

Rooted and Relevant: 21st Century Jewish Life

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**RECONSTRUCTING
JUDAISM**

Deeply rooted. Boldly relevant.

Challenges of Modernity

- Rise of scientific thinking/rationalism
- Emergence of modern nation-state
- Separation between Judaism (religion) and Jewishness (culture/identity)

Reconstructionism

Reconstructionism defines Judaism as “the evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people”

(Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan, 1881-1983)

- Nouns:

Judaism is “the evolving religious **civilization** of the Jewish **people**”

- Adjectives:

Judaism is “the **evolving religious** civilization of the **Jewish** people”

Reconstructing Judaism

- [Central organization](#)
- Five major areas:
 - Train moral leaders
 - Support, connect and represent affiliated communities
 - Invest in innovation, especially online
 - [Ritualwell.org](#)
 - Represent a Reconstructionist perspective in the public square
 - [Evolve.reconstructingjudaism.org](#)
 - [Cultivate resilience](#)

COVID-19 and After

- Religious revival
- What comes next after COVID?

Midwifing a New Paradigm

- Larger context
 - Breakdown in civil discourse
 - Rise in populism
- Promoting “covenantal conversation”
 - Sacred listening
 - Values-based speaking
 - Openness to transformation
- Defending democracy

Racial Justice as Vital Jewish Work

- Seeing every person as *בצלם אלוהים/Betzelem Elohim*
- Embracing worldwide Jewish peoplehood, including full range of diversity
- Doing our part in America's racial reckoning—internally and in the wider world
- Strengthen coalitions so that we can seek support in fighting antisemitism

Rising Antisemitism

- The internet's role in centering extremist views and connecting adherents to each other
- Extreme disruption causing fear, radicalization
- Rise of Christian nationalism in America

Chosenness and Racial Justice

Many Jews today want to help rid our society of systemic racism and serve as good allies to communities of color. But in addition to the required “homework” that we have to do as White Americans to root out the many ways that White privilege reinforces the marginalization of people of color in all sectors of society, we also have homework to do as American Jews. The chosen people idea may strike us as benign and a source of ethnic pride. Yet if we understand the extent to which ethnocentrism perpetuates a belief in a hierarchy of human worth (Jewish superiority), then we must recognize that the idea of “chosenness” is a barrier to a world in which every human being is seen as made in the image of God, worthy of respect and honor. In *The Dignity of Difference*, Jonathan Sacks challenges his readers “to see the face of God in those who are not ‘in our image’”.

Rabbi Sid Schwarz, *The Times of Israel*

Responses to Existential Threats

- Resilience
- Values/middot—especially ענוה /humility
- Practices
- Deep understanding of interdependence/interconnection
- Texts on sustainability
- Theology

Theology

“The world contains a primal chaos whose destructive power rises up again and again in history and in the life of each person; it is a realm that cannot be subsumed under the Divine.”

Rabbi Edward Feld, *The Spirit of Renewal*

Nonpersonal Metaphors for God (A very partial list)

- God as source of life
- God as the ground of being of the universe
- God as the source of goodness, creativity, interconnection
- God as unfolding process
- God as wellspring, God as rock
- God as “the power that makes for salvation and freedom” (Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan)

Predicate Theology

- Not “God (Subject) is Merciful (predicate)”
- Rather, when we see mercy (predicate), we can know that godliness, the quality of the Divine, is present

Rabbi Harold Schulweis

- Not “Where is God?” but “When is God”

Rabbi Dennis Sasso

- “Look for the helpers.”

Rabbi Fred Rogers

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ReconstructingJudaism.org



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