
Strengthening the Conservative Movement

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As a member of the administration of the Seminary, I have had the privilege to observe the Conservative movement and the on-again, off-again relationship of the American Jewish community with Conservative Judaism for nearly thirty years. In addition to being an observer, I have also had the opportunity to study the history of our movement in depth.¹ It is from these vantage points—observer and student—that I have come to feel so passionate about the lack of passion which many Conservative Jews, lay and professional, have for Conservative Judaism. Ask a Conservative Jew what is wrong with the Conservative movement today, and you are likely to hear, in one form or another, one of the following criticisms:

1. Conservative Judaism is unclear as to what it stands for and believes in and, therefore, is in need of greater definition, or
2. The movement's national organizations do not work together, or
3. The movement lacks a coordinated vision from which would follow a specific agenda.

While I would acknowledge some validity to items two and three, I do not believe for a moment that any of the three categories of complaints or even all of them together are at the root of the perceived and actual condition of the Conservative movement. The “problem,” I believe, is really quite simple and, in fact, it is so simple that it would not be at all difficult to fix. In a word, the current state of the movement is due, in large part, to the belief which makes us unique—our commitment to *klal yisrael*. No other denomination is so shaped by a similar commitment. Chancellor Ismar Schorsch, writing in *The Sacred Cluster: The Core Values of Conservative Judaism*, said:

It is that residue of Jewish solidarity that makes Conservative Jews the least sectarian or parochial members of the community . . . Often communal needs will prompt them to compromise the needs of the Movement.²

However, it is that uniqueness that is the most significant root cause of the movement's current condition. In short, we lack a passion for who we are, for what we believe in, and for what we stand for. And, because of that lack of passion, we do not provide ourselves with the support, pecuniary and non-pecuniary, that is essential to being a more effective and successful expression of traditional Judaism. The problem is rather paradoxical. Our commitment to *klal yisrael* precludes or inhibits us from self-identifying as Conservative Jews, and because we are loathe to do so, the world does not know nor understand that this commitment to all Jewry is the cornerstone of Conservative Judaism and that if Conservative Judaism is not supported, the voice for *klal yisrael* will eventually die to be replaced by nothing other than the extremes, represented by Reform and Orthodoxy.

Placing this thought in an historical context will make the point clearer. The Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTS) was founded with the aim, among others, of unifying the traditional element within the American Jewish community; certainly not to represent yet another denomination which would only further divide the community. Whether it is Solomon Schechter's understanding of the "conservative-tendency" represented by American culture or his concept of Catholic Israel, not to mention his commitment not to turn his graduates into a "synagoga militans" or the school into a drill-ground where young men will be forced into a certain groove of thinking, his early writings make it eminently clear that he and his lay directors were staunchly determined to build an institution committed to no "denomination or sect. . . ."³ Rather, JTS was to be a "theological center which should be all things to all men, reconciling all parties, and appealing to all sections of the community."⁴

Cyrus Adler, who succeeded Schechter as the head of JTS, embraced this vision throughout his twenty-five years as JTS' president. Witness his proclamation to the Rabbinical Assembly in 1923, some eight years after Schechter's death:

The Seminary was not the creation of any particular party in Judaism . . . The Seminary stands for the normal development in America in the main stream of Judaism, and it is willing to let any other body or group qualify or limit Judaism by any prefix that seems best to themselves.⁵

It is this thinking which has served as the very foundation of the movement's steadfast commitment to the concept of *klal yisrael* ever since.

Not only is the evidence of JTS' ambivalence, even resistance, to being the representative of Conservative Judaism plentiful in the writings of its leadership throughout its first eighty-five years, but it is also visible in the leader-

ship of its graduates within the community at large. The typical Conservative rabbis saw themselves and, for the most part, still see themselves as bridge builders reaching out to bring Jews back to Judaism while simultaneously building relationships between communities and groups within their geographical area. Rabbi Vernon Kurtz, immediate past president of the Rabbinical Assembly, wrote not long ago that:

. . . as Conservative rabbis we pride ourselves on holding centrist positions and see ourselves as promoting *klal israel* . . . we serve as a bridge to our colleagues of other streams in our communities. Conservative rabbis are the only ones who can be that link and we must work for unity among the Jewish people.⁶

During the 1940s, '50s and perhaps '60s, when Orthodoxy was thought not to have much of a future as a communal force and Reform was of little threat, JTS and its graduates could adhere to their self-proclaimed non-denominationalism seemingly with little negative effect; indeed, a "partisan consciousness" was not necessary.⁷

Little did JTS leaders and communal rabbis realize that they were raising up generations of Conservative Jews with little or no understanding of the core beliefs and values of Conservative Judaism and, as a result, little passion for and commitment to the Conservative movement. It was only the resurgence of Orthodoxy and a greater denominational stratification of the Jewish community at large that this lack of commitment began to be seen by some within the movement as a factor in the life of the movement and in the way Conservative Judaism was perceived by the larger Jewish community. It was then that the Conservative movement began to realize that it did not have the foot soldiers in the field to do battle with its counterparts on the left and on the right, many of whom were explicitly loyal to their denominational group.

The movement's initial and ongoing commitment to reconciling Jewry, to submerging its own denominational identity for the greater whole, has led to the movement in 2002 fitting the description of the movement in the 1940s. It was then that Rabbi Morris Adler wrote about the Conservative Jews of his time: "Theirs is a creed without color, a faith without fire." Indeed, today's Conservative movement is characterized by a rabbinate and laity whose passion for Conservative Judaism is lukewarm at best and whose commitment to the movement, both in North America and Israel, is far less than is necessary if we are to expand our outreach and impact beyond where they are today. Ironically, though the Movement has failed to produce a halakhically observant laity, it has been an unbelievable success in so far as it has created a laity totally committed to *klal yisrael*.⁸

Conservative Jews today must find the means and the methods to embrace Chancellor Schorsch's agenda eloquently stated in his inaugural address:

. . . the Conservative Movement must be elevated to the level of its full potential . . . we must recapture the imagination of Conservative laity

lost to the federation world, win the allegiance of Jews founding new congregations as yet unaffiliated with any movement, and above all better service the religious and educational needs of the myriad of synagogues that forms the pride and backbone of our movement.⁹

JTS and other centers of Conservative leadership must do their part in embracing the vision of its leader for it, too, has continued to present itself to the community at large as a bridge builder transcending ideological differences.

The arms of the movement, led by JTS, must articulate a clear and appealing vision of the Conservative synagogue for the 21st century, as well as of the larger Jewish community in general—a vision that its graduates can rally around and with which they can set their communal agendas; a vision that speaks of a better future; that is attractive enough to encourage Conservative Jews to modulate their commitment to Jewry at large, something now done at the expense of the movement; a vision which will enhance the self-esteem of all Conservative Jews; a vision that will provide the backbone of a revised curriculum for its professional schools; in short, a vision which will give Conservative Jews a reason to be passionate about Conservative Judaism. Professor Steven Cohen has documented the existence of “an emerging denominational consciousness in Conservative Judaism” and the concomitant growth of a “Conservative ideological affirmation” in its younger members.¹⁰ Clearly, our community awaits such a vision.

If the movement is perceived both by its members and the community at large as weak and ineffective, if Conservative Judaism is not better understood by the masses, if our leadership fails to embrace and “fly the denominational flag” within the course of its work, then I believe our future as a vital and effective communal force is in question.

The values underlying Schechter’s original vision are no less noble today than they were in his time but, alas, *they are highly impractical!* As long as our members and leaders insist on placing broad communal needs far above those of the movement and its constituent organizations, the movement will be severely underfunded and thus remain ineffective. Similarly, while the other denominational groups are aggressively self-identifying and claiming their share of communal support (pecuniary and non-pecuniary), JTS, USCJ, and the entire movement struggle for whatever recognition and dollars are left over after the other denominational groups have taken their share.

Our commitment to *klal yisrael*, combined with a distaste to self-identify as passionate Conservative Jews, has produced a laity incapable of articulating a vision, a laity ill-equipped to build new Conservative communities, and incapable of sustaining the communities with which they now identify.

Two examples of this situation. Regrettably and tragically, difficult times have fallen on the Argentinean Jewish community. The community is predominantly constituted and led by Masorti Jews. Suffice it to say, Masorti Jews are the critical infrastructure. During this period of crisis, many Jewish groups have visited Argentina to learn about how their respective organization or community might be helpful. Notwithstanding the centrality of Masorti

Jews within the community, the visiting groups tended to return home unaware that Masorti/Conservative Judaism or Jews played any role in the community. How is it that one can be both present and faceless at the same time? Colleagues familiar with this community explain that we train *klal yisrael* Jews. We participate in community coalitions but *not* as Conservative Jews. The leadership of the movement, I was told, simply has not trained our people and educated them sufficiently to represent our views and positions.

Not long ago, I participated in a meeting of leaders of Camp Ramah during which a few participants lamented the fact that some of the “best graduates” of Ramah end up in Orthodox synagogues because of their inability to find a supportive environment within a Conservative synagogues. In response, another participant commented, “That’s a success, not a failure.” Underlying his response is the belief in *klal yisrael* and the development of a strong Jewish community regardless of labels. Such thinking, however, reveals, in an all too painful way, the lack of passion for Conservative Judaism by some leaders within the movement. Even more to the point, his comment reveals a lack of awareness of just how much such thinking undermines any attempt to promote Conservative Judaism as a unique and necessary force in the general Jewish community.

Dr. Gerson D. Cohen identified a part of the problem when he observed:

If the devotion of the Conservative Movement as a whole to their goals seems to have diminished in recent years, the reason is that much of our constituency is not even aware of what these goals are *and why they are still central to the maintenance of a healthy Jewish life*. . . . Without a knowledge of their historical roots, it is impossible to expect Conservative Jews to become fervent advocates of their Conservative approach or the tradition or to defend themselves against their detractors.¹¹

To implement Cohen’s instruction, rabbis and Conservative educators must be far clearer than they have been about the fact that the Judaism they teach and model *is* Conservative Judaism and though *we* may choose to see it as “normative Judaism” not requiring any denominational label, it is a unique expression of our tradition. It must be made abundantly clear to all who listen that without Conservative Judaism, what we teach and how we teach it and the Jewish lifestyles we model would not exist and, in fact, will cease to exist if we do not embrace Conservative Judaism with passion. We must help the members of our movement recognize that Conservative Judaism is something the Jewish community cannot do without; indeed something that the Jewish community needs for its very survival. To allow Conservative Judaism’s identity and significance to be undistinguished is to consign its future to the dustbin of history.

Yet another example. My unscientific evaluation of our Schechter schools suggests that they operate in an educational environment which, while implicitly built on Conservative Judaism’s critical approach to the study of Text and its egalitarian approach to prayer, is explicitly devoid of any overt presence of Conservative Judaism. Typical graduates of a Schechter day

school are unable to articulate the distinctive qualities of Conservative Judaism, have no sense of the history of our movement, and are at a loss to defend themselves when challenged by those to the left or to the right. It is little wonder then that some of our "best products" end up affiliating with non-Conservative synagogues. Our schools and our entire educational effort must be infused with a greater sense of indoctrination. A student of mine said it best when she wrote:

... indeed the Jewish community at large is desirous of a Judaism that is welcoming to all. But the community no longer identifies the Conservative Movement as the source of such an ideal nor do they appreciate that without a clear understanding of all that the Seminary and the Conservative Movement stand for, it will not attract the necessary support needed to sustain itself.

We cannot continue to allow Conservative Jews to see Conservative Judaism as a "creed without color, a faith without fire."

It has been axiomatic for some time that a strong organization is one that clearly identifies what it stands for and, in so doing, proclaims its distinctiveness and uniqueness. Whether in the studies of the colleges and universities that survived that turbulent 1970s or those synagogues and churches which have overcome decline and apathy, the evidence is the same—to survive and to grow a clearly articulated mission and vision which distinguishes you from your competitors and which mobilizes your supporters is a *sine qua non*. We know what Conservative Judaism stands for; no further studies or commissions are required. Embracing its distinctiveness with passion and commitment is what the moment requires. Rabbi Vernon Kurtz wrote:

Even as we respect other perspectives, as Conservative rabbis we should herald our accomplishments and support the activities of our Movement. Rabbis need to promote the Masorti movement in Israel, the world-wide Masorti Olami, the importance of membership in Mercaz and financial support for our Conservative/Masorti institutions in North America. Conservative rabbis have been in the forefront of supporting Jewish communal causes and should continue to do so even as we emphasize our own institutions. We, too, have our own philosophy and halakhic standards. And we need to teach our communities that those standards are important to us and that we uphold them consistently.¹²

And another colleague wrote:

What we need to realize is that in addition to Israel needing us to show up—we need to support our own people. Now is the time to say we, the Conservative Movement, have been good soldiers for the great causes of our people. We, Conservative Jews, have been on the forefront of UJA, bonds and the various friends of groups. Now is the time to support our Masorti movement. [sic]¹³

What is true for Israel is even more so for North America. Now is the moment to re-energize ourselves and to reclaim our rightful place in the fore-

front of world Judaism. To do so, we must embrace Conservative Judaism with a new sense of passion and commitment. "We must not allow passion to become the monopoly of extremists. It is time to reassert with courage and conviction, in word and by teaching the wisdom of conservatism."¹⁴

I call upon my colleagues and all Conservative Jews to balance their unflagging commitment to *klal yisrael* with an equal commitment to representing Conservative Judaism in such a way that all those in the community who admire our belief in *klal yisrael* will come to associate it with Conservative Judaism.

We need to make the connection for our members between what we believe in and do and that which they see as positive and good in Jewish communal life, for much of it originated in Conservative Judaism. To wit, our openness to the non-observant, our acceptance of and patience with Jews wherever they may be on the spectrum of observance and religious commitment, our approach to the study of text, our egalitarianism, our embrace of *klal yisrael*, and our unwavering commitment to tradition, to mention just a few of the contributions that Conservative Judaism continues to bring to the Jewish community at large. If Conservative Judaism is perceived and understood as the powerful force for good that it is, the Conservative movement will be strong. Our strength and influence will come only from the communities' recognition and acknowledgment that what we stand for as Conservative Jews is that which is good for the long-term health and viability of the entire Jewish community. Remember the words of my 20-year-old student: "the community . . . is desirous of a Judaism that is welcoming to all. But [it] no longer identifies the Conservative movement as the source of such ideal. . . ." It will not come from the leadership of any one person or any collectivity of organizations regardless of their effectiveness.

We must rally together on behalf of Conservative Judaism with passion and pride if Conservative Judaism is to survive and the Conservative movement is to be seen as a major communal force. The great irony is that Conservative Judaism is a force for good in the community; it is just that no one knows it. The "fix" is in our individual hands. Refreshingly, it does not require huge sums of money; it does not necessarily require new leadership; it does not necessarily require greater synergy among the movement organizations. It requires only our belief in ourselves.

NOTES

1. Michael B. Greenbaum, *Louis Finkelstein and the Conservative Movement: Conflict and Growth* (Binghamton, New York: Global Publications, 2001). Michael B. Greenbaum, "The Finkelstein Years," in *Tradition Renewed: A History of the Jewish Theological Seminary*, Jack Wertheimer, ed. (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1997).

2. Ismar Schorsch, *The Sacred Cluster: The Core Values of Conservative Judaism* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1995), p. 4.

3. Solomon Schechter, "The Seminary as Witness," in *Seminary Addresses and Other Papers* (Cincinnati: Ark Publishing Co., 1915), p. 48, 50, 76, and Solomon Schechter, "The Charter of the Seminary," in *Seminary Addresses and Other Papers*, p. 23.

4. "The Charter of the Seminary," p. 11.
5. Cyrus Adler, "The Standpoint of the Seminary," in *Tradition and Change: The Development of Conservative Judaism*, Mordecai Waxman, ed. (New York: Burning Bush Press, 1964), pp. 176, 185.
6. *Rabbinical Assembly Newsletter*, October 2000.
7. Steven M. Cohen, "Assessing the Vitality of Conservative Judaism in North America: Evidence from a Survey of Synagogue Members," in *Jews in the Center: Conservative Synagogues and their Members*, Jack Wertheimer, ed. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), p. 41.
8. Mordecai Waxman, "Catholic Israel: Solomon Schechter and Beyond," in *Solomon Schechter in America: A Centennial Volume*, Robert E. Fierstein and Jonathan Waxman, eds. (New York: Joint Convention Commission, 2002), p. 89.
9. Ismar Schorsch, "Inaugural Address: Stereophonic Judaism," in *Thoughts from 3080: Selected Addresses and Writings* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1988), p. 57.
10. Cohen, op. cit., p. 57.
11. Gerson D. Cohen, "Conservative Judaism in the Modern World," in Gerson Cohen, *Jewish History and Jewish Identity* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1997), pp. 267-8.
12. *Rabbinical Assembly Newsletter*, op. cit.
13. Rabbi Daniel Allen, "e-mail to Ravnet," June 18, 2001.
14. Schorsch, op. cit.