Recently, I found myself deeply engaged in theological conversation over a communal Shabbat meal on the campus of a small university. The undergraduate students there are led and served by a student rabbi from the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. She participates in our campus track, where rabbinical students augment their intensive Jewish studies with discussions of such matters as fostering autonomy among emerging adults and building community among an ever-shifting population.

In December, students and faculty were joined at services by several Jewish trustees of the university. I sat with one, secular and skeptical in orientation, who quizzed me about Reconstructionist approaches to theology. I described transnaturalism, understanding God as hamakom, wellspring of the universe, the force that infuses and ultimately surpasses all things. I explained process theology, experiencing godhood in the constant change and unfolding complexity of our world. I spoke about being open to immanence, encountering the divine in the faces of our families and friends. At each juncture, he nodded in somewhat surprised recognition, shared a few engaged comments, and asked yet another question. When I made explicit that I was talking about having relationship with a non-personal God, and expressly setting aside the idea of God as Commander or King, his energy shifted, and he tartly observed, “Well, how are you going to get anyone to do anything Jewish without those ideas? If we don’t have to do them, why would we?”

 Arthur Green eloquently describes the historical context that led to the eclipse of a conception of a personal, interventionist God, and points toward one path that illuminates for some a new rationale for intensive Jewish living. Green’s mystical piety works for some of the rabbinical students enrolled at RRC, though it does not for others, as it would not for my conversation partner over dinner that evening. Other rabbinical students burn with intensity to organize and work for justice, deeply sustained by the intersection of personal sanctity/tzelem elohim and social restructuring/tikkun olam. Still others discern their evolving relationships with God through sustained conversations with their spiritual directors, or in hevrutah with Jews—through our many text classes—and non-Jews—through our multi-faith offerings.

The major question our faculty has asked as we have revised the RRC curriculum in recent years is: How do we train rabbinical students as effective leaders for 21st century Jewish life? Fostering multiple approaches—in theology, in practice, in outlook—is at the foundation of our efforts and emerges from our continued commitment to the concept of Judaism as a civilization. This embrace of diversity is as relevant in our day as it was when Mordecai Kaplan formulated it as the founding insight of a Reconstructionist approach in the 1930s. Kaplan helped to create the reality of Jewish pluralism. We have a responsibility to train leaders who can sustain rich, substantive, and diverse expressions of Jewish life. Our students themselves are diverse, in their beliefs and practices. We educate them to serve the breadth of the Jewish people. We do not imagine that each of our graduates can serve all Jews in all their needs at all times. But it is non-negotiable that our graduates affirm multiple approaches to meaningful Jewish living, and do not insist on a single standard. Many of our students and graduates—and some of the people they serve—resonate with “essential forms and tropes of Jewish piety.” RRC’s Ritualwell.org offers powerful evidence that many are actively creating new forms and composing new tropes.

Like Kaplan, Green seeks unifying, inspirational language for being Jewish in an open environment. Writing in a period known as “the age of ideology,” Kaplan sought to unify and inspire Jewish life in the modern era through the creation of an all-encompassing approach that would capture the American Jewish imagination. Kaplan proposed the creation of an ideology around the concept of Judaism as the evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people, which would at once provide a common understanding and accommodate diversity. However, we no longer live in the age of ideologies. We live in the postmodern age of pastiche, when individuals are free to pick and choose from among a rich banquet of interests and spiritual expressions, where boundaries and identities are fluid. The Reconstructionist contributions

“civilization” and “peoplehood,” once radical, have become widely accepted. These terms continue to have resonance, but they do not necessarily point toward a visionary future. I join with Green in asking, what next? We need not set aside the empowering and sustaining insights that our long-standing conceptualizations give us, but we should not believe that they are sufficient to the 21st century. As the new president of RRC, I am inviting leaders to engage in this challenging and essential thought work.

The Reconstructionist movement has long been committed to democratization across Jewish life, insisting on education and advocating for empowerment of the Jewish people. This commitment has significant implications for rabbinic training. Many traditional Jewish metaphors—the building blocks of the myth that Green describes—break down. We do not propose that Reconstructionist rabbis are *marai d’atra*, halakhic decisors. We make explicit the break from the narrative of literal revelation at Sinai, and thus the claim of an unbroken chain of rabbinic authority emerging from that moment. We ask our rabbis to be compelling, without, as my dinner partner astutely observed, any of the compulsory power that the pre-modern myths offered. We are engaged in an extended experiment of conceptualizing Jewish leadership in a context that is both democratic and open. We ask rabbis to lead by being meaning makers, spiritual guides and accompaniers, educators and moral leaders.

The RRC rabbinical program is based on the belief that the point of being Jewish is to live lives of meaning and connection to each other, Jews and non-Jews like. Being Jewish orients us toward this kind of life and helps us to achieve it with Jewish tools and methods. We train our students in the rich breadth of modalities used by Jews who came before us—text, liturgy, culture, practice—and support them in efforts to develop new ones. We ask rabbinical students to engage directly in consideration of the divine, in multiple expressions. At the same time, we urge them to remember that belief in God is not a prerequisite for and should not be a barrier to throwing one’s lot in with the Jewish people. However it is experienced, Judaism aids us in becoming ethical human beings, living in partnership and building with others a just and ethical world.