

## **Rabbinical Assembly Convention**

**Mexico City, Mexico**

**March 19, 2006**

### ***Our Common Vision; Our Common Purpose***

Dear friends and colleagues, I want to express my thanks to the Convention Committee for giving me this opportunity to address you. Let me take advantage of this moment to thank you for the work that you do in the service of the Jewish Community. Being a Jewish communal leader has only become more challenging over the years – making it more than ever a labor of love and not just a career. I salute you for all that you do.

The topic of our session today and the background description provided to each of us is somewhat open ended. I wish to use the time allotted to me to reflect on the reality of the Movement; put that reality in perspective, historically speaking, and offer my personal comments about what we may do to move ourselves forward as a Movement.

Some 46 years ago at the 60<sup>th</sup> Annual Rabbinical Assembly Convention, Rabbi Simon Greenberg, a great congregational rabbi, exponent of Conservative Judaism and leader of the Seminary, delivered a thoughtful and comprehensive address on the condition of the Movement – more specifically on the condition of the Seminary, the United Synagogue and the Rabbinical Assembly. Many of the issues and challenges that his generation was grappling with are still with us today – such as the curriculum of the Rabbinical School and the question of how

rabbis should be trained and educated. Among the many things from his paper that still resonate with this reader is his comment that he made to the effect that we, the membership of the Rabbinical Assembly is, for all intents and purpose, the Conservative Movement because when all is said and done it is our behavior, our successes and failures, our convictions or lack thereof, by which the United Synagogue and the Seminary (if he were speaking today he would add the Seminario, the Ziegler School and the Schechter Rabbinical School) – indeed the Movement are judged. I will return to this idea for it goes to the heart of my remarks.

Implicit in the title of this session is the question – *Do* we have a common vision or purpose? But the question we should really be asking ourselves is not whether we have one or what is it, but, rather do we *believe* that we have a common vision and purpose? One can write all the vision statements and ideological definitions – as indeed we have done over the course of the past 119 years, but if we don't believe any of them, they are of little practical use. Indeed, the history of the Movement is replete with thoughtful attempts to define C.J. Read Louis Finkelstein of 1927, Mordecai Kaplan in the 1940s, Mordecai Waxman's in the 50s, David Novak's in the 1980s, Robert Gordis's in the 1970s and again in the 1980s. Gerson Cohen's in the 1980s and Ismar Schorsch's in the 1990s, and more recently Brad Artson's only to mention the more significant ones.

Yet no sooner were each of these statements written then yet a new cry rose up from our ranks bemoaning a lack of ideological clarity, of a unifying

vision. It is almost as if we and our predecessors wouldn't accept yes for an answer. That lack of belief in these statements and the concomitant unwillingness or inability to teach them to our communities as a lens and structure through which we can live our lives and see the world, has inflicted significant wounds on the psyche of our Movement and to its success within the Jewish Community.

Not only have none of these statements been embraced as the overarching platform from which we do our work, but we and our predecessors have overlooked the amazing similarity between each of these statements – that it is to say the continuity of principles and philosophy from one generation to the next. Indeed, read the writings of the 6 chancellors of the Seminary, six very different individuals, and you will see an incredible similarity to their thinking. Why is it that over the decades we have failed to see this – all the while bemoaning a lack of ideological unity?

Does this reaction stem from our inability to balance the polarities of K'lal Yisrael and allegiance to Conservative Judaism? Why is it that we seem to feel that to do effective outreach, we need to hide who we are and what we stand for? Our orthodox brethren have amply demonstrated that these poles are not mutually exclusive; that one can allow themselves to be labeled; that one can make their standards and convictions clear and still be effective at reaching out to *amcha*.

The current day notion among some of us is that we need to deny our origins and ignore our institutions in order to accomplish our mission has not been thought through carefully. One colleague has recently written:

We have neither the time nor justification to focus attention and resources on the sustenance of institutions for their own sake. Narrow minded concern with strategies of self-preservation fundamentally misses the point. Yet few have the courage to shift the paradigm away building **Conservative** institutions, fortifying **Conservative** organizational structures, raising **Conservative** children.

Another colleague asserts:

"The time has come for the institutions of the Jewish community to transcend denominational boundaries."

My friends, such statements reflect a profound lack of understanding for what is needed to safeguard traditional Judaism for the foreseeable future. These statements are not benign or neutral, but rather antagonistic, blaming denominationalism for our problems. They are attempts to attract the most with the least. They project a pareve Judaism. They suggest that the way to attract the largest number of Jews is to eliminate all standards and barriers. But there is ample evidence that such an approach will not work. The recently published "The Churaching of America 1776-2005" observes that a "religious community's powers of attraction to adherence are in direct proportion to its offering something that is not available elsewhere." The literature of organizational behavior and leadership teaches that a leader who views her organization solely through a single lens is likely to fail. Rather, the successful leader sees their organization through multiple lenses and is able to reframe issues, thus enabling

them to see the issue from multiple perspectives – not just one. C. J. enables us to do the same thing. It enables us to see that life is not a choice of either this way or that way, but rather CJ enables us to examine an issue from multiple perspectives seeking balance, finding the middle path. CJ offers the community something unique and it is that uniqueness, if properly taught by people who believe in it and are passionate about it, that will enable it to thrive. No conviction in its efficacy, no passion for its importance, and it will surely fade away.

Indeed, as Chancellor Schorsch has recently said – the notion that to be inclusive, we need to be inoffensive dilutes passion for passion comes from conviction.

Who among us has that conviction; has that passion? Who among us shares the vision of Schechter that through CJ we can bring Jews to embrace a traditional mode of Judaism? Has not CJ served as a centripetal force in the American Jewish Community over the decades? Are not the movements on the left and the right of us moving toward the center? – a recognition that life cannot be lived on the edge – a recognition that a meaningful life requires finding – in the Rambam's words - the *middah bayonet*. Rambam teaches that we are endowed with many traits and each trait has two extremes which are distinct from one another and neither of which reflects the proper path. It is not right, he says, that we should behave in accordance with either of these extremes. Rather, we should follow the straight path which, according to him, the midpoint, the point of balance of each trait. In our private lives and in the world at large we are constantly in pursuit of balance, of perspective, of moderation. Finkelstein said it succinctly when he wrote that to be a Conservative Jew, you have to be prepared

to struggle with reconciliation. No, the center is not a position, but having balance and moderation as our desired endpoint *is*, and the path we follow to get there *is*. CJ is unique in enabling us to seek this balance through our Judaism. CJ is our pathway to God; our *derekh* for how to live life.

I know – such descriptions of Conservative Judaism have been rejected as ineffectual or outdated or both. But I ask, is that because they are ineffectual or outdated, or because we don't have faith in them?

*I* do not believe that we suffer from the lack of a common purpose. Do we not all share a desire to bring Jews closer to Judaism – specifically traditional Judaism – to show them its beauty; to demonstrate how it can give meaning to their lives and comfort to their souls; how it can help us structure our lives and give value to our actions. And do we at the three schools represented here not wish to recruit the most students we can and train them to be the most effective communal leaders and spiritual guides and insightful academics possible. And in so doing, don't we wish to model CJ through our graduates?

One could say this slightly differently, certainly more eloquently and unquestionably more expansively, but this, to my mind, is our common purpose.

So, *I* do not believe we suffer from the lack of a common purpose. Rather, I think our difficulties stem from a lack of belief in who we are and what we stand for as Conservative Jews, a lack of pride in our contributions to the Jewish community and a lack of confidence in the importance of Conservative Judaism for the welfare of that community and the survival of traditional Judaism. We focus on our weaknesses and shortcomings overlooking our achievements while

admiring the strengths and accomplishments of others all the while ignoring their shortcomings and weaknesses.

We represent an intellectual approach to our tradition which prides itself on challenging and questioning, and then wring our hands over the absence of a widely embraced definition or a vision. As one of our colleagues said to me not long ago, if the Lubavicher Rebbe said Sunday is Monday, his followers, in amazement, would have said – how does he know? While if a Conservative Movement leader said Sunday is Sunday, we would challenge – how does he know, and who is he to tell us that! We embrace an ideology which runs counter to the achievement of the unity we seek. We look to our national organizations and/or its leaders for the answer. We call out for a leader who can offer us a visionary statement that will bring us together forgetting that no one leader, and no single statement has yet to achieve that end. The *fix*, the answer to our search for a common vision lies not in New York or in California, or in any single individual or organization, but rather it lies within each of us. Simon Greenberg's 46 year old observation holds the solution to our malaise. We, individually and collectively, are the solution. The moment that we become passionate about who we are and what we stand for; the moment that we model it with pride; teach it with exuberance; will be the moment of our resurgence as a movement.

For the new chancellor to be successful in helping to lead us out of our current malaise, he will need a rabbinate that shares a common vision and pride in Conservative Judaism, a laity who sees the glass - that is Conservative Judaism - as being half full, and a movement that aggressively seeds new congregations.

As Rabbi Greenberg wrote:

The RA/JTS/USCJ form an inseparable unity and we of the RA are not only the vital link between the other two, but we are more completely identified with the whole than either of the other two. Hence, we cannot speak of ourselves without involving them, nor can we speak of them without involving ourselves.

Thank you.