Who are the intended readers of the new Guide to Jewish Practice?

The Guide is intended for all Jews who take Judaism seriously yet do not consider themselves bound by halakha. It can be read in its entirety or used in sections for study groups; and it can serve as a resource when an issue arises. Those who observe halakha are frequently confronted with choices that suggest they do more than the minimum required by law (lifnim m’shurat hadin). This book can provide a framework for thinking about those choices as well.

Values-based decision making is central to the practice of Reconstructionist Judaism. Can you provide a basic explanation of it?

People need a method for making decisions that allows them to take into consideration Jewish values, their own values, facts, history, norms and consequences. VBDM is a process that helps to do that. The discussion of this approach and the steps for using it are in the "Decision Making" section of the Guide; material throughout the volume provides background for applying it in various contexts.

Jews are disproportionately charitable. Why is it necessary to include the topic of tzedaka in a book about Jewish practice?

We need to think not just about how much to give but also about where and how to give. Looking at religious organizations, needy individuals and cultural organizations, how do we set our priorities? What about balancing our giving between Jewish and secular causes? Which should be one-time gifts, and which should be annual? And how do we respond when a neighbor comes to the door on behalf of a cause we don’t care much about? Everyone I know struggles to figure out what is fair and how to make their giving reflect their priorities.

Sexual ethics are constantly in flux; contemporary society is dealing with more variations in sexual lifestyle than ever before. Is it possible to develop a lasting sexual ethic now?

Our ethics about sex should reflect our basic values, our attitudes toward family and our understanding of what it means to be human. While society and scientific knowledge change, the values we apply as we approach the subject of sexuality should not change. This book takes that perspective while encouraging us to consider these far-reaching questions in a fresh, open-minded way.

Recent high-profile business scandals have had Jewish names attached to them. How
do we deal with wrongdoing in our own community?

People don't automatically do the right thing. We need to teach business ethics in day schools, camps and religious schools and in adult education. People need to hear about this kind of integrity from the bima and read about it in Jewish publications. And we need to teach about the obligation to reprove—tocheha—and create an environment that supports people in doing it. We cannot expect Jews to act differently if we don't share our approach regularly and urge people to live up to it.

The Guide deals with tikun olam. What is the Reconstructionist movement’s track record on repairing the world?

The Reconstructionist movement has always applied Jewish values to a broad variety of social justice issues. The pages of The Reconstructionist have analyzed such issues, and the movement’s congregations and havurot have been engaged with them. The Reconstructionist Rabbinical College offers training in this area through its courses in Jewish ethics and through a specialized program in social justice organizing.

In the Internet era, the misuse of speech has had deadly consequences. We know how dangerous hate speech and gossip can be, but what can we actually do to stop them?

We will never completely eliminate hate speech, but we can significantly reduce it by teaching about the damage it does, by explaining the way gossip tears apart communities, and by helping people understand the full power of words. Organizations need to insist that their representatives avoid destructive speech at public gatherings and meetings, and parents need workshops about how the use of such language affects children. Schools and congregations can teach a different way for people to relate to one another.

Much can be done. One simple project is to pass out kitchen magnets that say the house is a l’shon hara-free zone.

America is undergoing an economic meltdown right now, and there is no end in sight. When educated people are jobless, even homeless, how can they focus on economic justice for others?

Everyone who has money or time can make a difference through political engagement, through interpersonal actions and through community organizing. Those of us lucky enough to have jobs should anchor these efforts and welcome every individual who wants to help. We need to teach the values to which we are committed—and we need to apply them to how we live.

We hear arguments for the voluntary sale of human organs and just as many against it. For every argument against surrogate motherhood, there is one for it. How does one make informed bioethical decisions?
There are far more options regarding bioethical decisions than most people know about. People need to get the latest information and then make decisions in an orderly way. That is precisely what the Bioethics section of the Guide is meant to help them do. When in doubt, they should consult both with physicians and with Jewish experts. Chaplains can also help, using values-based decision making.

Finally, there are so many books about Judaism on the market. What is unique about this one?

The community has long needed this kind of resource, which considers everyday issues in a way that helps people to make decisions for themselves. There is nothing else quite like it available. The enormous challenges facing all of us in the 21st century demand that we make tough decisions frequently in our daily lives. This book provides fully contemporary guidance that helps people to bring their best selves to the decision-making process.