



String of Pearls

Reconstructionist Congregation of Princeton

Information for 2010-11

How did the congregation begin?

The original members were a group of friends who began a shared, spiritual journey in 1992. Since then, we have grown to over 50 households, have an established Hebrew School and Bar/Bat Mitzvah program, and continue to be proudly diverse and inclusive.

Where did the name "String of Pearls" come from?

The Yiddish song *Schnirele Perele* was one of the first songs that the congregation learned. The lyrics imply that those who are unique "pearls" share a sense of hope for the future. Rav Abraham Isaac Kook, the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of the British Mandate for Palestine, said, "As the string holds the pearls of the necklace together, so the yearning to commune with G-d unifies and joins all humanity as one. That yearning is the essence of the soul, which derives from the eternal source of all perfection."

What are the benefits of renting space for services rather than owning a building?

The biggest benefit is financial. Because we don't have the costs associated with ownership of a building (such as mortgage payments and maintenance staff), we have no need for a building fund. In fact, until this year, we had been able to keep our dues the same since 2003, even though our rent and some of our other expenses increased. The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Princeton has been an accommodating landlord; most of the dates we request for services and other events are accepted.

Why are services only generally twice per month?

This is a matter of our current size. With more members, we may elect to increase the number of services each month. When we set up our calendar for the coming year, we consider the holidays and number of b'nei mitzvah. In some months, there may be three Saturday services in addition to one Friday service. We also have several family services during the year and hold congregational celebrations for Sukkot, Simchat Torah, Chanukah, Tu B'Shvat, Purim, Lag B'Omer and Shavuot.

How do members help with setting up for services?

New households are paired with older households on a date of their choice to set up the space for services and to clean up afterwards. It's what we call "shammessing." This involves: purchasing wine,

juice, challah and light snacks for after the service; bringing materials up from our downstairs storage closet (such as tablecloths and yarmulkes); and making the siddurim (prayerbooks) and chumashim (Torah books) available for the service. Detailed instructions are available and are provided well in advance of the shamessing date.

How are members involved in running the shul?

String of Pearls has a Board of Directors consisting of members who volunteer to chair one of our activities such as Publicity, Adult Education, Hebrew School, Tzedakah/Social Action, Holidays or Community Building. The Board meets monthly to discuss and vote on the needs and issues facing the congregation. There is also an Executive Committee that consists of the current and past Presidents and Vice Presidents. Being involved provides opportunities to connect with other members and share in being a vital part of the congregation.

It is expected that by the second year of membership, new members will serve on a committee, and by the end of that year they will volunteer for a Board position. Experienced Committee Chairpersons will guide and assist new ones, and two or more people may share a position (especially the High Holiday and Hebrew School Committees). Positions can be held for 1 or 2 years (or more!), but two-year terms are encouraged so that there is always a combination of experience and new energy that can be used for the good of our community.

Are there any other meetings?

Large decisions, such as the dues structure and other budget items, are made at an annual business meeting in the spring. The meeting is considered mandatory so that our decisions can be as informed and inclusive as possible.

Can I attend High Holiday services without being a member?

Yes! All are welcome and tickets are not required. The suggested donation for attending High Holiday services is \$275 for families and \$125 for singles. All contributions will be applied to dues upon becoming a member household of String of Pearls.

What are the dues?

We currently request that families pay \$1,300 and singles pay \$650. However, no one is ever turned away due to financial hardship; confidential arrangements can be made with our Treasurer.

What about Hebrew School?

Our Hebrew School for students in grades 1 through 6 meets once per week on Mondays from 4:15-6:15 at Princeton Day School. Students learn Hebrew language and prayers and age-appropriate Judaica. The tuition for Hebrew School is \$700 per child. We require that students be part of our Hebrew School for two years prior to having a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, although special circumstances can be presented to the Board. Bar and Bat Mitzvah students in 7th grade meet monthly with their parents and the Rabbi. They are known as the BAGEL ("Bunches of Adolescents Getting Education and Lox") Group. The tuition is \$450. BAGEL families shammas all Bar and Bat Mitzvah services. A comprehensive set of F.A.Q.'s is available to explain how to plan for this exciting and memorable year.

Membership in String of Pearls is required to enroll children in Hebrew School and/or the BAGEL Group. Current members must be in good standing. No tuitions refunds are given should a child withdraw from Hebrew School.

From the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation web site: www.jrf.org

What is Reconstructionist Judaism?

Reconstructionism has stressed belonging over believing when it comes to Jewish identity. Belonging to a group with common commitments, culture and memories has given us a valuable sense of peoplehood and mission that has power regardless of what we believe about G-d.

One of the most important ideas that the founder of Reconstructionism, Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan, had was that Jewish civilization *evolves*—that it changes in response to its times and the situation it finds itself in. Reconstructionists prefer to think of Judaism as a living, ever-growing way of life. This means that Jews today do not practice their religion the same way that Jews did even 100 years ago, let alone farther back in time. People choose their practices based on their study of holy text, of history, and on the basis of their own personal values and their community's practices. Reconstructionists feel that decisions about how to practice religion as a community should be made by the community, and that personal religious decisions are best left to the individual, in connection with Jewish tradition and with others in the community. Reconstructionists strive to be dedicated, educated, and practicing Jews, and that's what's important.

For most Reconstructionists, G-d does not decide everyone's fate individually and intervene in human history through the use of miracles. Exactly what Reconstructionists do believe about G-d is as unique as each individual. While some feel comfortable with a more traditional way of thinking about G-d, a G-d with whom they can be in direct relationship, others perceive G-d more as a force in the world, and may feel G-d in the good things in life—when we see a flower, or when we feel better after hurting ourselves. And we may feel G-d when we act like our better selves—when we help someone, or are nice to someone, or love someone. This is when we see G-d in action in the world.

When we say we believe in G-d, we are really saying that we believe that people can be good, caring, and loving, and that they can care about things that are bigger than themselves.

Many people have come to reject G-d because they don't believe in a being that can break the laws of nature and act like a person. Reconstructionism rejects those ideas, as have many Jewish philosophers over time. Reconstructionism has offered many people who previously rejected G-d a renewed possibility of belief as they have been exposed to different conceptions of G-d. But some Jews will continue to reject even a reconstructed idea of G-d. It is possible to feel committed to Jewish values without believing in G-d. Throughout the ages, G-d has been the source of the commandment for us to create a just and fair world. But it is certainly possible to feel committed to a better world without connecting the source of that commitment to G-d.

What about the role of prayer?

There is more to prayer than asking G-d for favors. Although people may be surprised to see Reconstructionists praying using traditional descriptions of G-d and G-d's role in the world, prayer has a vital role to play in the life of a Reconstructionist congregation and each Reconstructionist Jew.

The Hebrew word for praying, "l'hitpalel", is a reflexive verb--that is, it applies to oneself, not to one's actions toward the outside world. L'hitpalel means to look inside of yourself. This suggests that even when prayers end with G-d, they begin with us. We don't know whether prayer can change G-d. We know that it can often change us. Prayer reinforces values and creates community. In addition, prayer acknowledges that human beings, at least individually, are not the most powerful force in the universe. In other words, prayer helps keep us humble!

Prayer gives us an opportunity to deepen our spiritual lives, to increase our connection with G-d and to notice spiritual moments when they occur. Prayer is a spiritual practice that helps us become more aware of what we are thankful for, and what we are longing for.

Prayer also keeps us linked to our history. When we say the Shabbat kiddush over the wine, for instance, we are saying much the same prayers that our ancestors have said in the same situation for nearly two thousand years. That is a very powerful connection.

And lastly, prayer is a way that we can come together as communities. In times of celebration, or in trying times, we look to our community for group support. During the silent Amidah, the entire congregation faces the same direction and prays together soundlessly, not as individuals but in a group. This is truly a moment that expresses the intimacy of community. By praying together we share sacred time, connect with other Jewish communities around the world, and best of all, we get to sing together!