



**RECONSTRUCTING  
JUDAISM**



**Reconstructionist  
RABBINICAL ASSOCIATION**

# Values-Based Decision Making Through a Reconstructionist Lens

## Text used or cited in this discussion

### Values-Based Decision Making

Values-based decision making (VBDM) has become a catch phrase in Reconstructionist circles, reflecting a desire to develop an orderly and valid process for individuals and groups to decide upon their policies, procedures and behavior. The need for a system as self-consciously considered as VBDM grows out of several realities. Most Jews no longer consider themselves to be bound by *halakha* and will not simply accept the opinion of a rabbi. Indeed, most liberal rabbis do not consider themselves bound by the decisions of the rabbis' rabbi.

Furthermore, most Jews know they are living in a society that does not reflect an ethical orientation with which they fully agree. Most Jews are seeking an approach closer to their own moral outlook, an outlook partly shaped by their Jewish backgrounds. VBDM provides a way of thinking through and expressing our commitments, allowing us to create ground to stand on. It has been used with- in the Reconstructionist movement for 20 years and is most recently embodied in *A Guide to Jewish Practice*.

### **8 Step Decision Making Process**

1. Determine facts, alternative actions and their outcomes.
2. Examine relevant scientific and social scientific approaches to understanding these.
3. Consider the historical and contemporary context, including the history and rationales of Jewish practice.
4. Look for norms that might exclude some actions.
5. Assemble and weigh relevant attitudes, beliefs and values.
6. Formulate decision alternatives.
7. Seek consensus (if a group is deciding).
8. Make the decision.

## Tzedekah

The word *tzedaka*, often translated as “charity,” comes from the Hebrew root *zedek*, meaning “justice.” Its current usage was developed by the early rabbis, who recognized that the distribution of resources that results from a free-market economy must be adjusted by other means to ensure a fair society. *Tzedaka* is an expression of justice rather than mercy; its purpose is to create a fairer distribution of resources. Doing *tzedaka* restores justice.

This attitude stems from the belief that we are stewards of the property we control rather than its owners. The real owner of the property is its Creator. “*Ladonay ha’aretz um’lo’o*; the earth and all that is in it belong to God.” (Psalms 24:1) When we acknowledge God’s ownership, we become more grateful for what we have and more openhearted in our willingness to share our blessings with our fellow creatures. Anyone who produces worth in the world has a partner in the Creator, who owns the means of production. Furthermore, Jews have a commitment to community that stresses mutual obligation.

Is this Jewish understanding affected by the specifics of individual theologies? Some understand God either as a Being with a will for particulars, or exclusively as a metaphor, or as the Unifying Principle of the universe, or in some other way. These differences do not change the fundamental Jewish idea that being part of the world generates obligations. Everything we accomplish derives from what we have received culturally and materially, starting with the gift of life itself. The challenge of *tzedaka* is to decide how much and where to give in light of the needs of others and of society as a whole, and in light of individuals’ resources and capacity to generate further resources. The goal of maximizing the just distribution of resources should guide us in meeting this challenge.

### **Charitable giving: A five-part series on more effective philanthropy**

As the year approaches its end, lots of people begin to think about charitable giving. Unfortunately, this means that many people are rushing around trying to cram a year’s worth of giving back into one of the busiest months of all. If this is you, maybe it’s time to consider developing a well-planned, strategic, year-round approach to charitable giving.

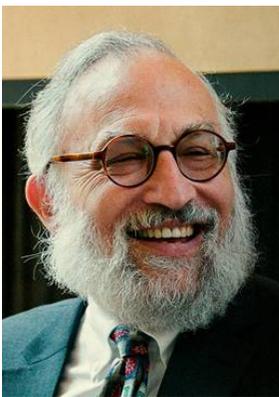
- [Part One: Why Should I Give?](#)
- [Part Two: How Much Should I Give?](#)
- [Part Three: Who Should I Give To?](#)
- [Part Four: How Can I Make Giving A Meaningful Part of My Life?](#)
- [Part Five: How Can I Maximize the Tax Benefits of Giving?](#)

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**For further Reading:**

- [Teutsch, Rabbi David A. "Decision Making." A Guide to Jewish Practice, Volume 1: Everyday Living, Reconstructionist Press, 2011, pp. 551-563.](#)
- Lev, Sarra. "They Treat Him As a Man and See Him As a Woman: The Tannaitic Understanding of the Congenital Eunuch." *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2010, pp. 213-243., doi:10.1628/094457010792912820.
- [Teutsch, Rabbi David A. "Tzedeka" A Guide to Jewish Practice, Volume 1: Everyday Living, Reconstructionist Press, 2011, pp. 405-471.](#)
- [Teutsch, Zach. "Charitable Giving: A Five Part Series on More Effective Philanthropy." Values Added Financial, 2 Dec. 2020, valuesaddedfinancial.com/charitable-giving-part-one/.](#)

## Speaker Bios, Texts and Sources

**Rabbi David Teutsch, Ph.D., The Louis and Myra Wiener Professor Emeritus of Contemporary Jewish Civilization and Senior Consultant to Levin-Lieber Program in Jewish Ethics and for Congregational Services**



**Rabbi David Teutsch** is the Wiener Professor of Contemporary Civilization Emeritus at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, where he was the founding director of the Center for Jewish Ethics. He served as president of RRC from 1993 to 2002, following appointments as executive vice president and dean of admissions. A widely known author, lecturer and organizational consultant, Rabbi Teutsch edited the award-winning three-volume series, *A Guide to Jewish Practice* from the Reconstructionist Press (2011,2014). He is also the author of *Making a Difference: A Guide to Jewish Leadership and Not-for-Profit Management* (2009)

and *Spiritual Community: The Power to Restore Hope, Community and Joy* (Jewish Lights, 2005). He is the editor-in-chief of the groundbreaking seven-volume *Kol Haneshamah* prayer book series (Reconstructionist Press, 1989, 1991, 1992, 1994, 1996, 1999, 2001) and of *Imagining the Jewish Future* (SUNY Press, 1992). He is a past president of the Academic Coalition for Jewish Bioethics and of the Society of Jewish Ethics. He holds honorary degrees from the Jewish Theological Seminary, Hebrew Union College, and Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. A graduate of Harvard University, Rabbi Teutsch received his Master of Hebrew Letters and rabbinic ordination from the Hebrew Union College-Jewish

Institute of Religion in New York City and earned his Ph.D. at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, where his work focused on organizational ethics.

### **Zach Teutsch, Founder, Values Added Financial**



**Zach Teutsch** founded Values Added Financial to help clients live more fulfilling lives by making wise financial, career, and other life decisions. Before he launched Values Added Financial, Zach developed the first national financial empowerment programs in the labor movement and reached several hundred thousand union members. After that, he joined the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau where he was a subject matter expert on financial education and empowerment. Zach has taught investment and financial planning topics to groups all around the country and has served individual clients for 15 years. His financial perspectives have been featured in the New York Times, Vox, Forbes, Recode, and The Billfold. He has taught at the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute, National Labor College, Tzedek DC, Jews United for Justice, The DCJCC, 6th+1, the National Havurah Institute, and for dozens of unions and union locals.

Zach lives with his family in the Petworth section of Washington DC, where he is the former chairperson of the Advisory Neighborhood Commission. He is active in progressive politics and recently led Councilmember Janeese Lewis George's successful run for office as a champion who puts people first. Zach loves parenting, playing ultimate frisbee, baking, and the joy/agonies of life as a Philadelphia sports fan. He is a former board member of the National Havurah Committee and the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation, a precursor to Reconstructing Judaism. He graduated from Brown University with honors and concentrations in Economic Sociology and Organizational Behavior.