

## A New Paradigm of Jewish Life for the Next Generation: The Pursuit of Holiness

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A husband worried that his wife's hearing was not what it once was and thought that she might need a hearing aid. The husband wasn't quite sure just how serious her hearing problem was nor did he feel comfortable broaching the topic with his wife. He decided, therefore, to call their family physician for advice. The doctor said, "Well, first, I would recommend that you conduct a simple test. After that, we will know how to proceed. Here is the test: Stand about 30 feet away from your wife and say something in a normal tone of voice. If she doesn't respond, move a few steps closer and, again, say something in a normal voice. Continue doing so until she answers you."

That evening, while his wife was preparing supper, the man decided that this was a good time to follow the doctor's advice. He stood about 30 feet away from his wife and called out: "Honey, what's for dinner?" There was no reply. He took a few steps closer and, again, called out, "Honey, what's for dinner?" Again, nothing. He continued repeating the question, each time taking a few steps closer to his wife. Finally, standing in the kitchen, only 6 feet away from his wife, the husband asks again, "Honey, what's for dinner?" At which point his wife turns around and says, "Roasted chicken. Same as the last five times you asked".

I share this story to make the point that at times we may think that those to whom we are speaking are just not listening to us. But, in some of those instances, it may be the case that they are speaking to us and that we are the ones who are not listening. What I suggest today is that this is exactly what has occurred and is occurring in Conservative synagogues throughout North America today. Our messages and mantras have been stated and repeated for several generations. Today, however, that message does not seem to be getting through. The problem is not as that they don't hear us. Perhaps, like the husband in the joke, the problem is not that the next generation is not listening to what we have to say. Perhaps we are the ones who have not listened closely enough to what they have been saying to us.

What are they saying to us? Allow me to explain it by using an example from the Torah: When the Children of Israel stood at the foot of Mount Sinai and heard the Voice of God, they shuddered in fear and responded: *Na'ash ViNishma* – We will do whatever You, God, want, even if we don't understand why you are telling us to do this. In past generations, Jewish life was perpetuated from generation to generation by repeating those words, *Na'aseh V'Nishma*. They accepted the bindingness of Jewish Law and the traditional mandate of the *mitzvot*, the commandments.

In contrast, the new generation of Jews is much more skeptical and much more doubtful than those of a generation ago. This generation has grown up, and is growing up, in age of individualism and personal autonomy in the larger society. In that context, that commanding voice of *halacha* which proclaimed, "You shall do the following..." is met with a response from every corner of the Jewish world, with the

exception of the Orthodox, in the form of a question: “Why should I?” They have told us that the language of Jewish Law, the language of obligation, the notion of “being commanded”, of “bindingness” no longer speaks to them.

This new response has been used by some to predict that this response represents the beginning of the end of the Conservative Movement. And here, I must disagree. This new response, these new challenges should not give us reason to fear for the future nor to despair. I am not discouraged by the fact that our message has gone flat. It is true that, unlike the generations of the past, the new generation will no longer say, “*Na’aseh/* we will follow unquestioningly”. Instead, in response to the notion of being commanded, they are simply asking for a different answer. They want to know: Why be Jewish today? Why should we continue, what should we preserve, as we move forward? I take these questions seriously. I accept the challenge to find a new message and a more compelling answer for a new generation. And, if we cannot answer these basic questions, I am not sure that we should survive as a movement.

In paving a new path, I sense opportunity and optimism. We have here an opportunity to re-imagine Jewish life for the next generation. I am optimistic in the sense that we, within our movement, have the precedents, the ability and the vision to craft a response which will speak to those we seek to reach. I would like, therefore, to begin that process this morning by briefly laying out the foundational ideas behind a new approach.

The American Jewish Community is comprised of several vibrant though very different approaches to the challenges we face. Beyond those who consider themselves secular or cultural Jews, there three religious streams predominate American Judaism. Each stream has its own solution, its own perspective on what Jews today need. And, since we live in the age of twitter, this generation will give us a maximum of 150 characters to make our points.

The tweet/motto of Orthodoxy is simple and straightforward and can be expressed in two words: *Torah U’Mitzvot*: For Judaism to continue, they contend, we utilize the formula which has been handed down to us, a formula tried and true. It worked back then and it will work today. Adherence to Jewish Law as a matter of obligation, unwavering commitment to the study of Torah, these are the core principles and the pathways to affiliation with and connection to the Jewish Community.

Ask a Reform Jew to encapsulate their philosophy of Judaism today and they will also respond with two words: Social Justice (what they call “*Tikkun Olam*”). To be a Jew in the world today means to engage and immerse one’s self in social issues and to work on behalf of the less fortunate. For some in this camp, the conscious incorporation of the universal values and virtues of kindness and compassion, values and virtues found in every religion, is sufficient to create a connection to Judaism. This approach suggests that acts of kindness and generosity embody the core meaning, the prophetic ideal of Judaism.

But ask a Conservative Jew for a tweet or motto, you are more likely to receive a overstuffed PDF. To fully appreciate the approach of the Conservative Movement you might also be handed a stack of books and articles regarding the historical and cultural development of Jewish Law, books and on the philosophy of the “*Wissenschaft School*” (to learn about our movement’s roots in German scholarship

of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century). You will be told about demographic studies and provided with opinions by well-known academicians. And, these books and articles are not only hard to carry, they are hard to understand. And nowhere, in all of this literature, is a concise or compelling motto.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, who I often quote with great respect and affection, has suggested in a recent article\* a unifying theme, what I would call a motto, eminently “tweetable” for the Conservative Movement. I believe it would be useful for us to consider this seriously. His motto consists of three words: *Asher Kiddishanu B’Mitzvotav*. You recognize these three Hebrew words as part of the formula of the blessings we recite before the performance of a *mitzva*. Lighting Shabbat or *Chanukkah* candles, eating in a *sukkah*, eating *matzah* at the *Pesach seder* are all performed with a blessing which contains these words, which I would translate as: ...Who brings Holiness to our lives through the performance of *mitzvot*. Or, to put it more succinctly for the sake of our “branding” for a new generation, I would say that our Movement’s motto and approach should be: Bringing Holiness into the lives of Jews.

What is Holiness? For the purpose of this discussion, I define Holiness according to Rabbi Kushner’s definition. Holiness is the dimension of our lives that human beings can experience but animals cannot. This is what the Torah means when, in the Creation story, we read of the creation of humanity: “*Na’aseh et HaAdam BiTzalmeinu* –Let us make man in our image”. Let us create a being which has a special connection to God, a special degree of access and connectedness to God. In this way the purpose of our existence is made clear, to transcend our animal origins and experience humanity through achieving holiness.

When I began studying at JTS, I had the good fortune of becoming acquainted with one of the great scholars there, Prof. Max Kiddushin. It was Kiddushin, in one of his early books, who coined the term “normal mysticism”. Normal mysticism, he suggested, encompasses those Jewish practice which invoke the presence of God in our lives. For Prof. Kiddushin, performing a *mitzva* is summoning God’s presence. Saying: *Baruch Ata/ Praised art You/Thou* at the beginning of a *bracha*, establishes a personal relationship with God at that moment. “Ata” is the language of second person singular, or as Buber would call it, the language of I-Thou relationships.

We don’t find God in places. We find God in moments. We have the power as human beings to transform ordinary moments into moments of Holiness. We know how to create from an ordinary moment, a moment in which God is found. In this formulation, the term “*mitzvah*” is understood, not in its literal sense of a commandment/obligation but as an opportunity to be in touch with God. And here is where a new approach comes in. Performing *mitzvot*, not as a matter of obligation or a sense of “being commanded” but rather as a path to Holiness and to connecting with God, changes our approach, our sense of purpose in adhering to our a traditional Jewish lifestyle.

Beginning in the 1950s, the Conservative Movement endorsed a variety of innovations for the sake of accommodating that new generation of American Jews. Among those innovations were that we were permitted to drive to the synagogue on Shabbat and we countenanced eating dairy food in non-Kosher restaurants. In the 1980s, we approved and embraced the participation of women to be counted in a minyan and to serve as *shlichot tzibbur*, prayer leaders. More recently, our Committee on Jewish Laws

and Standards has accepted endorsed non-discriminatory policies regarding gay and lesbian Jews, approving a *brit ahuvim*, a commitment ceremony for gay couples, encouraging them to accept both participatory and leadership roles in the Jewish Community.

To be perfectly candid, none of these, nor many other innovations, despite the fact that they have been endorsed by our Committee on Laws and Standards conform to Orthodox, *halachic* criteria. But the changes, nonetheless, were made. Why? Because our community, our members, our rabbis, our leaders made compelling arguments not regarding the *halachic* justification for making these changes. The changes were made because, as people who live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we understood that there were things ensconced in Jewish law which either no longer spoke to us or, in many cases, simply offended our modern sensibilities.

These changes which our Movement has sanctioned were made, in some cases, on order to harmonize Jewish observance with our modern context. Some changes were made as moral mandates. That has always been the hallmark of our Movement: to evolve, to incorporate modernity into a Jewish context, to change, not as a simple matter of style or personal preference but as a matter of necessity created by a desire to maximize the opportunities for our members to find, through their Jewish lives, Holiness and God's presence. Rather than turning away from those who bought homes too far from the synagogue, rather than condemning those with different sexual orientations, we said, "Let's see what we can do so that their inclusion will be warm and still recognizable as Jewish". Let us find a way to reach out to these Jews by helping them to find through their Judaism, Holiness in their lives".

When a member of our community drives a car in order to attend services on Shabbat, in order to pray with this community, in order to hear the Torah being read, that person is not violating Shabbat. On the contrary, she is making a conscious and determined effort to experience the beauty of Shabbat. When someone from our Movement scans a menu of options to choose between the one or two items on the menu which utilize only kosher fish or vegetables, he is observing *kashrut* in the Conservative idiom. To my mind, these are examples not to a lack of commitment or a rejection of *halacha*. These are acts and choices made by one who is fully conscious of Jewish laws and of the standards of our lifestyle and is incorporating those standards and guidelines into their lives.

These are examples, in my mind, of our Movement at its best. In encouraging attendance at Shabbat services, in supporting the notion of making Jewish choices when ordering in a restaurant, when providing access to Jewish life to gays and lesbian, by reaching out to embrace intermarried families, we are at our best. We are at our best, not because we have compromised but because we have given our members a way, we have shown a path for them to follow in order to find Holiness in their everyday lives. To my mind, that is exactly what Judaism is about. That is exactly the Judaism we need to convey to the next generation.

Let me say one additional word about *kashrut*, the Jewish Dietary Laws. There all sorts of explanations one can suggest as a rationale behind the Jewish Dietary Laws. But, what I learned from my daughter's Modern Orthodox Community, is a new reason to keep kosher, a reason to which many of us can relate.

As many of you know, my daughter, Tamar, and her husband, Yoni, were blessed with twins at the end of July. Lori and had arrived in Israel in mid-June. I returned to the States in July and, shortly after the birth, I returned to meet my new grandchildren. (I will speak more about some the twins on Yom Kippur. Lori asked me to wait until she returns, after *Rosh HaShana*, to speak about the twins).

Arriving at my daughter and son-in-law's small apartment, we met Oriya and Lavi who had returned from the hospital less than an hour before our arrival. And, very soon thereafter, I realized something which I cannot, explain even today. I realized that having two children simultaneously is three times more difficult than having them one at a time. I did not know this, but the small community in the Lower Galilee, where Tamar and Yoni live, did know this. They knew that raising twins, even when one's parents are there to help, is difficult and that this is a place where neighbors and friends become a community.

Shortly after I arrived at the apartment, there was a knock at the door. In came a woman who lived down the block. She and my daughter had not met previously but, as she entered she said, "I heard that you had twins and I brought a meal for you and for your family." That scene repeated itself for two weeks. 14 neighbors had signed-up online to provide a dinner each evening for this young family.

In the *Yishuv*/village or enclave of homes where Tamar and Yoni (and their beautiful newborn twins) live, all families agree, upon their acceptance into the community, to observe *Kashrut* at a certain level. In that way, there is no questioning when food is brought from one home to another. All of the 400 families agree that they will adhere to these rules, not only as a matter of personal commitment, but as a matter of communal responsibility. In that *Yishuv* in the north of Israel, sharing food is an essential part of belonging to the community.

In our congregation, eating together has become an essential activity (one which, by the way, we are particularly good at) in our attempts to create a warm and welcoming community as well. We also try to extend this experience beyond the walls of this building through our *Chesed* Committee. In this context, were someone to ask for my best reason to keep kosher, I have a "new" answer: "It is how we eat as a community. We follow the laws of *kashrut* in order that each of us can share and receive food from others in our community".

This fall, after the Holidays, I will be spending time, on several Sunday mornings, discussing and fleshing out some of these ideas about Holiness. Through this class, I want to encourage a more mindful and more carefully orchestrated search for moments of Holiness in our lives. The class is called: Kodesh Moments: Sacred Table, Sacred Time and Sacred Talk. I hope you will consider joining in this discussion.

In the past, we have told people who may be considering joining our congregation, "You should come. You'll meet some great people. We have such a great school. The rabbi gives such wonderful sermons..." Why does this not convince people to join? Because this is not what people are looking for. "There other places I can meet people. I can learn what I want online. I can find good sermons there as well (which I don't want anyways!)". But you cannot find "community" online. Friends online cannot celebrate with you at a *simcha* or to help pick you up when you stumble or bring to you a

container of “Soup for the Soul” or a home-cooked meal when you need some TLC. You cannot find these moments of Holiness on the internet.

The Holiness of Jewish Life is not experienced when you join a synagogue. Holiness enters your life when someone reaches out to you. It is what you feel when you reach out to others. Holiness is not found when the bride and groom exchange vows or the bat mitzvah girl reads the *Haftarah*. It is in the experience of being surrounded by others who sing, clap and dance in response to your joy. There is no magic here but there is also no way to create this experience alone. This is why one belongs to a community. This is a place dedicated to bringing Holiness into the lives of our members. And, if we are to reach a generation of people who are reluctant to join, affiliate or connect Jewishly, we must do it by showing them the joy and the Holiness found in being a part of a community

In the First Century of the Common Era, the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans. The loss of the Temple was much more than the loss of a building. That event posed an existential threat to the Jews of that time. Many Jews wondered if Judaism could survive without a sovereign state, without the sacrificial system which was the reason for the Temple. In retrospect, as painful as that event was to Jews of the time, the crisis enabled, indeed, compelled the rabbis, behind the leadership of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, to institute and re-imagine a Judaism of a new sort, replacing the centrality of the sacrifices with a religion of synagogues, study, prayer and a system of *mitzvot* to guide our behavior. The new system was designed to respond in a new way to the innate human craving for a sense of God in their lives.

Although what we face in the Jewish community today is not nearly as traumatic as the destruction of the ancient Temple, the threat we face with respect to the future of the Jewish People is no less serious. The status of Jewish Law, the *halachic* system has been, generally speaking, rejected by this generation, withering in an age of democracy and individual autonomy. Nevertheless, the basic human craving for closeness to God, for Holiness in our lives, has not changed. I believe that the Conservative Movement, today, has the ability to address the challenge we face, to help “searching” Jews to find a path to Holiness in their lives through adherence to the *mitzvot*. In order to accomplish this sort of loyalty and commitment, Judaism must be reinterpreted, no longer as a system of laws which explain, demand and command adherence to Judaism’s legal requirements. Instead, ours can be the authentically Jewish option characterized by our commitment to *mitzvot* and Jewish tradition, and dedicated to the pursuit of Holiness.

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- Kushner, Harold, “Conservative Judaism in the Age of Democracy” in Conservative Judaism Magazine. Summer, 2007, Vol. 59 No. 4, pp 1 – 13.