Introduction to *A Guide to Jewish Practice: Everyday Living*

Jews who want Judaism to play a major role in their lives need access to Jewish traditions and rituals, values and beliefs. Most of us do not see ourselves as bound by *halakha* (Jewish law) but we seek to be guided by *minhag* (Jewish custom) and thought. We want to find our own way, shaping our lives as thinking, contemporary individuals within the context of the richness of Jewish practice and ideas. We need the personal, interpersonal, communal, world-historical and theological dimensions of our lives to flow together through our major decisions and the details of our daily living so that what we stand for is reflected in what we do and who we are. In attempting to accomplish that, the ritual and ethical aspects of our decision making and practice are often tightly woven together.

*A Guide to Jewish Practice* is meant to help those who want to ground their practice in Jewish knowledge and thought. It describes traditional Jewish practices and contemporary alternatives within the context of Jewish attitudes, beliefs, ideals and values. This *Guide* does not support any one approach or practice to the exclusion of all others. It suggests reasons for differences in practice and provides a dialogue among thoughtful voices that is meant to help each of the *Guide’s* readers find approaches that work for us. Together we form another link in Jewish tradition as we encounter Torah and renew Judaism for our time.

This *Guide* rests on millennia of Jewish living and Torah study, but its roots more recently stem from a tradition of Reconstructionist thought on these issues that can be traced to a series of articles in *The Reconstructionist* magazine in the fall of 1941 entitled, “Towards a Guide to Ritual Usage.” A subsequent pamphlet was revised again
in 1962. Since then, position papers published by the Reconstructionist movement, guides produced by the Center for Jewish Ethics of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and articles in The Reconstructionist have brought the approach of values-based decision making to a new level. The current volume brings together the best of that approach in the most comprehensive, non-halakhic guide to daily Jewish living ever published. A Guide to Jewish Practice will eventually include two additional large volumes. All three volumes will rest on principles developed over the last 70 years:

1. *Unity of purpose, not of procedure.* We share a commitment to divine service, the strengthening of Jewish community, and the pursuit of justice and peace. At the same time, we recognize that Jewish communities and individual Jews will differ regarding how we ought to act. Knowing that we cannot have certainty in these matters, we not only tolerate diversity; we embrace pluralism as a value.

2. *A focus on the positive.* Our inherited traditions include many do’s and don’ts. In reclaiming ritual, it is valuable to focus first on the opportunities for positive observance. With notable exceptions, such as eating *hametz* on Pesach and doing work on Shabbat, the don’ts can come later.

3. *A rejection of all or nothing.* While our impulse to observe comes out of the Jewish encounter with the divine, the particulars of our practices are the result of complex cultural processes. Especially in ritual matters, an unwillingness to observe everything should not discourage anyone from observing in part. One may light Shabbat candles and still work on Shabbat morning, or shop on Saturday afternoon and still do *Havdala*. Moreover, everyone’s practice evolves over time.

4. *Reinterpretation and renewal.* Often, people stop performing a particular ritual because the apparent reason for it is no longer applicable or appealing. However, when such a practice falls into disuse, a deeper value it carries can be lost. One example is kashrut (Jewish dietary practice), which was abandoned by many because they perceived it as a burden based on nothing more than an outdated health practice rather than as an ethical guide designed to sanctify the act of eating. Through our reconsideration of the purposes of inherited practices, they can be reinterpreted and renewed.
5. New circumstances, new responses. As times change we need to add practices to reflect changing circumstances and evolving values. Birth rituals for girls, egalitarian divorces and same-sex commitment ceremonies are but three recent examples of these responses.

Our approach reflects the fact that Jewish civilization continually evolves in response to changing social, political, intellectual, technological, scientific and economic conditions. Ever since Jews ceased living in self-governing communities at the end of the Middle Ages, we have lacked the organic community that provided a social and political context for rabbinically determined halakha. Our contemporary voluntary, democratic communities do not have the power to enforce law — nor would we want them to have it because we have come to value the autonomy of an open society and the democratic processes that accompany it. This places a greater burden upon individuals and communities for determining their own practices. Asking what our ancestors did is not the end of the search, though often it serves as a wonderful beginning.

Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, founder of the Reconstructionist movement, taught that in our time Jewish tradition should have “a vote but not a veto.” But giving Jewish tradition a vote is no simple matter. For tradition to vote, we must understand what it says and why. The purpose of this Guide is to help readers allow Jewish civilization to cast its vote in their lives. Thus this Guide is organized according to times and situations in which decisions must be made about personal, familial or communal practice. This volume of A Guide to Jewish Practice deals with everyday living, including daily religious practice, kashrut, tzedaka, bioethics and general principles of business and of family and sexual ethics. Volume two will cover Shabbat and the Jewish holidays. Volume three will examine life-cycle and personal status issues. The volumes are divided into topics and subtopics. Within each volume, relevant Jewish values, ideals, beliefs and norms receive attention. Alternative practices — from ancient to contemporary — are explored in light of these values. The Guide’s operating assumption is that each of us weighs and applies
values differently so that no two people or communities will necessarily end up following precisely the same practices.

Furthermore, individual decisions about these matters change over time. Some inherited practices, such as bal tash’hit (“do not destroy,” understood also as “avoid waste”), have acquired more weight in these environmentally conscious times. Some contemporary values, such as egalitarianism, now play a major role in many of our decisions as well.

We value living in an open society, and we do not see a need to strengthen barriers between the social lives of Jews and non-Jews. The intention of this Guide is to explore practices in light of Jewish values so that the reader can make thoughtful choices. Many of these values have been part of Jewish tradition for thousands of years. Others originate in Western culture and have become Jewish only recently. Once a value is accepted, its origin is of secondary importance.

Intended for use by individuals, rabbis and communities, this Guide is designed both for general study and for use as a reference. A guide rather than a code, it cannot be exhaustive in reviewing the entire halakha or in dealing with every situation. For those who want more details of Jewish law, many traditional codes are available, such as the Shulhan Arukh, as well as works produced by other movements, such as the Mishneh B’rura (Orthodox), Isaac Klein’s A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice (Conservative) and American Reform Responsa. In addition, there are now thousands of volumes, many of them in English, dealing with specialized topics at a level of detail impossible in a more encyclopedic work such as this one. Dozens of new and specialized volumes are published each year. Some of these materials are described in the “For Further Reading” listings at the end of each section of the Guide.

While A Guide to Jewish Practice is meant to serve all who will find its approach to Jewish living helpful, its outlook is Reconstructionist. Its position is post-halakhic because we live in a post-halakhic world — a world where Jewish law cannot be enforced. Obligation and spiritual discipline exist without the enforcement of a functioning legal system. Thus we take halakha seriously as a source and resource that
can shape expectations while not necessarily seeing ourselves as bound by inherited claims of obligation. Therefore the practices advocated in this Guide are not monolithic, and the voices of a lively group of commentators provide further insights, arguments and alternative approaches that span the broad range of views advocated by Reconstructionist rabbis and scholars. The Guide assumes that thoughtful individuals and committed communities can handle diversity and will of necessity reach their own conclusions.

Because this Guide is value-driven, the list of Jewish attitudes, values and beliefs found in the last section of this volume, along with articles about values-based decision making, is central to all that the Guide contains. While it is impossible to produce a totally comprehensive list, this one includes the values utilized in the Guide. But that does not mean the list includes everything we value. For example, we value each mitzvah, but mitzvot are actions, not values. We value them because they reflect our values. Values-driven decision making rests upon underlying attitudes and beliefs. We hold many attitudes and beliefs that shape our values, which in turn shape our practices. This Guide attempts to identify some of these in order to clarify decision-making by applying the beliefs, values, attitudes, norms, practices and ideals that provide much of the fabric of our shared experience.

It may often be appropriate for community practice to differ from the actions of the individuals in that community. The community is a model for Jewish practice, while the individual is responsible for personally integrating the best of American and Jewish civilization. The community may often be more stringent about an issue like kashrut than most—or even all—of its members. Because the community’s task, in part, is to unite its members, its practice should be designed to maximize the comfort of the Jews with whom it deals. Thus it might work to accommodate the most observant of its potential members or to maintain a high kashrut standard in part for the benefit of guests at members’ life-cycle events. There would be no inconsistency in a congregation’s maintaining a much more traditional posture on an issue of kashrut than do its members.
The *Guide* opens the way to experiences of learning and living. It explores the traditions we have inherited, considers their origins and suggests ways of responding to them. A variety of commentators add their voices, and suggestions for new rituals appear. Ultimately, this *Guide* will allow readers to explore ways to ground their personal and communal practices and observances in Jewish values and traditions that can help to make every moment an opportunity for holiness.