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Inside...

JEWISH RENEWAL is a solid presence in American Judaism with many hallmarks of a movement: a retreat center, renowned rabbinic leaders, a dedicated following, and foundational publications. But with all that, what is Jewish Renewal really?

In this issue, we explore the nature of Jewish Renewal, with views from inside and out.

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Sh'ma

A JOURNAL OF JEWISH RESPONSIBILITY

Is Jewish renewal good for the Jews? ■ Jack Moline

If you were to ask me my basic criticism of the three American brands of liberal Judaism, I would offer this statement: the architects of Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist Judaism all assumed that American Jews would make the effort to reform, conserve or reconstruct that which came before. But while Wise, Schechter and Kaplan themselves were steeped in tradition, the innovations they introduced to Judaism became the baseline for later adherents. That which was to bring the past into the future too often became an excuse to leave the past behind.

If you were to ask me what redeems all three American brands of Judaism, I would say this: mostly, there is a deep reverence for and awe of God, Torah and the community of Israel.

Jewish Renewal In Action

If you were to ask me my basic criticism of the Jewish Renewal (JR) movement, it would be the same. Seeking to "renew" both the disaffected of our people and the Judaism we have supposedly outgrown, the visionaries have repeated the mistakes of earlier reformers. As a result, there is far too often no "re-" in "renew."

However, Jewish Renewal does not seem to embrace the redeeming reverence and awe. And so, I believe that even though Jewish Renewal can lay solid

claim to being Jewish, it cannot lay claim to being Judaism.

I am uninterested in the historical comparisons made by other critics of Jewish Renewal. The highly creative and articulate teachers who have envisioned Jewish Renewal can defend it for what it is intended to be. I look instead to the experience of "doing" Jewish Renewal and to those who participate in it, as I did during a week at Elat Chayyim. While I came back to my suburban synagogue with some remarkable techniques to enhance and deepen traditional practice, I found the orthodoxies which JR has adopted regarding God, Torah and Israel placed me behind a tie-dyed *mechitzah*.

Re-Visioning God

Most distressing to me is Jewish Renewal's attempt to define God in politically correct terms. Rabbi Jonathan Omer-man (no stranger to JR) teaches that we refer to God each morning as *el chai v'kayam*. *El chai*, the living God, implies a certain accessibility and flux. Life involves constant change, growth and (yes!) renewal. But a God who is *el kayam* is One who is established, unchanging and mostly inaccessible. Rabbi Omer-man warns that however much we would like God to be perpetually *el chai*, the warm and fuzzy aspects of God's nature are but

a fraction of a per cent of God's being. Only by standing in awe of *el kayam* do we begin to appreciate the totality of God's presence in our lives.

However, *el kayam* is in disfavor in Jewish Renewal. God is love and wants us to act with love, not to fear God or be obedient out of a sense of mere obligation. Again and again, embracers of Jewish Renewal told me of the sense of liberation from law and expectation which they found in JR. They felt they did not need to really know anything traditional—merely be open to the loving experience of God, in a Jewish context. (There is something uncomfortably familiar in this God-of-love—who-requires-not-the-law approach.)

As a result "power images" are mostly expunged. The familiar euphemism for God's name, *Adonai*, is too male, too power-trippy, too anachronistic. God as commander, judge, king, ruler is virtually taboo, except as a reflection of ourselves (one exercise had us pretend to crown ourselves as we recited "the King who sits on a high and mighty throne"). Instead, God is spirit, source, breath, wellspring whose proper title is *Yah*.

Moving Too Far

Torah, our window to God, is also disparaged. A young intern at Elat Chayyim objected to the idolatry of Torah. "It's just a book that was written a long time ago," he said. Though some who were present were upset to tears, the young man received hearty accolades for his insight from the teachers and leaders who were present. Of course Torah has always been interpreted and applied. In the past, however, the purpose was always to preserve the sacred content and context of God's word.

Instead, JR looks to the innovations and commentaries of the mentors of the day who, no small matter, are exceptionally well-grounded in tradition, both academic and kabbalistic. However, what they offer to disaffected, undereducated Jews is considered the baseline. For the mentors, it is a point of arrival. For the students, it is a point of departure. Far from being a place of entry into the community of Jews in this world, students of JR return to the Jewish community only to find less common ground with educators, rabbis and God-bless-them laypeople in their local synagogues, organizations and public policy groups.

I get the uneasy sense that such disaffection is just fine with some of the leaders of JR. They have a messianic sense of mission, to transform Judaism and rescue it from the shackles of the rabbinic model and the prophetic call which typify Conservative and Reform Judaism. And

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thank God Mordecai Kaplan did not believe in life after death; he would be spinning in his grave to see how his Reconstructionism has been co-opted in Jewish Renewal circles.

Obsession With Sex

Jewish Renewal seems to have it backwards. I was always taught that the role Judaism was to play in society was to seek to transform injustice and separation from God through our values. Instead, JR is transforming Judaism by infusing it with values from other societies, most notably America.

Most lamentable among those values is the contemporary obsession with sex. Gender is a construct of grammar; sex is a construct of body and relationship. When the two are confused, as happens often in JR, sexuality assumes a highly exaggerated prominence. In Hebrew, every word has gender. In English, only personal pro-

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nouns have gender. Therefore, it is easy for an English speaker when reading or learning Hebrew to make the mistake of ascribing sexual nuances to gendered words.

Mistakes are not always bad, if they lead to new insights and greater holiness. Because the sexual metaphor is used (sparingly) in Torah to warn against infidelity to God, one might expect that the elevation of the sexual metaphor in Jewish Renewal would bring with it a renewed ethic of fidelity in intimacy.

I was encouraged to discover that Elat Chayyim has a strict policy which prohibits the *initiation* of a sexual relationship between faculty and students during the week of residence. (Rabbinic organizations need such a code of conduct!) But everything else about sex and Jewish Renewal seems to fall into the category of "consenting adults can do no wrong." With sexuality a central metaphor for theological interaction, the danger of a virtually unrestricted attitude toward sex is evident. There is a difference between a loving experience (or even a succession of loving experiences) and a life of loving commitment. As Rabbi Raphi Friedman has similarly observed, there is a difference between a spiritual experience (or even a succession of spiritual experiences) and a life of spirituality. In both cases, the former is an attempt to rise above the mundane. The latter—the goal which typifies Judaism in all its expressions—is an attempt to raise the mundane.

It is the conceit of every generation that they can better fulfill Micah's admonitions to do justice and love kindness than generations past. By casting off the yoke of the tradition so carelessly, Jewish Renewal compounds that conceit by ignoring Micah's ultimate requirement: to walk humbly with God. ✦

The meaning & message of Jewish renewal

Rami Shapiro

Jack Moline's critique of Jewish Renewal offers us a welcome opportunity for self-reflection; a chance to clarify our thinking and align our energies. I shall attempt a little of both, responding to the four issues raised in Jack's essay and then proposing my own manifesto of Jewish Renewal.

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Jack is turned off by the idea that God is love. Me too. It is a dangerous theology inexorably leading to scapegoating as a means of explaining the presence of evil. Contemporary America suffers greatly under the heavy hand of Love, excusing our complicity with evil by blaming all our problems on welfare mothers, illegal immigrants, Newt Gingrich, big government, big business, Democrats, Republicans...Jews. My own theology comes from Isaiah 45:5-7: "I am God, there is nothing else...I make light and create darkness. I make peace and create evil. I, God, do all of this!" And we are created in the image of God. We create light and darkness, good and evil. Be care-full.

Jack worries that, for us, Torah is "just a book." I hope he's wrong. Torah is our continuing conversation about how to be humanly holy. Torah reflects our dual nature, our capacity for evil and good, and provides us with a means for controlling the one and affirming the other. Not everything in Torah is to be applauded, but there is nothing in Torah we can dare to ignore.

Jack believes we are messianic. He is correct. We believe we are creating a fresh Jewish voice for the 21st century. This belief is the source of our creativity and strength. It can also be the source of blind *chutzpah*. If our sense of mission overwhelms our *mentschlichkeit* we will create nothing of lasting value. Our messianism should be humbling, challenging us to be worthy of our mission, and excepting nothing less than our best.

Jack fears we verge on sexual irresponsibility. There is always danger here. Of all the fires that burn within us, it is sex that most threatens to consume us. We should articulate a clear sexual ethic, and open it to debate.

Jack Moline is not a casual observer. If he questions our love and respect for God, Torah and Israel, we may well be giving out a message we do not intend. With that in mind, I present my own understanding of the meaning and message of Jewish Renewal.

Challenge

Contemporary American Judaism, an *ad hoc* mix of ethnicity, nostalgia, pop-psychology, Holocaust memorials and vicarious Zionism, no longer speaks to the majority of American Jews. Unless we boldly reclaim and recast the timeless message and meaning of a Torah centered and spiritually compelling Judaism for the 21st century, we will be the grandparents of Gentiles.

Vision

To be a holy people, a beacon of justice and compassion rooted in an understanding of reality that unites all things in the Greater Unity of God.