

Reconstructionism

By Mark Nazimova

Reconstructionism is a movement within Judaism--like the Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox movements--that was founded in America at the beginning of this century. It sees Judaism as the evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people. Reconstructionists value Jewish culture and its rich tapestry of meaning, and combine this with a modern outlook. We are committed to understanding our tradition, while keeping an open and questioning attitude that allows for change.

While belief and practice are important to Reconstructionists, we see the central defining characteristic of Judaism as peoplehood--the fact that we are all one people with a shared history, a common yet multifaceted culture, and a related future. Different Jews have different ways of expressing their Jewishness--through religion, study, social and political projects, and cultural activities, among others. The common umbrella of Jewish peoplehood has room for spirituality and secularism, innovation and orthodoxy, Israel and the Diaspora. Like a family, we are all members of the Jewish people; and as a people, we are an integral part of the human family.

Reconstructionism continues to influence all streams of Judaism, especially the Reform and Conservative movements. Looking at one example--the status of women--we established the Bat Mitzvah observance, pioneered birth rituals for girls, and have always been at the forefront of living an egalitarian Judaism, in which Jews of both genders and all backgrounds participate in all aspects of communal Jewish life.

You can find out more about the Reconstructionist approach to Judaism here, or by coming to a service or class at West End.

Rosh HaShanah Themes

Before we consider what is special about our observance of Rosh HaShanah at West End Synagogue, this is a good time to think about the meaning and themes of the Holy Day.

1. Repentance

It is said that God judges each of us at Rosh HaShanah and seals our fate on Yom Kippur. This period is an opportunity to examine how we have fallen short in our lives during the past year, how we have transgressed against God, against others, and against ourselves. We repent turning aside from what we knew to be right.

Repentance involves more than prayer. If our sins have been against other people, we must try to put right the wrong that we have done to them. As the Talmud says about the process of repentance and atonement:

For transgressions between human beings and God, Yom Kippur effects atonement; but for transgressions between a person and his fellow, Yom Kippur effects atonement only if he has made peace with his fellow.

2. Return

Another major theme is that of teshuva--turning, or returning. Having repented, we turn from our shortcomings and return to our ideals, to healed relationships with those around us, and to God.

3. New Year

Rosh HaShanah literally means "the head of the year." As the prayer book proclaims each time the shofar is blown, hayom harat olam, "Today is the birthday of the world." Today it is as if the world were being created all over again; at this moment, all things are possible, for our tradition views creation as a continuous process, not a completed event. Rosh HaShanah gives us the opportunity to begin again, to join with family, friends, and community in searching for a better way to live our lives.

4. God

The Holy Day liturgy--particularly the musaf amidah--emphasizes three themes highlighting different aspects of God:

Sovereignty (malkhuyot). The kingship or sovereignty of God, an underlying theme in Judaism, is a major theme of Rosh HaShanah--the time when we are most aware of our relationship to a power greater than ourselves.

Remembrance (zikhronot). God remembers the good and bad that we have done, as well as the covenant made with us at Sinai. This theme also points to the power of human memory, as Theodore Gaster notes:

"Memory defies oblivion, breaks the coils of the present, establishes the continuity of the generations, rescues human life from futility. It affords the only true resurrection of the dead."

Shofar (shofarot). The shofar is associated with key divine events, including the revelation at Sinai and the redemption yet to be.

5. Origins

The earliest mention of Rosh HaShanah--in the Torah--refers to it as Yom Teruah (the Day of Sounding the Shofar) and Yom HaZikaron (the Day of Remembering). The Torah gives us few hints of what was being celebrated or remembered:

In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe complete rest, a sacred occasion commemorated with loud blasts [of the shofar]. You shall not work at any of your occupations; and you shall bring an offering by fire to the Lord. (Lev. 23:24-25)

By Talmudic times, the Holy Day had its current name--Rosh HaShanah--along with its current significance as the New Year and a time of repentance.

While we don't know when or how this transformation happened, many scholars think that some of these attributes were post-Biblical additions which show the influence of a Babylonian divine coronation festival celebrated in the fall, which the Israelites would have experienced first-hand during the Babylonian exile if not earlier. In this view, the theme of malkhuyot transforms the Babylonian idea of obedience to the king into the Jewish idea of obedience to the one true King, God.

6. Rosh HaShanah at West End

Now that we've reviewed Rosh HaShanah and Reconstructionism, we can consider what is special about our observance of Rosh HaShanah here at West End.

7. Intention and Meaning

The biggest difference between our observance and more traditional ones involves how we think about the Holy Day, and what the Holy Day means to us. This has much to do with the Reconstructionist approach to God and to halakha (the body of Jewish law).

8. God

God is never a simple subject, and Jews in different times and places have seen God in different ways: consider the midrashic writer's Shekhinah (divine presence) weeping in exile, the medieval philosopher's unchanging One, and the kabbalist's sefirot (divine emanations).

Reconstructionists follow diverse approaches to God, whom we understand to be a Power greater than ourselves. We are all likely to agree that there is not a supernatural deity like the one described in Jewish tradition who authored the Torah and directly intercedes in the world and human history.

Some understand God as the power that makes for salvation in the world; others identify God with our highest aspirations and ideals; still others shift the emphasis from God to Godliness, finding it more fruitful to remind themselves that justice is Godly than to argue about the nature of God. Some Reconstructionists always think of God in this non-supernatural way; others find it more meaningful, when they pray or perform rituals, to imagine a more personal God. And while these are "mainstream" Reconstructionist views, we are an inclusive movement welcoming people ranging from atheists to those believing in an active spiritual entity.

What follows from this is that when we read traditional Rosh HaShanah prayers referring to God, we understand "God" to refer to the power that makes for salvation, or to our highest ideals poetically personified. We retain the traditional language to maintain continuity and empathy with those who have come before us, and to emphasize the bonds that we share with the wide-ranging Jewish community today.

9. Halakha

While halakha is often thought of today as a rigid unchanging body of law, Reconstructionists see it as the Jewish process of sanctifying and transmitting tradition. Halakha has always adapted itself to the changing needs of the Jewish people. The tradition that it transmits is important: it is the accumulated wisdom of our forebears and provides a golden strand of continuity from their experience and wisdom to our lives today. We also recognize that we live in different circumstances and have a different view of the world, and so this tradition--this halakha--has a vote, but not a veto.

This brings us to another special aspect of Rosh HaShanah at West End. We celebrate the Holy Day not because halakha is absolutely binding upon us, but because we value the opportunity: the opportunity for spiritual renewal, the opportunity to recognize our mistakes and then leave them behind in the old year and start afresh, the opportunity to mark the season and the cycle of time as our people have for thousands of years. The more you study the Holy Day and participate in its observance, the more opportunities you can find and experience.

10. Composing the Service

One of the central principles of Reconstructionism is the active participation of the congregation. What does this mean for our Holy Day service? While we base our service on the traditional liturgy and forms of practice, we also examine the meaning of the Holy Day and its significance to us today, and--lay members of the congregation together with the Rabbi and Cantor--creatively shape our congregational observance. This is an ongoing process that we engage in each year.

11. The Makhzor

Our makhzor (Holy Day prayer book) is similar to the traditional one, but introduces changes designed to encourage your participation and to reflect contemporary Reconstructionist thought. All communally-spoken prayers are transliterated, and the English text is gender-neutral. The traditional prayers are complemented by new Hebrew and English liturgy, and the service is

illuminated by traditional and contemporary commentary interspersed throughout the book. While the makhzor is accessible to those finding their way into Judaism, it has also proven to be inspiring for those who are familiar with the liturgy.

Ultimately, though, the key difference goes beyond anything found on the pages of the traditional and Reconstructionist makhzorim: what is definitive is the perspective of the person reading it. We take the golden strand of traditional meaning and historical continuity and, using the Reconstructionist approach, further the growth of living Jewish culture by weaving something that is meaningful in our lives today.