Symposium—What We Have Learned

In this section, members of the research team reflect in a more personal fashion on the larger significance of their findings. They were specifically invited to address the following themes:

- The commitment and loyalty of synagogue members to Conservative Judaism
- The commitment and loyalty of synagogue members to the larger Jewish community
- How the synagogue intersects with family life.
- The impact of egalitarianism
- The differences between the core and the periphery
- The impact of intermarriage on the Conservative synagogue
- The role of informal Jewish education in the Conservative synagogue
- The sources of vitality in the Conservative synagogue

1. Sidney and Alice Goldstein

Conservative Jewry in the 1990s has been shaped by the evolution of the denomination in the preceding fifty years. Developed initially to serve the needs of East European immigrants in their efforts to integrate into American life, Conservative Judaism prospered, especially in the years following World War II. Responsive to the increasing suburbanization of American Jews and their transformation from working class immigrants to second generation professionals and business owners/managers, the Conservative synagogues built in the 1950s and 1960s served not only as places of worship, but also as educational institutions, social centers, and locations for volunteer activities parallel to those in the larger community. They were thereby attractive to Jews from traditional backgrounds who were rapidly assimilating to American life but who were not yet fully accepted into the American mainstream. In the process, Conservative Jewry

became the largest of the three major denominations in the United States.

A major part of the appeal of Conservative Judaism to American Jews was its retention of the familiar context of Judaism without the insistence of stringent obscrvance that characterized Orthodoxy. The autonomy of individual congregations, the laxity of observance among many Conservative Jews, and the lack of a centralized, coherent ideological position created major contradictions within the movement. At the same time, they allowed great flexibility in how Conservative Jews defined themselves in relation to their practices and beliefs and allowed a broad spectrum of Jews to comfortably identify as Conservative.

Changes in American society in the decades after the 1960s profoundly affected American Jews. The decline of overt anti-Semitism and the recognition of Judaism as one of the major religions in the United States made integration into the larger society easy and desirable. In fact, much of the ethnic distinctiveness of East European Jewry was adopted by Americans: Yiddish words and phrases entered the vocabulary, and "Jewish foods" became standard in the American diet. Increasing secularization, stress on individualism, and the rise of a feminist perspective all contributed to changing the way many Jews considered the role of Judaism in their lives.

These transformations were reflected as well in the comparative sizes of the major denominations. By the end of the century, Conservatism was no longer the largest denomination; the one-third of American Jews who identified as Conservative was just slightly less than the number who indicated they were Reform. Only a small proportion considered themselves Orthodox. Given such fluidity in denominational identification, even while most American Jews do identify with one or another denomination, it becomes imperative for each movement to understand its constituency if that movement is to retain its vitality in the next century. This may be especially important for the Conservative movement because of its position between Orthodoxy at the more traditional end of the religious spectrum and Reform at the more liberal end, and because of the lack of a clear delineation of the movement's practices and beliefs.

In the past, most studies of Conservative Jews have relied on information gathered from persons belonging to a synagogue. This approach is often very useful in generating insights into congregational dynamics, but it cannot provide a comprehensive picture of the entire population who consider themselves Conservative. In the United States, where

synagogue/temple affiliation overall is at a low 41 percent, understanding the characteristics of both those who are affiliated and those who are not is essential for long-range planning. This is especially true at a time when attrition from Judaism in general is high and when debates about outreach vs. inreach assume a central role in determining strategies for continued growth and vitality in the movement.

In 1990, the National Jewish Population Survey generated a national data base that covered the entire spectrum of American Jewry, from those who were fully involved with the Jewish community to those with only tenuous connections by virtue of having a Jewish parent. The survey provided information on what respondents considered to be their denominational identity and the denomination in which they had been raised, as well as on a wide array of personal characteristics, practices, and beliefs. It is therefore a valuable source for assessing the nature of those individuals who identify themselves as Conservative Jews, both synagogue members and nonmembers.

We distinguish between the core (members) and the periphery (unaffiliated) among Conservative Jews. In doing so, we recognize the centrality of the synagogue in the Conservative movement, even though many persons may be members without being highly involved in synagogue activities.* By being members, however, individuals/households have made an active commitment (even if only a financial one) to the movement, and are thereby clearly different from individuals who say they are Conservative but do not indicate this in a formal way. About half of all those who identify as Conservative are affiliated with a synagogue. The Conservative affiliation rate is thus above both the national average and that for Reform Jews; it is below the rate for the Orthodox. That half of all persons who identify as Conservative Jews do not belong to a synagogue emphasizes the need to understand who the unaffiliated are and how they differ from the affiliated. We examine the two groups separately, turning first to the members.

The Jewish Identity of Core Jews

The religious school has been a central element of synagogue life, and its impact is apparent in the levels of Jewish education in the Conservative core. Almost half have had six or more years of Jewish schooling and only one in four has had less than three years. Since Jewish education is a key to a strong Jewish identification, it is not surprising that persons with high levels of such education are also likely to be synagogue members. Not only are they members, they also attend services with some

regularity (half attend once a month or more), suggesting considerable involvement in the life of the synagogue.

Membership, Jewish education, and attendance are clearly intertwined, with each factor acting as both cause and effect. Households and individuals become members of synagogues because they have been educated to recognize the importance of supporting Jewish institutions and because attendance at religious services has been an integral part of their childhood routine. They may also join because they wish to provide their own children with a religious education, especially in connection with bar/bat mitzvah preparation, and this is often possible only through membership in a synagogue. Even synagogue attendance may be related to children's education since such attendance is often a mandatory part of the school curriculum in the year(s) before bar/bat mitzvah. If families join a Conservative synagogue because of their children, the challenge for the movement becomes making such membership attractive, not only during the elementary school years, but most importantly during the children's teen years, as well as beyond the time when children live in the household.

Although synagogue membership is obviously an important aspect of being a committed Conservative Jew, the movement also places high premium on a set of observances that are considered central to Judaism, including the observance of Shabbat and maintaining *kashrut.*** Another series of timerelated rituals (Seder attendance, lighting Chanukah candles, fasting on Yom Kippur) also can be used as measures of commitment to the tenets of Conservative Judaism.

Core (affiliated) Conservative Jews have a very high level of adherence to those rituals that are relatively rare occurrences. The great majority annually attend a seder, light Chanukah candles, and fast on Yom Kippur. They are much less likely to practice rituals that involve daily or weekly activity. Despite the official stance of the Conservative movement about the halachic importance of Shabbat observance and kashrut, a minority of members observe either of these practices. The proportion maintaining kashrut is especially low — only one-quarter.

Apparently, judged by the indicators used, even most of those Conservative Jews who are members of synagogues do not regard the lighting of Shabbat candles or maintaining kashrut at home as defining elements in their Judaism. They may, however, observe Shabbat and/or kashrut in some form not captured by the information available to us or specified by halacha. Households may celebrate Shabbat with a special meal or family activity; they may refrain from eating pork products or shellfish, without buying kosher meat or having separate dishes.

^{*} Because synagogue membership was determined on the basis of the household, 17 percent of individual respondents who identified themselves as Conservative lived in households with synagogue membership in another denomination.

^{**} For our purpose, within the limitations imposed by the NJPS data, we define Shabbat observance in terms of lighting *Shabbat* candles, and *kashrut* in terms of maintaining separate dishes in the home and always buying kosher meat.

These modified behaviors may thereby serve as a useful entry point to fuller observance, if the movement can capitalize on existing practices and transform them into behavior that is more congruent with the movement's halachic position. That the less demanding practices associated with holiday celebrations are so widely observed suggests an underlying strong connection to Jewish ritual and tradition among the core group.

Using these less stringent observances as stepping stones to fuller observance, Conservative Jews may be gradually induced to more widespread observance. For example, observance of kashrut may be introduced in stages that make each step a natural and easy progression to the next level of observance. Programs may be instituted that will teach congregants the blessings over Shabbat candles, provide *challot* to households, hold workshops that teach Shabbat or other rituals rituals, and how to make appropriate ritual objects like *challah* covers or *kiddush* cups. One or more mentoring programs can provide less threatening learning milieus and more flexible schedules than more formal classes. Hebrew schools, including junior congregations, should be coordinated with imaginative programs aimed at adults to enhance adult involvement.

The identity of the core Jews as expressed through synagogue membership extends to the larger Jewish community, although not always at a very high level. A large majority contribute to Jewish causes (80 percent), but many fewer (about six in ten) belong to Jewish organizations. Even fewer engage in Jewish voluntarism. Apparently, connections to the larger Jewish community are relatively passive, with little direct, personal involvement. Nonetheless, among this group the commitments in terms of funds and organizational membership are relatively strong. Their less active involvement may be due to constraints on time or physical ability.

These commitments to the Jewish community are mirrored by the core group's involvement in the non-Jewish community. Levels of giving, organization membership, and voluntarism for non-Jewish activities are at levels just slightly below those for Jewish involvement. The largest difference appears in contributions to Jewish and non-Jewish causes, but even here the difference is not great. These somewhat superficial measures of Jewish vs. non-Jewish involvement indicate little favoritism to the Jewish community among the core group of Conservative Jews. They suggest instead that these Jews are relatively integrated into the larger American society. To retain their support and loyalty, then, the Jewish community will need to at least equal the kinds of opportunities and satisfactions provided more generally. In this respect, the role of the synagogue may be especially important since the core Jews are already synagogue members and contribute funds to it. This affiliation should be used more forcefully to enhance other forms of involvement in the community. Closer

cooperation and joint programming between local federations, community centers, and synagogues are needed to foster such involvement.

Beyond connections to the local and national community, the core group also shows an above average commitment to Israel, as defined in terms of visits. Almost half have traveled to Israel at least once, far above the national average for Jewish Americans. Again, the Israel experience should be used as a point of entry to get affiliated Conservative Jews more engaged with both their synagogue and the Jewish community in periods following visits to Israel. It suggests, too, that synagogue members who have not yet visited Israel represent a promising pool of potential visitors who need to be encouraged to do so.

Conservative Jews who are affiliated with a synagogue clearly are relatively committed to active involvement in Jewish activities at both the communal and personal levels. Nonetheless, they remain a heterogeneous group whose depth of commitment varies considerably and who obviously have a variety of motives for being members of synagogues. Even among this group, then, efforts must be made to enhance participation in Jewish activities and observance of those practices that are central to Conservative Judaism. Because of their demonstrated commitment to Conservative Judaism through synagogue affiliation, members constitute a logical focus for efforts to enhance Judaic practices and commitment to the larger Jewish community.

Jews on the Periphery — The Unaffiliated

Half of all Jews who in 1990 identified themselves as Conservative were not members of a congregation. The basis for their self-identification as Conservative is not clear; it may be related to their identities and experiences in the families in which they grew up or it may simply be a way of indicating they consider themselves not as observant as the Orthodox but more observant than the Reform. Lack of a clear understanding of why so many Jews who call themselves Conservative do not have stronger ties to Conservative institutions or ideology needs in-depth research. They constitute a potential source of members in the future.

The unaffiliated form a strong contrast to the core group. On almost every dimension of identity as Jews, their levels are below those of the core group. They are much less Jewishly educated, with almost one-third having had no formal Jewish education. Not surprisingly, two-thirds seldom or never attend synagogue services.

Their degree of observing Jewish practices is also much more marginal. Very few light Shabbat candles or keep kosher. Like core Conservative Jews, they are more likely to participate in those rituals that occur only annually, but even here, participation rates are lower: Only about one in six attend a seder, light Hanukkah candles, or fast on Yom Kippur,

compared to nine in ten of the core. Similar differentials between the periphery and core characterize participation in Jewish communal activities. A smaller percentage of the nonmembers belong to a Jewish organization, are involved in Jewish voluntarism, or donate to Jewish causes. These individuals are also somewhat less involved in the general community, where participation rates are also lower, although the differences between the core and periphery are much smaller.

In the aggregate, therefore, this peripheral group of Conservative Jews is generally less involved and less committed to both their Jewish identity and to involvement in the Jewish and general communities. Many are not, however, separated completely, still maintaining tangible connections to their Jewishness. In fact, one-third had been synagogue members in the past. Although they clearly deviate from Conservative ideology, their commitments may take different forms that are not measured by the available data. The very fact that they identify as Conservative suggests that being a Jew and having a denominational identification are meaningful to them at some level, even though most would not be considered Conservative Jews by standards recognized by the movement itself.

A major challenge for the movement, then is how to capitalize on these connections to transform unaffiliated Jews into more intense participants. The issues become particularly acute at a time when the Conservative movement, like American Jewry in general, is faced with stable numbers at best, and considerable turnover in composition. Small pilot projects are needed that aim first at determining what being a Jew means to these peripheral persons, why they are unaffiliated, and—of the once affiliated—why they left. These projects could then be followed by experimental programs designed to integrate some of the marginal Conservative Jews into the more active core.

The Fluidity of Membership

Long-term trends among Jewish Americans have seen a decline in the attractiveness of more traditional ideologies and practices toward less demanding forms of practice. As a result, large shifts have occurred out of Orthodox into Conservative and from Conservative to Reform identification, or away from any denominational identity altogether. Such shifting has been a major mechanism in the growth or decline of specific denominations. It has also been a key factor in shaping the specific profile of Conservative Jews in the 1990s. Comparisons of the denomination raised with the current denomination of respondents in the NJPS, provide important insights into these patterns.

Consistent with general historical trends, the Conservative movement gained heavily from the Orthodox over the course of the lifetime of the NJPS respondents. Some 492,000 adults who identified themselves as Conservative in

1990 had been raised as Orthodox. Together with the 917,000 individuals who were raised as Conservative and remained so, they formed the large majority of Conservative Jewry in 1990. Many fewer persons joined the Conservative movement after a Reform or secular upbringing or were converted from a non-Jewish religion.

Those who joined from an Orthodox background brought with them many of the traditional practices and behaviors associated with Orthodoxy. They are, in fact, somewhat more observant and involved than those who have been Conservative all their lives. The in-switchers thereby have raised the overall Jewish profile of Conservative Jewry and have formed a significant segment of the Conservative group, adding an important element of Jewishness. Because most who switched from Orthodoxy did so a number of years ago, they constitute a relatively older segment of Conservative Jewry that will phase out as mortality takes it toll.

At the same time, historical trends also operated to draw persons away from Conservative Jewry. Almost as many who were raised as Conservative Jews left the movement for Reform (429,000) as joined Conservatism from the Orthodox. In addition, Conservative Jewry also lost adherents to Reconstructionism; others preferred to be "just Jewish;" and some 93,000 became non-Jews altogether. On balance, the Conservative movement experienced a net loss of 77,000 among the population represented by the respondents to the NJPS.

Just as the movement in from Orthodoxy enhanced the Jewish identification of Conservative Jewry, switching out of the movement also enhanced its Jewish character, because in the aggregate those who left tended to be the most loosely attached, with lower levels of religious practice and more tenuous attachments to the organized Jewish community. As a result, those who remain are among the more strongly identified. For example, while about four in ten of those who have been Conservative Jews all their lives are members of a synagogue/temple, this rate is even higher among those who switched in (half), but it is only one-quarter among the outswitchers. Similarly, six in ten of the lifetime Conservatives have medium-high levels of ritual observance, as do threequarters of the in-switchers; but only about four in ten of those who left the Conservative movement are this observant. Not surprisingly, compared to lifetime Conservative Jews, a relatively large percentage of persons joining the Conservative movement were converts to Judaism; while among those leaving, the proportion of intermarried Jews was exceptionally high.

Many factors may contribute to the shifting constituency of Conservative Judaism. Persons may shift for ideological reasons or personal preferences. They may see denominational change as congruent with a more American lifestyle or as more appropriate to changing social status. Other reasons for change include marriage between persons raised in different

denominations, migration to areas where institutions with the preferred denomination are not available, and social pressure by peers, colleagues, and neighbors. Sometimes the appeal of a charismatic leader or an attractive institution may occasion change.

Whatever the reasons for movement into or out of a Conservative Jewish identity, the trend over the past decades is clear. The stable size of Conservative Jewry in the United States largely has been the result of the heavy in-movement of the formerly Orthodox counterbalanced by the departure of even more persons to the less traditional forms of Judaism. By the 1990s, the pool of Orthodox Jews in the United States had become quite small, but also quite cohesive. Compared to earlier decades, persons are much less likely to leave Orthodoxy in any appreciable numbers over the next several years. In fact, it is quite possible that in increasing numbers the most committed among Conservative Jews will become disaffected by a perceived lack of standards in the Conservative synagogue and join the ranks of the Orthodox. At the same time, Reform Judaism continues to be attractive and the Reconstructionist movement is growing. Both of these denominations constitute alternatives for Conservative Jews who are not strongly committed to Conservative ideology and/or halachic standards. Any growth in the Reconstructionist movement may be especially serious for Conservative Jewry, because those who have switched to the Reconstructionists in the past have relatively high levels of Judaic practices and behavior. The high rates of intermarriage among newly-marrying cohorts also suggest that there may be some attrition from Conservative to Reform, no denominational identification, or movement away from Judaism altogether. For those who intermarry and convert under Conservative auspices, it becomes especially important that pre- and post-conversion educational experiences stress observance and involvement.

The Challenges for the Future

The configuration of Conservative Jewry at the end of the twentieth century points to several areas that will pose major challenges to the movement in the coming decades. These challenges must be seen within the broad framework of American society and changes in attitudes toward and acceptance of religious diversity. Developments in the past several decades have already profoundly affected how individuals relate to religious institutions and how they deal with private expressions of religiosity. Further transformations are inevitable.

Conservative Jewry can be seen as a series of concentric circles. The innermost circle consists of persons who are members of a synagogue and who are fully involved in the Jewish community and subscribe to a set of Conservative beliefs and practices. At the next level are those other synagogue

members who are only slightly involved in synagogue life but who are less observant and less involved in the larger Jewish community. They are likely to be the most receptive, if properly educated, to increase their participation and practices. The next circle, still consisting of members, is constituted of individuals who appear in the synagogue only for the High Holy Days and an occasional life-cycle event; some may still have children in Hebrew school. They are committed to the existence of the synagogue, but do not lend more than financial support. They are themselves not involved in synagogue life or, often, in the life of the general Jewish community. Nonetheless, their attachment is meaningful to them and crucial to the viability first of the synagogues of which their households are members, and then of the Conservative movement more generally. A better understanding of why they are members and regard themselves as Conservative Jews could lead to programming that would induce them to increase their levels of participation. Finally, in the outermost circle are nonmembers-including the third who were former memberswho still consider themselves Conservative Jews. That they constitute more than half of all Conservative Jews suggests the size and potential importance of the periphery for the movement, if their Judaic practices and involvement can be strengthened. The reasons for their lack of institutional membership may be conditioned by factors beyond their control-economic constraints or lack of a Conservative or any other synagogue where they live—or by purely personal preferences. A recognition of the dynamics involved in membership is essential for an understanding of why so many persons who say they are Conservative do not express their identity through membership, and also to develp programs to attract them to affiliate or reaffiliate if they were former members. If Conservative Jewry is to sustain its current numbers, the outer periphery is an essential component. That individuals in this category differ in significant ways from the affiliated suggests that relying only on information about synagogue members provides incomplete and probably biased information about Conservative Jewry as a whole.

Only if the movement is willing to define itself solely in terms of current synagogue members can this large peripheral group be ignored. While numbers alone are not necessarily crucial at the national level, they have great significance for the viability of synagogues and other institutions in the community. A certain density is essential for the maintenance of schools, programs, and staff; indeed, the existence of individual synagogues may be in jeopardy if numbers drop below a given critical mass.

While many factors contribute to the growth or decline of individual congregations, some policies may be instituted that would encourage affiliation and thereby help synagogues with declining memberships. Among these, the barrier of high

membership costs may be especially crucial. The economic issue may become central for congregants who move from one location to another and want to join a new congregation. Too often this involves increased costs because of additional fees and dues. Some transference of membership and credit for earlier investments would be helpful in such cases. Younger members with school-age children may find it difficult to pay both membership and tuition; accommodations for such situations are important. Subsidies, either from national, regional, or more local organizations, including federations, would help to ease such financial burdens and encourage membership.

The Content of Conservative Judaism

With such varying levels of involvement/affiliation, it is not surprising that Conservative Jews vary widely in their religious practices. This "pick and choose" approach to religion resembles that of the American population in general but also reflects the nature of the Conservative movement. Although the movement has an overall halachic position, this stance is not always articulated clearly or forcefully; and individual congregations have considerable flexibility in setting their own practices and formats within the general Conservative ideology. Conservative congregations therefore can offer many entry points for individuals seeking affiliation. The challenge should be seen as both raising affiliation levels and concurrently raising the levels of observance of current and new members.

The flexibility that has characterized the Conservative movement has its advantages and drawbacks. Individuals from a wide variety of backgrounds can feel comfortable within the Conservative movement. Thus persons raised Orthodox find themselves at home with the halachic positions and traditional services of the Conservative synagogue even while it provides a setting that is seen as more congruent with modern life styles. The extensive switching into the movement of those raised Orthodox is clearly a reflection of this perception. At the same time, those who are inclined to observe few if any practices feel little pressure to become more observant. The danger here is that these individuals will eventually drift away from Conservative affiliation either into Reform or away from any denomination at all.

The challenge, then, is to find a strong identity, position, and structure for Conservative Judaism that at the same time allows individuals a variety of entry points at various stages of the life cycle and provides a way to progress toward greater involvement and observance at their own pace. Strengthening the Jewish education, formal and informal, of persons brought up in the movement is a central starting point. In this respect, Schechter schools and Ramah camps are important ways to enhance Judaic skills and create a leadership that has been reared in the movement. But unless the younger segments of

Conservative Jewry, which have chosen to be more observant as a result of their exposure to Schechter schools, USY activities, and Ramah camping experiences, feel comfortable in the Conservative synagogue, they may shift to Orthodoxy. Creating a set of practices to which Conservative congregations across America can generally subscribe is another way to create a unified movement with a visible, cohesive image. The use of the same Siddur and niggunim for prayers is a case in point. At the same time, the movement needs to articulate its stance on a wide variety of halachic issues and convince individual congregations of the value of these positions and of the need for a certain level of conformity.

This approach suggests a strengthening of the practices and beliefs to which Conservative Judaism subscribes. It may thereby help to retain persons who are among the most observant and committed. If articulated well, it may also attract unaffiliated persons and those outside Conservative Judaism who are seeking a more meaningful structure in their religious lives. On the other hand, it may alienate some members who are indifferent to halachic concerns and seek a much looser milieu in which to express their religiosity. If so, then the number of persons who consider themselves Conservative may well decline over the next decade or two. Some decline might, in fact, be acceptable if it were to result in a more cohesive and active membership. Too much decline, however, would have a serious impact on the ability of individual synagogues and the national organizations to maintain levels of service, especially in a population that is characterized by high migration rates. The data from NJPS clearly show that Conservative Jews cover a wide spectrum, from the almost-Orthodox to the almostsecular. To find the balance between inreach to the more strongly identified and outreach to the marginal Conservative Jews is a major challenge.

A variety of approaches are obviously needed to reach Jews in the different circles of the amorphous entity that is Conservative Jewry. Creating a clear image of Conservative Judaism is only one step in this direction. To be effective, programs must be developed to counteract trends in the larger society toward greater secularism and individualism. Some indicators suggest that individuals are, in fact, now seeking a greater sense of community and are searching for values and structure. Conservative Judaism can be a powerful vehicle for meeting those needs. A first step is to know the character of the constituency. Programs can then be designed to speak to individual Jews and their families; to retain those who are already actively involved, to enhance the participation of those with qualified interest, to draw in those affiliated persons very marginally involved, and to attract into membership persons who identify as Conservative Jews but who have no formal affiliation. Only in this way can the Conservative movement be assured of a strong and viable future in the next century.

2. Samuel C. Heilman

It is, of course, difficult to compress into a few pages the understanding I have gained about Conservative Jewry from my field work in two synagogues. What I have learned about Conservative Judaism is naturally skewed by the fact that the source of my knowledge was synagogue members. While some of these members were more actively involved in synagogue life than others, all were formally affiliated with the synagogues I studied. Hence, what there is to learn about Conservative Judaism from those who are currently not members of a Conservative synagogue, but call themselves Conservative Jews is excluded from these conclusions. Finally, my information is not random nor necessarily comprehensive. Rather, it comes from those informants who opened their lives to my eyes and my inquiries during the time I spent as a participant observer in their synagogues.

The Commitment and Loyalty of Synagogue Members to Conservative Judaism

Overall, the synagogue members I observed and interviewed may be divided into two essential categories: 1) those who are actively involved in their synagogue and the Jewish life associated with it, and 2) those whose synagogue and Jewish attachments are dormant or at best quiescent. In general, most members interviewed did not perceive a contradiction or tension among their commitments and loyalties to Judaism, their synagogue, and Conservative Judaism as an ideology. Nevertheless, they did tend to define both the demands of Judaism and expectations of their Conservative affiliation largely through the prism of their experiences in their particular synagogue. Often they felt a greater loyalty to their particular synagogue, rabbi, and fellow members than to the movement as a whole. Indeed, in quite a number of cases, their association with Conservative Judaism as a movement followed their joining the synagogue, and that decision was made for a variety of personal reasons, including location, changes in their family situation (commonly marriage and/or becoming parents), or social needs. For such people, as they became engaged in synagogue life, they often gradually "discovered" that they were indeed able to identify as Conservative Jews. To be sure, others came to such a realization beforehand and selected their synagogue affiliation as a reflection of that ideological commitment.

Whether their involvement in synagogue life was active or quiescent, they were largely convinced that Conservative Judaism, while holding fast to certain standards of tradition, allowed them a great deal of freedom to interpret the nature of their religious attachments and commitments. Their Conservative Jewish identity was thus subject to a sort of improvised and personalized reinterpretation. Moreover, it

expanded or contracted throughout the life cycle.

Frequently, the people I observed understood their decision to be part of the Conservative movement as a rejection both of Reform Judaism, which they found too indefinite and vague in its demands, and Orthodoxy, which they saw as rigidly narrow and hostile to women. In contrast to these extremes, they believed that Conservative Judaism provided a place in the middle, a niche that granted freedom and flexibility along with some level of commitment and tradition. Yet, as noted, they also believed that Conservative Judaism treated them as adults who, although offered these concrete commitments, could nevertheless make choices about which commitments to embrace and how to do so. As one man put it: "Every Jew has to find out where they [sic] are and who they are not."

They expected to feel "comfortable" about the way they practiced (or did not practice) being Jewish, even if that did not quite square with the formal ideological or behavioral demands of the movement, or even if it was at odds with the rabbi's interpretations. Episodic engagement was all right. Put differently, they expected Conservative Judaism and the synagogue in which they practiced it to hold on to them, as one man put it, "firmly but with an open hand."

In practice, they believed this meant that Conservative Judaism allowed them—if they wanted it—to be inconsistent in their Jewish lives. They believed it also offered them an opportunity for Jewish growth—even if that happened in irregular spurts. It enabled them to feel good about their level of commitments—even when these were minimal — and gave them no guilt feelings about those things they did not do while encouraging them in whatever they did choose to do. In short, the Conservative Judaism they embraced was personally satisfying, tolerant, and moderate. In the Conservative synagogue, as one member put it, "No one ever said to me, 'You can't join if you won't do this or you won't do that."

How the Synagogue Intersects with Family Life

Embedded in many of those synagogue members I interviewed was a conviction that, as one woman articulated it, "You have to belong to a synagogue." This was because, she explained, one had to "show some level of commitment," and that sort of commitment could not be fulfilled completely at home: "Belonging to a synagogue is an integral part of being Jewish." This conviction, however, was often dormant and frequently required some life cycle change to awaken it.

The common pattern was that a child became affiliated with a synagogue through one or both parents. That affiliation was maintained at least until bar or bat mitzvah age and perhaps at a less intensive level after adolescence. Although among the active core of a congregation, some young people remain intensively engaged in synagogue life throughout the high school and college years, sometimes on campus, the adolescent

and post-adolescent period is commonly one of dormancy for Jewish affiliation and involvement. Following marriage, the dormant affiliation may become reawakened. Commonly, the newly married couple that maintains some synagogue involvement does so at first through their parents, often returning to the parents' synagogue for Jewish holidays that often serve simultaneously as family reunions. The evidence demonstrates that being in a family situation has always been a key stimulus for synagogue affiliation and involvement. Thus, couples tend to join a synagogue independently after the birth of their first child or when that child reaches school age. This change is often accompanied by a move to a new and larger home, frequently in a new neighborhood.

As children grow, the nature of parents' synagogue involvement may change. For example, some who joined because of a child's birth discover that the presence of a toddler in the synagogue restricts their own capacity to become deeply engaged in the prayer service even though, paradoxically, it is the presence of that child that moved them to attend the service in the first place. As the child matures, some parents may find themselves personally drawn to increased synagogue involvement. Sometimes this takes the form of concern with the synagogue's educational activity on behalf of their children. At other times, it involves becoming engaged in the institutional and organizational life of the synagogue, paralleling their growing authority and power in other domains of life, primarily their careers. Finally, because they are less consumed with the details of controlling their children's behavior during services, some young parents find themselves more absorbed by the worship.

On the other hand, some parents find that as their children grow and particularly when they leave for college, their own synagogue involvement diminishes. These are people for whom synagogue involvement was essentially part of their parenting responsibilities.

The death of a parent may once again move some of these same individuals to return to the synagogue in order to recite memorial prayers. Ironically, some parents may be able to bring their adult children to synagogue and into Jewish life with their deaths far more easily than they could during their lifetimes.

The synagogue and its associated school and community of worshippers often provides a social, cultural, and spiritual anchor for the Jewish family and its members. It is often the place where they choose to mark life's important passages: birth, coming of age, graduation, marriage, and death. Some synagogues have added the receipt of a first prayer book or Bible, leading services, reading Torah, and other specifically Jewish accomplishments to the list. All of these roles are probably what one member meant when he suggested that he believed that "the synagogue should be like a family." And as in

a family, "You flow in and flow out," as he concluded.

As one member put it, "a synagogue provides a whole complex of programs to meet the needs of every age level of the family — spiritual, educational, cultural, social and recreational." As each of these needs becomes felt, the synagogue is able to fill it.

The Commitment and Loyalty to the Larger Jewish Community

For many of its members, the synagogue serves as a nexus with the larger Jewish community. For some, it is the only place in their lives where they congregate only with other Jews and in an institution guided by Jewish principles and traditions. It is here, for example, they might assemble to mark some occasion that affects Jewry in general. Here is where they come to proclaim their solidarity with the Jewish people. When world Jewry mourned the murder of Israeli Prime Minister Rabin, an event that took place during the period of this study, members expressed their solidarity with the mourners in a variety of venues, but primarily through gatherings in their synagogues. Obviously, the universal Jewish calendar of holy days is often apprehended, experienced, and marked in the context and framework of synagogue life.

Often people conceive of their attachment to their particular synagogue as tantamount to an association with Jewry in general. Moreover, in their quest to enlarge the membership, a kind of abiding desire of all those who make up the leadership and active core of synagogue life, the surrounding Jewish community is perceived as a target population. Correspondingly, the creation of good Jews, a resource for Jewry in general, is one of the tacit educational goals of the synagogues. When the synagogue seeks to have its members "do more," it is seeking simultaneously to have them do more as Jews in general. Thus often the local and specific goals of the synagogue coincide with the more extensive and universal aims of the Jewish community in which that synagogue and its members locate themselves.

Finally, as synagogue members experience a Jewish religious or cultural awakening—something that often occurs in the course of their synagogue life—they feel a commitment and loyalty not only to their congregation, but to the Congregation of Israel, the Jewish people. As active members of a synagogue in particular, they also see themselves as part of the affiliated community, the Jewish mainstream.

The Differences between the Core and Periphery

In the synagogues examined here, the membership may be divided into an active core and a relatively inactive periphery. The core members constitute the synagogue's most familiar faces and are, in a sense, a small congregation, the beating heart, that lives inside the body of the larger synagogue. For this group, the synagogue feels like a far smaller place, a place

that provides a family-like community. For this group it is not the many who come a few times a year (and whose dues and financial donations help sustain the large building, staff and institution) but rather the familiar faces of people they see and worship with regularly, who serve on the synagogue's many committees, that make up the synagogue as they commonly experience it. Indeed, those who are part of the core often refer to the synagogue as their "shul," a term commonly associated with smaller, more intimate synagogues. The wide use of this "Jewish" term probably also serves to signal the enhanced sense of parochial Jewishness that many in this core group feel.

The people of the "shul" are often the ones who also make up the leadership corps of the larger organization, who shape the character of its social life, and who in a very concrete way determine its Jewish orientation in concert with the religious and educational staff.

Yet these core people also recognize that they are part of an institution that includes large numbers of others who constitute the periphery. Almost all those "others" will show up on the three days of the year that constitute the High Holy Days. Some of them will also come on special occasions like the anniversary of a kaddish recitation or else a bar or bat mitzvah or some other rite of passage. They may also appear on occasions like Homecoming Sabbath, when college youngsters who are home for the Thanksgiving holiday are invited back to play a prominent role in the service, or on Teen Sabbath, when a similar thing happens for high school youngsters. In a sense, many of these "special occasion Sabbaths" have as a latent function the attraction of those from the periphery who normally do not come to the synagogue regularly.

The peripheral membership is essential to the "largeness" of the institution. The core group does not expect to encounter most of the periphery in the synagogue very often (even though in principle the core wishes to engage them more and interest them in synagogue life). From out of the periphery and into the core come those people whose synagogue involvement and consciousness may have been dormant for some time but because of some change in their life circumstances, may become active. And into the periphery may go those who for parallel reasons find their synagogue involvement playing a smaller role in their lives. The ebb and flow of members' synagogue involvement tends to be accepted, if not condoned. A person who has stopped coming or not yet begun is not to be made to feel like a pariah or a renegade.

This is because in spite of the relatively high level of their synagogue involvement and the salient role it plays in their personal and Jewish lives, core members understand that other members, like themselves, will become more or less active at different points in their lives. In fact, many of the current core members may themselves have had long periods when they were not very involved and understand that, though they are

currently much engaged in synagogue life, there might come a time when they will again find other interests and concerns. As one member put it: "there is a life-cycle character to involvement." That is why members of the core—who generally feel a great attachment to other members of the core—are also prepared (although not always equally) to embrace members of the returning periphery like prodigal kin.

The line between the core and periphery is relatively easy to find at any given point in time, but the population in each of these groups may exchange places in the course of a synagogue's life.

The Impact of Egalitarianism

Egalitarianism may be defined most simply as a willingness to afford equal rites and Jewish obligations to men and women in the synagogue. For many people in the synagogues studied, an acceptance of an enhanced role for women in synagogue life is perhaps the single most important symbol of a congregation's openness to egalitarianism.

Conversely, those congregations and movements that do not accept the principle and practice of egalitarianism are, in words heard repeatedly, considered "hostile to women."

When individuals and congregations embrace egalitarianism, they are not taking a step onto the slippery slope of diminishing Jewish involvement and commitment, as some who have opposed this move away from Jewish tradition assume. On the contrary, egalitarianism's supporters seek rather to expand the Jewish duties and responsibilities incumbent on the Jewish woman at the same time that they endow her with some of the public honors that accompany their fulfillment. Thus, the women who are most supportive of egalitarianism tend to be among those synagogue members who seek to increase rather than diminish their involvement in matters Jewish, as symbolized by their desire for a more active ritual and religious life. In fact, within the congregations observed. many of those who were committed to the highest levels of Jewish observance were also in favor of egalitarianism. For them, the empowerment of women would simply increase the number of members who could express their strong attachment to Judaism.

Those who claim that women's full participation in Judaism is religiously threatening do not understand that these women were, as one man who supported egalitarianism explained, "still doing mitzvot," still accepting the obligations of Judaism. Indeed, he concluded, women who embrace the egalitarian ideal "have not said to us, 'it's okay if you do two hundred and thirty-two out of six hundred and thirteen *mitzvot*.' In other words, they have not diluted those obligations." So, he reasoned, why not let women do as much as they are willing to do, which was a great deal more than they had been doing in the past? "So long as the movement is saying there is more that is

allowable," he concluded, "let's get there. Why deprive a woman from learning more or caring more about her Judaism? What have we accomplished by limiting women?"

Often, the women who support the egalitarian approach to synagogue life do so in part because they seek to make use of skills they have acquired in the course of their Jewish education, including the ability to lead prayer, read Torah, and chant the haftarah. In other cases, these are women who have embraced egalitarianism as a social ideal and become moved to improve their religious and ritual skills to exercise their new enfranchisement. The enhanced Jewish engagement that egalitarianism brings about among women may, furthermore, stimulate others in the family to intensify their religious, ritual and synagogue involvement. Thus, for example, the wife and mother who chants the haftarah also brings her husband and children to the synagogue to hear her performance and may by her example or urging encourage them to do what she has done.

Egalitarianism also allows women to display their empowerment and competence in a most public way. They then can draw praise from their fellow congregants in equal measure as their husbands, fathers, and sons—something that makes them feel far more bonded to the synagogue community than they did when they were only passive participants. It also allows them to play a public role in ensuring Jewish continuity. The fact that the Conservative movement has a formal commitment to egalitarianism has also made women, and those who care about them, feel a more powerful affinity toward this movement, which they believe now welcomes them as full-fledged members. It makes "Conservative" seem synonymous with "progressive."

Finally, the issue of egalitarianism is connected to the question of who will be able to participate fully in synagogue community life, who will be in the core and who in the periphery. Whereas in congregations that reject egalitarianism women may seem to be second-class citizens, peripheral to the proceedings, in the egalitarian Conservative synagogue they can be part of the active core.

The Impact of Intermarriage on the Conservative Synagogue

Intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews is a fact of American life. There appears to be hardly a Jewish family that is not touched by it. Yet whereas in generations past, an intermarriage was assumed to lead inevitably to a complete or near-complete breach with the Jewish community and way of life, if not the Jewish family—especially where the non-Jewish partner did not convert—that is no longer inevitably the case. Today, the intermarried may continue some sort of affiliation with the synagogue and Jewish community, leading to the presence of both converts and non-Jewish spouses within the congregation.

To understand this dynamic, one must first realize that

religion—like marriage—is perceived today less as a matter of fate and more as a matter of personal choice. Non-Jews who marry Jews are often estranged from their own religious backgrounds. At the same time, their willingness to date and then marry a Jew often reflects an openness to Judaism and Jewish people. When and if they convert, they may become more engaged by Judaism than their born-Jewish spouses. In part this phenomenon is explained by the fact that the Jewish spouse is often someone who has become estranged from or indifferent to Judaism and detached from the Jewish people.

Sometimes the Jewish involvement of the convert acts as a stimulus for the born- Jewish spouse to become more involved. Other times the desire to explain Judaism and Jewish life to a non-Jewish spouse serves as a stimulus for greater Jewish involvement. All of these options become possible because of the Jewish community's growing tolerance of non-Jews and converts within its midst.

While by no means always the case, intermarriage may in some families become an occasion for a Jewish renaissance. This is more likely to occur when the non-Jewish partner converts. To be sure, conversion requires enormous amounts of outreach and education. The obstacles are particularly daunting within the Conservative synagogue. The prospective convert has to learn sufficient Hebrew to use the prayer book, still the norm within the Conservative synagogue. For some this also includes gaining competence in the laws of kashrut (particularly daunting when the convert is the wife and mother), and sometimes even becoming committed to intensive Jewish education for their children and opposed to their possible intermarriage. For this renaissance to occur, moreover, the congregational community and its religious and lay leaders must be more than tolerant; they must be welcoming toward newcomers and strangers.

While the Conservative movement and the synagogues may demand conversion as the price of tolerance and welcome, the rank and file membership will often settle for a mild interest in matters Jewish or even the absence of estrangement. Non-Jewish family members who have not converted often make their way into the congregation's social network and appear at services (most commonly on the High Holy Days or Passover). On the occasion of their children's bar or bat mitzvah or even on some other synagogue performance, these non-Jewish parents are routinely expected to join in the celebration (although the synagogue roles they might play are not always clear). Thus, while formal boundaries remain between the non-Jewish members of Jewish families and the Jewish community, these are become increasingly tenuous in practice.

The Role of Informal Jewish Education in the Conservative Synagogue

Today's Conservative Jews recognize Jewish education as an

important element of their synagogue life. They come not only to worship, but also to be intellectually stimulated and informed. A successful rabbi will be more than a spiritual leader or minister; he or she will also be an educator. So much has this become the case that even the sermon—for generations the single most important speech event in a rabbi's role—is now frequently transformed into an occasion for teaching, often in the form of a discussion or a joint review of a written text.

While the rabbi remains the primary educator, this role is increasingly shared with lay members who regard their Jewish commitments and involvements as including a capacity to study and teach some Jewish sources. Many rabbis thus regard it as their role to empower their congregants as educators. Pulpits are opened to the laity. Occasions when in the past the rabbi might have been the teacher—at a *seuda shlishit*, the commemoration of a *yahrzeit*, a child's coming of age—are now frequently opportunities for laity to fill that role.

This is a result of the increasingly high level of Jewish knowledge that large numbers of people of the **boomer** generation and below have acquired. Often products of day school education or Camp Ramah, these people have the competence to handle Jewish sources. Coupled with their high levels of secular education—the proportion of college graduates in the synagogues approaches 80 percent—they have internalized an attitude that not only values learning but also assumes that one should be able to study on one's own.

While large sectors of Conservative congregations remain under-educated Jewishly, there is a growing consensus—at least among those who are in the congregations' active cores — that Jewish knowledge is essential to being active in synagogue life. The lay leader who is satisfied with activity limited to social or financial affairs—a common figure in Conservative synagogues of generations past—has largely disappeared. Today, even those focused primarily on such matters also recognize and embrace some forms of Jewish education. Thus, for example, in one of the synagogues observed, all meetings always began with a brief but intensive d'var Torah.

The "Shabbat retreat," an intensive weekend away shared by a small circle of members, is an increasingly common feature of congregational life and is often an occasion for informal, hands-on Jewish study. So-called "havurah" services as well as "learners" services likewise provide opportunities for informal Jewish education, an alternative to the passive experience of large, formal prayer services. For growing numbers of members, these are more important reasons for synagogue attendance than coming to worship.

Special Sabbaths on which children in the synagogue perform or lead the services are often presented as opportunities not only to display what they have been taught but also to teach and inspire parents to improve their own Jewish skills. The Sabbaths even feature bar and bat mitzvah ceremonies no

longer limited to adolescents. Adults who either missed their own such celebrations or have acquired new Jewish skills like chanting the *haftarah* or reading Torah may display their accomplishment during an "adult bar or bat mitzvah" ceremony.

In sum, the synagogue is expected to extend Jewish knowledge and empower its members educationally. If it does not succeed in this task, the membership will see it as having failed as an institution.

The Sources of Vitality in the Conservative Synagogue

When it works best, the synagogue gives its members a sense of empowerment, competence, community and continuity. The degree to which these feelings are enhanced is a direct consequence of being part of the active core of congregational life. Moreover, each of these is linked to the other. Thus a sense of empowerment grows out of a feeling of competence; people who know their way around the synagogue, who are proficient in ritual behavior, who know "how things work in this place" not only feel Jewishly empowered, they also feel communally empowered, as if they are part of a living and breathing community. And when that community is a synagogue-based one, they also feel as if they are contributing both to the continuity of the Jewish people, and to the community's continuity. Moreover, because the synagogue generally plays an important part in their family life, for such people positive feelings toward the larger Jewish world reverberate in their feelings toward their own family. Maybe this is what was meant by the 1950s slogan, "The family that prays together, stays together."

3. Barry A. Kosmin

As the largest body of affiliated Jews in North America, Conservative synagogue members stand at the center of organized Jewish life. Theory and practice predict that as a "broad church" lying between the particularism and parochialism of contemporary Orthodoxy and the universalism of Reform Jewry, Conservative Jews would be most aware of *Klal Yisrael* and most committed to the concept. Previous research I have done confirms this prediction.

When the North American Jewish Data Bank was asked to provide a composite profile of the most likely donor to the UJA-Federation campaigns by drawing upon local and national demographic surveys, the finding was that he or she would most likely be a Conservative synagogue member. The profile reflected the typical synagogue board member—an individual fifty-five to sixty-four years old with a substantial income and high degree of ritual observance, who attends synagogue monthly and has a purely Jewish social network. My national

survey of Hadassah also yielded the conclusion that support for Zionism among American women is heavily dependent on Conservative synagogue members.

Our survey of the b'nai mitzvah class of 5755 provided the opportunity to ask whether this concern for the wider Jewish community has been transmitted to younger Conservative Jews. The answer is a resounding yes. Today's Conservative synagogues are raising a new generation of community-minded Jews. The occasion of the bar or bat mitzvah was used by 58 percent of these youngsters to give a donation to charity, and 80 percent said they intended to give tzedakah from their pocket money. A willingness to volunteer in the Jewish community was evinced by 87 percent of this sample of nearly fifteen hundred teens. This willingness to volunteer was a direct result of their Jewish education, according to 60 percent. In fact, for 29 percent of the b'nai mitzvah class, community service was part of their synagogue's educational program.

These survey findings suggest that a new generation of Conservative Jews has been taught to view the synagogue and the movement as part of a larger unit, the Jewish people, and tradition of involvement and service to the wider community. "Being involved in activities in the Jewish community" was regarded as very important to their sense of Jewishness by 49 percent of these teenagers and somewhat important by 47 percent. Today Conservative youth are probably alone in expressing the sentiment that "a feeling of closeness to other Jews" is very important (49 percent) or somewhat important (47 percent) to their own sense of Jewishness.

How the Synagogue Intersects with Family Life

No life cycle event is more closely connected to the synagogue in contemporary North American Jewish society than the bar or bat mitzvah. Certainly the involvement in this rite of passage far exceeds rites associated with birth, death or marriage. The local synagogue is the site of the ceremony and most of its preparations, which according to 51 percent of parents dominated their family lives for the preceding year. It is a oneday event that engages the entire family—the student, siblings and parents all prepare for it. The family expects the support and solidarity of their fellow congregants and the professional staff as they receive neglected and distant relatives into the sacred space of their synagogue. Though they no longer, perhaps, express the term, family yichus is involved as the parents present their child and themselves to their respective families, friends and associates. We should also not underestimate the impact of this public act of religious engagement upon Gentile friends and associates.

The appeal of the bar or bat mitzvah is perhaps that it marks the last gasp of the *mishpokha* (the extended family). It appeals to the older generation because it symbolizes the link between the generations, assuring the elderly that the chain of

transmission has not been broken and that they have done their duty.

It is important for the synagogue as an institution to realize the huge amounts of emotion, time and money invested in this event by most Jewish families. Ironically, the synagogue activists and regulars who are *shomrei mitzvot* are least likely to invest heavily in such episodic and life cycle-oriented events. Yet the satisfaction most families feel after the day—fully 97 percent of parents and 99 percent of children felt it was worth the time and trouble—redounds to the congregation and rabbi.

This amazing level of inter-generational unanimity provides an important insight into the true value of the bar and bat mitzvah ritual for contemporary Jewish families. A part of the transition from childhood to adolescence, this rite symbolizes the transformation in the relationship between parent and child. It helps the child and parent define new levels of control, responsibility and autonomy. It provides the young person with a chance to earn self-esteem and gain a sense of belonging. Contemporary parents and children recognize and appreciate this opportunity to work together towards a clear goal. The high level of congruence in attitudes between parents and children that this survey has reported offers evidence of great success on the family level. Like the gender gap, the generation gap is closing and that is a success.

The Impact of Egalitarianism

The impact of egalitarianism on the Conservative synagogue is shown by the statistic that of the b'nai mitzvah class of 5755, 45 percent were girls and 55 percent were boys. This balanced gender situation can be contrasted with the generation of parents in their forties. Among this population, 87 percent of the fathers had bar mitzvah ceremonies but only 31 percent of the mothers had bat mitzvah ceremonies.

The number of young people participating in b'nai mitzvah ceremonies has almost doubled in a generation, putting pressure on Shabbat services. Finding dates for ceremonies has become more difficult in congregations with large numbers of younger families, and regular congregants often find themselves weekly spectators at an "event" rather than at a prayer service.

Egalitarianism has won acceptance across the Conservative movement. Seventy- eight percent of congregations reported that they treat bar and bat mitzvah students exactly alike in training and ritual requirements. And almost none of the twenty-two percent of congregations that don't treat them alike reported refusing to make any concessions to girls. Moreover, the overall trend was towards greater egalitarianism and no cases of retrogression were found. This finding suggests that the complete emancipation of women in Conservative Judaism is just a matter of time and when it happens there will be a well- educated female laity ready to participate fully.

The equal treatment of young men and women has had the sociologically expected outcome of reducing differences between the sexes. The survey shows that today's teenagers exhibit no gender differences in their observance of rituals, intention to attend synagogue, nor, perhaps more significantly, in their theological views, such as the importance of God.

Among their parents, the gender gap has also narrowed because of the increased opportunities for women. Mothers are slightly more likely to attend religious services than fathers, but there are few gender differences in attitudes towards Judaism. Fathers and mothers exhibit almost exactly the same patterns of holding office in the synagogue (24 percent) and having friends in the congregation. This lack of difference even extends to parental attitudes and reactions towards the theoretical possibility that their children might intermarry.

The synagogues these young people attend are egalitarian in terms of leadership positions, both lay and professional, with the exception of the clergy. Female presidents are quite common. Fifty-three percent of youth directors are women, as are 65 percent of the educational directors of the supplementary schools. However, only four percent of the rabbis are female. Nevertheless our research shows that egalitarianism is no longer being debated in most Conservative synagogues. Certainly for b'nai mitzvah students and their families, who represent the younger element in most congregations, this issue is no longer even relevant. The battle for egalitarianism has been won.

Differences between the Core and the Periphery

The concept of core and periphery echoes R. Saadia Gaon's assertion that Jewry exists "only by virtue of its Torah." The data assembled here differentiate synagogue members from the unaffiliated, but the stark contrast is artificial. While synagogue members may have a greater acceptance of halakha, enhancing their level of Jewishness and commitment to Jewish continuity, I am not convinced that there are two distinct populations. Rather, I believe a more accurate analysis would reflect a continuum. At one end are the *shomrei mitzvot*, a synagogue elite with a sense of transcendent obligation. At the other end are the largely deracinated, nominal Conservative Jews who have not attended a synagogue for regular worship since their youth and identify solely through social inertia. In between lie most Conservative Jews.

Distinguishing between a core and a periphery is arbitrary, an exercise in stereotyping. The artificiality of the operational definitions used in this project is obvious when we recall that surveys are merely still photographs within the "movie" of affiliation with Jewish life. Of course, some Conservative Jews will never be unaffiliated while others will never join a congregation. Probably a majority will have

episodic involvements in synagogue life.

To some extent this core/periphery contrast applies to the day of the b'nai mitzvah ceremony since it is an event of maximum inclusiveness, a faint echo of the highly affiliated community of the 1950s. It is a Shabbat when the less educated, the "three times a year," even the solely nominal Jews appear on the synagogue scene. Attendance on this day is an essential element of their episodic, infrequent and *unobtrusive* attachment to Judaism. Moreover, given the evident decline of observance of death-related rituals such as *yizkor* and *yahrzeit*, the bar and bat mitzvah are the last remaining occasions for the "unchurched" to appear in large numbers. The participation of the "periphery" undoubtedly reinforces the feelings of solidarity among the "core" of regular worshipers in most congregations.

The bar and bat mitzvah students and their parents form an essential part of the core population during their years of preparation. Of course, the synagogue monopoly on the ritual creates problems. Successful recruitment leads to a battle to maintain religious and educational standards. This challenge largely explains the ambivalence of rabbis and synagogue leaders towards the ceremony and the majority of b'nai mitzvah families.

In fact, there is evidence that contemporary attitudes of exclusion by synagogue elites is leading to the creation of a periphery. The data from the various surveys make clear that the desire for standards has strengthened exclusionary practices in most synagogues. "Problem" populations—interfaith families, one-parent families, blended families and poor families—are under-represented among b'nai mitzvah families in Conservative synagogues. There is also very little evidence of outreach towards these peripheral populations.

Tightening up the standards of entry for students, increasing the time commitment to Jewish education, and raising the Hebrew language requirements result in a narrowing of the range of backgrounds from which the current cohort of students in Conservative synagogues is drawn. Quantity is sacrificed for quality. Requiring parents to make early choices for their children's Jewish schooling disadvantages migrants as well as late blooming religious enthusiasts. In other words, the periphery finds it increasingly difficult to access the b'nai mitzvah system and the Jewish education system.

Furthermore, the data show that rabbis exhibit no missionizing zeal and recognize no obligation to recruit Jewish children other than those of paid members. Very few synagogues even offer the possibility of a second tier bar or bat mitzvah ceremony; for example, in the chapel on Mondays and Thursdays for the problem cases.

So the division between core and periphery is not yet a fact but the current climate of opinion and synagogue policies in the area of bar and bat mitzvah are widening the gulf. The likely result is that some peripheral Conservative Jews will fall into

the orbit of Orthodox or Reform congregations which are more committed to outreach. Probably many more will be lost to Judaism altogether.

Intermarriage and the Conservative Synagogue

The rise in intermarriage rates recorded by the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey has been confirmed for Conservative Jews by this project. However, we have to recognize that all types of intermarriages are rising in the US. In fact, only one in four non-Hispanic white marriages unites partners of identical ancestry. Though religious intermarriage is less common than ethnic intermarriage, it is more common than inter- racial marriage. As differences between groups in language, education, residence, occupation and life style erode, the natural barriers to intermarriage fall.

American Jews are obviously part of a societal trend. Unlike their European forebears, they do not intermarry out of a rational desire to gain access to the perquisites of the majority population; nor do they intermarry out of a desire to leave the Jewish people or their families. It is rather that, for many, being Jewish is just an accident of birth without much transcendent or spiritual meaning.

Yet somewhat paradoxically, one of the major findings of this project is that interfaith couples are very rarely members of contemporary Conservative synagogues. Among the parents of the bar and bat mitzvah students in our sample, a population that married mainly during a period when nearly one-half of Jews chose a Gentile life partner, we found that 91 percent were Jews by birth. Nearly 8 percent were Jews-by-choice and just over one percent of parents were currently not Jewish. Of course, since parents come in pairs, 18 percent of these teenagers have grandparents who are not Jewish.

So if the intermarried are so rarely present, why do they loom so large in the thinking of synagogue leaders? The answer is that among the older generation of congregants, most have an intermarried child. This child is the one that does not join a Conservative synagogue. And even those members whose own children are not intermarried have nephews and nieces, cousins and friends and neighbors who are intermarried. We have survey evidence that even while, in theory, these Conservative congregants endorse halakhah, they also believe in patrilineal descent for their own grandchildren, for how could members of their own families not be Jewish?

The parents of the bar and bat mitzvah students exhibit the same ambivalent attitudes. Though 98 percent are currently not intermarried, they have family and friends who are. Theoretically, 88 percent agree that "a Jew should marry somebody Jewish." Yet 66 percent agree that "rabbis should be more helpful in welcoming non-Jewish partners into the community." Their teenage children have embraced American societal norms, which stress integration, and they have taken

their cues from their parents' and grandparents' generations.

Thus 65 percent of teenagers now think "it is okay for Jews to marry people of other religions."

The attitudes held by the majority of congregants in all three generations towards intermarriage mean that it is just a matter of time before intermarriage becomes a major issue in synagogue life, especially if Conservative synagogues wish to maintain their current levels of membership.

4. Riv-Ellen Prell

How the Synagogue Intersects with Family Life

The two Conservative synagogues in Minnesota that I studied share a long-standing pattern of American religion. Families join synagogues when they have children and remain most active during their children's lives at home. The synagogue is particularly compelling to people who want to transmit what they believe are Jewish values, a Jewish outlook and an identity.

Congregants in their early thirties who have not had children yet described the synagogue as far more welcoming toward and directed at young families. One woman, a pharmacist, said "My candlesticks just sit on the counter begging to be lit." She expressed the greatest confidence that she would use those candlesticks regularly once she had children, but it never seemed to make sense to do it simply with her husband. She and others expressed similar sentiments about regular Shabbat morning attendance.

The relationship between synagogues and families is, then, one of the key issues of Conservative Jewish life. One of the new dimensions of that relationship is the integration of families into Shabbat prayer. A long time member of a synagogue described Friday night as the time in the 1960s when she hired a baby sitter so that she and her husband could attend services, hear an interesting lecture, and then socialize both at the Oneg Shabbat and later in the evening in neighborhood homes. The synagogue and its services were synonymous with adulthood. Children, because they were noisy, were not allowed into the sanctuary and had their own programs instead.

Shabbat morning services in both synagogues, even though child care is available, are full of children of a variety of ages, beginning with infants. Parents remove their children when they are crying, but keep them in strollers or in their arms when they are not distracting. Some young children go to educational programs but always end the service on the bimah singing along with the congregation, literally at center stage. Shabbat services are family events, and families seem drawn to them in order to bring their children, to extend their children's sense of attachment to a congregants and peers. Older members often describe the presence of children as chaotic and distracting, however rabbis and younger families seem

committed to keeping children integrated and attached to a synagogue where they feel comfortable.

The synagogues' rabbis provide a vision for Jewish families by linking life in the synagogue to the creation and maintenance of a Jewish home. Both rabbis created materials, tapes, and other forms of support to assist families in that effort. As one of the synagogue educators said, "Some synagogues, like public schools, are becoming the sole educators, taking over what families do. Rabbi Allen is focusing on not taking that away." The synagogue, then, serves as a source of integration for families, home, public worship and community.

With the substantial shift of Conservative Jews toward day school education, the synagogue has become only one of several sources of identity and socialization for families. Increasingly, then, the synagogue today serves as a religious community, in contrast to the 1950s when congregations mainly offered families a social center.

The Impact of Egalitarianism

The Conservative movement's decision to allow women to function as religious equals with men affected both of the Minnesota synagogues. Over half the members of each synagogue surveyed in our study agreed that egalitarian policies attracted them to the synagogue.

Many women congregants expressed greater self-consciousness about their participation in religious life than men. The women reflected on the choice involved in wearing a *talit* and learning to read Torah and acquire other synagogue skills. Several women congregants suggested that they chose to learn skills and take on more responsibilities because they were inspired by the expertise of other women who performed these roles.

In both congregations, the community discussed and debated the inclusion of women. Their decision to extend equality to women considerably increased the pool of Torah readers, *hazzanim*, and other congregation leaders. The participation of women has revitalized both congregations.

One of the synagogues is situated in an Orthodox Jewish neighborhood and some children of congregants attend an Orthodox day school. One such yeshiva student requested that she be allowed to celebrate her bat mitzvah in an all women's Shabbat service outside of the main sanctuary. She apparently felt that by forgoing her bat mitzvah in the main sanctuary, she would make it possible for her Orthodox school mates to attend. The rabbi ruled that no such minyan could be held. "I would not allow an all men's minyan," he said; "so I could not allow a women's only minyan." Egalitarianism continues to pose a variety of challenges.

The Sources of Vitality in the Conservative Synagogue

Congregants interviewed about their synagogues, both those who were quite active and those who were less so, viewed synagogue life largely in terms of those activities in which they personally participated. Depending on the synagogue and the age of the person, congregants focused primarily on the choir, prayer, community, nursery school, and somewhat less often the board of directors.

During the year of my study, the rabbis of both synagogues used the idiom of *mitzvot* and observance to define a salient characteristic of membership. One congregation launched a "campaign" to raise the level of *kashrut* observance, while the other focused on the "celebration," rather than observance, of Shabbat. Congregants were invited to understand their lives within Jewish rhythms and in dialogue with Jewish law.

Those very idioms were frequently used by congregants who often employed the vocabulary of their rabbis to describe their own Jewish lives. The synagogues' vitality was measured by events and discussions devoted to observance, rather than other forms of participation. The rabbis exercised their leadership by emphasizing an idiom of *mitzvot* as the foundation for participation.

In both synagogues, congregants were encouraged to take on Jewish observances incrementally, rather than making a complete commitment at once, (a position congregants associated with Orthodoxy) they were invited to obligate themselves to new *mitzvot* gradually. The license to move step by step appeared to be quite effective in creating a committed, observant, and expanding core of members who, in turn, offered the synagogue a variety of skills, competence and commitment that were central to their self-definitions as observant Jews.

The Differences between the Core and the Periphery

Synagogues are like all voluntary organizations in that their membership is rarely equally committed within their own individual lives or within the life of the community. The committed core is always smaller than the total membership. Nevertheless, the membrane between the core and the periphery is permeable. Several factors determine a congregant's place relative to the core. True, the more observant are usually the most committed. What is perhaps less obvious is that members apparently on the periphery often do not view themselves in that way. In one congregation, parents who are active in their children's daily nursery school felt centrally involved in the synagogue. Families who were once very active when their children were younger and frequently attended Shabbat morning services held onto the sense of themselves as strongly committed. Those who attended Shabbat services infrequently because they had young children saw themselves as simply

waiting in the wings; they planned to become more active as soon as their children were considerably older.

The avenue to membership in the synagogue's core was not by way of children alone. A great number of congregants described being asked by a ritual director, cantor, rabbi or other congregant to learn a skill or to receive an *aliya*. The effect was transforming. As they felt recognized and more central to the synagogue, they began to attend more regularly, sometimes to feel more competent, and hence to identify strongly with the synagogue.

Nevertheless, though congregants of all ages attended Shabbat morning services, the ages of core members were fairly consistently between about thirty-five and sixty-five, with the greater number of core participants being in their late thirties through fifties. In addition to demonstrating the numerical strength of the Baby Boom generation, the core further reflects the real link between active synagogue membership and the life cycle.

The Role of Informal Jewish Education in the Conservative Synagogue

Synagogue membership creates innumerable moments for learning about Jewish life and observance. Peripheral members are often defined as "three-days-a-year" Jews, which implies that people pay substantial dues solely to have a synagogue to attend on the High Holidays. In fact, the life cycle seems to have a far more binding effect on members. More like an insurance policy than a three day pass, synagogue membership assures a setting for the celebration of a bar or bat mitzvah, wedding, and funeral, as well as a source of support during times of illness.

Rabbi Allen described these moments as important opportunities for people to learn that "Judaism can speak to them." His congregants express just that view. They are surprised not only by the depth of his concern, but by his ability to bring profound meaning to those events.

Children sometimes have greater Jewish competence than their parents. The bar or bat mitzvah of a child often provides the occasion for mothers, in particular, to seek out the cantor, rabbi, or other functionary to teach them synagogue skills, such as chanting the Torah. They are drawn into Jewish adulthood sometimes at their children's request and sometimes by their own desire to learn.

In both congregations, the rabbis serve preeminently as teachers, a role highly valued by congregants who are eager to learn in the context of worship. The rabbis I studied took the initiative to teach in a variety of ways. They encouraged learning through adult bar and bat mitzvah classes and a variety of literacy programs. They taught formal courses in Talmud, Bible, and ethics, the latter dealing with issues such as assisted suicide and abortion. Their teaching especially revolved around mitzvot.

5. Paul Ritterband

The Synagogue and Family Life

There is no question that the family is the key institution in Jewish life, as it is in life generally. The family produces Jews. Its primary function is biological but close behind is its social function: turning squalling, needy, helpless infants into responsible, decent, loving and productive human beings. The human family produces human beings much like other animals produce copies of themselves, responding to instincts embedded in their bodies through God knows how many generations.

Socio-biologists have coined a very useful phrase, "the selfish gene." In order to explain behavior that appears anomalous and often counter-productive, they assume that above and beyond everything else, the genes in the chromosomes of all living creatures want to live. They live by having copies of themselves passed on to the next generation, defeating the death of the individual. The spawning run of salmon, which almost inevitably ends in the death of the individual fish, succeeds when the next generation of fish comes swimming down the stream. Biological immortality is achieved pretty much the same way, with minor variations, by all living creatures.

Social immortality is more complex and requires considerably more effort on the part of parents. Parents have to train their children over a number of years in order for the children to become social copies of themselves. Think about the old-fashioned response of parents to their children marrying out; they would mourn the children as if the children were dead, sitting shiva. Why? Because the child had reduced the chance of the parents to achieve social immortality. How else can we explain this harsh, even brutal response of traditional yet loving Jewish parents?

In my analysis of the survey of Conservative congregation members, I was amazed by the power of the family. To a remarkable degree, the adult members of a Conservative congregation order their lives in accordance with the values and behavior they learned in their parents' homes. The frequency of attendance at synagogue services, the probability of being a member of Hillel in college, the probability of a non-Jewish spouse converting to Judaism and the likelihood of many more adult Jewish choices and behaviors are highly influenced by the Jewishness of the parents' homes.

Schools and other educational institutions impart skills and knowledge, but homes construct the identity that carries into maturity. We need good Jewish schools because we need literate Jews. But no Jewish school, no matter how good, can give children a sense of who they are as Jews or the motivation to continue to be Jews. It will not do for Jewish parents to send their children to Jewish schools so that they can learn *about* Judaism and Jewishness. To do so simply runs counter to the

evidence of the social researcher and the folk wisdom of the Jews.

Core and Periphery

Core and periphery are easy notions to understand in the abstract but more problematic when we move to the practical arena. If core is "at the center" and periphery is "way out there, somewhere," how do we know where exactly the center is and how do we measure distance from there to the periphery? And who exactly is in the center? Is the center comprised of those who are close to the rabbi? Members of the board of trustees? People who are particularly observant? No matter which indicator we use, the results are similar, conforming to the general rule, "the more, the more."

Those who attend services more frequently than others are also likely to give a higher percentage of their incomes to Jewish charities, make more visits to Israel, attend more lectures on Jewish themes, even have more Jewish children than other members. It is not necessarily that one of these activities leads to another. More likely, they are inter-connected parts of a single mind-set.

One bit of folklore has it that there is a division of labor in congregations: some people pray, others pay the bills, while others still clean up after children. Another version of the same bit of folklore is that officers and members of the board are good at finances and housekeeping matters but are unlikely to attend services or participate in adult education. We now know that both versions of this story are false. The general rule of thumb is "the more the more."

A second bit of folklore suggests that a tiny cabal controls the congregation and neither new people nor those without money are welcome into the core. This is also false. Usually terribly short-handed, most congregations are welcoming both to newcomers and to those without substantial capital.

Other measures of core and periphery yield comparable results. For example, those with a more traditional Jewish ideology are more likely to participate in activities and report that their closest friends are members of the congregation. The opposite is true of religious liberals, revealing that religious liberalism is a predictor for the periphery.

Are there demographic markers for those in the core or on the periphery? Here we have a very interesting turn of events. When we look for membership in the core or periphery of the Jewish population as a whole, demographic characteristics make a major difference. For example, age makes a big difference in predicting levels of Jewish commitment in the population as a whole. However, when it comes to the membership of Conservative congregations, such factors become trivial. The act of affiliating with a Conservative congregation filters out the marginal Jews. And

increasingly, core Conservative Jews are believing Jews. They are Conservative Jews by choice not by default.

Sources of Vitality

Conservative Judaism can be defined both by its professional leadership and by the opinions, values and behavior patterns of its lay constituency. For now, I attempt to understand the movement as it is actually lived by the members of its congregations. As such, it has long been recognized as full of paradoxes and internal contradictions. Often seen as the movement's weakness, particularly when evaluated against a standard of internal consistency and rigor, I see these as its strength. It is a strength when we evaluate human communities in terms of their humanity, their willingness to live with ambiguity and to recognize that life itself is filled with internal contradiction. Hillel the Elder asserted, "If I am not for myself, who shall be for me? When I am for myself, what am I?" Contradictory? Without question, yes! Make sense? Without question, yes!

Take one example from our questionnaire responses. Three-fourths of the members of Conservative congregations assert that Conservative Judaism lets its members choose those parts of Judaism that they find most meaningful; more than three-fifths assert that Conservative Jews are obligated to obey Jewish law; about half believe in both propositions. Orthodox and Reform Jews know better than to affirm both ideals simultaneously. Reform Jews deny the obligation to obey halakha while Orthodox Jews deny the right to choose. The most frequent response of Conservative Jews is to accept both propositions despite their contradictory nature.

The major strength of the Conservative movement, when taken seriously rather than as a default option, is that it demands the critical Ioyalty of its adherents. While God may have given the commandments, the decision to obey is up to each Jew. That decision cannot be made responsibly in ignorance. Thus, it is the obligation of the Conservative Jew to know and to understand both the tradition and the world in which he or she finds himself or herself. The Conservative Jew negotiates with the tradition, balancing the demands of past, present and future just as Hillel taught that the Jew must balance the demands of self and others.

At its best, negotiation with the tradition takes place in a communal context. Individuals negotiate not only with their own judgments of past and present but with their neighbors' judgments as well. Participating in communal negotiations transforms the synagogue. Rather than functioning as a supermarket of social and religious services supplied to passive consumers, the synagogue becomes an active agent in conserving the usable Jewish past to forge a liveable Jewish future.

Intermarriage

Some issues lend themselves to cool, rational discourse while others arouse a great deal of emotion. Intermarriage tends toward the latter. It does little good to tell parents who are facing a child's intermarriage that they ought to be rational about the matter. Yet, the community has to find ways of being rational without compromising its basic commitments. Some knowledge and guidelines for thinking about the issue would help.

Every westernized or secularized Jewish community has had a non-trivial ineidence of intermarriage. Once the social, cultural and psychological barriers between Jews and Gentiles came down, intermarriage followed. Some North Americans placed their bets on "American exceptionalism." Since the United States and Canada were born as democracies and their Jewish communities never had to go through the process of emancipation, their children would not feel the temptation to marry "the other" the Gentile, the stranger.

Well, as we all know now, that is not how history works. Intermarriage is now a common feature of Jewish life, and North America is not exceptional. But what can we do about intermarriage? First, we must acknowledge that the issue exists. From our survey of Conservative congregation members we know that a significant fraction of children of members of Conservative synagogues are married to people who are not Jewish. In addition, many husbands or wives in households affiliated with Conservative congregations were not raised as Jews but are now Jews. Finally, a good number of current Conservative congregation members were not raised as Jews and are still not Jewish. Intermarriage is a reality in the Conservative movement. Wishing will not make it disappear, and neither hand-wringing nor incrimination will substitute for communal policy.

There is pressure brought upon rabbis to perform intermarriages. In our survey, one-fourth of Conservative Jews agreed that their rabbi should officiate at intermarriages. To do so would solve the immediate problem, but would complicate life for the Jewish community. Every sort of community has boundaries and rules of participation. There is nothing particularly parochial or narrow-minded about the Conservative congregation living by its rules.

Intermarriage, conversion and affiliation can be understood by analogy to the absorption of immigrants. When the receiving society is strong and when the desire of the immigrants to become part of their new society is strong, then absorption of immigrants is accomplished effectively and efficiently. When these conditions are not met, the new immigrants do not learn the ways of the receiving society, and their original culture overwhelms that of the receiving society.

As a community, the Conservative congregation can deal with intermarriage without bending its standards for affiliation

and participation in the life of the community by welcoming Jews-by-choice. While this point of view does not preclude outreach, it does suggest the establishment of an order of priorities: take care of your responsibilities at home first. Then focus your efforts on those who stand at the edge of your community and finally on those who were once part of your community.

Once you have succeeded in dealing with the population of current members and their children, then you can afford to go beyond to the larger public. But by all means do not think that the struggle for Jewish continuity can be won "on the cheap." If we denature Judaism and Jewishness in order to gain numbers, ultimately we will lose both quantitatively and qualitatively.

6. Jack Wertheimer

While our research on Conservative Synagogues and Their Members was primarily intended to spark healthy discussion about the future of Conservative Judaism, it would be unfortunate if the broader Jewish community were to regard this study as a parochial matter of relevance only to the Conservative movement.

From a quantitative perspective alone, the population examined by this study is central to the future of American Jewry. Conservative Jews constitute almost half of all synagogue members in the United States and their Jewish commitments are an important barometer of the vitality of the larger Jewish community. They play a role disproportionate to their numbers in the maintenance and support of the institutions that serve the Jewish community as federation and UJA donors, as lay supporters of the major volunteer organizations, and as members of JCCs. Even more important, findings from this study can serve as guideposts for the larger Jewish community on the road to continuity.

Jewish Education Makes a Powerful Difference

A striking and consistent pattern emerged when we asked members of Conservative synagogues about their exposure to Jewish educational programs. With each younger age group, the rates of exposure to these programs rose. Such educational experiences are necessary factors (among others) for continuing participation in Jewish communal institutions.

Intensity of Jewish education also makes a profound difference. For example, members of Conservative synagogues who only attended Sunday school participated in synagogue life at lower rates than those who attended supplementary school programs or day schools.

These findings argue powerfully against the claim that a minimal Jewish education is sufficient. Those who wish to reduce the number of contact hours in supplementary schools or who promote one-day-a-week education should be regarded as

modern-day snake oil salesmen: they are promoting a product that may harm more than it helps.

The Bar and Bat Mitzvah Experience Is a High Point

Contrary to the widespread perception that the bar/bat mitzvah celebration is a vacuous experience for young people, our study suggests that it is a profound and formative Jewish event. After interviewing nearly fifteen hundred recent bar and bat mitzvah celebrants in communities throughout North America, it is evident that the process of studying and then performing in public raises the self-esteem of young people. Recent celebrants overwhelmingly described the religious ceremony as the most important part of the event.

Even more important, recent b'nai and b'not mitzvah express high levels of positive identification with being Jewish, believing in God, visiting Israel, learning Hebrew and continuing their Jewish education. Unfortunately, it still appears likely that these young people will detach themselves from Jewish life as they make their way through their teens and twenties. With the exception of relatively small populations, significant numbers of young people drop out of Jewish life right after experiencing a high point in their Jewish lives.

All of this suggests that a culture of Jewish disaffiliation exists for young Jews in their teens and early twenties. Even more tragically, the Jewish community has acquiesced to this culture: "They're just rebelling; they'll come back." How often do we hear this soothing, yet false claim? Though some young Jews do return to active Jewish life after a hiatus of ten or fifteen years, many never return.

By failing to involve our young people, the Jewish community is taking a dangerous risk. It must invest heavily in programs that capitalize on the bar/bat mitzvah "high," rather than allow those positive feelings to dissipate.

People Rise to Expectations

In addition to speaking with young people who recently celebrated a bar or bat mitzvah, we also interviewed one parent of each child. In the period prior to their child's celebration, parents participated far more actively in synagogue life. A great many of these parents became more involved because synagogues required attendance and participation. Some synagogues enact formal guidelines; in other cases, the rabbi, cantor or education director seeks to persuade parents that their presence is critical.

In an age when Jewish institutions have become ever more hesitant to convey any expectations, it is still possible to ask people to do more and they will respond positively.

Jewish Continuity Begins at Home

The most important finding of the study links parental behavior to the subsequent Jewish involvement of their children. This finding undoubtedly will not come as a surprise to many. After all, we all know the pitfalls of asking children to do as we say, not as we do. And yet many, if not most, American Jews continue to act otherwise.

Synagogue members whose parents took them to religious services are the most likely to attend services regularly as adults and the most likely to believe that religion is very important. The model of parents who themselves take synagogue services seriously is the most powerful factor affecting future service attendance by their children.

There are important lessons here for those concerned with "Jewish continuity." We must invest in intensive Jewish education for all our young people and embrace them in a range of Jewish programs during the decades after bar and bat mitzvah; we must enlist parents and families as role models for Jewish living; and we must talk to adults about our communal expectations. As a community we must realize that ensuring Jewish continuity really is not such a mystery.

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