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# **How To Successfully Integrate and Use Reconstructionism in Synagogue Processes**

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***Transformative Judaism for the 21st Century***

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## Values-Based Decision Making

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# Values-Based Decision Making

BY DAVID A. TEUTSCH

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. The two most obvious ideologies in America today are those of the Christian Right and the materialistic hedonism purveyed by the media and advertising. 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 cre-

ate ground to stand on somewhere between the *halakha* and the *New York Times*. It has been used within the Reconstructionist movement for twenty years and is most recently embodied in the new guide to Jewish practice, the first experimental section of which was recently published.\*

### Decision Making Process

Many of those who talk about VBDM, however, do not recognize that it involves the application of many other criteria besides values alone. In fact, employing values occurs nearly at the *end* of VBDM process. A typical VBDM process contains the following steps:

1. Determine facts, alternative actions and their outcomes.
2. Examine relevant scientific and social scientific approaches to understanding these.

\*David Teutsch, *A Guide to Jewish Practice — Introduction; Attitudes, Values and Beliefs; Kashrut* (Reconstructionist Rabbinical College Press, 2000).

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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.

VBDM has its roots in the British-American tradition of moral philosophy that sees our lives as subject to a complex series of facts and concerns that cannot be reduced to a few very broad principles from which everything else can be deduced. One example of the broad-principle approach is the work of Immanuel Kant and such successors as John Rawls. The Kantian school attempts to derive all conduct from such principles as the categorical imperative, which states that we should only do things that would benefit people if everyone did them. Other people use the Golden Rule ("Do unto others") as a broad principle.

One problem with moral philosophies that derive ethical systems from just a few core principles is that they do not capture the richness and complexity of most people's moral concerns. How do I apply the Golden Rule, for example, to the question of euthanasia for someone whose beliefs and values are totally different from my own? For a decision-making system to work in real life, it must work

in a cultural context that reflects the thicket of our moral experience, which is a tangle of beliefs and attitudes, rights and norms, obligations, values and practices.

## First Principles

Systems that start from a few basic principles (sometimes called "first principles") are difficult to interpret and apply — fatal flaws if non-philosophers are to use them. When we apply the Golden Rule to end-of-life issues, we need to explore what we want for ourselves, and why, and how the other person differs in what that person would want and why. Then we would need criteria for exploring the legitimacy of these distinctions in values, attitudes and practices. We would also need to weigh how all this should affect the application of the Golden Rule.

For example, a Catholic believes that only God should take a life. If I disagree, how does that affect the decision I need to make regarding that person? Clearly the outcomes in different cases will vary person to person because considerations far beyond the Golden Rule would have to be brought to bear.

As for euthanasia, applying the Golden Rule usually involves many other moral considerations which shape the decision maker's thinking whether or not that person is conscious of them. Unless these moral considerations are examined in their full complexity, the legitimacy of the conclusion is undermined.



## Understanding the Context

VBDM takes for granted that good decisions reflect consideration of the context in which they are made. That context is made up of political, economic, social and techno-scientific factors over which individuals and small groups often have little control. The context is also cultural in the broad sense (e.g. American, Jewish, Reconstructionist) and in the narrow sense (the culture of a congregation, family, or organization; the web of such cultures within which an individual lives).

Sometimes people divide decisions into moral ones and ritual ones. But virtually all decisions have a moral component. For example, the decision about whether to keep kosher, and if so, where and how, raises issues that touch on ecology, kindness to animals, and the centrality of Jewish community. So while issues and decisions may also have aesthetic and prudential components that are not moral, they virtually always have a moral component as well. The decision-making method can stay largely the same.

Thus the best approach to food distribution in a drought-stricken African nation with poor transportation and communication systems will differ considerably from the best method in an American city. This illustrates that the moral dimension to decisions exists alongside an array of prudential concerns. These prudential concerns need to be clarified at the first stage of VBDM because they

provide the required context for decision making. Determining the facts, possible courses of action, and their costs and consequences provides knowledge needed to make ethical decisions. Skipping this step often creates acrimony and confusion.

## Universal and Particular

Once the facts and consequences underlying a major decision have been established, it is helpful to employ the insights of relevant academic disciplines. Depending on the decision, this might entail considering the issues from the perspectives of anthropology, medicine, psychology, the sciences and other fields. This process is likely not only to shape the understanding of the decision maker. It will often help in the discovery of unselfconsciously held beliefs and assumptions that shape decision making. Those beliefs and assumptions might be about human nature, or expected community conduct, or the reliability of information or commitment-based action, or dozens of other areas.

All of this information must be placed in its cultural context. We don't make decisions that are valid for all people in all places. We make decisions that are sensible for a certain time, place and group of people. But aren't there some rules that are universal? It may be true that under some circumstances one can legitimately kill — for example, in self-defense — but isn't it the case that one should never murder? Jewish tra-

dition accepts this as a universal rule, which is what a norm is. Such norms require some actions and forbid others, and they guide us at the extremes of conduct. The Ten Commandments contains many norms. VBDM only operates away from these extremes because our conduct at the extremes is regulated by norms. In other words, VBDM operates within the areas not determined by norms.

These norms operate in consonance with our underlying attitudes. For example, one fundamental Jewish teaching is that human beings are created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God. That supports the belief that each of us has infinite worth. This belief supports the norm that forbids murder. The attitudes and beliefs we have also support our values.

### Moral Building Blocks

When our attitudes, beliefs, norms, values and practices are in harmony with each other, they are mutually reinforcing. Since we often absorb these moral building blocks unselfconsciously, absorbing one of these elements does not always precede the others in time. While we might understand some of them as being more fundamental than others, each of them depends on the others for creating moral lives of substance. Even our understanding of virtues is interactive with the other moral elements.

*Mentshlikhkeit*, for example, is a peculiarly Jewish virtue that reflects many of our values and beliefs. It in-

cludes such other virtues as honesty, courage, and compassion, which in turn tie to our vision of a just and caring society. The Reconstructionist understanding of our civilization as evolving and of our sacred texts as emerging from their historical contexts contributes to the possibility of linking our contemporary moral sensibilities with our encounters with Jewish texts and traditions. This helps us integrate our theological language, experience and morality. This is critical if we as a minority group are to sustain our moral practice.

The very idea of values, of "value," comes from our consciousness that the world is God's (I would prefer to say that the world is infused with the divine); that the world has worth is one corollary of that attitude. What we recognize as having worth is at best consistent with our attitudes, but our attitudes cannot fully predict our values. Our values grow out of our experiences and cultures. The attitude *Ladonay ha'aretz umlo'o* ("The world and all that is in it belongs to God" — Psalm 24) means that everything in the world has the capacity for good, but this insight has to be fleshed out by values before we can easily act on it.

### Beliefs and Assumptions

We cannot make decisions wisely unless we are aware of what shapes those decisions. Our beliefs about the right balance between community responsibility and individual autonomy are so powerful in shaping



decisions that they need careful examination to ensure that the balance between those beliefs is the one we consciously mean to apply. Often decision making goes awry because people are not aware of how their beliefs and assumptions drive their conclusions. When beliefs and assumptions are not articulated, dialogue often generates more heat than light, and individual decision making becomes erratic and confused. Once made explicit, beliefs and assumptions can be tested against knowledge and experience, creating a more rational and orderly universe of discourse.

Assuming we have clarified the facts and scholarship relevant to a decision and that the decision is not completely determined by norms, we next will need to understand its context in past history and practice as well as in contemporary culture. Understanding our predecessors' practices and what motivated them helps us to explore our own attitudes, beliefs, norms, and values. Empathetic consideration of our heritage gives Judaism a vote. Having done this, we can turn to exploring the rest of the values relevant to a decision.

Each decision that we make has a moral component to which values can be applied, but each decision is also affected by different values. Even when two decisions are shaped by similar values, some values will be more central to one decision than the other. Once we are at the values stage, it is time to consider which values are more important and, in light of

all the previous steps in the decision-making process, why. Some values have a more direct connection to a particular issue, and some are felt more strongly. The history of values and their origin affects the weighting of values as well. The value of community is far more central to deciding whether to attend a *shiva* minyan than it is to how expensive a cut of meat to buy.

Applying that emerging hierarchy of values to the decision and its consequences prepares the decision maker to select the best — or sometimes the least bad — choice. Thus in VBDM, exploring values is the last step in the process before actually making the decision.

## Who Decides?

When groups need to make a decision, they should begin by seeking agreement about who ought to make it. Decisions can most efficiently be made by the smallest group with sufficient authority and competence to make them. Sometimes a series of groups needs to be involved; in a synagogue, a membership or ritual committee decision of importance might require board approval. If the issue is fundamental enough, the board might seek ratification by the congregation's members. Critical to the legitimization of the decision is the broad affirmation in advance of the legitimacy of the process and the decision making group. Groups' decision making therefore needs to be carefully planned. If the process is

affirmed in advance (in part because those who care will have sufficient input to satisfy them) the outcome of the process will usually be accepted by those who disagree with it.

At the group level where the recommendation is formulated, the group should go through the same decision-making steps outlined above. Once the group reaches a conclusion, it needs to work on leading other decision makers through the process in a shortened form so that they can affirm the group's conclusions.

This model of decision making requires both an educational process and access to a variety of information. While a sophisticated and dedicated group of volunteers can use it, a professional often aids in facilitating the process and assembling expert input. When a rabbi does this in a congregational setting, the rabbi can often play a critical role in successful decision making. This requires differentiating among three functions:

- facilitation that creates safety for open inquiry and exchanges of views;
- teaching about Jewish sources and providing other insights;
- stating personal values, reasoning and conclusions.

When these functions are suitably differentiated and labeled, the rabbi can successfully play a central role in an effective process. When the rabbi does not differentiate among the factors, this can fuel interpersonal conflict, disrupt decision making, and

prevent the emergence of a decision that the group will accept. The rabbi's expertise is very much needed. Its exercise requires reflection, self-discipline, and commitment to the VBDM process.

## Negotiating Priorities

Group conflict often peaks at the stage when members negotiate value priorities. At this stage it is possible to look ahead and see which priorities will lead to which conclusions. This is a time when active listening and facilitation can help build consensus, which is not the same as unanimity. For a consensus to emerge, points of commonality must be discovered and emphasized so that people are willing to move forward despite their differences.

Which decisions should a group make? It first ought to make the decisions needed to mount its core programs and provide for their administration. As it adds to its program, new decisions will have to be made. When congregations start, they typically begin making ideological and ritual decisions and then quickly move on to dealing with financial and structural decisions as well. Before long decisions relating to employment and social action are added to the mix. All of these decisions have moral components.

Communities inevitably need policies and procedures, necessitating frequent decisions. In the open society of the United States, group decisions limiting the freedom of individuals



(“Who are you to tell me what to do?”) are usually accepted only to the extent that they are needed for aspects of group life that the individuals seek. Thus we make decisions about whether the synagogue will have a kosher kitchen or avoid styrofoam products, but those decisions are not binding on synagogue members when they go home.

### Shaping Conduct

One of the major benefits of VBDM can be consensus-building and establishing shared group behavior. This in turn shapes the moral conduct of the members of the group. Research shows that most people conform to the attitudes and behaviors of the groups they are in. Thus groups using VBDM both provide a model for personal decision making and reinforce the moral conduct of their members.

If a Reconstructionist congregation has as one of its goals shaping the personal conduct of its members, it will use a broadly inclusive process to produce guidelines for personal

conduct — but will not enforce them as rules unless the rules are needed for the welfare of the congregation. This situation results from the fact that today congregations are voluntaristic communities that require the consent of their members. Their health and legitimacy requires that they validate their activities through the consent of their members and act no more coercively than needed to fulfill their agreed-upon purposes.

In our post-modern world, we know that no one group has the sole claim on justice or ethics. But creating a way of living that we share with our community, a way of living shaped by our attitudes and beliefs, norms and values, allows us to live morally coherent, meaningful lives. When our lives are lived in harmony with the rhythms of our Jewish community, we are reinforced in our morality. If that morality includes attention to improving our world, as authentic Jewish morality must, then it has value that extends beyond our own lives. It brings us to living lives of transcendent meaning.



## Decision Making in the Congregational System

Richard Hirsh

The Reconstructionist, Spring 2001

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# Decision Making in the Congregational System

BY RICHARD HIRSH

**R**econstructionist Judaism has exemplified a commitment to democratic process and values-based decision making. At its best, democracy in our congregational communities should be a process that both rabbi and congregation experience as Jewishly authentic; that is community-building; that incorporates Jewish principles, values and categories; and that balances the congregation's mission of representing and transmitting Judaism with the needs and circumstances of a contemporary congregation's constituency.

### Problems of Polar Positions

The valuable core ideas of democratic participation should be saved from the problematic and unhelpful extremes to which they can sometimes be taken. At one extreme are congregants who deny rabbis any authority, often displaying hostility towards and showing a need to con-

trol them. Democracy at this extreme can become a pretext for unhealthy and disruptive rebellion against authority that has less to do with lay empowerment than with rabbinic disempowerment.

At the other extreme are rabbis who strongly assert rabbinic authority, exercising a veto over religious policy issues and denying laity a voice in the establishment of key congregational policies and procedures. Authority at this extreme can become a pretext for the expression of frustration, resentment and disparagement, and has less to do with reclaiming the role of the rabbi than with restraining the role of the laity.

Between these unhelpful extremes, congregations can live out the best implications of a democratic community. Reconstructionism has correctly identified the importance of engaging Jews with Judaism, and encouraging, even requiring, that they take responsibility for their Jewishness.

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Reconstructionist rabbis are not in the role of surrogate Jew, the one expected to fulfill Jewish ritual on behalf of congregants. Reconstructionist rabbis are teachers and guides, leading congregants into deepening cycles of personal involvement with Judaism and the Jewish people. Reconstructionist laity seek the opportunity to learn by doing, to take on ritual roles, to study, to deliver *divrei Torah*, to participate in life-cycle events rather than only to watch the rabbi presiding over them.

### Systems Theory

In applying these insights to the issue of congregational decision making, it is helpful to have a common conceptual framework within which to work. When rabbis and congregations start from the same point, establishing a model for productive decision making becomes a shared opportunity.

When it comes to the role of the rabbi and the rabbi-congregation relationship, social scientific research and theory helps frame the discussion in innovative ways. In the past few decades an enormous amount of research has become available to organizations and their leaders regarding the nature of their identities, their work, and their interaction.

Beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, "systems theory" emerged in the fields of family therapy, anthropology and communications, as well as in the business world. A systems approach looks at the totality of a so-

cial organization and the interaction within it. This approach recognizes that the parts interact organically, with the whole being greater than the sum of its parts.

Peter Steinke writes:

Systems thinking is basically a way of thinking about life as all of a piece. It is a way of thinking about how the whole is arranged, how its parts interact, and how the relationships between the parts produce something new. A systems approach claims that any person or event stands in relationship to something. You cannot isolate anything and understand it. The parts function as they do because of the presence of the other parts. All parts interface and affect each other. Their behaviors are reciprocal to one another, mutually reinforcing. Thus change in one part produces change in another part, even in the whole. There is a "ripple" throughout the system.

No problem can be seen in isolation. The problem is in the whole, not the part. The system is the locus of the problem. The problem is in the interaction between the parts. The same is true for solutions and corrections. With a systems approach, we "see" the interactions that take place, the information that is exchanged, and the influence that is reciprocally reinforced.<sup>1</sup>



## Activities, Jobs and Roles

As applied to synagogue life, a systems approach sees the totality of the congregational system along with the interaction of the component parts, rather than looking only at individual roles or functions. There are significant and promising implications in this approach for understanding decision making within a conception of the synagogue as a system.

A systems approach implies new ways of thinking about issues inherent in the rabbi-congregation relationship. At any given moment, for example, specific individuals may be responsible for exercising leadership, but leadership is an activity of the congregational system, rather only than the job of one or more persons. Similarly, decision making is an activity of the congregational system, although at a given moment in terms of a given issue, the responsibility for decision making may lie with one or more persons, with a committee, or even with the entire congregation.

Individuals, of course, play a role in and affect a system, as do subsystems of the congregational system. Any individual congregant or congregational subsystem can unbalance the entire system. For example, a decision of the education committee to increase the academic requirements for bar/bat mitzvah will have an impact on the membership committee, the ritual committee, and the synagogue board. It will also affect, among others, the rabbi, the cantor,

the students and parents, the bar/bat mitzvah tutors and the president (who is likely to get both irate and supportive phone calls).

## Strong Leadership Indispensable

Strong leadership is indispensable for healthy congregations, and should be welcomed rather than avoided. While some of the inevitable tensions and difficulties of the rabbi-congregation relationship are tied to the rabbi's role as leader, many of the best opportunities in that relationship are also found in the leadership role that a rabbi can and should play. *How* the rabbi leads, rather than *should* the rabbi lead, is the key issue.

Democracy is a value shared by Reconstructionist rabbis and congregants. As applied to congregational life, this creates a vision of rabbis and congregations working in mutually respectful partnership. Of course, because congregations are also organizations in which rabbis are leaders, specific areas of authority will need to be explored and resolved. But rabbis, by virtue of their education, skill and experience, are normally best qualified to represent Jewish teachings and the scope of Jewish perspectives on issues.

What the rabbi has to teach should be taken seriously and considered appropriately; his/her voice is not just one among many. A rabbi can be viewed as *an* authority without having to assume that the rabbi is *in* authority.

Ronald Heifetz writes in *Leader-*

*ship Without Easy Answers:*

Imagine the differences in behavior when people operate with the idea that “leadership means influencing the community to follow the leader’s vision” versus “leadership means influencing the community to face its problems.” In the first instance, influence is the mark of leadership; a leader gets people to accept his vision, and communities address problems by looking up to him. If something goes wrong, it is the fault of the leader. In the second, progress on problems is the measure of leadership; leaders mobilize people to face problems, and communities make progress on problems because leaders challenge and help them to do so. If something goes wrong, the fault lies with both leaders and the community.<sup>2</sup>

Viewing the rabbi as a leader does not and need not imply ceding power or decision-making responsibility. A systems perspective enables Reconstructionist rabbis and laity to avoid the unproductive polarization whereby one person’s leadership is presumed to be at the expense of another’s, with leadership understood as a finite resource. If leadership is thought of primarily as an activity residing in the congregational system, rather than an attribute residing in the rabbi, president and/or board, then ultimately responsibility for leadership (as well as for success or

failure) in the congregation should be shared.

**Reconstructionist Models**

From its inception, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College sought to shape a model of the rabbinate in which the priestly role was minimized, the teaching role was maximized, and the ability to engage with congregants on a mutually respectful level was assumed and encouraged. This approach developed into thinking of the rabbi as a “resource person,” one not vested with clear decision making authority (the *mara d’atra*) but functioning more as a consultant-expert seeking to empower congregants to take responsibility for their own individual and collective Jewish lives. Reconstructionist congregations came to see democratic decision making as a hallmark, suggesting that the rabbi had “a vote but not a veto.”

There have been many positive dimensions to the Reconstructionist rabbinic model. A high degree of participation and a sense of comfort, welcome and informality are often cited by Reconstructionist congregants as major factors that attract them to our communities. These attractions are directly related to the Reconstructionist style of the rabbinate. Reconstructionist rabbis welcome the opportunity to teach and to learn with congregants. Together, they engage in the common goal of balancing fidelity to Jewish tradition with appropriate adaptations for con-



temporary Jewish life. Our rabbis exemplify the importance as well as the satisfaction that derives from teaching people the knowledge and skills with which to expand their Jewish lives.

The demystification of rabbis and the empowerment of laity remain central to the Reconstructionist vision of shared responsibility. Ideally, democracy and lay empowerment ought to result in a mutually satisfying partnership. But there has been a down side as well, which is often cited by Reconstructionist rabbis as a particular source of unhappiness with and conflict in their work. When democracy is incorrectly invoked, it is often experienced by rabbis as disempowering, and delegitimizing of their leadership, expertise, learning and experience.

Rabbis are not the only ones who are unhappy when democracy and empowerment go astray; congregations often report that the leadership they would in fact welcome from their rabbi is lacking. A rabbi can be a strong and effective leader in a democratic organization when the rabbi embraces the opportunity and the congregation supports and welcomes the rabbi's leadership.

### **Executive and Legislative Decision Making**

In most modern organizations — and congregations are no exception — decisions often divide into either “executive” or “legislative.” For effective and efficient day-to-day func-

tioning of the congregation, executive decision making cannot be subject to democratic process. The congregational board needs to vest a professional with this function. Often this executive is the rabbi, although depending on the issue, it might be the executive director, the school director or the cantor.

While it is not possible to anticipate every contingency, rabbis and congregations should define as clearly as possible — especially to board members, committee chairs and other synagogue staff — what executive decision making functions are vested in the rabbi. This will avoid many potential problems that can arise because of unclear lines of authority.

Democratic process is both necessary and desirable for legislative decision making, where decisions shape the life and culture of the community. In such cases — examples being a change in choice of prayerbook, a structural change with regard to schedule of religious services, engagement in a controversial social action project, or a change in dues structure — congregants want and need participation. While the rabbi is both a leader and a participant in such processes, the broader community — in the language being advocated here, the congregational system — should be actively involved, engaged and ultimately responsible.

Issues will not always neatly fall into one of these two categories. In some cases, even when a rabbi can in theory exercise executive decision

making authority, s/he should understand the value of working with the appropriate committee, board member, or staff person rather than operating independently. The way in which a decision is reached can be as important as the decision itself.

### Religious Policies and Procedures

The rabbi is actively involved with all aspects of congregational religious practice and ought to be involved in the decision-making process around issues of religious policy and procedure. Depending on the issue and the congregation, such matters may come before the religious practices (or ritual) committee, the synagogue board, or the entire membership.

For example: a religious practices committee might handle an issue such as trying an experimental format for a once-a-month Shabbat service, while a board might take responsibility for adopting bar/bat mitzvah policy guidelines, and the entire congregation might be involved in a decision about the role of non-Jews in Jewish rituals. Regardless of the venue, the contribution of the rabbi as a leader, teacher and expert in areas of religious policy and procedure is central.

Democracy is an imperfect system, predicated on people seeing their participation as a right coupled with responsibility. All citizens who are eligible can vote on election day, irrespective of their awareness of issues and understanding of the positions

of candidates. But even though people can exercise their rights in an uninformed way, this is far from optimal. Just as we endorse citizens becoming informed and personally committed in our civic life, so should our congregants have a significant degree of literacy with Jewish sources and involvement in the religious life of the congregation in order to participate maximally in the democratic fashioning of policy and making of decisions.

Reconstructionist congregations should set expectations of involvement and study as prerequisites for participation in certain decision-making processes. Congregational by-laws may allow any congregant to vote in certain settings — for example, on a slate of officers presented at an annual meeting. But a congregation can and should establish conditions for participation in a decision-making committee or process affecting ritual and religious policies— for example, debating levels of communal Shabbat observance or the *kashrut* of the synagogue kitchen.

Such requirements might include an attendance requirement (to vote, one had to have been at X% of the meetings devoted to the topic under debate), a study requirement (to participate in a ritual policy decision, one had to have engaged in study of relevant Jewish sources), or a participation requirement (to be on the *siddur* selection committee, one has to be a regular attendee at services).



## Individual and Communal Decisions

It is useful to distinguish between decisions that affect individuals and issues that affect the congregation. When working with individual congregants, rabbis make decisions in response to the individual's circumstances, being careful to operate with an awareness of congregational policies and procedures. While the rabbi may inform the congregational president of such decisions, they do not require input from congregational leaders. When rabbis are engaged with issues that affect the culture, policies and practices of the entire community, they convey their positions and exercise their leadership by teaching and/or attempting to persuade, but they normally will not have final decision-making authority.

One useful indicator of when to broaden the decision-making process is to gauge the impact of an issue on the congregational system. The congregation will benefit when issues with a deeper, long-lasting impact are handled in a collaborative lay-rabbinic process. Another useful indicator is to anticipate strong reactions among congregants to certain issues and decisions. Significant congregational decisions underscore the importance of broad accountability.

Many conflicts over authority between rabbi and congregation can be avoided when issues are viewed systematically. Decisions which shape the character and culture of a commu-

nity need to reside within the congregational system, hopefully with concord between rabbi and congregation. A shared and broad decision making process provides credibility, which both supports the decisions and helps bind a congregation together despite differences of opinion.

While the distinction between individual and communal issues is suggested as one guideline, the two areas cannot always be kept discrete. Individual life-cycle events, for example, often occur in communal space and time — such as a baby-naming at Shabbat services. The choice of which Rabbis' Manual to use is made by the rabbi, while the choice of *siddur* being used at that same Shabbat service reflects a decision of the congregation.

## Making the Personal Public

Personal or familial issues can easily become communal issues of the entire community. Whenever possible, controversial and sensitive issues should be anticipated and dealt with before they arise for a specific congregant or congregant family. But in a time of changing demographics in the Jewish community, with a variety of understandings about what constitutes Jewish identity, there will inevitably be moments when there will be disagreement over what the congregant, ritual committee, board and/or rabbi believes appropriate.

Congregations and rabbis today find themselves engaged in the sensitive task of responding to the un-

precedented circumstances of our open and rapidly changing society. For many of the most pressing issues, there are as yet no clear guidelines. The recent report by the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation, *Boundaries and Opportunities*, for example, outlines suggested positions on a number of ritual issues as they apply to the role of non-Jews, but also indicates the responsibility of each congregation to review and decide if and how to incorporate those recommendations.

### Inevitable Tensions

The rabbi-congregation relationship is a *brit* (covenant) in which *hesed* (loyalty) and *rahamim* (compassion) are indispensable. At no time is this more important than when feelings are the strongest. Even where consensus is unattainable, the rabbi and congregants need to be heard and respected, and to be given the opportunity to make their case based on the teachings of Jewish tradition, Reconstructionist positions and the nature of the community.

As leaders, rabbis have the opportunity to push the congregation beyond where it might feel comfortable, to encourage risk-taking and innovation. But simply asserting rabbinic authority without the support of the relevant committees or lay leaders can create a negative ripple effect through the congregational system. The more buy-in rabbis can generate through teaching and persuasion, the more receptivity there will be for the posi-

tions they advocate — and the more positive the impact on the congregational system.

Ideally, both rabbi and congregation should have clarity about bottom line issues at the time of interviewing and hiring, so that they do not end up in a partnership when there is fundamental disagreement on basic issues. Even with the best intentions and clear communication, however, unforeseen issues may later arise. In some extreme situations, the congregation may face the possibility of making a decision with which the rabbi not only cannot agree, but which, if made, would result in the rabbi no longer being able or willing to serve in that community.

Wherever possible, in the interests of preserving the rabbi-congregation relationship and with an awareness of what it would mean for the congregation to lose its rabbi, rabbis should receive the benefit of the doubt, and their strong convictions should be taken into account by congregational leaders. For their part, rabbis need to understand the importance of limiting the exercise of such power to an absolute minimum.

In such a conflict, the congregation and rabbi both need to examine ways in which the discussion can be *l'shem shamayim*, “for the sake of heaven,” argued on merits rather than politics, argued with passion but not with anger, argued with an awareness of a common stake in the welfare of the congregation as well as with respect for the employment implications for the rabbi. It is always to be



hoped that a compromise, option or alternative can be reached and the rabbi-congregation relationship can continue. Occasionally, regrettably, such a resolution may not be attainable. Regardless of outcome, both rabbi and congregation should act towards each other *l'khaf zekhut*, "with an assumption of the best motives."

### An Opportunity for Change

Decision making takes place in all systems. Within a congregation, dozens of small decisions are made on a daily basis; many of these decisions do not reach the public eye, do not affect many people, and are routinely absorbed into the ongoing life of the community without comment.

Other decisions, especially those that have a broad and deep impact on congregational culture and self-perception (identity), can become a prism through which the strengths — or the weaknesses — in the congregational system become evident.

In working towards a systemic approach to decision making, Reconstructionist congregations and rabbis have an opportunity to shape alternative models that can serve as vehicles for learning and as conduits for community.

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1. Peter Steinke, *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach* (Alban Institute, 1996), 3-5.
  2. Ronald Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Massachusetts, Belknap Press, 1994) 14-15.

## **Values Based Decision-Making**

### Chapel Hill Kehillah

<http://www.chkehillah.org/VBDM.htm>

Before making communal decisions that affect Jewish life or practice, Reconstructionist synagogues engage in values-based decision-making (VBDM). Used both for large, community-wide decisions and for decisions made in small groups or committees, this process involves looking carefully at the issue at hand, including exploring Jewish tradition and history, our own preconceptions, Jewish values, and scientific data. Values-based decision making reflects a desire to develop an orderly and valid process for individuals and groups to decide their policies, procedures, and behavior. This process is used to help us make decisions that ultimately best serve our community.

### **Drafting Proposals**

Values-Based Decision-Making provides a way of thinking through and expressing our commitments, allowing us to create ground between halakha (Jewish law) and modern society. Below are the steps taken as we use VBDM to draft proposals.

1. Determine the issue.
2. Examine our intellectual, emotional, and moral preconceptions to understand how our experiences would impact this decision that we are making in community.
3. Examine our communal and Jewish values in relation to the issue, including community norms.
4. Examine Jewish law and teachings about the issue, including how the teachings/laws were derived and upon what values they were based. Consider the historical and contemporary context, including the history and rationales of Jewish practice.
5. Examine relevant scientific and social scientific data pertaining to the issue.
6. Assemble, compare, and weigh the conclusions from the examination of self (attitudes and beliefs), context (communal norms and values), Judaism (tradition and history), and data (#2, #3, #4, and #5).
7. Consider possible decision options and their potential outcomes, excluding options that contradict essential values and/or norms.
8. Seek consensus in the group.



## 9. Make the decision.

The rabbi is an integral part of the VBDM process, as s/he plays a critical role in (1) facilitation that creates safety for open inquiry and exchanges of views; (2) teaching about Jewish sources and providing other insights; and (3) stating personal values, reasoning, and conclusions.

Adapted from Exploring Judaism and "Values-Based Decision Making," by David Teutsch in The Reconstructionist, Spring 2001.

## Presenting Proposals

In decisions that affect the Kehillah as a whole, after a committee gains consensus and makes a decision, the committee presents the proposal to the Board. Proposals to the Board contain the following information:

1. Action item: the proposal to be voted upon
2. Background: the history of the issue or proposal, including past policies (voted upon or de-facto) and current practices
3. Values: Jewish values, including but not limited to the values documented in the by-laws, which should be the basis for the proposal and should support the proposal.
4. Staff commitment required: how much the proposal will affect staff, and the time commitment needed to carry out the proposal
5. Immediate and long-term costs: any costs to the Kehillah both in the current and future fiscal years. If there is a cost, the proposal may include ways to pay for itself.

## **FURTHER RESOURCES**

### ***Exploring Reconstructionism Seminar Workbook***

A 500-page resource binder on:

- Reconstructionist processes and values-based decision making.
- Rabbinic and lay leadership in Reconstructionist communities.
- Sample policies on issues including kashrut, finances, inclusion, the role of non-Jews in Reconstructionist communities, tikkun olam, and Shabbat.

⇒ The binder can be purchased for \$54 plus shipping from the **Reconstructionist Press**. Please contact Hattie Dunbar, Reconstructionist Press Fulfillment, via e-mail to [hdunbar@jrf.org](mailto:hdunbar@jrf.org) or phone to 215-885-5601 x30.

### **A Guide to Jewish Practice**

David A. Teutsch

Published by the Center for Jewish Ethics of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, the Guide to Jewish Practice series gives a Reconstructionist perspective on contemporary Jewish practice – from keeping kosher to bioethics.

⇒ <http://www.rrc.edu/site/c.iqLPIWOEKrF/b.1467137/>

### **The Evolving Face of Reconstructionism**

Rabbi Shawn Zevit, Reconstructionism Today (Spring – Summer 2004)

⇒ <http://jrf.org/showrt&rid=532>

## **SAMPLES OF CONGREGATIONAL POLICIES**

### **Kashrut**

Agudas Achim (Attleboro, MA)

⇒ [http://jrf.org/files/Kashrut%20\(Agudas%20Achim\).doc](http://jrf.org/files/Kashrut%20(Agudas%20Achim).doc)

### **The Role of Non-Jews in Congregational Life**

Dor Hadash (Pittsburgh, PA)

⇒ [http://jrf.org/files/Non-Jews%20\(Dor%20Hadash\).doc](http://jrf.org/files/Non-Jews%20(Dor%20Hadash).doc)

### **Same-Sex Commitment Ceremonies**

Temple Sinai (Buffalo, NY)

⇒ [http://jrf.org/files/Same-Sex%20\(Temple%20Sinai\).doc](http://jrf.org/files/Same-Sex%20(Temple%20Sinai).doc)