

Chapel Hill Kehillah

We are blessed in the Triangle to have a diversity of communities to find pathways into vibrant Jewish life. The Chapel Hill Kehillah is unique in that it is the first synagogue established in Chapel Hill, and the only Reconstructionist synagogue in the area.

The Reconstructionist approach to Judaism, conceptualized by Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan in the mid-1900's, begins with an understanding of Judaism as an *evolving religious civilization*. By speaking of Judaism as a *religious civilization*, we recognize both that religion is the core of Judaism and that religion is not Judaism in its entirety. We acknowledge the fullness of our cultural legacy expressed in many ways, including art, music, drama, literature, language and our connection to Israel. All of these and more, not solely ritual observance, become gateways to Judaism.

In acknowledging that Judaism is *evolving*, Reconstructionism understands that Judaism has changed over time in every place where it has flourished, in response to different historical, cultural and social forces. Reconstructionism makes this process an intentional, community endeavor, insisting that Jews, in community, should work to understand and develop Jewish values, ethics, ritual and practices in the context of the larger world in which we live.

Like Jews throughout history, Reconstructionists seek to hold onto our sacred legacy and place a primary value on the study of traditional texts and sources. We strive to give ancient practices new interpretations when necessary so that they remain meaningful in our modern lives. We are also open to new forms of religious expression when traditional practices do not address modern concerns; for example, the first American Bat Mitzvah ceremony was that of Judith Kaplan (later Eisenstein), Mordechai Kaplan's daughter, in 1922.

Consistent with this approach, Reconstructionist prayer books offer traditional texts and structures, commentary, explanation, transliteration, modern adaptation and alternatives, and a wide variety of metaphors for God. We are excited at the Kehillah to begin the year with a new Reconstructionist *machzor* (High Holiday prayer book) for all of our High Holiday services.

Because each person's sense of the divine is deeply personal, in Reconstructionist congregations there is a diversity of belief about God. What Reconstructionists share, though, is a commitment to living our lives in ways that give expression to God's presence in the world: through mitzvot, bettering the world and ourselves, supporting and comforting each other during times of need, and deepening our moments of joy and celebration..

This is an exciting time at the Chapel Hill Kehillah as we live these Reconstructionist ideals in creating a dynamic, engaged and engaging Jewish community through our services, adult learning, Religious school, social action and governance. For example, we have just completed a series of study and discussion sessions in order to develop our Kashrut policy. Our study included biblical, rabbinic and medieval sources on the Jewish dietary laws, and also modern concerns such as sustainable agriculture, recycling and the fair treatment of farm laborers. Our discussion also addressed the kinds of issues faced by a diverse Jewish community, such as the ability of people with different levels of home kashrut observance to bring food to the Kehillah for community celebrations and events. This process of engaging deeply with Jewish tradition and texts, addressing modern concerns, and working together as a community provided the basis for developing a policy that will be brought back for further discussion and a vote during the coming year.

We are also in the process of developing our Shabbat services. After the High Holidays, we'll be exploring different prayer books while learning about the structure and spiritual depth of traditional Shabbat prayer. As a community we'll reflect on our learning, experience, and values in shaping services that reflect the uniqueness and the vibrancy of the Chapel Hill Kehillah.

We invite you to join us as we create this participatory, inclusive, egalitarian community committed to exploring Jewish life with dedication, warmth and enthusiasm.

Rabbi Jennifer Feldman
