



Reconstructing Judaism: Evolution in Action



News

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Part of my “elevator speech” answer to the question “What is Reconstructionist Judaism?” has been the familiar, almost catchphrase: “Reconstructionists believe that Judaism is the evolving civilization of the Jewish people.” On a really short elevator ride, that could be the entire speech, leaving the person who asked the question slightly puzzled and really no better informed than they were when we left the lobby.

Recently, however, I have come to a much deeper appreciation of what an apt metaphor “evolving civilization” really is, and how it can help shape our response to the challenge of reconstructing Judaism for the 21st century.

If you stand at our current point in the evolutionary process and look back over vast stretches of time, it is easy to see evolution as something resembling a *New Yorker* cartoon: in a straight line, a fish crawls out of the water; grows legs and lungs; starts to walk; walks on two legs; grows fur; picks up a giant club; sheds fur; puts on clothes; trades the club for a briefcase; and fills out an IRS Form 1040. A nice and orderly progression.

But, of course, that’s not what evolution actually is. If instead of looking back, you look at any one moment in the evolutionary process, it’s not a straight line at all. It’s really messy. At any one time, countless mutations and adaptations develop out of what already exists, and vie for survival in a challenging, even hostile, environment. Over time, the vast majority of those mutations and adaptations will die out, and only those best suited to the current environment will thrive. As the environment changes, characteristics that once assured a species’ survival can become vestigial or, even worse, can make survival even more difficult. A species that adapts successfully will survive — as long as it continues to adapt — and a species that does not make the right adaptations will become extinct.

Evolution is not nostalgic. Of course, there isn’t a new species in each generation. But what has come before is subjected to an unrelenting process of subtle and less subtle changes. The evolving species draws strength from the successful adaptations of the past, changes and grows through new adaptations, and will eventually shed vestiges of the past that may impede survival.

Deeply rooted. Boldly relevant.

It is reasonable to look at the evolution of Jewish community in our time as a similarly messy process. In communities across North America, existing congregations and *havurot* engage in a constant process of change and adaptation in their effort to survive, to grow and to thrive in a changing world. How do we educate our children? How do we use new technologies to

communicate and learn? How do we address environmental factors that result from those new technologies — from reduced attention spans to increased competition for our attention? How do we attract new members? How do we fund our community and its programs? How can we talk to one another about difficult questions — from domestic politics to Israel/Palestine — that might shatter us? How do we build a single community that can span the generations? How can we ensure that our communities model our inclusive values, so that Jews of color and intermarried families feel empowered and embraced? And through all of that, how do we preserve that which makes us unique?

Across North America, our affiliated communities are trying new ideas and new adaptations of existing strategies to meet those challenges and more.

And outside of our existing communities, new expressions of Jewish communal life that are not traditional synagogues are emerging from the lives of our children. Although some of those communities may not look like our existing congregations, they all emerge from our past and present, and are rooted in our culture and history. Those communities face many of the same questions as our existing communities — from how to fund themselves, to how to grow in a cohesive way, to how to succeed in helping their members live richly Jewish lives, often across differences — and constantly experiment and adapt to meet those challenges and to thrive.

Over time, each of those adaptations, each new way of thinking about education and spirituality, or even marketing or finances will be tested by the environment. If enough successful adaptations emerge, take root and prosper, progressive Jewish communal life — and the Jewish people — will thrive in our generation and the next. If the adaptations that will enable us to flourish do not emerge and are not able to spread, our survival will be much more perilous.

Of course, no metaphor is perfect. And it is in the imperfection of the evolution metaphor that I see inspiration to act, and a guide to what Reconstructing Judaism can offer to Reconstructionist communities and the Jewish world.

In the natural world, the evolutionary process is random. Whether the right mutation will emerge in the right place and at the right time is entirely a matter of chance, so that countless random mutations over millions of years must appear and fail before that fish in *The New Yorker* cartoon can fill out a federal income-tax return. Whether a particular mutation that is successful in one environment will spread to other places where it might also thrive is also left to chance. Ocean currents, wind flows, bird migrations and other uncontrollable forces will determine where a new adaptation will spread, and whether or not it will be shared (or improved) in another environment.

The power of a movement — our movement — is that our adaptations and new ideas are not random, and we do not have to rely on happenstance to see them spread.

Rather, really intelligent and thoughtful rabbis, professional educators and lay members in our affiliated communities across North America and beyond are purposefully building innovative and creative solutions to meet the opportunities and challenges of our changing environment. In Wyncote, our rabbinical students, our faculty, our Innovation and Impact team, and our Affiliate

Support team bring fresh energy and new initiatives to the challenges of 21st-century progressive Judaism.

In addition, we do not need to rely on the vicissitudes of the shifting winds and tides for our best ideas to be shared and tested and improved by others. Rather, we can (and do), in a very intentional way, create connections among our communities and other fellow Reconstructionists across the movement so that Reconstructing Judaism can and will function as the laboratory and the proving ground for the best ideas in contemporary Jewish communal life.

How do we do that?

Well, the most potent example is on the near horizon — our [Reconstructionist convention](#) in Philadelphia, which will be held from Nov. 15-18, 2018. Our convention will bring together hundreds of Reconstructionists from across the movement in one place to share our passion, our commitment and our best work. While the schedule is still in formation, we expect there to be more than 50 workshops in which lay leaders, rabbis and other professionals from across the movement will share the experiences of their communities, in addition to their best thinking about the opportunities and challenges that we all face. There will be time for “affinity groups” — rabbis, congregational lay leaders, educators, music leaders, executive directors and others — to meet, share common concerns and initiatives, and forge connections that they can build on long after the convention. Our plenary sessions will address some of the major issues of contemporary Jewish life. And there will be lots of opportunities to experience prayer, music and study as they are lived in other Reconstructionist communities across North America, and to bring those experiences home to invigorate our home communities.

Please come to convention, share what you have learned and be open to learning about the ways in which other communities are working to grow and thrive.

Reconstructing Judaism’s commitment to nurturing good ideas and forging connections goes well beyond a convention:

- Every day, our Affiliate Support team works with rabbis and lay leaders from across the movement to help them develop and hone new approaches to emerging opportunities and challenges, and to make connections among congregations and *havurot* so that our communities can help one another.
- We sponsor President’s Forums, regional gatherings, the Reconstructionist Plenum and other opportunities for our community leaders to connect with one another, and share their problems and their best solutions.
- We work in close partnership with the [Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association](#) to make sure that rabbinic voices are heard across the movement.
- In partnership with the RRA, we have created the Joint Israel Commission and are forming a Tikkun Olam Commission that will bring rabbis and lay leaders from across the political spectrum and across North America together to create and share models of respectful discourse and effective engagement, drawing on the best work of our communities and the wider world.

- We have developed the [Reconstructionist Learning Networks](#) to connect Reconstructionists from across North America in webinars and workshops that address “the questions of Jewish life that can’t be Googled.”
- Our camps — [Camp Havaya](#) and the new [Havaya Arts](#) — bring together children and teens from across North America for fun, and for potent learning experiences that forge relationships to last a lifetime.
- We sponsor [Ritualwell.org](#) as a forum for sharing and finding creative Jewish rituals and practices for a changing world.
- We provide [innovation grants](#) and mentoring to individuals and communities so that they can bring their best ideas to life.
- This summer, we will continue our rollout of Evolve, an online discussion forum on the most compelling topics of contemporary Jewish life.
- We use [podcasts](#), webinars, list serves and other media to spread ideas and inspiration.

Why belong to a movement? Because the metaphor is flawed. Because it is only by joining with communities and fellow travelers from across North America, in a very intentional way, that the best ideas for building a vibrant Jewish communal life can be shared, tested, improved and put into practice. Together, we can both develop strategies to seize the opportunities and face the challenges of our home communities, and play a role in enabling the Jewish people to thrive.

Why the Reconstructionist movement? I believe that because of our commitment to the concept of peoplehood and to the imperative of cultural evolution; because of our commitment to the lay/rabbinic partnership, and to community-based and values-based decision-making; because of our commitment to participation and engagement; because of our openness to new ideas; and because of the empowered intelligence of our rabbis and lay members, we are uniquely suited to be, as we have always been, a powerful engine to drive the Jewish future forward.

It may turn out, I guess, that the world was created, exactly as we know it, in seven days by an all-knowing God. If that’s the case, I’m going to need another metaphor.



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