People and to encourage Reconstructionist ideas, ideals and presence in Israel and other Jewish communities.
- To support, as able, charitable organizations in Israel and in the Diaspora which further the establishment of a just and equitable Israeli society.

***Obligations of Israel to the Jewish People:***

- To serve as a refuge for Jews in need.
- To be a spiritual, cultural and religious center of the Jewish People with a Jewish cultural environment expressed by Hebrew language, the celebration of Jewish festivals and marking of Shabbat, the advancement of Hebrew culture and the study of Jewish history and heritage, preserving the rich and diverse traditions of the many communities to whom Israel is home.
- To strengthen democratic institutions and to achieve social justice, civil rights and equality for all its citizens.
- To protect freedom of religion and religious pluralism, creating an environment in which individuals and communities can live according to their own beliefs and practices and to preserve holy sites of all religions with right of access to all.
- To preserve the environment of the land of Israel.
- To work together with other communities to forge meaningful connections of the Jewish people, including creating and participating in programs such

as reciprocal visits, mutual educational enrichment and engaging Israel experiences that enable Diaspora Jews to know Israelis in meaningful and diverse ways.