

Inside Conservative Judaism

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THE ORTHODOX, REFORM, AND RECONSTRUCTIONIST movements have all been challenged by the pressures to accommodate change over the last decades. Now, as the Jewish Theological Seminary of America searches for a new chancellor (Ismar Schorsch, who has served for 21 years, steps down this summer), the Conservative movement has an opportunity to rethink its ideological underpinnings and structural architecture, to address a shifting Jewish demography across North America, and to strengthen its presence as an international movement. This issue of Sh'ma opens with "letters" to the incoming chancellor that speak about the movement's future — pitfalls and responsibilities; current and past lay leaders provide analysis and concrete proposals; and rabbis offer their "out-of-the-box" visions for the movement — including among others JTS-trained Shoshana Boyd Gelfand's essay on transforming the Conservative movement into a model of trans-denominational Judaism.

From Susan E. Hodge

To the new Chancellor:

I find my home in the Conservative movement, which offers intellectual honesty, egalitarian practices, and the opportunity to lead a committed, observant Jewish life. But the movement also has — as I see it — three problem areas that I hope you'll address:

Contempt for Conservative Jews

It is a half-joking, half-bitter catchword among some of us, that the Conservative *movement* has contempt for Conservative *Jews*. The movement has too

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From Jeffrey E. Schwarz

Dear Chancellor:

As you move into your new offices at 3080 Broadway and assume your position as head of the Jewish Theological Seminary and *de facto* leader of the Conservative movement, we are facing the greatest challenges in our history. Partially a product of broader societal trends being played out in 21st-century America, partially a reflection of denominational developments in Judaism, but unquestionably, to some degree of the movement's own making, these challenges beg two

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From Martin Werber

Dear Chancellor:

Motzei Shabbat, several years ago, a close friend called in a panic. Rabbi Joel Roth, the preeminent Conservative halakhic expert who was for many years head of the Rabbinical Assembly's Law Committee, had just concluded a Shabbaton at her synagogue in Pennsylvania and had thrown a bombshell. Rabbi Roth said that Conservative Jews are bound by halakhah. Everyone was in an uproar. No one in that synagogue had ever heard that said before, and she wanted to know if what Rabbi Roth had said was true. I deeply disappointed my friend who had

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From Rebecca Russo

To the Chancellor:

It is Thursday night, and our voices sing so loudly they are heard outside. The *Beit Midrash* is packed. Teenage campers sit together with staff members, crowded around a long table covered with scattered song sheets and food. A camper's *d'var Torah* ends, and two *kollel* members begin to teach a *niggun* they wrote, immediately followed by an outburst of singing and dancing from the oldest campers in the back.

This is the scene of *mishmar* at Camp Ramah in Wisconsin, a weekly gathering where we prepare spiritually for the

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Susan E. Hodge, from page 1

many self-perpetuating bureaucracies that are out of touch with us and don't respect or even welcome us, the ordinary Jews living our lives.

A personal example: our daughter attended Columbia University in New York as an undergraduate and got involved with Koach, the Conservative college group. Periodically, she and her friends trekked up Broadway to attend Shabbat services at the Seminary. Sometimes one or more of them would even arrange ahead of time to lead davening or to *leyn* Torah. How many times did these young people — *who are our future* — get invited to someone's home for Shabbat dinner or lunch? Never. Now try to imagine a similar situation involving college students and any Orthodox institution: I think we can safely predict that these hypothetical students would be inundated with Shabbes invitations.

Of course this is just one small example, and some Conservative institutions do serve us well. But there are also too many instances like the one above. "The tone is set at the top." You, as Chancellor, can set that tone, both by personal example and via policy, to counter these negative attitudes and to encourage all Conservative institutions to respect and welcome their lay members.

Overemphasis on Day Schools

It is wonderful that in many parts of the country, Conservative Jews have viable day school options, either for community day schools or for Schechter schools that are specifically associated with our movement. It is less wonderful that, increasingly, Conservative leaders are writing off children and families that do not choose day school. Last time I looked, the Torah commanded us, *v'shinan'tam l'vanecha*, "and teach your children," not, "and send them to a Solomon Schechter day school." Yet to many Conservative leaders, the third minimum requirement to be considered a committed Conservative Jew, after observing kashrut and being *shomer Shabbat*, is to send one's children to Schechter. In our real lives, however, parents may choose other schools for valid reasons:

- Financial limitations — do you really want to say that only families of means can be "good Jews"?
- Personal issues — the Schechter schools are not always equipped to handle learn-

ing disabilities, ADHD, social problems, etc.

- Broader social concerns — do you really want every Jewish child in America to be raised in the segregated environment of a Jewish school? More disturbing, do you want every *non*-Jewish child in America to be raised without coming into contact with Jews? Is this the way for us to be a light unto the nations? And what about small communities that cannot support a day school. Should Conservative Jews live only in urban settings?

I hope that you will convey to Conservative leaders that the movement must not *abandon* children who don't attend day schools. I hope you'll continue to develop and improve afternoon Hebrew schools along with day schools and that you'll encourage other Conservative leaders to respect the choices that families make.

Moral Failure vis-à-vis Gay Jews

Finally, it's time for the Conservative movement to stop discriminating against gay Jews in any aspect of communal Jewish life. (Please note I am *not* addressing the more complex issue of religious gay marriage.) The movement justifies this discrimination because of what gay Jews do (or don't do) in bed. But it doesn't use that reasoning for other Jews. Let me pose the question this way: if Judith and Ruth, or Daniel and Avi, are living together — creating a Jewish home, participating in a Jewish community, pursuing Jewish learning, and possibly raising Jewish children — what business is it of anyone else's what they do in bed? Nobody has the chutzpah to ask that question of me and my husband — not in *any* Jewish context, whether it is receiving an *aliyah* in our local shul or studying for the rabbinate at JTS. This has nothing to do with looking over our "right" or "left" shoulders, nothing to do with what other movements decide. Rather, I see it as a straightforward moral issue, and I hope that as Chancellor you will provide moral leadership in this area.

Sincerely,

Dr. Susan E. Hodge

Professor, Columbia University

Congregation Beth Shalom, Teaneck, New Jersey

Upcoming from Sh'ma

March:
Stretching
Pluralism

April:
Holocaust
Education

May:
Jewish Identity
in Israel

June:
Innovation and
Imagination

The Sh'ma Forum on Sustainable Innovation & Jewish Life

March 23rd in NYC

For more information, contact
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