

What makes Oseh Shalom a Reconstructionist Congregation?

Since its founding more than thirty years ago as the Jewish Congregation of Laurel, Oseh Shalom has seen several dramatic changes. Its membership located its first Rabbi, joined the Reconstructionist Movement, designed and established a beautiful synagogue, and, more recently, chose a successor to its first Rabbi.

In the past year or so, Rabbi Haifetz and the leadership reviewed various aspects of the synagogue. They developed a Mission Statement, which described Oseh Shalom as “a vibrant, inclusive Reconstructionist synagogue . . . dedicated to providing a supportive community for celebrating Jewish life through prayer, learning and social action.” Next, they held a series of “vision forums”. While each meeting had its own agenda with specific topics for discussion, two concerns arose repeatedly. One was quantitative: membership rolls and enrollment in the Religious School were decreasing, and not coincidentally, funding was down. The other was qualitative: Congregants felt that there was a distance within segments of the Congregation. Too few people seemed actively engaged, and Oseh Shalom’s status as a Reconstructionist synagogue had little or no meaning to all but a small minority. One person noted that, while people often declare how much they love the sense of community at Oseh Shalom, few are aware that Reconstructionism informs this atmosphere.

Even before the series of forums had ended, members of the Executive Board began contacting congregants to get their input. The recruitment of prospective members became more visible. New technologies are being deployed to improve communication among members and to generate interest from prospective members.

Although no action carries a guarantee of success, these steps do not address the overarching problem. Increased participation and increased membership may provide the power to change the trajectory of Oseh Shalom. To bring about the vitality that the Congregation seeks will require a substantial change in the current educational model. A profound commitment to the Congregation’s Reconstructionist values must become the first priority.

The need for this commitment has two related causes rooted in the history of the Reconstructionist Movement. Over the centuries, European Jews developed traditions in reaction to constant threats to their existence. The survival of Jews and of Judaism required strong group identification, and observing ritual provided the clearest demonstration of this identity. As each generation came to America, however, they learned that there were no institutional restrictions in their new home. The law gave them the right to worship as Jews and the freedom not to worship at all. Many soon shed their culture, European and Jewish, to join the American mainstream.

With the observance of ritual so embedded in their cultural memory, European Jews in America struggled to find the balance between the traditions developed in the shadows of intolerance and the opportunities granted in the American Age of Enlightenment. By the early 20th Century, the American Reform Movement, consciously American, established the first American seminary. Students and teachers searched for the boundaries where Jewish identity could be maintained within a modern American life. Concerned that these reforms were

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destroying Judaism, opponents established the Jewish Theological Seminary. Soon thereafter, controversy developed over its leaders' views of the proper balance. Those who rejected the march of modernity formed the Orthodox Movement and left the JTS to the newly-named Conservative Movement.

In the midst of this debate at the JTS, Mordecai Kaplan developed a set of ideas that exploded the dynamic of ritual versus enlightenment. Viewing modernity as beneficial, progressive, and inspired by ancient Hebrews, Rabbi Kaplan identified Judaism as more than a religion composed of rituals to be memorized and obeyed. While, for centuries in Europe and America, Jews had retreated into the shell of religion as a way to appear less threatening and less foreign, Rabbi Kaplan declared that Jewish identity was more than the observation of ritual. He conceived of Judaism as the expression of Jewish values through social action, education, and prayer. He called on Jews to reconstruct Judaism for the modern, American world.

The Reconstructionist vision of Judaism as more than a religion and of a synagogue as more than a house of worship swept through all of American Judaism. Changing the meaning of Jewish was Rabbi Kaplan's but establishing a separate movement was not. Only after generations of American Jews had established themselves in Reform or Conservative synagogues, did Reconstructionism establish its own seminary. As a result, more than 9 in 10 affiliated American Jews belong to one or the other, and only 1 in 100 is a member of a Reconstructionist congregation.

Reconstructionist synagogues thus have two more challenges than the majority of congregations. On the one hand, Reconstructionist Judaism requires the active investigation and expression of Jewish values. On the other, our Jewish experiences are far more likely to have been the product of membership in a Conservative or Reform synagogue. Thus, consistent with the boldness of Oseh Shalom's founders, the current members must undertake similar boldness in seeking to reinvigorate the congregation by strengthening our commitment to Reconstructionist Judaism.

Moved by what I'd learned at the forums and by my own interest in the development of American Judaism, I recently participated in my first meeting of the Education Committee. Less than a week later, I attended, with our Religious School Director, a conference of the *Initiative in Congregational Education* of the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington. One speaker presented a study of American congregations. Another described bold, new models for learning. While no synagogue had the precise solution for Oseh Shalom, the ideas and actions of these synagogues offer great promise. They experienced problems similar to those addressed at our forums, yet they found ways to engage their congregations' children and adults.

For Oseh Shalom, the need to focus on education is critical. Commitment to this idea requires a radical departure from the present methods for teaching our adults and children. The Religious School, in its present form, should be replaced with a Congregation-wide, multi-age, multi-discipline model for teaching and learning. While this proposal is merely intended to start the discussion, there are a few conceptual blocks upon which to build:

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(1) Education is an activity. It occurs when teachers learn and learners teach. By contrast is this invitation, found on the web site of a nearby synagogue:

Being an adult seems to entail lots of responsibilities - too many in my view. That's why I like taking Adult Education classes! I can feel like a twenty-year-old student again. All I have to do is to show up and listen. Such a pleasure, nu?

Sitting passively is not consistent with the ways that Judaism developed.

(2) Jewish rituals are part of our history, and the observance of ritual should be explained within the context of our history. Conversely, observing ritual is not an expression of a heightened form of Judaism. It is a choice which may or may not be consistent with important Jewish values. Whether a Jew observes a ritual may say no more about his or her Judaism than whether a presidential candidate's failure to wear a flag lapel indicates an absence of patriotism.

(3) Children and adults should, with some exceptions, learn together. Large concepts are grasped by the vast majority of people at every age. More important, if the goal is the expansion of learning throughout the Congregation, helping younger members to feel comfortable with Jewish values will benefit all of us. Further, children treat education with greater respect when they observe all ages participating. Certainly, parents will determine the limits on their children's participation when mature themes are presented.

(4) Education is the Congregation's responsibility. As one synagogue did, Oseh Shalom should abolish "School" and "tuition". Money need for education should be part of membership dues. As a corollary, participation in an educational program at Oseh Shalom requires membership.

At this point, my goal is not to present a fully designed model for education within Oseh Shalom. The goal is to start a meaningful discussion about the need for changing the present course of the Congregation. Taking a bold step offers Oseh Shalom the best chance to produce a more meaningful Jewish life for this generation and the next.