
A Response to Trans/Post/Non-Denominational Critiques

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The contemporary conceptualizations of post-denominational, trans-denominational and non-denominational Judaism can function as a clarion call to Jewish unity, a reminder of shared sacred texts, the rich and fraught history of Jews around the globe and the splendid ethnic and geographic diversity of the Jewish people that we wish to embrace as part of our collective Jewish identity. Denominations are, after all, a relatively recent way of organizing ourselves, and we are a people whose shared credo resides in oneness. These terms that imply a rejection of denominationalism seem to celebrate Jewish diversity and Jewish unity over factionalism, with all of its negative connotations.

So what is the point of denominations anyway? In postwar American Jewish life, a denomination is made up of affiliated congregations and their members; a rabbinical association, such as the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association; a congregational association, such as the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation; and an educational institution, such as the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. A denomination has ideas or ideals, whether historic or presently active, that guide its particular approach to Jewish life.

Denominations are useful. In a non-divisive way, they help us to marshal our resources, organize our communities, make meaningful choices and sanctify our lives. We build open denominational institutions to clarify our values and live according to our highest ideals. Reconstructionist Judaism, in particular, represents

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a singular approach to the tradition. It stands for particular processes and strives, in all of its manifestations, to promote Judaism and serve the Jewish people.

Trans-Denominational, Post-Denominational and Non-Denominational

One popular approach to re-imagining the American Jewish community is usually labeled “trans-denominational.” This approach suggests that denominations have much to offer and that, rather than being part of a single denomination, we should be able to partake of all denominations.

This approach is based on the flawed premise that contemporary Jews do not already routinely connect with one another across denominational boundaries. The false implication of trans-denominationalism is that being part of a particular denomination means that one is unable to partake of what other denominations offer. Students at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College study Reform, Orthodox and Conservative thinkers. Our students, our graduates and our lay people seek out interactions with other Jews, hoping to learn and grow as a result of those interactions. And we are equally conscious of the extent to which Jews who affiliate with other movements turn to Reconstructionist Judaism for liturgical innovations, for resource materials of all kinds, for scholarship and certainly for the support and leadership of our rabbis. The idea that one must be trans-denominational in order to be open to Jews of all denominations is akin to the idea that a person should not be an adherent of a particular religion but should embrace no religion in order to learn from them all.

The post-denominational approach, sometimes called “non-denominational,” implies that the denominations have had their day and that it is now time to give way to new approaches to Jewish life. Many reasonable critiques of denominations are contained in this approach, since denominational ideologies are frequently outdated. Denominational affiliations often serve to separate Jews from one another rather than to draw Jews closer together, and synagogues often fail to attract many Jews or to inspire the Jews they do attract. The problem with the post-denominational approach, however, is that these critiques propose no solution. “Post-denominational” and “non-denominational” are negative definitions — they tell us what they are not, but fail to tell us what they are.

What exactly is it about denominations that post-denominationalists and non-denominationalists want to leave behind? Are they against the existence of synagogues, educational institutions, congregational associations and rabbinic associations?

I hear the post-denominational objections already: “Of course we don’t need to do away with these functions; we just don’t like how they are being filled.” If that is the case — if all the functions would remain but be filled by new organizations, then the term “post-denominational” is really defining a desire for a new denomination. That is not *post-denominational* at all. If people would like to create a new denomination, they should do so. The terms “post-denominational,” “non-denominational” and “trans-denominational” stop people from creating a new denomination because the very definition of these terms excludes this possibility.

Perhaps the post-denominational objection is not to the functions that denominations serve, but to the ideas and ideals that guide them. Perhaps postdenominationalists are saying, “The ideas and ideals of the denominations have outlived their usefulness; they are no longer vital sources on which we can build a vibrant Jewish life.” I have much sympathy for this view. But the answer to this problem must surely be the development of new ideas and ideals.

If we need new ideas and ideals and new institutions that are capable of carrying those ideas and ideals into the world, then what we need is renewed denominations or perhaps even new denominations. The terms “non-denominational,” “post-denominational” and “trans-denominational” sound as if they hold out the promise of a new approach upon which future Jewish life can be built. But a closer examination reveals that these terms are taking a stance against the status quo without clearly articulating a remedy. They often hide an anti-institutional bias — a bias that makes it very difficult to create the institutions necessary to improve upon our present situation.

Labels

People do not like to be labeled and, indeed, identifying oneself as Jewish does not require any additional adjectives. It is enough to say “I am a Jew” without needing to define oneself further, as in, for example, “I am a Reconstructionist Jew.” However, one must be willing to say, “I am a Jew.”

Labels carry implications. Labeling oneself as a Jew carries the implication of a special connection to the people and ideas of the Jewish past, present and future. Most people in the Jewish community would bristle at the idea that carrying the

label of “Jew” implies that they are separating themselves from the broader human community. Yet we know that sometimes such separation occurs.

The challenge revolves around how we wear our labels. Identifying as a Jew can actually bring us closer to the broader human community through Judaism’s humanistic and universalistic ideals and practices. Identifying as a Jew can help us understand and empathize with the attachments others hold to their traditions and people. Whether being Jewish separates us or brings us closer to the broader human community depends upon how we choose to live out our Judaism.

We are not all Jewish in the same way. This variety is good for the Jewish people and should be part of what we value as Jews. We seek others whose approach to being Jewish is similar to our own to create a Jewish communal life that reflects our priorities and values. We need not restrict ourselves to this group; neither must we separate ourselves from those who do not identify with this group. Those who label themselves as “non-denominational,” “trans-denominational” or “post-denominational” and who participate actively in Jewish living engage in this process of group identification just as actively as those who identify themselves with a particular denomination. The pretense of having no label ends up being a distinction without a difference.

The challenge is to use our labels and their attendant identities to bring us closer to other people rather than to separate us from them.

Denominations

Denominations are made up of institutions. Institutions are neither inherently good nor inherently bad. Jewish institutions exist in order to bring certain missions and visions into the world. They should be evaluated based on their missions and visions and their successes and failures in bringing their visions to life.

The institutions of Jewish life will, to a large extent, determine what Jewish life will look like in our day and in the future. Anti-institutional biases must be discarded in order to create an environment conducive to building vibrant institutions capable of responding to the Jewish needs of our day. The negative self-definitions of post-denominationalism, non-denominationalism and trans-denominationalism must give way to definitions that use positive attributes, e.g., pluralistic, democratic, engaged etc.

Denominations are groups of interrelated institutions and people. Non-denominational and trans-denominational rabbinical training institutions do exist that

are not connected to other institutions, but I am convinced that a lack of affiliation is not a strength. If a nonaffiliated rabbinical training institution fails to become connected to an association of its rabbinic graduates or to the congregations they serve, this weakens the training institute. Formal affiliation increases accountability and helps to ensure that rabbinic training will be responsive to the lay community rabbis serve. Both the ability of rabbis to grow in their profession after graduation and the ability of the profession to set standards and to monitor itself depend upon strong rabbinic associations. For a rabbinic training institution to actively advocate to have no rabbinic association is irresponsible. For a rabbinic training institution to advocate that their graduates should join the rabbinical associations connected to other educational institutions fails to appreciate the meaningful interrelationship of rabbinic education, rabbinical associations and affiliated congregations.

Every new institution does not need to develop the same kind of complex of interrelated institutions that the denominations now comprise. But the types of institutions that make up denominations — rabbinical seminaries, congregations and rabbinical associations — are weaker, not stronger, if they choose to go it alone.

Synagogues are not the only Jewish institutions necessary to address the challenges of Jewish communal life. New institutions and new approaches are welcome. Sometimes, new approaches have come from within the denominations (e.g., www.ritualwell.org) and sometimes, from outside of them (e.g., Jewish healing centers). All effective new approaches and programs are welcome.

Institutions with approaches to Jewish life outside of the denominations (e.g., Jewish community centers) have existed for a long time without announcing themselves as replacing or going beyond the denominations. The denominations have never expected or wanted to be the only institutions within Jewish life.

Congregations that choose not to affiliate with a denomination are congregations that fail to help support the institutional structures that most likely have trained their leadership, produced their *siddurim* and created a number of other resources those congregations utilize. Although there is a number of legitimate reasons for certain congregations to remain unaffiliated, their lack of affiliation should not be seen as desirable or as a strength.

If denominations are made up of ideas and ideals and the institutional structures to implement them, then what we need are new and/or renewed denominations. This renewal, plus other new and creative approaches, is the answer to the problem of a Jewish community that is frequently uninspired by Jewish organizations.

Unfortunately, many creative philanthropists and activists seek to address today's challenges by concentrating only on those programs and ideas that emerge outside of denominational structures, thereby ignoring the potential for change that can emerge from within denominations. The implication seems to be that the denominations are either incapable of self-renewal or that their renewal will perpetuate rather than address the problems of Jewish life.

But even as we acknowledge the potential for renewal within denominations, we must also acknowledge that no denomination can survive outdated ideologies, a divided Jewish community or dysfunctional synagogues. Denominations that are not functioning correctly need to repair themselves. A denomination incapable of self-repair should cease to exist. Members of the Jewish community would do well to support those denominations that are functioning well or are on the road to self-repair and to deny support to those that are not.

Reconstructionist Judaism

Reconstructionist Judaism understands Judaism as the evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people. This definition leads to a people-centered view of Jewish life that is deeply grounded in tradition while simultaneously encouraging innovation and creativity to meet the challenges of the day. We offer our best efforts to the community in the hope that they will help the world become a better place. Among other recent innovations, we have played a leading role in incorporating the practice of spiritual direction into the Jewish community; enriched prayer and liturgy with our groundbreaking *siddurim* and our Web site, www.ritualwell.org; addressed ourselves to the spiritual issues facing a graying Jewish community; published elements of a contemporary guide to Jewish practice; increased our emphasis on interfaith understanding and the importance of Jewish-Muslim relations; embarked upon an effort to revitalize the holiday of *ta'anit* Esther by connecting it with courageous social activism; and made special efforts to improve educational attitudes and responses toward those with learning differences. Our strength comes to us in no small part from our ideological commitment to serving the entirety of the Jewish people.

Jewish communal life is not a race or a contest. Despite the fact that a majority of Jews are most comfortable with most of the ideas and ideals of the Reconstructionist movement, the number of Jews affiliated with the Reconstructionist movement remains relatively small. In my view, the market-share approach to evaluating the

success of Reconstructionist Judaism and other denominations is odd. Reform is not “winning” because they have the most affiliates. If the same market-share analysis were applied to Judaism as compared to other world religions, it would be clear that we Jews should give up immediately, since based on such an analysis, Judaism itself should be judged an abject failure.

A more meaningful approach to evaluating the success of a religion or a denomination within a particular religion would be to measure positive impact and influence. Unfortunately, impact and influence are more intangible than numbers of affiliates and therefore more difficult to evaluate.

Using positive impact and influence as the measure rather than numbers of affiliates, Judaism itself and Reconstructionist Judaism in particular have a proud legacy. Most observers of Jewish life would agree that the Reconstructionist movement has been a source of important innovative resources, transformational ideology and significant new approaches to education. That so much positive impact has come from such a small percentage of the Jewish population should be understood as an achievement.

Educating Rabbis

The Reform, Orthodox and Conservative movements were all founded to answer the question, “Can Judaism change, and if so, how?” Another important question for these movements was “How can we be both good Jews and good citizens?” These questions are no longer the essential questions for the Jewish community.

The Reconstructionist movement was founded to answer the question, “What is Judaism, and what is its purpose?” The answer offered by Mordecai Kaplan — “Judaism is the evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people whose purpose is to bring us closer to salvation” — still rings true.

The programmatic implications and practical applications of Kaplan’s response have not come from the Reconstructionist movement alone. Nevertheless, having clearly articulated ideas and ideals has helped those associated with the Reconstructionist movement to be at the forefront of positive change within the Jewish community for more than 70 years.

Our outsized influence is an outgrowth of our defining ideas and ideals. We do not embrace the view of Judaism that begins with God creating Judaism, God looking for a people to carry that religious program, God choosing the Jewish people to bring that program into the world and then the Jewish people doing their best

to conform to that program. Reconstructionist Judaism has suggested a different approach. The approach we embrace is that Jews created Judaism in order to fill their lives with spirit, purpose and meaning.

This view of Judaism has sometimes been mistaken to be an argument for a Judaism without God. This is an unfortunate misunderstanding. God's existence and attributes are not dependent upon the view that God created Judaism.

Because we believe that the Jewish people created Judaism in order to add spirit, purpose and meaning to our lives, our orientation is humanistic. This emphasis means that we judge ourselves based upon whether we have truly made the world a better place for its inhabitants — including, as we move into the 21st century, its nonhuman inhabitants.

The role of rabbis is to be leaders in the effort to make the world a better place. Whether rabbis are serving a group or individuals, running an organization or teaching in a university, they should take advantage of the opportunities available to them to improve the lives of individuals, groups and/or society at large.

The academic training that enables rabbis to fulfill this task is first and foremost a deep immersion in the history, thought and literature of the Jewish people. We hold that Judaism — the evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people — has a tremendous capacity for helping us to make the world a better place. Only a deep immersion in Jewish learning can equip rabbis to bring the transformative power of Judaism to the people they serve.

At RRC, this immersion experience is enhanced by a chronological approach to Jewish study. Our study of Judaism begins when Judaism begins — in the biblical era — then proceeds through our entire history and concludes with the present day. This chronological approach flows directly from the idea that Judaism was created by the Jewish people. A study of Judaism that does not peer through the prism of history in this way typically carries with it the erroneous assumption that because God created Judaism, influences of culture and time period are incidental rather than central.

The chronological approach enables RRC students to emerge from rabbinical school with knowledge of the ways in which Judaism has changed over time. They appreciate the fact that Judaism's capacity for adaptation and innovation has helped to keep the Jewish people alive. And they are emboldened and equipped by their studies to become innovators and original thinkers themselves.

Immersion in the history, thought and literature of the Jewish people is necessary but not sufficient. Rabbis must possess a wide variety of skills and personal attributes. RRC has a rigorous program of courses that prepares students for the various tasks rabbis face, whether that involves conducting a funeral or doing public-relations work. And RRC has an expansive program that cultivates the life of the spirit. It is our hope that this training equips our graduates to better serve those who come to rabbis with their own spiritual quests and questions. We also hope this training will help our graduates to avoid burnout by strengthening and clarifying their core commitments.

Serving the Jewish People

Our approach to Jewish life — an approach that places the focus on people and on Judaism's ability to improve their lives — enables us to be expansive as we think about rabbinic vocation. Roughly 50 percent of RRC's 300 graduates serve as rabbis of synagogues. The other 50 percent serve as educators, campus rabbis, chaplains and staff members of various Jewish agencies. Our educational program is designed to prepare our graduates to serve in all these settings.

Wherever they serve, rabbis provide Jewish content. Many new gateways to involvement in Jewish life have been created in recent years. In particular, programs for Jews in their teens, 20s and early 30s have received a great deal of attention. Not all programs need to have rich Jewish content. But individuals who want their programs to have such content will be well-served if they look to rabbis to be both content providers and designers. Rabbinic training is a tremendous communal resource and should be valued and utilized.

It is important for rabbis and other educators to be able to acknowledge the particular perspective they bring. And it is false to think that it is either possible or desirable to bring no perspective to education.

Jewish life will be largely shaped by the underlying ideology of the rabbis and educators who are the providers of Jewish content in programs and institutions. Although ideology is presently out of fashion, we ignore it at great cost. What approaches to Judaism will work to engage Jews in the 21st century? And what kind of Jewish future do we want to create, anyway?

Reconstructionist rabbis work to create a Jewish future in which Judaism is understood as one religion in the family of religions. We recognize that religion has often been a source of conflict, and we work hard to fashion a religious approach

that can embrace other Jews, other religions and people with no religion. We challenge ourselves to look honestly and critically at ourselves and our heritage. We do this in order to fill life with spirit, purpose and meaning.

Reconstructionist rabbis bring to the community Jewish wisdom, practical skills and an ability and willingness to innovate. It is our mission to serve the community at large and we do that within avowedly Reconstructionist settings and outside of them.

The Future

The structure of the denominations is a little more than 100 years old, a relative newcomer on the Jewish scene. Will this structure continue to hold for the next 100 years?

Whatever the future brings, a few principles should guide us:

- 1) Organizations and/or institutions are necessary in order to put ideas and values into practice. Anti-institutional undercurrents can be valuable when they intelligently critique existing institutions. They are not valuable when they deplete the strength and growth of institutions doing good work.
- 2) As a profession, clergy would benefit by moving toward the level of professional oversight and continuing-education demands made of other professionals, be they doctors, lawyers, realtors or beauticians. (Because they have licensing and continuing-education requirements, all of these professions have structures for peer professional oversight that are more stringent than those for clergy.) The societal trends that de-emphasize the role of rabbinical associations should be resisted.
- 3) Flexibility, adaptability and creativity will be necessary if existing institutions are to serve the Jewish people well. This applies equally to denominations and to organizations and initiatives that are not denominationally based.
- 4) The organizational strength of the denominations, particularly the educational institutions, should not be underestimated. A few institutions of higher education have lasted for centuries and many more seem destined for similar longevity. Jewish institutions of higher education that have significant endowments and are able to manage their finances responsibly are likely to be around for many years to come.