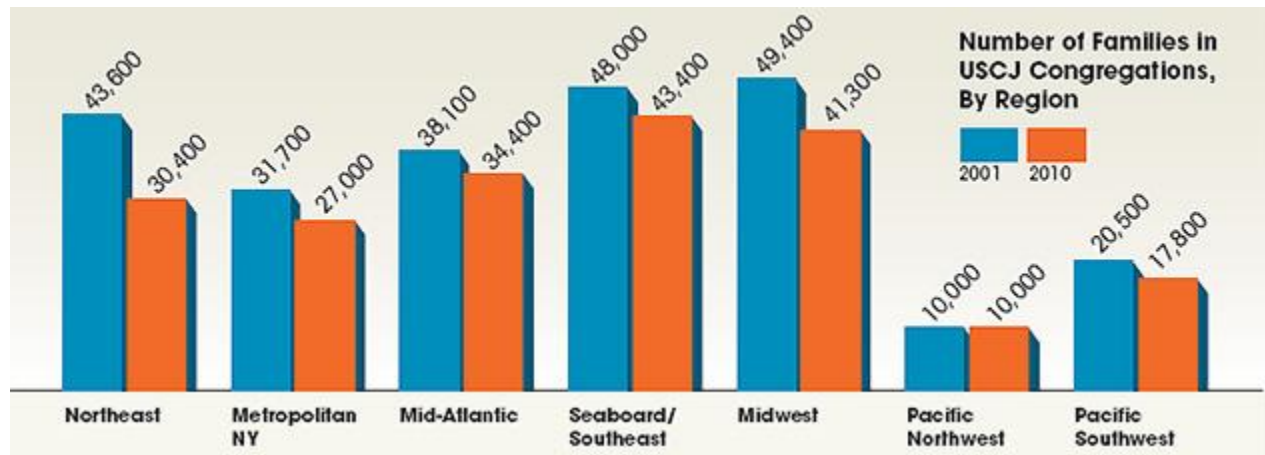


Liberal Denominations Face Crisis as Rabbis Rebel, Numbers Shrink

Struggling for Relevance and Funding



USCJ

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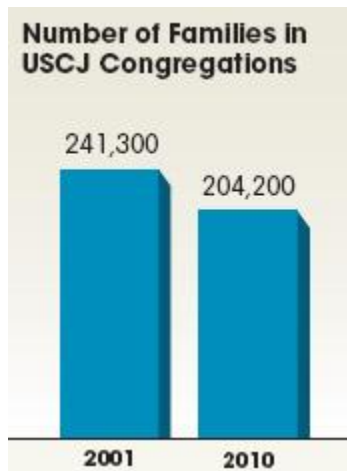
Conservative Judaism's membership rolls are in free fall.

According to a strategic plan for renewal issued in February by the denomination's congregational arm, the number of families served by synagogues belonging to what was once American Judaism's leading stream has shrunk by 14% since 2001. In the denomination's Northeast region, the number of families has dropped by 30%.

The new draft strategic plan by the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism proposes ways for the USCJ to regain some of that lost ground. And the plan comes, as it turns out, at a fraught moment not just for Conservative Judaism, but for all the synagogue organizations that anchor America's liberal Jewish streams.

Within Reform Judaism, the Forward has learned, a group of dissident rabbis is seeking to shake up a movement long seen by outsiders as untroubled by internal dissent. While the specific agenda of the group is unclear, its heft within the movement is undeniable: The group consists of 17 senior rabbis from large Reform synagogues that foot a significant portion of the movement's budget. In this sense, the Reform rabbis bear some resemblance to influential synagogue leaders within Conservative Judaism whose near-revolt in 2009 led to the strategic plan that the USCJ has just issued.

Meanwhile, the synagogue body of the smaller Reconstructionist movement is weathering its own transition. Following a November vote, Reconstructionist leadership is finalizing a plan to merge its synagogue arm with its rabbinical school.



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The parallel developments within all three of North America’s liberal Jewish denominations paint a picture of a growing crisis in liberal Judaism. Their long-standing central bodies are struggling to convince the synagogues that pay their bills of their relevance and usefulness.

“We’re putting people on notice that we are no longer going to send checks in to an organization simply because that’s what we’ve always done,” said Rabbi Michael Siegel, senior rabbi of Anshe Emet Synagogue in Chicago and chairman of the Hayom Coalition, the dissident USCJ caucus.

The USCJ’s new strategic plan was unveiled nearly two years after Hayom’s initial broadside against the organization, which accused the synagogue umbrella group of being “insular, unresponsive, and of diminishing value to its member congregations.” USCJ members have worked with representatives of Hayom since March 2010 to create the strategic plan, which awaits approval by the USCJ board.

The document describes a shrinking movement whose members have little regard for the USCJ. “Among congregations of every size and in every region, there is growing ambivalence about their continued membership in the USCJ,” the document reports.

The plan proposes to broaden the constituency of the USCJ, from synagogues self-identified as Conservative to those of a broader “vital religious center,” in the language of the document. The plan describes an effort to reach out to the so-called independent minyanim, small unaffiliated congregations with mostly younger members. Conservative leaders argue that members of these congregations grew up in the Conservative movement, and as such have a natural home in the USCJ.

But even as the plan says that congregations that do not identify themselves as Conservative may now join the USCJ, it includes a caveat stating that all USCJ congregations must “meet the religious standards of the Rabbinical Assembly,” the movement’s rabbinic organization.

“You can’t have it both ways,” said Brandeis University American Jewish history professor Jonathan Sarna, who called the plan a “compromise document.”

Others asserted that the plan would appeal to independent minyanim. Both the minyanim and the mainstream congregations “will have to go beyond the false duality of denomination and independence,” said Steven M. Cohen, a leading Jewish sociologist and newly appointed senior counselor to Jewish Theological Seminary Chancellor Arnold Eisen. Cohen is credited as having been among those who prepared the USCJ document. “There’s no reason why we can’t be both independent and a part of a denomination,” Cohen said.

The strategic plan also proposes to decrease the dues that synagogues pay to the USCJ by increasing philanthropic support and inviting philanthropists to join the USCJ board. USCJ governance would be reshaped under its proposals. And the body would promote better coordination among the movement’s summer camps, youth groups and other educational programs.

USCJ leadership said that the organization would undertake staff cuts beyond those imposed in 2009, when the group reduced its staff by 10%. Specific reductions have yet to be decided.

As the Conservative movement nears the end of the first phase of a process designed to repair rifts in its synagogue arm, the Reform movement appears to be just starting to grapple with divisions within its ranks. Since convening a year ago, the Rabbinic Vision Initiative — a faction whose members are senior rabbis at congregations that pay some of the heftiest dues to the Union for Reform Judaism- — has made its presence felt throughout the Reform movement.

“I think that much of what they have brought out has been helpful and fruitful, albeit engendering a good deal of anxiety among some of the leadership,” said Rabbi Ellen Weinberg Dreyfus of B’nai Yehuda Beth Sholom in Homewood, Ill., president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the Reform movement’s rabbinic organization.

Over the past year, delegates from the group have met with the leadership of the URJ, the board of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, the leadership of the CCAR and the committee that has been appointed to nominate a successor to Rabbi Eric Yoffie, current president of the URJ, who is set to step down in 2012.

The RVI was convened by Rabbi Peter Rubinstein of Central Synagogue, a historic and wealthy congregation based on Manhattan’s Upper East Side. Other members include Rabbi Steven Leder of Los Angeles’s prominent Wilshire Boulevard Temple and Rabbi Micah Greenstein of Temple Israel in Memphis, Tenn. Only Rubinstein would agree to speak.

Rubinstein would not cite specific goals or grievances held by the group. He said that the group sought to assert a role for individual synagogues as the Reform movement re-evaluates itself.

“What we’re concerned about is that our movement needs to work together, rather than as separate institutions, in thinking about the future, and that congregations have a major role to play in setting the agenda for this,” Rubinstein said.

Other Reform sources pointed to the URJ’s reorganization in 2009, when the national economic crisis hit it hard, as a sort of tipping point for the movement’s synagogues. Synagogue leaders began to question the direction of the movement as the group cut about 60 staff positions and slashed its budget by a reported 20%, sources said.

People who have met with the RVI say that the group does not have a specific agenda or demands, and that it does not speak with a unified voice.

“There are some who lovingly express their concern, and others who might express threats of withdrawing financial support, and everything in between,” said Dreyfus, who has met with the RVI as CCAR president and as a member of the URJ presidential nomination committee.

According to multiple sources, Leder’s Wilshire Boulevard Temple is currently considering leaving the URJ. Rabbi Daniel Frelander, the URJ’s senior vice president, said that he didn’t think that had anything to do with Leder’s membership in the RVI. Leder declined a request for comment.

The selection of the next URJ president has also reportedly been of concern to the RVI. Two Reform insiders said that they had been told that the group was pushing for an interim appointment rather than a permanent replacement for Yoffie; another said that one member of the group had suggested that the RVI have veto power over the selection committee’s decision.

The RVI certainly has the attention of the URJ leadership. The formation of the Reform Judaism Think Tank, a group of 30 Reform leaders from each of the movement’s institutional branches, was “very much in response” to the appearance of the RVI, according to Frelander. That group is to meet four times annually in public forums that are webcast and archived online.

But some have criticized the RVI for its perceived exclusivity.

“I can’t help but feel that some of us who have congregations and communities of equal substance might feel a little left out, might wonder why the process at some point didn’t reach out to include others, or at least [seek] input from others,” said Rabbi Jack Luxemburg of Temple Beth Ami, a large Reform congregation in Rockville, Md.

“My discomfort with this group was that it appeared to be the rabbis of large congregations, and it appeared to be that the reason we were getting together was that we had the financial weight to throw around,” said Rabbi Amy Schwartzman of Temple Rodef Shalom in Falls Church, Va., who was invited to join the RVI and declined. She said that she would have preferred a more transparent effort rather than “creating some kind of cabal to force the hand of the powers that be because we have the money, because our congregations have these hefty dues that they give.”

Meanwhile, changes have come to the Reconstructionist movement, changes that could foreshadow future developments in the Reform and Conservative spheres. Reached February 4, Jewish Reconstructionist Federation's interim executive vice president, Robert Barkin, said that discussions between his organization and the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College to merge the two bodies were nearing their conclusion. The discussions were authorized by a vote taken during the JRF's convention in November, during which the organization passed a resolution that would unify the two arms of the movement into a single legal entity.

"This is not just a cost-cutting measure," Barkin said. "Especially in our case, it's really much more trying to figure out what's the best way to further the movement."

The agreement will not be officially made public until it receives approval from the current boards of the JRF and the RRC.

The weakening of denominational organizations is not unique to liberal Jews, according to Mark Chaves, a professor of sociology, religion and divinity at Duke University who studies congregational life in America.

"What is unambiguously a trend is lower amounts of money being given by churches to denominational offices, and that is causing financial turmoil at the denominational level," Chaves said. "Protestant churches are asking themselves... 'What do we get from the denomination?'"

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