Spirituality and the Language of Prayer

BY RICHARD HIRSH

Throughout the Jewish religious community, the current key word is "spirituality," by which any number of things seem to be meant. For some, "spirituality" is like the weather-everyone talks about it, but no one does anything about it. For others, "spirituality" is like art-we don't know much about it, but we know what we like. And for others, "spirituality" is akin to a judicial opinion about pornography, which suggested that "I don't know what it is, but I know it when I see it."

Reconstructionism, somewhat curiously, seems poised at the cutting edge of the current discussion. This is curious, owing to the fact that for any number of years, critics (and often adherents!) of Reconstructionism saw it as an essentially ethnic form of Jewish identification, in which God played a relatively minor role. "There is no God and Kaplan is his prophet" is the apocryphal reference which perhaps best typifies this attitude.

Notwithstanding this criticism, Reconstructionism as envisioned by Kaplan certainly had a great deal to say about God, even if what it had to say was not always clear. At the heart of the confusion lies the unresolved issue of whether there is in fact "a" or "the" Reconstructionist idea of God.

Movement or School of Thought?
The debate as to whether there is a "Reconstructionist" idea of God has a long parallel history with the debate as to whether Reconstructionism is a "movement" or a "school of thought." From the point of view of a "movement," Reconstructionism could fairly be understood to support a nonsupernaturalist theology. God was "the Power that makes for salvation," or, as Kaplan later explained it, a cosmic principle by which all things are simultaneously independent and interdependent. But God was by no means conceived in personal terms.

From the perspective of a school of thought, a framework whereby varying Jewish viewpoints could coexist, Kaplan supported theological pluralism, which of necessity incorporated various forms of "supernaturalism." Even as he published books with titles like Judaism Without Supernaturalism: The Only Alternative to Orthodoxy and Secularism, and leveled increasingly sharper attacks on traditional conceptions of God, Kaplan asserted that there could and would be differing ideas about God within contemporary Jewry.

As Reconstructionism emerged from a school of thought into a movement, the unresolved nature of this debate was transferred from the larger community to the movement. In addition to the issues of naturalism/supernaturalism with which Kaplan struggled, the conversation now includes issues of feminist thought, gender-neutral prayer language, neomysticism, neo-Hasidism, and a host of other concerns which Kaplan's version of Reconstructionism did not anticipate.

It was precisely Kaplan's insight that Judaism is the natural human product of the Jewish people-rather than the supernatural revelation of God--that made Reconstructionism a hospitable environment
for theological and liturgical experimentation. While respectful of tradition, Reconstructionism is also most able to incorporate often radical attempts at revising that tradition. As a relatively new movement, it is unburdened by decades of tradition; as a non-halakhic movement, it is unfettered by legalistic constraints; as a movement whose founder repeatedly breached religious conventions, it is willing to experiment.

**Slighting the Non-Supernatural**

Reconstructionism's innovative approach to contemporary spirituality often seems, however, to slight the non-supernatural affirmations of Reconstructionism. While there may be no "official" Reconstructionist idea of God. Reconstructionism has certainly been the main advocate for and representative of a non-personal theology. One would expect that in the current discussion of spirituality Reconstructionism would strongly represent that option.

The current Reconstructionist Friday evening prayerbook, Kol Haneshamah, offers a convenient point of reference for focusing this discussion. Within the pages of this Siddur, we find restored supernaturalism ("splitting the sea in front of Moses", p.87 and note there); neo-Hasidic reappropriation of the Song of Songs (p.16 and note there); neo-mystical meditations (pp.179 ff), and feminist liturgical reconstructions (pp.150 ff).

Surprisingly, what is not found is any attempt to de-personalize the Deity in the translations--an inconsistent anachronism that the new Reconstructionist prayerbook shares with its 1945 predecessor. Notwithstanding the fractionated Yah/appellation, the prayers are still addressed to a "You"--a gender-neutral, non-hierarchical, immanent-mystical "You", but a "You" nonetheless.

One searches in vain for a liturgical translation that reflects Kaplanian naturalism--one that dispenses with God as "You" and speaks about what it means to be godly. To be sure, there are nonpersonal supplementary meditations and readings in Kol Haneshamah, but such readings are not uniquely Reconstructionist; they are found in current Reform and Conservative liturgy as well.

The Reconstructionism that so often speaks of "godliness," is not as prominent in our new liturgy as the feminist and mystical innovations. Translations affirm God as the "You" "who makes the evenings fall;" "who loves your people Israel;" "who gives and renews life." For those seeking to correlate "the Power that makes for salvation" with the language of the prayerbook, some degree of cognitive dissonance may be assumed.

It is perhaps unfair to focus the discussion of God and spirituality solely on the Siddur, but as with the traditional prayerbook, so too with our own: what we say in prayer is probably the best anthology of our affirmations.

**Inheriting Kaplan's Inconsistency**

The problem of consistency derives from a paradoxical problem inherent in contemporary prayer. This problem is neatly summed up in the original preface to the 1945 Reconstructionist prayerbook, where two primary functions of prayer are outlined:
I. "The prayers of the Synagogue imply the will of the worshiper to become one with the collective being of the Jewish people and its spiritual aims ... Such oneness ... must mean that we are conscious of being members of the Jewish people ... we recognize the unity of Israel, past, present, and future ... Communal worship should be the occasion for thus immersing ourselves in the living reality of k/al Yisraei" (p.7).

2. "People expect a Jewish prayer book to express what a Jew should believe about God, Israel, and the Torah, and about the meaning of human life and the destiny of mankind ... Unless we eliminate from the traditional text statements of beliefs that are untenable, and of desires which we do not or should not cherish, we mislead the simple and alienate the sophisticated" (p.9).

A logical conclusion of the first assumption is that liturgical change is to be eschewed; how can we identify with klal Yisrael and participate in the unity of the Jewish people, if our tinkering with the prayers isolates or marginalizes us? (Consider, for example, the Reconstructionist Bar/Bat Mitzvah student whose Torah blessings are "different" from his/her friends - at an age when being different is often devastating!)

A logical conclusion of the second premise is that every outdated idea and every example of archaic thought ought to be eradicated in the pursuit of intellectual honesty.

The awkwardness of the 1945 Reconstructionist prayerbook reflects the indecisiveness of the editors regarding this conundrum. Certain ideas dropped out, apparently for the sake of supporting what was regarded as "true or right" - there is no "splitting of the sea before Moses." But the essential format of the prayerbook, notably the translations, is left intact. It is a "conversation theology," in which God is addressed as a "You" (actually, a "Thou").

Notwithstanding Kaplan's withering attacks on supernaturalism, the 1945 prayerbook offered the uninitiated worshiper a rather traditional format - certainly not a message for those seeking a non-supernatural theology. While the new Reconstructionist prayerbook has overcome some of the intellectual rigidity of the 1945 version, for the uninitiated worshipper looking for a non-supernatural spirituality, the problem remains the same.

Reconstructionism has created a paradox: we retain the bulk of the traditional Hebrew prayers for the sake of identification and continuity, while affirming that many of us mean something quite different by the term "God" than the conversation theology of the English translations suggests.

**Religious Naturalism**

Rabbi Alan Miller framed the theological issue in this way: "Reconstructionist Judaism is religious naturalism. God to our way of thinking is not a person who stands over against the universe he has created. The term God is rather the name we give to the interpersonal process of growth and creativity that takes place naturally among men and women striving towards authentic fulfillment. Reconstructionism, in short, preaches godliness rather than God."
One can be a member of a Reconstructionist congregation and affirm a personal, supernatural God; after all, for decades, Reconstructionists were members of Conservative and Reform synagogues while affirming a non-personal naturalistic God! No one suggests, or at least no one should suggest, a theological litmus test by which one attains Reconstructionist certification.

But the larger issue is: in the quest for spirituality which is at the center of much of contemporary Jewish life, has Reconstructionism missed the opportunity to send a clear message of religious naturalism? If we "preach godliness," then should we not say so, loudly and dearly, most especially in our Siddur?

It is a valuable development that the editors of the new prayerbook were able to reappropriate much of what was removed from the 1945 edition. This shows a healthy appreciation for the richness of poetry and metaphor, and a respect for the non-rational (as opposed to irrational) elements of religious experience. There is much in Kol Haneshamah that indeed speaks to the contemporary search for spirituality.

But there is also much that was missed, specifically the opportunity to couch in non-personal, reflective poetry the sense of the traditional Hebrew prayers. It should not be the responsibility of the simple, nor the burden of the sophisticated to process intellectually the conversation theology of the prayerbook so that "Blessed are You, Guardian, Israel's redeeming power" comes out something like, 'In moments of redemption, we become witnesses to and partners in the work of freedom.'

Belief in God/Conceptions of God

Mordecai Kaplan's most significant contribution to contemporary discussions of spirituality lies in his crucial distinction between belief in God and conceptions of God. "The belief in God is the intuitive experience of cosmic Power upon which we depend for our existence and self-fulfillment. ... the particular conception of God is a cultural formulation of that belief. It varies with the particular stage of man's intellectual and social development."

Reconstructionism like Orthodoxy, Conservatism, and Reform, can absorb a variety of conceptions of God; mystical, feminist, meditative, even personal. But Reconstructionism alone has been willing to endorse, validate, and promote a non-supernatural and non-personal theological vocabulary for those Jews who seek it.

For the sake of Jewish continuity, out of a respect for the sancta of tradition, and in the interests of klal Yisrael I would also argue that it is imperative to retain the admittedly male-oriented formula, barukh ata Adonay in contrast to the experimental nevarekh et eyn ha-hayyim ("Let us bless the well of life") or other formulations suggested by Marcia Falk. When we davven in Hebrew, we are, to use a formulation suggested by Rabbi Alan Miller, offering quotations, declaiming the words of our ancestors in order to fulfill the need to belong.

However, what we pray in English ought to reflect, as the preface to the 1945 prayerbook suggested, what we as modern Jews can affirm. There is nothing wrong with using the word "God," perhaps the most important prism through which we refract our intuitive experience of the Divine. But
the primary function of English in our prayerbook should be to paraphrase in non-personal and
c nonsupernatural terms the theme, insight, or feeling of the corresponding Hebrew prayer -not to offer a
translation that obscures the uniqueness of the Reconstructionist conception of God.

Translation or Paraphrase?

Consider the following English versions of the second benediction of the Amidah:

1. "You are forever powerful, Mighty One abundant in your saving acts. In loyalty you sustain
all the living, nurture the life of every living thing: uphold those who fall, heal the sick, free the
 captive, and remain faithful to all life held dormant in the earth. Who can compare to you, almighty
God, who can resemble you, the source of life and death, who makes salvation grow! Faithful are you
in giving life to every living thing. Blessed are You, Reviver, who gives and renews life."

2. "We pray we might encounter the Power whose gift is life, Who quickens those who have
forgotten how to live on earth. We pray for love that will encompass us for no reason save that we are
human. For the love through which defeated souls may blossom into persons able to determine their
own lives. We pray to stand upright. we fallen to be healed, we sufferers of the sickness of our kind; we
pray that we might break the bonds that keep us from ourselves. We pray that we might walk within the
garden of a life of purpose, touched by the Power of the world, touching the meaning of the earth.
Praised be God whose gift is life, who quickens those who have forgotten how to live on earth."

The first is the translation from Kol Haneshamah, while the second is a paraphrase from the
High Holiday Mahzor On Wings Of Awe, edited by Rabbi Richard Levy. Levy's version reflects the
approach to English prayer that Kol Haneshamah, might have adopted, reflecting more clearly the
function of English prayer in a Reconstructionist setting.

In making the choice to render the English in a faithful (and elegant) translation, the editors of
Kol Haneshamah provided valuable access to the original Hebrew, but missed an opportunity to
articulate the distinctiveness of Reconstructionist theology.

In its attempt to be "liturgically correct." Kol Haneshamah incorporated a variety of spiritual
approaches, in a hierarchy that seems to have placed non-sexist language, feminist interpretations, and
neo-Hasidic/mystical interpretations in descending order of priority. While all of these reflect important
concerns and Kol Haneshamah is to be applauded for the courage to incorporate them such innovations
could have had a still greater impact had they been couched in naturalistic language that reflects our
uniqueness.

The contemporary quest for spirituality reflects a deep need for meaning and value. A
vocabulary that can offer hope, inspiration, and comfort to modern Jews is indispensable in responding
to that need. Perhaps not everyone in this "generation of seekers" is in need of a nonsupernatural and
non-personal approach to God; but surely many are. If we in the Reconstructionist movement do not
provide the vocabulary for those Jews, no one else will.


5. "New Blessings: Toward a Feminist-Jewish Reconstruction of Prayer," *The Reconstructionist* 53 (Dec .. 1987), 10-15, 22; see also the essay by Falk in the current volume,


Richard Hirsh is rabbi of the Jewish Reconstructionist Congregation, Evanston, Illinois. (1994)

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