

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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Jeffrey E. Schwarz, *from page 1*

fundamental questions about the future of the movement:

- What does the Conservative movement uniquely stand for (if anything)?
- Does the Conservative movement need to exist?

Integration versus Insularity

The Conservative movement is faced with the challenge of integration versus insularity (played out through issues such as intermarriage). We continue to employ a false duality — the notion that as an individual becomes “more American,” s/he becomes “less Jewish.” In fact, younger people today realize that the opposite may very well be true. Our Judaism, our Jewish values, and sensibilities, inform and shape who we are as Americans. And, at the same time, American values inform and shape who we are as Jews. Younger Jews have no interest in a Judaism based significantly upon tribal considerations of bloodline and “laws” that directly or indirectly separate them from their non-Jewish friends and neighbors. As such, a focus on “in-marriage” grounded in the need for retaining biological and/or social particularity will continue to fail. In 21st-century America, only an engaged Jewish life synonymous with compelling content and depth of meaning has a chance of making “in-marriage” an achievable goal.

Plate Tectonics in Jewish Denominational Life

The Conservative movement faces crowding from both ends of the denominational spectrum. Ritual practice, serious commitment to the study of sacred texts, and the use of Hebrew continue to become increasingly important to the reinvigorated Reform movement. At the same time, cutting edge institutions and congregations within Modern Orthodoxy push the boundaries of what have traditionally been considered women’s roles in Orthodox prayer services, thereby encroaching upon the Conservative movement’s egalitarian bona fides. As the so-called “middle” ground continues to erode, the Conservative movement must chart a course that enables it to do more than survive, but rather contribute to the competitive Jewish marketplace of ideas.

The Conservative Movement Itself

If the Conservative movement wants to be taken seriously, it must address an elemental truth regarding halakhah. The movement

calls itself halakhic, yet not only are the vast majority of its laity (and perhaps a not inconsequential number of its clergy) non-halakhic, but an undeniable critical mass of Conservative Jews do not consider halakhah to be their “commanded” path to an authentic Jewish life. In this regard the movement differs from, on the one hand, the stated position of Reform, whose doctrine and adherents do not see Jewish practice through a lens of commandedness, and on the other hand, from that of Orthodoxy, whose doctrine and adherents view halakhah as the “authentic” Jewish way. The cognitive dissonance within the Conservative movement surrounding the issue of halakhah is disturbing for those committed to intellectual integrity. From a pragmatic perspective, the constant carping from the pulpit by our clergy about the desirability of increasing levels of ritual observance is ineffective at best and may very well encourage people to stay out of the pews entirely.

The most significant act the Conservative movement made was the decision, nearly three decades ago, to ordain women. And the movement still remains traumatized by the fallout associated with that decision, leaving it seemingly paralyzed, unable to adapt to the progress that broader American society has made in accepting as equal those who happen to be other than white, heterosexual men. How else to explain the fact that Conservative congregations continue to have the right to choose to be non-egalitarian? Does the movement really want to perpetuate the second-class status of women? Moreover, the movement’s position denying ordination to men and women who openly identify themselves as gays and lesbians calls into question the movement’s *raison d’être*, the idea that Jewish law can and should change and adapt.

Chancellor, avoiding change when change is needed, dodging crucial decisions while waiting for consensus to develop, can be a far riskier step than asserting the principled stance of a true leader. This may be one of the most important realizations of your Chancellorship.

Jeffrey E. Schwarz

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