



# Reconstructionism A to Z

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Sponsored by Tzedek v'Shalom, a Reconstructionist congregation in Bucks County, PA.

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Inspired by and adapted from the book *Exploring Judaism: A Reconstructionist Perspective*, by Rebecca T. Alpert and Jacob J. Staub.

**W**hile there is no such thing as a “standard” Reconstructionist profile or set of laws, there are characteristics that define the generally shared Reconstructionist point of view. The list below represents guidelines that can help us understand the values and concepts begun by Mordecai Kaplan, furthered by modern Reconstructionist communities, and upon which we can build our own communities.

**Activism** – Primary tenets of the Reconstructionist movement are the values of justice (*tzedek*) and peace (*shalom*). As such, we remain activists in the pursuit of both in all aspects of society. We look at justice in the context of fairness—that is, all human beings are worthy of *respect* and *opportunity*. Thus we are active proponents of equal rights and opportunities for women, gay men and lesbians, people with disabilities, minorities, and others who need our support. Likewise, Reconstructionist congregations are committed and passionate regarding concepts such as *tzedakah* (charity) and *tikkun olam* (healing the world).

**By Choice** – To be “Jewish by choice” is a core concept of Reconstructionism. We want people to pursue an active role in Judaism for the sake of identity, not out of a sense of obligation or commandment. Whether it’s regarding the subject of rituals, traditions, or other aspects of Judaism, we want them to be drawn because they are compelled, not because they’re coerced. We want them to be drawn because of the richness of Jewish heritage, the depths of Jewish spirituality, the beauty of Jewish poetry and art, or the sensibility of Jewish ethics and law.

**Community** – In Reconstructionist congregations, community is at the heart of everything we do. We believe that *belonging* must come before *behaving* and *believing*. We believe that a community can influence its members, not by coercion or exhortation, but through immersion. By way of engagement, involvement, and enrichment, Reconstructionist communities support their members’ embracement of Judaism in the areas of study, ethical practice, and rituals. We look to Jewish tradition and values, our shared community values, and our own personal values for direction and ethical guidance. We embark together on journeys of discovery and acts of social responsibility. And we support and nurture each other. Community is our lifeblood.



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**Democratic** – Reconstructionist communities embrace the democratic process. We employ a participative decision-making process that considers individual differences while also establishing community norms. According to the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation (JRF), a Reconstructionist values-based decision making process includes:

- Study of Jewish sources and practice.
- Study of current information from the social and natural sciences.
- Reflection on values.
- Analysis of the impact of each possible decision on each affected party.

The process is democratic and inclusive, with as many participants as possible. In a study of traditional and contemporary sources about decision making, one JRF committee formulated a ten-step model for decision-making that can be employed in a number of areas:

1. Appoint a committee that reflects all the views and constituencies of the congregation.
2. Create a trusting atmosphere.
3. Examine the congregation's mission and underlying values.
4. Determine who will be affected by the decisions.
5. Consider the issues in membership, ritual and governance.
6. Explore which values pertain and which values conflict in each area.
7. Select appropriate means to educate the congregation (including the board) once the committee arrives at a series of positions.



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8. Vote on the positions at the committee and board levels.
9. Make policies available to all members and prospective members.
10. Continue the educational process.

As the report states, by following these ten points, a congregation should be able to implement a values-based decision making process to educate people and enable everyone to feel richer for the experience

**Egalitarian** – In a Reconstructionist congregation, all aspects of community and congregational life are open equally to men and women. In fact, Reconstructionists were the first to invent the Bat-Mitzvah, which is now standard practice in all but certain Orthodox circles (modern and centric Orthodox congregations are beginning to embrace the concept as well). We even have a ritual (washing of the feet) to welcome female babies into Judaism, just as male babies have traditionally been inducted with circumcision. Parts of the traditional wedding ceremony have been modified to be more egalitarian in nature as well.

In a broader sense, our egalitarian principles demand that all people be treated as equals, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, economic class, or political or sexual orientation.

**Flexible** – We believe and recognize that there are many ways of expressing Jewishness. For instance, there are numerous ways one may find spiritual meaning. We do not perceive one way to be more valid than another, and strive to offer opportunities in each discipline. This may include:

- Prayer and ritual
- Singing or chanting
- Playing musical instruments
- Physical movement or dance
- Meditation
- Analysis and study
- Social action (Tikkun Olam)
- The interpersonal contact of a community
- Observing nature



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- Experiencing the creative process
- Participating in critical questioning or healthy skepticism (iconoclasy).
- ... and many others

We also recognize diversity in the ways people may observe the laws of *kashrut* (keeping kosher). Some may choose to simply eat in ecologically responsible ways; some pursue ethical vegetarianism; some may embrace mindful eating, and so on. Some may begin there and then decide to pursue the more traditional observances. While synagogue or communal kitchens generally keep kosher, and community events are generally kosher (to respect those who do observe), we recognize the individual preferences of our members when they are away from the community. As with any ritual, we suggest that members try and experience it, and if necessary even substitute or alter the practice in ways that are meaningful to them.

It is the same with *Shabbat*, where we strive to create an agreed-upon communal practice while remaining cognizant of the many ways members may observe Shabbat in their own time. For instance, if we view Shabbat as being primarily about *rest* and *renewal*, there are various ways one may interpret certain activities. Gardening is a good example. One may find it relaxing and renewing, while another may consider it work. In essence, we want individuals to make conscious and informed individual choices versus binding decrees from Jewish law and decisions determined only by rabbinic scholars. We acknowledge the individual's right to choose which rituals resonate, and to embrace them or not, at their own pace and in their own way.

Congregations generally follow a democratic process to determine how they will observe Shabbat for congregational events. Sometimes creative solutions must be reached, ideally in harmony with one or more Jewish values.

The bottom line is that Reconstructionist communities are neither authoritarian nor coercive, but seek to influence individuals' ethical and ritual choices through studying and learning from Jewish sources, sharing of values and experiences, and the impact of the community culture. We develop recommendations, not laws. No judgment is passed. In all cases, whether questions of ritual or principle, individuals must decide for themselves about the proper Jewish way to proceed in a given situation. We can only offer guidance.

In essence, we recognize that contemporary Jews who continue to seek forms of Jewish expression that are meaningful often find that traditional forms don't work. Pluralism is a cardinal principle of Reconstructionism. Therefore we seek to be innovative to accommodate people's needs while also striving to create community standards for congregational events. This



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may also mean experimentation with new forms of prayer and ritual practice that make traditional themes come alive in a contemporary style.

**God as a Power or Process** – We do not view God as a “person” who literally speaks to us and intentionally intervenes in our life’s events. Instead, we view God as a presence in the world, not “hovering over it.” In line with this belief, we reject the concept of Jews as the “chosen people” and the idea that commandments, articles of faith, and rituals were literally God-given. Instead, we believe that God works *through* us and not *upon* us, and that our ancestors were inspired and comforted by God’s presence in the context of their times, just as we can be inspired and comforted by God’s presence in the context of ours. In this way, we can be modern-day prophets or messengers of God, whenever we are acting and speaking with Godliness.

We view God as a transnatural power, energy or process, and believe that when we act with Godliness that God is present within us, and that when we seek God, we shall be divinely inspired. In essence, we believe in divine presence and divine inspiration, not divine revelation or divine intervention. Thus we view ourselves as partners with God in the caring of the world.

**Hebrew** – In an effort to embrace our rich history as a civilization, the Hebrew language features prominently in our services, in prayer and in song. However, to remain accessible and welcoming to those who do not speak or read Hebrew, our prayer books have the transliteration beside Hebrew text. We also have commentary in English for those who prefer analysis and study as their form of prayer. For those who do not know Hebrew, but wish to learn, Reconstructionist congregations are committed to offering adult learning opportunities. Even better, adults can even take on teaching roles for young children’s Hebrew classes, and learn along with the students.

**Inclusive** – Reconstructionist communities are progressive in their level of inclusion. We are cognizant about including and welcoming not just traditional Jewish couples or families, but singles (whether seeking a significant other or not), gay men and lesbians, intermarried couples, feminists, Jews with disabilities, Jews of color, non-Jews, and a host of other demographic groups that sometimes do not feel welcome elsewhere. We remain committed to upholding democratic values and embracing the evolving nature of Jewish civilization.

**Judaism as a Civilization** – The Reconstructionist philosophy is built upon the definition of Judaism as an *evolving religious civilization*---encompassing religion, nationality, values, and culture. In this sense, Jews are a people---defined in terms of belonging versus believing, unified yet diverse, inspired by the past yet embedded in the present. Like other civilizations, we place



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an emphasis on culture, music, and the arts. Ultimately, according to the Reconstructionist philosophy, our goal as a civilization is threefold: the fulfillment of the individual; the responsibility of individuals to treat others (Jews and non-Jews alike) as reflections of the divine image; and the responsibility of each community to seek global justice and peace among all communities.

**Kavanah (meaning)** – Kavanah (which means *intention* or *direction of the heart*) is core to Reconstructionist spiritual practice. We seek meaning and relevance in all we do. Through prayer we seek inspiration and connection with God's divine presence that works within us. We emphasize meaning in Jewish holidays as well. For example, on Pesach, we still tell the story of the Exodus, but our central focus is on oppression and freedom---recognizing those who are oppressed and expressing gratitude for our freedom. With each holiday and each ritual, we strive to experience *kavanah* and focus on the intent of our hearts---the true meaning---rather than just participating blindly or because we are “supposed to.”

**Lifelong Learning** – Reconstructionist congregations are committed to lifelong learning. To foster this, communities hold a variety of programs and events geared toward learning. This may include adult education programs, ongoing Torah studies and discussion groups, and family events, such as a *Shabaton* (Shabbat retreat), *Shabbat Seder* (including services, dinner, and other activities), and other programs and projects that involve family learning. In addition, some congregations are beginning to adopt a lay-teacher approach, where parents and other congregants serve as teachers in the religious school. This not only fosters family education, but strengthens the community as well.

**Mordecai Kaplan** – Mordecai Kaplan is the founder of the Reconstructionist movement. Raised in an Orthodox home, his progressive thinking led him in 1922 to found his own congregation in New York, the Society for the Advancement of Judaism (SAJ). A believer in gender equality, he "invented" the bat mitzvah when, at Shabbat services one Saturday morning, he had his oldest daughter, Judith, read from the Torah.

His first book, in 1934, was *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life*. When he retired from the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1963, he helped create the Reconstructionist denomination, along with its own rabbinical college, which teaches the progressive Judaism that Kaplan advocated.

**Nurturing** – Reconstructionists often describe their congregation as nurturing. The shared principle is that when members of communities are interconnected in many aspects of their lives,



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the power and meaning of their religious connections are enhanced as well. To this end, many Reconstructionist communities institute formal and informal networks that help members to help one another in all facets of their lives. Some also have special funds that can be made available for those congregants in need.

**Outreach** - There are many barriers to people becoming comfortable entering or returning to the Jewish community, whether these barriers are real or perceived. This can apply to Jews who have never embraced traditional Judaism (or religion) for a variety of reasons; Jews who never felt welcomed or accepted in traditional congregations; or non-Jews who wish to learn more about Judaism in a welcoming and non-threatening way. Reconstructionist communities strive to help people overcome these barriers. For instance, for intermarried couples and families who wish to live a Jewish life, we not only welcome them, but seek them out, either through sponsoring “Introduction to Judaism” courses, facilitating mixed-couple peer groups, or simply inviting them to community events. Yet we never push people to convert to Judaism. We believe people must embrace Judaism in their own time and way.

**Pluralism** – We view our covenant with God *not* as a set of commandments in exchange for some exclusive right, but as a holy relationship grounded in mutual trust and respect. We believe also that other peoples have developed their own similar approaches to human responsibility. In addition, we believe that to thrive as a civilization, Jews must integrate with the norms of the society in which they live while at the same time remaining an active part of the Jewish community.

We also recognize that, while we share a common thread, Jews in Israel are immersed in a different culture than Jews in North America or elsewhere, and there are advantages and disadvantages to both. Each must adapt to their own environment, as Jews have been doing for centuries. Moreover, each can learn from the other.

Instead of an “us versus them” approach or an either/or relationship, be it Jews vs. Non-Jews, Jews vs. secular society, Orthodox vs. Reconstructionism, or any other adjacent value system, we strive to understand how each side can benefit *through* the other --- a through-through relationship, rooted in mutual respect and open dialogue.

Finally, we believe that individuals have different ways in which they embrace God, whether through prayer, study, song, activism, creativity, or a host of other paths. In Reconstructionist communities, no one mode of spirituality is favored over another, and we strive to offer ample opportunities in each area.



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**Questioning** – Reconstructionist communities are encouraged to raise challenging questions, and not to adopt a conformist mentality. We believe that blind observance and literal interpretation of traditional Jewish law is unwise. Instead, we seek relevance and meaning, and for this to occur, a healthy skepticism or critical eye is often required. In a Reconstructionist setting, it is healthy to raise questions such as:

- Who wrote this or that section of the Bible? What did they mean by it? What were the circumstances at the time? Are there multiple ways to interpret it?
- Does a particular teaching reflect values we would still call divine?
- Why should we observe a given ritual or practice? Are there more meaningful ways we might observe it today?

Just as the Talmud was intended as (and remains to be) a living, breathing document, we believe it is our duty to continue to evolve as Jews and debate important issues in contemporary context.

Our scrutiny extends to our own congregational policies as well. We strive to continuously reevaluate our procedures and policies in light of the congregation's evolving shared values--- and we modify them when they fall short.

**Responsibility** – Responsibility is a key value cherished in Reconstructionist communities. Specifically, we encourage individual responsibility for one's ethical and ritual decisions, informed and supported by the community. As a community, we endorse social responsibility, as well as responsibility to each other, such as those struggling with adolescents or aging parents; those in need of legal or financial advice; those in economic need; those who are ill; those seeking friends to celebrate events with; and so on.

**Shared Leadership** – In Reconstructionist congregations, leadership is shared among the Rabbi and lay people. Even decisions regarding ceremonies and rituals are made jointly, typically by the Rabbi and a board member or appointed committee. Often, the democratic method will include increasingly broad audiences in the decision-making process as ideas are vetted. To foster this culture, Rabbis and educators help members learn how to lead. In addition, communities seek members to help lead services; chant Torah; deliver Torah commentaries (*Divrei Torah*); visit the sick; chair committees; and many other community roles.

**Tradition** – To emphasize the continuity of our civilization and to benefit from the insights of countless generations, Reconstructionist congregations attempt to preserve traditional forms of Judaism wherever possible, including songs; liturgical melodies; rituals; the use of Hebrew; and



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so on. This is balanced, however, with the need to remain accessible, relevant, and contemporary. Elements that are difficult to support in today's day and age are reevaluated, and modified if necessary.

For example, references to the “chosen people” and resurrection of the dead have been removed from prayer books, as well as gender-specific references to God. Prayer books include supplemental commentary in order to accommodate those for whom study is a more meaningful form of prayer. They also include transliteration for those who cannot read Hebrew. In essence, we continuously strive to honor the past, while remaining embedded in the present and aspiring to shape the future.

**Understanding** – We believe that to remain relevant and vibrant, we must strive to understand the people and the environments with which we interact. This includes maintaining a healthy respect for other traditions and perspectives, gaining an understanding of individuals' needs and preferences, and understanding the society and culture in which we live. It also includes attempting to understand the environment of our ancestors, so as to view history in its proper context. From this empathetic and respectful view, we can gain true wisdom, and not just knowledge.

**Vote, Not a Veto** – Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionism had a well-known saying: “The past has a vote, but not a veto.” By this, he meant that we must understand the past from which we've come, and we should seek to honor it wherever possible, but we must also be open to reevaluating it in the context of today's times if necessary. This doesn't mean we should simply discard that which we do not understand or disagree with, but that we should seek to interpret it, or reconstruct it if necessary, in ways that are meaningful to us today. We believe that rigid adherence to ancient laws---themselves once developed innovatively to meet past challenges---is unwise. Instead, we seek to cultivate a Jewish renaissance, embracing an open society that is welcoming of all Jews wishing to participate.

**Warm and Welcoming** – Surveys of Reconstructionists show that they frequently cite the warm and welcoming atmosphere as a key reason for joining their congregation. Perhaps this is because Reconstructionist communities make a concerted effort to welcome new members, involve them in the community, and accommodate their diverse needs. We welcome all who wish to embrace Judaism in an open and accepting environment. For those who do not read Hebrew, our prayer books have transliteration. If they wish to learn Hebrew, we have opportunities to learn at any age. For those who lack knowledge of Judaism, we have ample resources and programs to gently educate them on that as well.



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**X** – In true Reconstructionist fashion, we can use the letter X to represent different things. For example, it can represent a “crossing out”---such as crossing out that which we do not believe is appropriate in today’s times, or rejecting concepts that we don’t feel is ethically sound or beneficial today. Or you can replace the X with the letter of your choice, and pick a word that is meaningful to you as a core principle of progressive Jewish thinking. This is a chance to participate, to be innovative, and to join in the discussion.

**You** – Reconstructionism, and indeed Judaism, cannot thrive without its most important element--*you*. By becoming involved in a Jewish community, whether participating in services; attending social events; teaching in the religious school; supporting a cause you’re passionate about; or participating in discussion groups; you not only enrich yourself---you enrich the community around you. In a Reconstructionist community, each individual is valued---for the perspective they bring, the help they can offer, and simply, for their presence. The highest aspiration of humankind is to make a difference. And here, you can.

**Zionism** – We support the need for the State of Israel as a vital center of Jewish culture, where Judaism can thrive and our traditions can flourish in a supportive setting. We also believe that Jewish communities in the Diaspora are equally vital, and should influence, and be influenced by, that center. Each can learn from the other. Most importantly, we believe in a pluralistic and democratic Jewish State, where the voices of Jews of all denominations can be heard.

Moreover, while we firmly believe in Israel’s right to defend itself, we feel it is important that we voice our concerns if we see our Jewish homeland stray from its intended values. We remain committed to the original Israeli founders’ vision of an Israel that treats all of its citizens and neighbors justly, is always ready to negotiate for peace, and strives to limit its military activity to defensive campaigns designed to minimize unnecessary civilian casualties. We believe that the long-term viability of Israel depends on its loyalty to traditional ethical principles and its dedication to the highest ideals, even in the face of constant challenges.