

A Conversation With David Teutsch About *A Guide to Jewish Practice*

RRC's Center for Jewish Ethics, directed by David Teutsch, Ph.D., is in the midst of publishing *A Guide to Jewish Practice*, a collection of volumes intended to provide guidance in all areas of contemporary Jewish living. The books' values-based approach and substantial commentary are designed to help readers reach their own conclusions about a range of topics, including dietary

laws, bioethics, disclosure to the terminally ill, *tzedakah* and mourning.

RRC's Gari Julius Weilbacher talked with Teutsch about values-based decision making (VBDM) and about his role both as the publisher's representative for the series and as a leader in contemporary Jewish ethics.

Teutsch is the Louis and Myra

Wiener Professor of Contemporary Jewish Civilization, chair of the Department of Contemporary Jewish Civilization and director of the Levin-Lieber Program in Jewish Ethics. He served as president of RRC from 1993 to 2002, following appointments as executive vice president from 1990 to 1993 and dean of admissions from 1986 to 1990.

Q How did the *Guide to Jewish Practice* series begin?

During the years that I was the executive director of the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation (then the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Havurot), it became clear to me that many Jews who do not consider themselves bound by *halakhah* (Jewish law) nonetheless would often like guidance from Jewish sources about ethical and ritual concerns. There must be a way to examine these issues other than through information found in *The New York Times* or the *Shulkhan Arukh* (*The Code of Jewish Law*)! Thinking through the challenges organizations face is what led me to earn a Ph.D. in organizational ethics, with the hope of eventually writing a guide to Jewish organizational ethics.

Q How were the topics of the series determined?

I started with *A Guide to Jewish Practice: Kashrut* because one of my motivations was to provide resources for people when they called or wrote with questions. I used to receive a huge volume of questions about the specifics of keeping kosher, which have largely been answered by that volume since it was issued in 2000. Clearly it fills a need—we reprinted the guide in 2003, and we continue to sell copies on a regular basis.



After I wrote the first volume with a group of commentators, an editorial advisory committee was formed, and I presented an outline of the series. It covers every common ethical and ritual concern that would be handled for traditional Jews by a code such as the *Shulkhan Arukh*. The difference is that we provide guidance and options rather than simply the answers in Jewish law.

The small books we are now producing eventually will be published in three large volumes: one on the life cycle, being written by Rabbi Richard Hirsh, executive director of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association; one on Shabbat and festivals, being written by different Reconstructionist rabbis; and one with all the everyday concerns in it, which I am writing. Richard and I co-chair the advisory committee, and I serve as the publisher's representative for the series. The advisory committee suggests a sequence of publication.

Q Can you give a brief summary of VBDM and how it applies to the *Jewish Guide* series?

Values-based decision making reflects a desire to develop an orderly and valid process for individuals and groups, which they can use to decide upon their policies, procedures and behavior. Users also apply other criteria, in addition to values. For individuals it is a seven-step process. Organizations add the consensus piece before the process is concluded. A typical VBDM process contains the following steps:

1. Determine facts, alternative actions and their outcomes.
2. Examine relevant scientific and social scientific approaches to understanding these.
3. Consider the historical and contemporary context, including the history and rationales of Jewish practice.
4. Look for norms that might exclude some actions.
5. Assemble and weigh relevant attitudes, beliefs and values.
6. Formulate decision alternatives.
7. Seek consensus (if a group is deciding).
8. Make the decision.

The *Guide* series follows this approach and provides windows to rich and meaningful opportunities for Jewish living.

Q Is this series the only place that values-based decision making is used as a methodology for evaluating Jewish issues and concerns?

Reconstructionist thought on these issues can be traced back to a series of articles in the Fall 1941 edition of the *Reconstructionist* magazine entitled "Towards a Guide to Jewish Ritual Usage." A subsequent pamphlet was revised in 1962. Since then, position papers published by the Reconstructionist movement, guides produced by the Ethics Center and articles in the *Reconstructionist* have brought the approach of values-based decision making to a new level.

For a number of years, I have been using values-based decision making in all my writing for the movement. In 1989, I wrote an essay in the *Reconstructionist* on sexual ethics. The first major commission that used VBDM was the movement's Homosexuality Commission, which started its work shortly thereafter. Since then, increasing numbers of people have adopted VBDM for local use and movement-wide decision making. Several of my essays that explain how to use VBDM have been republished as part of *A Guide to Jewish Practice* so that people can learn how to use that process effectively.

One of the dangers of the success of VBDM is that sometimes people use the term to justify their decision making when they have, in fact, not followed the steps that VBDM requires. That kind of use devalues an effective and disciplined approach to decision making.

VBDM is not for the weak or lazy. Do you find that folks are willing to do the work it requires, or are they calling you for a quick fix to a situation?

People looking for a quick fix only call me if they don't know me! I help people to see issues in their full depth and complexity as a first step toward finding the best solution. If they want someone else

to do their decision making for them, I recommend they consult an Orthodox rabbi.

I am intrigued by the fact that you receive many *she'elot*, or questions. That evokes images of people lining up in the village square to ask their rebbes to ponder significant issues: "*shaylas* (questions) for the rebbe." What categories do the questions fall into? Is there a process by which you answer questions?

The questions that come my way run the gamut from sexual ethics to business ethics to bioethics. Many of them deal with the kinds of ethical situations that arise in synagogues and in people's private lives. Let me give a few examples from the last few weeks.



- "How do I know when it's time to move my mother, who has Alzheimer's, into a nursing home?"
- "Someone in the congregation has been accused of a financial crime. How should we handle that?"
- "How do we balance the obligation to warn with the obligation not to gossip?"
- "My father just suffered a heart attack, and he almost certainly won't recover. How do I decide whether, and if so when, to donate his organs?"
- "I am a graduate student, and I believe one of my colleagues is falsifying some of his research. Do I have an obligation to act? What should I do?"
- "I have discovered that a friend of mine is committing adultery. What do I do with that information?"

These kinds of questions ensure that my life is never dull!

Most of the time, I am familiar with the applicable concepts and values. Otherwise, I do some research before answering. I make sure I understand the question, lay out the concepts and values for the questioner, show how I would apply them, and then discuss them until the person feels ready to make a decision, which may or may not be identical to what I would have done. My responsibility is to present insights that can shape the decision and ensure that the key angles on the issue have been examined. It is up to the questioner to finally decide. That attitude is fundamental to Reconstructionist thought.

There is a difference between wanting intellectual answers to critical questions, and seeking emotional comfort and respite from painful ones. How do you “read” the questions?

Often the questions I am asked come from rabbis, doctors or communal leaders who want help with an issue that someone has brought to them. I don’t presume they are turning to me for pastoral coaching unless they ask for it. When an individual is seeking advice about a personal dilemma, of course exploring the emotional terrain is a critical part of understanding the dilemma. That has to precede making suggestions about how to move forward.

This brings me to the question of leadership. RRC is in the business of training spiritual leaders. How does RRC integrate questions of ethics into its curriculum?

RRC offers a four-semester cycle of Jewish ethics courses: Bioethics, Speech Ethics, Sex and Family Ethics, and Organizational Ethics. One reason I love teaching these courses is that it gives me an opportunity to help future rabbis develop the tools they need for ethical decision making and for teaching Jewish ethics. I don’t think liberal rabbis are fully equipped for leadership in the contemporary Jewish community unless they have those skills, and I look forward to a time when they are required of all our graduates.

To me, the series and VBDM stand opposed to the role of the rabbi as *mara d’atra* (local *halakhic* authority). How is the series received by the more traditional denominations? Does it matter?

As the current president of the Society of Jewish Ethics and past president of the Academic Coalition for Jewish Bioethics, I have been pleased to see the rapidly increasing recognition of VBDM among Jewish ethicists. Those with a compelling interest in the subject matter read our materials seriously, and I think the ethics work being done in our movement has more influence than is always publicly acknowledged. Of course, the less than 10 percent of the American Jewish community that makes personal decisions solely on the basis of *halakhah* are unlikely to be avid consumers of our work. I’ll settle for attempting to reach the other 90 percent.

The concept of community is interwoven throughout the series. I would imagine that reading the series in community is powerful. Are synagogue book groups doing this?

Many of our congregations use them for adult education, and some of them, such as *Ethics of Speech* and the book on *tzedakah*, have been the basis for board retreats. Some, such as *Kashrut*, are used in organizational decision making as well as for home guidance.

Who is buying the books?

Congregations buy the books for adult education classes; laypeople and rabbis buy them for their own reading. Scholars concerned with Jewish ethics are buying them, as are libraries and ministers. I have been amazed at how many different kinds of people have been interested in the guides once they discover them, often because a friend gives them a copy. Many rabbis give copies of Richard Hirsh's *Journey of Mourning* to bereaved families.

What are your plans and hopes for the series?

Completion of the series is a primary goal, and that will take a considerable amount of time. Five of the small books are out now, and I hope we will bring out at least one or two more a year in coming years. When one of the large volumes is complete, it will be reissued in that form. And the further along the project gets, the more interest in it grows. It is soul-satisfying work!

All books may be ordered on the RRC Web site, www.rrc.edu, or by calling 215.576.0800, ext 145. Some publications may be found for sale on Amazon.com.

The *Guide* series includes the following:

A Guide to Jewish Practice:

The Journey of Mourning

A Guide to Jewish Practice:

Kashrut

A Guide to Jewish Practice:

Bioethics

A Guide to Jewish Practice:

Tzedaka

A Guide to Jewish Practice:

The Ethics of Speech

These publications are also available from the Ethics Center:

Behoref Hayamim: A Values-Based Guide to Jewish Decision Making at the End of Life, by the Center for Jewish Ethics at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College

Quality of Life in Jewish Bioethics, by Noam J. Zohar

Spiritual Community: The Power to Restore Hope, Commitment and Joy, by David A. Teutsch, Ph.D.

Jewish Ethics of Speech: Disclosure to the Terminally Ill, by Dawn Robinson Rose, Ph.D, with Rabbi Mona Decker

Jewish Ethics of Speech: Gossip and Slander, by Dawn Robinson Rose, Ph.D.

