

Religion

Reconstructionist leader steps down after 13 years leading movement through interfaith, Israel tensions

Rabbi Deborah Waxman, CEO of Reconstructing Judaism, said she is leaving to make way for the “next generation” of leaders.

By [Andrew Silow-Carroll](#) May 1, 2025



Rabbi Deborah Waxman, shown here speaking at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College graduation in 2024, said she is stepping down as head of the Reconstructionist movement in order to make way for “the next generation of leaders.” (Courtesy Reconstructing Judaism)

Rabbi Deborah Waxman, who leads the seminary and congregational union of Judaism’s Reconstructionist movement, said this week that she will retire in the summer of 2026, opening the top job at a movement that has been rocked by tension over a growing strain of anti-Zionism among its recent rabbinical school students and graduates.

Since taking over as CEO of Reconstructing Judaism in 2014, Waxman has steered the main bodies of American Judaism’s smallest denomination to a firm financial footing following the post-2008 financial upheavals, and spearheaded curriculum changes at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College that beefed up field training and pastoral

education for its graduates. During her tenure, the seminary also became the first rabbinical school to admit rabbis with non-Jewish partners.

In 2018, she led [the renaming of the organization that combines, since 2012, the seminary and the former Jewish Reconstructionist Communities](#). She hosts a popular podcast, “[Hashivenu: Jewish Teachings on Resilience](#),” and expanded [Ritualwell](#), an online collection of new rituals and prayers.

But the movement’s reputation as organized Judaism’s progressive vanguard — pioneering the inclusion of women, LGBT people and Jews of color and embracing rituals later adopted by other liberal denominations — has been overshadowed in recent years by internal discord over Israel. Reconstructionist rabbis have taken leading roles in anti-Zionist activism, leading to public complaints by students and alumni and to the formation of Beit Kaplan, a new group of rabbis asserting their support for Israel.

Waxman [addressed those tensions last year in remarks at the seminary’s ordination ceremonies](#), and last July [the movement issued a statement reiterating its support for progressive Zionism, the existence of Israel and the two-state solution](#).

In an interview Tuesday, Waxman emphasized her own personal commitment to Israel and the movement’s stance that it will not submit current or prospective rabbis to “litmus” tests over Zionism.

And she said her decision to step down was not related to the tensions over Israel, but rather a personal decision after 13 years to hand leadership over to a new generation. (The movement has not announced a successor.)

“I deeply believe that institutions need to renew themselves, and that a change in leadership helps toward that renewal,” said Waxman, 58. “When my contract concludes in August of 2026 I will have served 13 years, almost a generation, and I really believe in raising up the next generation of leaders, and so [I’m] stepping aside for the vitality of the Reconstructionist movement.”

Talk of generational change came up frequently in a conversation held shortly before the movement was to announce her decision. Ordained as a rabbi by the RRC in 1999, Waxman said she studied in Israel when the potential of the Oslo Accords was “still at hand.”

“The Reconstructionist movement had long been in support of a two-state solution, and many of our leaders were involved from the time when Jews paid a very high price to advocate for Palestinian national aspirations,” she said.

For younger Jews, such ideals seem like ancient history, especially following the shocks of Oct. 7, 2023 and the war in Gaza that continues to grind on.

“Thirty years later, the young folks in the Reconstructionist movement have largely come up with the dismantlement of Oslo under Netanyahu’s leadership, with brief interruptions, and with the building of the separation barrier, and with an ever-worsening situation for Palestinians with no political will to really address it,” said Waxman, who holds a Ph.D. in American Jewish history from Temple University. “The realities of Israel and what has gone on in Israel have something to do with the experience of young folks and their differing analyses.”

Rather than shun the Reconstructionist rabbis who have joined anti-Zionist movements such as Jewish Voice for Peace, Waxman said her approach has been to engage them in a process of dialogue and mutual learning she calls “covenantal community.”

“We’re in the vanguard because of our commitment to complexity and nuance and our willingness to have really hard conversations. How we are navigating all of the complexities of the current moment is yet another way that the Reconstructionist movement is leading, and I would love for people to see that in our efforts to create a covenantal community,” she said. “What we are trying to do is stay together with integrity and with courage.”

Reconstructionist Judaism emerged out of the teachings of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan (1881–1983), a Conservative rabbi who conceived Judaism as an evolving “civilization” rather than just a religion. That framing allowed the movement, which coalesced in the 1950s and opened its own seminary in 1968, to innovate in ways that the Conservative movement considered a breach of halacha, or Jewish law. The college, based in the Philadelphia area, accepted its first woman rabbinical student in its second class, 16 years before the Conservative movement followed suit. Waxman is herself the first woman and the first out LGBTQ person to lead a congregational union or seminary affiliated with one of the Jewish denominations.



Eleven graduates of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College were ordained as rabbis in a ceremony in Abington, Pennsylvania, May 19, 2024. (Stephen Silver)

Today the movement counts 94 Reconstructionist congregations; this year, RRC will ordain 10 rabbis, of whom a third or so will seek pulpit positions. The others expect to find work on college campuses, as chaplains or as what Waxman calls “entrepreneurial” rabbis.

Having herself grown up in the Conservative movement — where rabbis were often considerably more observant of Jewish law and custom than most of their congregants — Waxman says that in the spirit of Kaplan, she has led efforts to orient the movement “toward the lived experience of people on the ground,” as opposed to a top-down approach.

“Reconstructionism has been so deeply informed by an embrace of democracy, which includes a powerful partnership between rabbis and lay people, and the understanding that in communities a rabbi exists as a leader, a teacher, an interpreter, as an empower, as a facilitator – as the first among equals in all of the different expressions of the Jewish civilization.”

The “lived experience” model led the [RRC, in 2015, to accept rabbinical students in interfaith relationships](#). (Hebrew College, a pluralistic seminary, [followed suit in 2023](#), as did [Hebrew Union College, the Reform movement seminary, last year](#).) Critics said rabbis need to be role models who demonstrate the Jewish norm of in-marriage. Proponents said rabbis could better serve their communities by reflecting the demographic reality of increasing mixed marriages.

“We heard some anxiety, including from some folks who were partnered with non-Jews, but overwhelmingly, we heard from people who said, ‘Thank you so much for validating my life, and thank you so much for seeing me and for believing that that that I am no less Jewish,’” Waxman said.

That conception of the rabbi as facilitator has led to criticism that the movement refuses to set firm boundaries of what is and isn't acceptable Jewish belief and practice — criticism that Waxman accepts with pride.

"The idea of who sets the boundaries and how they get policed is an unhealthy and unhelpful conversation," she said. "I'm much more interested in the generative conversation. I'm much more interested in, What are we building? What are we committed to? What are we trying to drive for?"

That approach has extended to Israel. Last December, responding to the previous year's divides over Israel, the movement hosted [a "convening" of some 600 movement rabbis, professionals and lay people](#). In careful language, Waxman and many of the speakers sought to avoid a debate over "Zionism" and focus instead on "values" articulated in her opening remarks: "a commitment to worldwide Jewish peoplehood," "all humans are created b'tzelem elohim, in the image of God," "the centrality of democracy and justice, the affirmation of self-preservation and the importance of accountability and reconciliation."

Similarly, during an intensive summer in Israel, rabbinical students are encouraged to engage with Israeli and Palestinian activists and NGOs who are working on the ground on issues that reflect that set of largely liberal values, and not on politics.

"What we are most interested in at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College when we're training our rabbis is behavior," said Waxman. "How do we interact with each other, what is the kind of care we provide and the kind of capacity to see the humanity and the pain and the aspirations of the person in front of us?"

"And sometimes I'm talking about Palestinians, but sometimes I'm talking about the young person sitting opposite me, or someone who holds a different opinion than I do," she added. "I just think that these are essential skills for us to learn."

For some in the movement, this kind of openness sanctions behavior that is beyond the pale. Last May, [in an oped in the Forward](#), two rabbinical students said they withdrew from the seminary because they "experienced an increasingly vociferous anti-Zionism among the student body, the steady erosion of civil discourse and the seminary's inability to transmit the Jewish narrative to those it will ordain as future spiritual leaders of the Jewish people."

Waxman insists, however, that rather than "retreat into rigid orthodoxies" and expelling students over their beliefs about Israel she prefers an approach of dialogue and acknowledging differences.

“There’s a huge generational component to what’s going on, and I think that we’re so much better served being in conversation with each other and articulating the things that we are most interested in investing in,” she said. “That is a much richer conversation, full of potential, than talking about who’s out and who’s in.”