

Conservative Judaism: Passionate About the Center

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The three major branches of American Judaism have been described as “crazy, hazy, and lazy.” I will let you sort it out and guess which is which. In a stinging attack on the conservative movement, outgoing Jewish Theological Seminary Rabbi Ismar Schorsch addressed the newly ordained rabbis, cantors and educators in his final message this past May as chancellor of the Seminary. He condemned the appalling lack of scholarship and vision, calling the motto, “tradition and change” “inane” and used words such as “impoverishment” and “malaise” to characterize the movement he has led for the past twenty years. He even lambasted Etz Hayim, the very Torah commentary for which he wrote the foreword. I cannot help but wonder why he never bothered to try to offer any kind of constructive leadership or vision during his tenure when he could have truly had an impact.

While much of his criticism is petty and even mean-spirited, some of what he said rings true. These are tough times for the Conservative movement. Many synagogues in Israel are struggling to survive. Various branches of the movement compete for the same limited contributions and do not always speak in one voice. Will Rogers’ classic line about his political affiliation could just as easily have been applied to members of Conservative synagogues. Will Rogers used to say, “I don’t belong to any organized political party. I’m a Democrat.”

The post World War II phenomenal growth enjoyed by our movement in suburban America has abated, and Conservative Judaism is no longer the most popular Jewish denomination in the United States. According to the most recent Jewish population survey, about 33 percent of American Jews affiliate with Conservative Judaism, down from 38 percent 10 years ago. As one conservative leader put it, “Earlier in the twentieth century, the common wisdom was that Orthodox Judaism would die out in America since it was outmoded and irrelevant. Instead, it's the American Jewish center that's eroding.” Some Conservative leaders have questioned whether or not the decision in the 1960’s to permit Jews to drive to shul on Shabbat may have been a mistake. They suggest it has contributed to further geographic dispersion, thereby diminishing a sense of community among congregants.

If this is what our own people are saying, you can imagine what others have to say about the movement. Rabbi Paul Menitoff, an officer of the rabbinic arm of the Reform movement, pronounced a few years ago that Conservative Judaism has only about 20 years left before it expires and runs out of gas. He predicted the demise would be caused by the gravitation of traditionalists to Orthodox synagogues and of those interested in a more liberal approach affiliating with the Reform way of life. My primary concern about his prediction that the movement would die in 20 years was to try to keep his comment from the Board – as I was about to sign a 22 year contract.

In addition to being a trying time, this is also a time of transition. After a long search, The Jewish Theological Seminary has just elected a new chancellor, Arnold Eisen, an individual whom all anticipate will provide much more inspiring and imaginative leadership than his predecessor.

This is a time of transition in other significant ways as well. Against the backdrop of all this turmoil, uncertainty and upheaval and one of the primary reasons I am speaking about the subject this evening, is that in the next few months the Conservative movement will be prominently featured in the news -- in both the secular media as well as in the Jewish press. And the news will have nothing to do with the substantive problems which plague our movement and cry out for our attention. Rather, the coverage will focus exclusively on the difficult decision about what to do in regard to the agonizing issue of homosexuality. The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards is currently considering whether openly homosexual individuals can be admitted to study for the rabbinate and whether or not rabbis will be permitted to officiate at same sex unions. The decision will have repercussions beyond the Conservative movement and will reverberate throughout the Jewish world.

The deliberations are being conducted in a manner consistent with the way in which Conservative Judaism considers halakhic matters and makes changes to Jewish law. The controversial issue is being studied and debated by rabbinic scholars who are poring over the Talmud, commentaries and responsa to find applicable precedents as they, like the rabbis who preceded them, strive to interpret Jewish law for a new generation.

The challenge when revising halakha is to make change because it is necessary and justified, and not just to acquiesce to the demands of the time. It is essential to insure that any modification of halakha is based on a reverent reading and understanding of the meaning of the texts and is consistent with the overriding spirit and intent of Jewish law.

In this instance, the struggle is to reconcile the harsh, blatant, unequivocal opposition expressed in the Torah and Jewish law to homosexuality and centuries of following this approach with what we now know about how sexual orientation is determined. The decision must also take into consideration the Jewish inclination for compassion and understanding. It is a difficult issue -- many will applaud the movement for its willingness to adapt and to tackle such a difficult issue. Others will criticize any change in the status quo as a further erosion of the commitment to uphold halakha and will condemn it for fomenting greater divisiveness in the Jewish world.

In fact, it appears most likely that two contrasting, opposing opinions will both be adopted -- one affirming the status quo and one liberalizing it, allowing rabbis to choose either position. (Ok, so now I just gave away which of the three denominations is hazy, but you still have to figure out the other two.)

Despite the efforts to de-politicize the topic and to prepare the public for whatever the verdict will be, controversy is inevitable. One of the proponents of what is referred to as the liberal position removed his name from the proposal because he was upset with the

process for the measure's approval. Already some of the more traditional synagogues in Canada are threatening to form a breakaway coalition.

I am concerned that all the attention devoted to this one issue, important as it may be, will distract us and divert us away from the crucial work of considering how to attack and solve the serious and real problems which afflict our movement. And make no mistake about it – we Conservative Jews have a number of serious problems facing us. To sum it up, much of what ails us can be attributed to the fact that for the most part, children and members of conservative synagogues are not serious about Jewish observance. We might not only be hazy, but also a bit lazy as well.

This point was driven home to me not too long ago when speaking with my children, who told me how difficult it is for them to find other young people with a similar appreciation for Judaism. As one of my children put it, "The young Jews my age that I meet are either *frum* (very religious) or do absolutely nothing Jewish. There aren't many kids out there like us for whom Judaism is important, but who are not Orthodox."

This is a major dilemma and an unfortunate situation. We are guilty of creating a disparity between the ideal of living a committed Jewish life and the reality of the limited level of observance in the lives of Conservative Jews. Although we are members of a movement that maintains the importance of kashrut, most of our members do not attempt to adhere to any dietary standards. Although we are members of a movement that emphasizes the importance of prayer, most of our members do not make attendance at synagogue services a part of their routine, even when faced with the loss of a parent or loved one. Although we are members of a movement that embraces study of Jewish texts as an essential element of our identity, most of us do not engage in any kind of serious ongoing study. The observance of Shabbat, the holidays and other home rituals are emphasized and reaffirmed in just about every policy and platform statement of the United Synagogue and Rabbinical Assembly as central pillars of our people. Yet in most Conservative Jewish homes, practice is relatively limited and not the norm. Despite the urging of rabbis, most of the holidays come and go and for most congregants, barely register a blip on the radar.

The predicament is reflected in a story about a child who was sobbing in the back seat of the car on his way home from shul after attending High Holiday services with his family. His father asked what was wrong and why he was so distraught. At first the little boy refused to answer, but finally he stopped crying long enough to blurt out to his parents, "The rabbi said he wants children to grow up and live in a Jewish home --- but I want to stay in our home with you!"

Clearly there is a gap between the ideology of our movement, which charts a course towards preserving Jewish tradition while adapting to modernity, and the typical daily level of observance of most members of Conservative synagogues.

Judaism needs a centrist movement, both to serve as an alternative to Orthodox and Reform Judaism, and also because of what it stands for. I would suggest this evening that

it is more important than ever for us to be passionate about upholding the center. In fact, the very survival of Judaism may be dependent upon strengthening the movement and its sensible approach, and on how we, the members of Conservative synagogues live our lives.

In a pluralistic world of multiple options, it is inevitable that Jews will express and encounter Judaism in various ways. We need all the major denominations and non-denominations for they each appeal to a different segment of the Jewish population. Furthermore, Judaism has always been multi-faceted, encouraging different interpretations and celebrating diversity. The Talmud itself records minority opinions as a measure of the respect it holds for variant interpretations. This heterogeneity is a manifestation of the Talmudic dictum, “*shivim panim laTorah*: there are 70 faces, or dimensions to the Torah.”

After all, let’s face it: not all Jews are going to be Orthodox. While there is much appeal to the warmth and closeness in the Orthodox community, a sense of authenticity and its devotion to preserving Jewish ritual and customs, many of us are the products of families where grandparents were turned off by a lifestyle which they consciously rejected. Most modern Jews will not accept the stringencies placed on them by an increasingly isolated, insular, restrictive, archaic and outmoded set of practices that seem exclusionary and which do not make sense to them.

Reform Judaism works hard to make Judaism meaningful in the lives of its adherents by injecting modern modes of expression into our ancient tradition and has maintained a passionate commitment to pursue principles of social justice. It appeals to many who otherwise might be lost to the Jewish world and keeps them in the fold. Yet it often dilutes and deletes traditional practices, leaving people with a void and little connection or knowledge of Jewish customs or tradition. At times, it goes overboard in its efforts to be inclusive. Even as it reintroduces abandoned rituals, its adherence to the principle of individual autonomy as the foundation of its ideology is problematic, for most Jews are not capable of making informed decisions about halakha and wind up choosing to practice very little. Consequently, the emphasis on individual choice is harmful for it seriously weakens the sense of unity, community and continuity.

Other newer modes of Jewish expression appeal to some who otherwise would not have any means of feeling a part of the Jewish community. Yet their innovations are often excessive and have little basis in traditional, familiar Jewish traditions. Their unconventional modes will not be of interest to the vast majority of Jews.

I already articulated at the outset some of the serious faults and shortcomings of the Conservative movement and the many things we need to remedy. As Rabbi Yitz Greenberg has said on numerous occasions, “I don’t care which movement you belong to, as long as you are embarrassed or ashamed by some aspect of it.”

Yet despite all its problems, I still believe the ideology of Conservative Judaism is consistent with the intent of ha’zal, the sages, that Judaism should not be stagnant, and

that Jewish law should be an organic process. I believe that it offers the best way to live a Jewish life in our secular world, and to achieve a balance between preserving our ties to Jewish tradition while living in the modern world. It is the best way to maintain Judaism and to live an authentic fulfilling Jewish life while being a part of modernity. This is what ultimately, will insure our survival in this free and open society we live in. But that will happen only if we do not merely subscribe to its ideals. We have to actually put into practice what our rabbis teach. In other words, the time has come for us to commit to living a Jewish life, for making Judaism play a more significant role in our lives and in the decisions we make about our lifestyle.

For too many members of Conservative shuls, the sum total of being a Conservative Jew consists of feeling uncomfortable in a Reform Temple. But Conservative Judaism is much more than just Reform Judaism without the organ and a little more Hebrew in the service. We need to become more serious and passionate about our observance of Judaism.

One of the appealing aspects of Conservative Judaism is its intellectual integrity. Since its inception the Conservative movement has accepted modern scholarship while retaining Jewish practices. It sought to preserve and maintain time-honored practices, which is why it was initially called “Positive-Historical Judaism.” This approach contrasts with Reform which used the conclusions of scholars as justification for rejecting much of Jewish tradition, and Orthodoxy which at the outset, refused to permit the critical study of texts altogether. We should be proud of the widespread acceptance of egalitarianism which offers women the opportunity to fully participate in the ritual life of the synagogue.

The attitude of Conservative Judaism towards halakha is honest and true to Jewish tradition. Jewish law is sacred because it is what gives value, shape, direction and a framework to our lives. We accept the indispensability of halakha while recognizing that it has evolved throughout the ages as it attempts to adapt to the needs of each community and generation. As stated in the work that encapsulates the movement’s principles, Emet v’Emanah, “Since each age requires new interpretations and applications of the received norms, Halakha is an ongoing process.” We recognize that it is an ancient tradition rooted in the experience and texts of our ancestors, and thus the way in which the Jewish people and its sages interpret the will of God.

Even the pluralistic approach which allows for rabbis to arrive at different conclusions and may at times appear to be “hazy,” is an authentic and appropriate reflection of Judaism’s traditional acceptance of multiple modes of expression. The Talmud recorded minority opinions and is replete with numerous instances of respect for rabbis who went against the prevailing position of the majority.

A central tenet since the time of one of its early leaders, Solomon Schechter, is the concept of clal Yisrael, the importance of Jewish peoplehood and of Eretz Yisrael, the land of Israel. In fact, the emphasis on the whole body of the Jewish people is one of the reasons why a sermon like the one I am giving tonight is rarely heard in a Conservative

shul, unlike Reform and Orthodox colleagues who do not shy away from promoting their denominations.

It is difficult to be passionate about the center, for liberal denominations of any faith usually make a religion out of tolerance and values acceptance of others. But let us resolve to celebrate our centrist ideology and what we have to offer the American Jewish community. Our homes should be recognizably Jewish – filled with Jewish ritual objects, books, magazines, art and conversation. Even more than that, they must have Jewish content and activity. We need to live in harmony with the rhythm of the Jewish calendar, making holidays and Shabbat a part of our lives.

Let us resolve in this New Year, for the sake of my children, for the sake of your children and for the sake of Jewish survival, to be more passionate about strengthening our commitment to what it means to be a Conservative Jew. In so doing, let us take our Judaism more seriously and to be more passionate about how we express it. The Jewish people will benefit, and so will we.

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