# Boundaries in Reconstructionist Synagogues

BY ADINA NEWBERG

Bet-Or is a fictive Reconstructionist synagogue in a metropolitan area. Many of its members are professionals with hectic careers, busy family lives and other civic and political commitments. The relatively new rabbi noticed that while members would readily participate in a variety of committee meetings, there were difficulties attaining a minyan many Shabbat mornings, and even more so during holiday mornings that fell during the week. The rabbi asked the ritual committee to see if it could find ways of attracting more members to services. After discussion with the membership, the ritual committee suggested that holiday services take place only on the Sunday following the holiday, so that members would not have to miss work.

While the outcome of this hypothetical (and deliberately exaggerated) discussion is not crucial, it illustrates some important issues: What is the process by which the synagogue as a Jewish religious institution decides ritual and liturgical decisions? What is the role of the rabbi in this process? What is the role of *halakhah* and of Jewish tradition? What would happen if the rabbi opposed the decision of the ritual committee? What could be the basis for such resistance? What sort of process might lead to a final decision?

One way of understanding these questions is to apply social systems theory as a conceptual tool through which we can describe and understand social phenomena. Social systems are composed of smaller systems, generally called subsystems, parts of a larger whole, relating to and influencing each other. Social systems or subsystems are separated from one another by socially-constructed boundaries, which are variable and permeable. A boundary in a social system is a conventional way of constructing and understanding a reality that is constantly changing. Taking a metaphor from linguistics, systems theorists call such variable distinction-making "punctuation."[1]

In our example of Bet-Or, there are committees, a school, study and social groups. Each one of these components is a subsystem in the larger syn-

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agogue system;[2] each has independent functions and definitions, yet each influences the other ones and is influenced by them. Creating the committees, defining the school's functions, and distinguishing between the functions of the synagogue, the school, and the larger Jewish community—all these are punctuation tasks. For example, if the education committee together with the adult education committee create a joint educational program, the boundary between the school and the rest of the synagogue is re-punctuated.

The conscious and unconscious social dynamics of the constituent groups as well as the intentional delineation and punctuation of the boundaries within any system determine the degree to which the boundaries will be permeable. Within each organization there are instances where boundaries are more or less rigid.[3]

## Boundary Permeability

In any synagogue, the definition of membership represents a rigid boundary. There are defined rules regarding membership: one has to pay dues, and one has to be a Jew, or, in Reform or in some Reconstructionist synagogues, the spouse of a Jew. Yet the boundaries are not completely rigid, since there are relatives and friends who are involved in the life of the synagogue without officially being members. Although membership in the Board of Directors is theoretically non-permeable, here too the influence of those "outside" the boundary can extend to those who, for instance, are friends and associates of members of the Board of Directors.

In contrast to the more rigid boundaries, those delineating membership in committees are more permeable. Members go back and forth in their committee activities, and those who are not official members of committees at times participate in discussions and decision-making, despite their being "outsiders."

Establishing boundaries is necessary for organizations. External boundaries provide a sense of organizational goals and purpose, defining the *raison d'etre* of the organization and the ideological tools for maintaining its existence. Internal boundaries between and within various subsystems in the organization permit leadership to emerge and to function and authority structure to be followed. Such boundaries promote established roles and functions for the organizational actors and definite communication channels.[4] The degree of boundary permeability will reflect the organization's idea of itself as well as the personal and psychological dynamics of its actors.

Examining the extremes of boundary permeability can be a helpful tool. Underboundedness or overboundedness are equally destructive for organizations. Underbounded organizations have neither sense of purpose, appropriate authority structure, nor effective leadership. Overbounded organizations are too authoritarian and monolithic. They create competition between subsystems to satisfy the authorities and to compensate for the

lack of involvement and commitment from members.[5]

If the balance between overboundedness and underboundedness is difficult for most organizations, it is even more so for organizations that hold democracy, pluralism and lack of hierarchy as their espoused principles, as is the case with Reconstructionist congregations. Among the key principles of Reconstructionist synagogues, the most relevant to our discussion is democracy. By democracy, Reconstructionism means that power and responsibility are shared by many. All decisions are made by the whole congregation after a process of study and exploration. When possible a consensus is reached; when necessary a majority vote determines. Rabbis as leaders of the synagogues act as teachers and as facilitators, but not as decision-makers.

Whatever historical authority the past may have for other movements, for Reconstructionists, boundaries are determined in relation to Reconstructionist philosophy—that is, with respect for the tradition and with an understanding of tradition's importance in shaping an evolving religious civilization.[6] But there are tensions between philosophy and practice. These are illuminated by the concepts of "espoused theory" and "theory in use," as developed by organizational theorists Donald Schon and Chris Argyris.[7]

## Espoused Theory and Theory in Use

Organizations have two sets of behavioral guides. One, the espoused theory, comes from the principles and ideals that define those organizations. The espoused theory points to an image of itself and behaviors that the organization would like to promote. At the same time, due to a variety of conscious and unconscious dynamics, all organizations become engaged in practices and behaviors that are different than the ones espoused, but nevertheless are particular to that organization. Such behaviors constitute the theory in use.

Organizations based on clearly espoused theories, such as Reconstructionist synagogues, have strong boundaries of self-definition. Reconstructionism stands for democracy, equality for women, and respect for the Jewish tradition, and stands against the dictates of *halakhah* in Jewish life.[8] Yet that same espoused theory rejects the notion of strong boundaries in relation to lines of authority, thereby making room for individuals and their views, concerns not generally respected in organizations with strong self-defining boundaries.

With respect to authority, Reconstructionist synagogues prefer the loose boundaries that are promoted by democratic decision-making processes and by respect for the integrity of the individual's needs. This combination of strong boundedness with respect to group ideology and loose boundedness with respect to individual autonomy is paradoxical. The stronger the boundedness of a system, the stronger its members' sense of the whole and their agreement about the purpose of the system. The weaker the bounded-

ness, as in an organization that promotes democratic involvement in decision-making, the more difficulties exist in agreeing on a whole and its purpose. What establishes Reconstructionist synagogues' sense of purpose is thus also what can cause their diffuseness and lack of agreement.

## Tensions/Paradoxes

Similar tensions occur regarding leadership and authority. Reconstructionist synagogues tend to prefer weak boundaries between the religious and lay leadership, but that same principle also brings confusion about role distinctions. The espoused theory calls for learning with the help of religious leaders, drawing from the tradition, and adapting to modern American circumstances through a democratic process. While the democratic process establishes joint learning and decision-making, the rabbi's role is indeed different from that of any other member of the community. As the most knowledgeable person and the one with the contractual responsibility for providing religious leadership, the rabbi has to teach what the tradition considers its ritual boundaries and to lead the way to an appropriate ritual and religious response for that particular synagogue.

The Reconstructionist community values communal decision-making in relation to ritual boundaries, but Reconstructionism also has movement-wide institutions that impinge on and limit those decisions. Theoretically, the community is free to decide what language and format a particular religious event will have, as long as it respects equality to women, democratic process and commitment to Israel.[9] Indeed, there is much variety among synagogues in how these principles are respected and carried out. Yet within this boundlessness and freedom to decide, some styles and wordings are preferred to others. Lately, with the publication of the new series of *siddurim* by the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Havurot, the Reconstructionist movement has provided a model for these stylistic preferences that will greatly influence what Reconstructionism will come to mean for the congregations that use these prayerbooks.

To illustrate the complexity of this paradox, let us imagine briefly that some members of our fictive Bet-Or decide they want to recite the Shabbat morning prayers in Hebrew only. This desire is not contrary to any established Reconstructionist principle, yet it probably would not be accepted, as it runs counter to the evolving understanding of the style and culture of a Reconstructionist service. Having an all-Hebrew service would be considered exclusionary and, therefore, anti-democratic.

Reconstructionist style and culture reflects the theory in use of what Reconstructionism is, rather than its espoused theory. The espoused theory promotes great inclusiveness and openness to innovation, yet the theory in use is more bounded and defined. Innovations and changes are difficult to introduce not necessarily because of resistance to change, but because the process of change is itself so inclusive and therefore complex

and hard to manage. Change means that some members' views would be included and others excluded and perhaps hurt in that process. Resistance to change thus stems from fears of the social dynamics that might result from change. The evolution of this process is determined largely by the dynamic between the rabbi, various subgroups in the community (e.g. feminists, traditionalists, secularists), and the past experiences they have shared around issues of change.

## Boundaries in Organizational Life

As we have said, all organizations create boundaries that enable functioning and role distinction. Synagogues establish boundaries between lay leaders and professional leaders by hiring the professionals, writing contracts, job descriptions and work policies. The very terms "lay" and "professional" are a function of the boundaries deemed necessary to the organizational life of the synagogue. Lay leaders hire professionals to fulfill certain functions, whether or not other members have skills to fulfill these same functions. As a consequence, boundaries are maintained between functions that belong to lay leaders and others that belong only to professionals, which seems contrary to the espoused theory of Reconstructionism. Paradoxically, one of the expectations of professionals is that they provide leadership, which means, in many cases, establishing boundaries.

Not only is the synagogue leadership interested in establishing boundaries between lay and professional leaders, but the professionals are interested in maintaining them too. As long as professionals are employed by those whom they must teach and lead, there is a strong need for boundaries distinguishing the roles and functions of the different parties. Such boundaries ease the task of evaluating the professionals' performance and their relationship to their employers.

Synagogues are structured like many non-profit organizations. Not only are the boundaries between various committees defined, but equally important, there is a clear delineation between what and how decisions are democratically made through committees in charge of such tasks as financial expenditures, hiring and firing paid staff, and the running of particular departments in the synagogue, such as the school. While boundaries are theoretically delineated between various committees as well as between committees and professionals, in many instances, information and power, authority and decision-making can become fused. For example, a member of the education committee who happens also to be chair of the finance committee will have more authority and power in the education committee than other members.

Conversely, those members who are part-time employees of the synagogue are structurally and contractually under the professional's supervision and under the ultimate authority of the responsible committee, but they also participate as volunteers in other committee work. When they participate in such committee work,

they can bring to bear the additional information that comes from their role as employees. The boundaries between paid work and lay work are fused for that person, and thus for the committees and departments to which that person is connected.

The synagogue's structure establishes different roles for lay workers and paid staff, yet in many ways it blurs the expectations it has of the professional with the expectations it has of its members. The paid professionals are expected to have the same (infinite!) level of commitment and loyalty to the organization that volunteer members have, even though their loyalty is directly related to the members'/employers' assessment of their work and ultimately determined by a contract that is usually terminated by the decision-makers.

Not only are expectations toward a rabbi's work blurred, but there is considerable confusion between the private and public domain of the rabbi's life. The rabbi's children and spouse are very visible and scrutinized for many of their actions inside and outside the synagogue walls. To which school does the rabbi send her children? Does her spouse come to services? Where do they eat dinner? Do they keep kosher? Similarly, the boundary between the rabbi's private and professional time is blurred. Not only is every rabbi's time at home always disturbed by work-related phone calls and meetings, but social occasions become professional, and many of the rabbi's "social" events are synagogue or community-related. Even many of the "private" events take place at times when synagogue members or colleagues are present and work is invariably discussed.

## Complex Decision-Making

Given both the ideological and institutional paradoxes of Reconstructionism we have described, it should be evident that decision-making is especially complex in Reconstructionist synagogues. Reconstructionist espoused theory consciously blurs the distinction between professionals and lay leaders. The professional is a spiritual leader, a teacher and guide who facilitates the democratic decision-making process of the synagogue, not its only decision-maker. Yet the professional's relationship with the synagogue is different by virtue of being paid and not having chosen the synagogue as a lay member. The rabbi is not one among equals. The rabbi is an "expert" in Judaism, the "guardian" of the tradition.

This paradox creates an inherent conflict for the rabbi's behavior. The rabbi is primarily hired because of her knowledge and expertise in Judaism. What should be the role of the rabbi, then, when she disagrees with the majority view and sees its decision as detrimental to the continuity of Judaism, for which she feels herself responsible? A rabbi has to avoid creating factions or mobilizing only part of the membership to support her position. She will always be reminded that she is contractually the rabbi of the whole synagogue and has to find a way of being the rabbi to those with

whom she disagrees. She cannot alienate those who think differently by openly fighting their positions.

The theory in use is such that rabbis do not always follow the democratic principles espoused. Rabbis sometimes lead without going through the process of reaching consensus. Style, personality and conviction and the history of the synagogue-rabbi relationship determine what "leading" means for any particular rabbi and community. In some areas of synagogue life, the rabbi may decide to take a stand and fight, in disagreement with the community, while in others he may feel comfortable teaching and guiding, but letting the community as a whole decide. The role and behavior boundaries that exist for the rabbi are not just defined by him, but also by the community that hires or fires him.

What is the process for changing these role boundaries? When Carol, a rabbi in a medium-sized synagogue decided that the Sunday morning breakfast for the Hebrew school could become a rotating responsibility of the parents, they did not see it her way and requested that the breakfast continue to be the rabbi's responsibility. In this example, the rabbi and the community had different interpretations of the rabbi's role and the needs of the community. The ideal solution for achieving better understanding is joint exploration of the issues involved. Yet there are many instances in which even after a process of study, positions do not change. Theoretically, this is the point when the rabbi should either accept the voice of the majority or resign. In practice, the community often accepts the rabbi's position without agreeing to it, simply because they do not want to lose her or alienate her to a point where it is difficult to work together.

Because contractual and structural boundaries define the rabbi's functioning, the rabbi finds himself living out a paradox. His job description requires him to blur the boundaries between himself and the rest of the congregation, to be democratic and encourage the community to become involved in decisions in which they may not have an interest. At the same time, he has to maintain professional, religious and personal boundaries in order to be inspired and inspiring of others, to be a leader and a teacher as well as an authority figure.

Such paradoxes are inherent in the life of Reconstructionist synagogues. These complex organizations are guided by a strong philosophy that encourages a blurring of boundaries. This same philosophy encourages synagogues to establish and maintain appropriate boundaries, so they can function as strong, healthy organizations. As with all organizations, the theory in use is always different from the theory espoused. By pointing to the discrepancies between the ideal and the reality, this paper aims to narrow that gap and bring theory and practice more in line with one another, so that those involved in Reconstructionist synagogue life can bring it closer to the ideal and also be less frustrated with its daily realities. ♦

1. Bradford Keeney, *Aesthetics of Change* (New York: Guilford Press, 1985), 24-29.

2. Focusing on subsystems should not obscure the fact that the synagogue is itself a system that functions in relation to other systems (educational, political, economic) in its environment.

3. Kenwyn Smith and David Berg, *Paradoxes in Group Life* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1987), 102-08.

4. Smith and Berg, 102-08.

5. Smith and Berg, 102-08.

6. Rebecca Alpert and Jacob Staub, *Exploring Judaism: A Reconstructionist Approach* (New York: Reconstructionist Press, 1985), 11-17.

7. See especially Chris Argyris, *Strategy, Change and Defensive Routines* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 78-91.

8. Staub and Alpert, 31-32.

9. Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Havurot, "By-laws," (1992).