

The Sacred Center

Rabbi Carl M. Perkins

(Originally published in *Judaism*, Volume 54, Numbers 3-4, pp. 194-198)

How should Conservative Judaism face the challenges of the twenty-first century? The answer is to articulate the movement's principles, embrace its inherent pluralism, and inspire its constituency.

Articulating the Ideology of the Movement

It has not been easy to define the ideology of the Conservative movement, as is evidenced by the fact that its statement of principles, *Emet Ve-Emunah*, appeared fully seventy years after the establishment of the United Synagogue. Some have argued that the decision *not* to articulate clearly where the movement stood during those years was a source of its strength, for it allowed people who might otherwise (if only they realized it) more appropriately situate themselves in the Reform or the Orthodox camps to find a home within the Conservative Movement.

Now, however, both Orthodoxy, on the one side, and Reform, on the other, are strong, confident—even triumphalist—movements. (Reconstructionism, though numerically much smaller, is also growing, and is justifiably confident.) In this environment, inertia is not likely to draw one toward Conservative Judaism. On the contrary, it is necessary to articulate strong reasons why Jews should resist the pull to the right—the sense of authenticity, as well as the seriousness, piety, and strong communal spirit within Orthodoxy—or for others, the equally compelling pull to the left: the value accorded personal autonomy, the low entry-level threshold, the openness to those on the margins (both Jewish and gentile) seeking to engage, and the *ruach* (spirit), enthusiasm, and self-confidence that characterize Reform today.

What are such reasons? Notwithstanding its strong emotional appeal, Orthodoxy requires intellectual compartmentalization for those whose *hashkafah* (religious outlook) has been enlightened by critical historical scholarship. Reform, on the other hand, grants too much authority to personal autonomy and is just not loyal enough to the chain of Jewish law and tradition. Reconstructionism, though its theology is not necessarily incompatible with one's identity as an observant Jew, has similarly firmly diverged from traditional Jewish practice.

There will always be Jews who are, on the one hand, committed to the continuity of Jewish tradition, yet who have minds fully open to the intellectual insights to be gleaned from modern historical scholarship, as well as the moral insights (such as feminism and egalitarianism) that are the products of modernity. Such Jews will not, I believe, feel fully at home anywhere other than in the Conservative movement.

One major reason it is difficult to explain Conservative Judaism, as Chancellor Ismar Schorsch has argued, is that it is difficult to explain Judaism. Judaism is an intellectually demanding, text-centered cultural system that can't be condensed into "sound bites." As

Abraham Joshua Heschel pointed out fifty years ago, Judaism embraces polarities—e.g., *halakha* and *aggadah* (law and lore); notions of God as both transcendent (wholly other) and immanent (present in the world); Jewish existence in both the Land of Israel and the diaspora, to take a few examples. To define Judaism’s focus too narrowly (as, for example, “law” or “faith”) is to distort its core as an evolving religious civilization—to employ Mordecai Kaplan’s term. Moreover, from the outset, Conservative Judaism has defined itself as both loyal to tradition and open to change, a position far more difficult to convey than the stances of other movements. But the effort to define and explain the movement is vital, for its values and principles are the basis of its appeal; not knowing what they are, it is difficult to generate much support or enthusiasm for the movement.

Fortunately, we now possess several successful statements that articulate where the movement stands. Chancellor Schorsch has provided us with *The Sacred Cluster*, a short pamphlet itemizing seven values at the core of Conservative Jewish identity. In my own words, these are: (1) devotion to *torah*, broadly defined, as our national literary and cultural legacy; (2) commitment to *talmud torah*, the study of our sacred texts; (3) responsibility for and love of *klal yisrael* (the totality of the Jewish community); (4) the duty to support and to remain connected with the people and the state of Israel, with whom we are covenantal partners and with whom we share a common fate; (5) reverence for Hebrew, our *l’shon ha-kodesh* (holy language; see b.Sanhedrin 21b), the language in which our classical texts were written and the premier language of Jewish expression in Israel today; (6) the recognition of *halakha* as the guide to a Jewish way of life; and (7) *yirat shamayim*, reverence for the sacred.

The Sacred Cluster is a strong and sophisticated statement that requires reflection and interpretation for a community to claim it as its own. We within the movement should be distributing it and promoting it. We should be preaching and teaching about it. We need more such statements to clarify our ultimate concerns, and to remind ourselves and others what we are committed to and what inspires our commitments.

Embracing the Inherent Pluralism of the Movement

Fortunately, the Conservative movement does not require a pledge of loyalty to its doctrines. It would seem unrealistic—and self-defeating—to those familiar with the world views, motivations and practices of average Conservative Jews to require such fidelity. The “sacred cluster” need not become a catechism. Yes, it is important for the movement to articulate its principles. But the movement has never insisted on ideological purity—and it should not start doing so now.

The Conservative movement has long respected the diversity of beliefs, practices, and conceptions of its adherents. One may view this stance cynically as grounded in the requirements of building and growing the movement. This may be so, but in my view, this approach flows directly from an ideological commitment, which I regard positively. It is a corollary of the core value of *klal yisrael* to recognize and respect the multiplicity of world views of individual Jews—particularly in the wake of the enormous ruptures in Jewish self-understanding wrought by modernity. I believe that this implicit pluralism (rather than any ideological fuzziness) has been the secret of the Conservative movement’s success, and that we must continue to nurture this laudable quality.

Conservative congregations have long consisted of individuals and families who place very different emphases on the core values of Conservative Judaism—and yet who coexist respectfully. In my experience, congregations include “regulars,” for whom weekly or daily *davening* (worship) is vital; community-minded men and women who understand that the congregation’s greatest mission is to serve as an instrument for social action; so-called “secular” Israelis who are committed to maintaining a strong connection with Israel; intellectuals who love to study Jewish texts; and other sub-groups. Though few of our members may be committed to the entire cluster of core values—a source of frustration for Conservative Jewish leaders—successful congregations express their allegiance to Conservative Judaism by making room for Jews with different commitments within the “sacred cluster.”

At a time when we are experiencing declining numbers, some may find it tempting to seek doctrinal and behavioral unanimity, to insist on exclusionary policies ... —in short, to erect boundaries. This might “work” in that it could create a more uniform Conservative Jewish community, though such an effort would, I believe, come at a cost, not only in numbers but also in the loss of openness, accessibility, and appeal. Were it to take such a step, the movement would be backing away from its core commitment to *klal yisrael*.

Instead, we must embrace a variety of religious sensibilities within our core constituency—and beyond it as well. Certain institutions of the movement have long done so. Solomon Schechter schools, for example, welcome children from Orthodox as well as non-observant Jewish households, and the Ramah camps are filled with kids whose parents want them to have an intensive Jewish summer camp experience—but who may not, for example, accept the constraints of *halakha* when it comes to their personal practice.

We must envision the Conservative congregation as a center for Jews with a variety of Jewish commitments. In so doing, we may help those who have “strayed” from the movement to return. For example, many Modern Orthodox synagogues have members who are orthopraxic (observant) but certainly not orthodox in *hashkafah*. Were the option of a more traditional and participatory alternative service in the local Conservative shul available, some might join it

instead. Similarly, there are *minyanim* and *havurot* throughout the country which can and should be meeting in Conservative shuls—if only they were invited to do so.

There is a danger in such openness, of course. Whenever a religious institution sponsors a variety of religious practices, serious questions arise: What is the role of the *mara d’atra* (the rabbi, as local religious authority)? How far may the practice of an alternative *minyan* or a *havurah* diverge from that of the *kahal* (congregation) as a whole? For example, is a “*mehitzah minyan*” (i.e., one with separate seating for men and women) appropriate in an egalitarian congregation? Openness towards variation in outlook or practice may invite those who are less learned and less grounded in Jewish culture to propose practices that are inappropriate or tasteless. The rabbi’s role as

educator and community organizer becomes crucial in such cases. Rabbis can and should exercise leadership to help creative alternatives within the congregation develop intelligently, sensitively, and harmoniously.

The Sacred Center

At their best, Conservative congregations are stimulating and inspiring institutions. They can succeed, though, only if they are truly welcoming and inspiring to seekers beyond their walls as well as those within. They must be open to those who wish to connect with Judaism in a variety of ways—through music or meditation or social action or Israeli culture, as well as, of course, through religious practice. They must provide opportunities for novices to learn how to keep kosher, how to observe Shabbat, how to celebrate and mourn as a Jew, and how to *daven*.

At the same time, Conservative congregations must nurture and support their core constituency. Entry-level programming must not be at the expense of the more learned and/or committed members of the community. Congregations must provide fertile environments for deep Jewish learning, spirituality, and living. They must be willing, with encouragement and empathy, to challenge their members to grow Jewishly. Most important, they must strive to create and sustain within themselves committed, observant sub-communities. Otherwise, the more observant members of the congregation will be tempted to leave, not necessarily out of ideological incompatibility, but because they crave the *sine qua non* of an observant Jewish life: a supportive community of men and women who share their values and commitments.

The Conservative movement has an inspiring, compelling message for Jews living in the highly fractured post-modern world of the twenty-first century. It is that men and women of different backgrounds and different religious sensibilities can, in the context of mutually respectful and supportive communities, connect with Judaism and promote Jewish values in a variety of ways. My hope is that the movement will retain its rightful place—in the sacred center of our people—guiding all who find their way to its doors to pursue lives of Jewish learning, piety, and practice.