

A New Leader for the Conservative Movement Ties to AJ



It was one year ago that Dr. Ismar Schorsch, Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, announced that he would be stepping down from his position at the end of June this year, concluding twenty years in his role as the leader of the Conservative Movement in Judaism worldwide. A select committee was established that has been deliberating for months. They have been interviewing candidates, conscious that their choice will have to give new vision and leadership not only to the Seminary, but the Movement as a whole during very difficult times.



Dr. Arnold Eisen

On April 10, 2006, on the eve of *Pesach* the decision was announced. Dr. Arnold Eisen was named the new Chancellor, the seventh leader of the institution since it was founded in 1886. Dr. Eisen is a Philadelphian as were many of his predecessors. Rabbi Sabato Morais, the first president was the leader of Mikveh Israel Congregation, and the third president, Dr. Cyrus Adler, was also a prominent Philadelphian. Dr. Schorsch was born in Germany but grew up in nearby Pottstown and is a graduate of Ursinus College. Dr. Solomon Schechter, Dr. Louis Finkelstein, and Dr. Gerson D. Cohen round

out the seven leaders. Morais, Schechter and Adler held the office as president. The title Chancellor was created during the tenure of Dr. Finkelstein, who, by the way, was present at the dedication of our current building in 1964.

Dr. Eisen grew up at nearby Congregation Emanu-el. His father, Alan, later became a member of OJCC-BI, and when that congregation merged with AJ in 2004, he joined us. Alan is a regular at *Shabbat* services. When I saw him on *Shabbat HaGadol*, as rumors were already swirling that Arnold's election as Chancellor would be announced the following Monday, I said to him, "Alan, I hear some very interesting rumors about Arnie." He replied, with the biggest grin on his face, "On Monday, they won't be rumors!" As a congregation, we share in a father's pride!

Dr. Arnold Eisen has an outstanding reputation in scholarly circles as a compelling teacher, distinguished scholar, fine author, and man of character. He is currently chair of the Department of Religious Studies and Koshland Professor of Jewish Culture and Religion at Stanford University. He has been a faculty member at Stanford for the last twenty years. He received his Ph.D from the Hebrew University and holds undergraduate degrees from Oxford University and the University of Pennsylvania.

Dr. Eisen's field of interest has been in the area of Jewish identity, the revitalization of Jewish tradition, and the redefinition of the American Jewish Community. These are precisely the areas with which Conservative Judaism must grapple today.

The selection of Dr. Eisen as Chancellor was surprising to many because he is not a rabbi. Among his six predecessors, only Cyrus Adler was similarly not a rabbi, and his tenure ended over sixty years ago. So this is clearly a break with recent tradition at the Seminary. But these are difficult times for Conservative Judaism. Surveys show a rapid decline in membership as both Orthodoxy and Reform are growing. The movement's rabbinic leadership is riven on issues such as whether gays and lesbians can be ordained as rabbis. The various arms of Conservative Judaism are often at loggerheads with each other.

Dr. Eisen enters this arena with a perspective untainted by having been a combatant on any of these contentious issues. He comes with the clarity of a scholar and the heart of a principled Jew. I believe he will give the situation a fresh approach and a new authority, one which will guide us in a path that will clarify our vision and unite our efforts for the future.

We owe Dr. Schorsch a tremendous debt of gratitude for his distinguished leadership during the last twenty years. I have great affection and admiration for him. He was my first history teacher at JTS and was an outstanding lecturer. My notes from his clear, highly organized lessons are still useful to me today.

As Chancellor, Dr. Schorsch has led the Seminary with a steady hand. He has secured its financial base and expanded its committed lay leadership. He has expanded the offerings and strengthened its schools, an undergraduate college with links to Columbia University and Barnard College, graduate school, school of education, cantorial school and rabbinical school.

But more, Dr. Schorsch has been the quintessential rabbi to the movement. His strength of character, his encyclopedic knowledge, his authentic scholarship, his principled stance on public issues, and his compassion have made him an individual who has personified the ideal of our movement. He has demonstrated in his life and mission as Chancellor the "truthful piety" to which he has exhorted us so often.

AJ is one of the 22 founding congregations of the United Synagogue. Our roots in Conservative Judaism are deep and secure. I am proud of those men and women who grew up at AJ and have entered the rabbinate. Currently, we have three students in the List College, the Seminary's undergraduate program. They are **Gabriel Miner**, **Alyson Miller**, and **Suzanne Lipkin**. **Amy Mayer**, our former executive director is in the rabbinical school.

On Wednesday night, June 7, 2006, our own **Robert Friedman** will be among the city-wide honorees at the annual dinner of JTS. We look forward to honoring Robert for his leadership and dedication and to supporting the work of the Seminary, the intellectual and spiritual heart of the Conservative movement. I hope you will be joining us.

These are exciting times for the Seminary and AJ. We give appreciative thanks for the leadership of Dr. Ismar Schorsch. We anticipate the thrill of Dr. Eisen's new approach to the challenges we face as a Movement, and we look forward to honoring one of our distinguished AJ leaders.

May this be the threshold of renewed vigor for the Conservative Movement and our people.

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