

*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 many self-perpetuating bureaucracies that are out of

*continued on page 2*

*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 fundamental questions about the future of the movement:

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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 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 some-

*continued on page 4*

*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

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 would trek up Broadway to attend Shabbat services at the Seminary (sometimes Friday night, sometimes Saturday morning). 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 place for Shabbat dinner or lunch? The answer is: "None." 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 Shabbat invitations.

You might say that this is just one small example, but this one small example is emblematic of my concerns. "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 its 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 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 well-off families can be "good Jews"?
- Personal issues — The Schechter schools are not always equipped to handle learning 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 really want every *non*-Jewish child in America be raised without coming into contact with Jews? Is this the way for us to be a light unto the nations?

I hope that you will convey to Conservative leaders that the movement must not *abandon* children who don't attend day schools. (In fact, this abandonment is another example of my first point, about having contempt for Conservative Jews.) 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 here.) 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 of Judaism 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 at Columbia University*

*Congregation Beth Shalom, Teaneck, New Jersey*

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Jeffrey E. Schwarz, *from page 1*

- 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 contrary 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 blood-line 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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 incon-

sequential 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*

*Co-founder and co-managing partner of Metropolitan Capital Advisors, Inc., New York Member of Park Avenue Synagogue, Congregation B’nai Jeshurun, and the Conservative Synagogue of the Hamptons*

## Upcoming from Sh'ma

March:  
Stretching  
Pluralism

April:  
Holocaust  
Education

May:  
Jewish Identity  
in Israel

June:  
Innovation and  
Imagination

## Martin Werber, from page 1

how hoped that I would have the chutzpah to contradict Rabbi Roth.

I tell you this story because it is not enough for the Jewish Theological Seminary to choose a gifted administrator and fundraiser as the new Chancellor. Ultimately the health of the seminary depends on the health of the Conservative Movement. And what the movement needs today is for you, as Chancellor, to project a clear, compelling vision of Conservative Judaism for the 21st century.

This movement started out as a marriage of convenience between a visionary fledgling seminary with a critical scientific approach to the study of Jewish texts and a laity, many of whom were seeking a familiar form of Judaism that could be integrated with their new American lifestyle. The seminary provided the clergy needed to run the Conservative synagogues sprouting up all over America, and the laity provided the funding to allow the seminary to function. Somehow, it just seemed more convenient for all involved not to remind the laity too often what was required of a committed Conservative Jew. This arrangement worked fairly well for nearly a century; it worked well for Conservative Jews who were new immigrants or were raised in Orthodox homes. But if the seminary is to maintain its base of support, it is going to have to help find a more persuasive reason to continue the partnership for a generation of Jews without the nostalgic baggage to make Conservative Judaism a comfortable fit.

In America, we are all Jews by choice. Contemporary Jews need to know why they do things, not just how to do them. We are a generation of seekers, and many would be more willing than their parents to accept a framework of *halakhah* if they saw it as enhancing their lives and providing greater meaning for life. As the new chancellor, you must enthusiastically promote a Conservative Jewish lifestyle and a Conservative Jewish prism through which to view the world. The excitement, the exploration and discovery at the seminary must be projected beyond the gates of 3080 Broadway. This needs to be more than intellectual gymnastics; it needs to be a passionate appeal that a lifestyle of fulfilling mitzvot will enhance life and bring a deeper connection to God and to the Jewish community.

I am eager to see you project a strong vi-

sion of Conservative Judaism. I believe there are many who hunger for a clear, unambiguous understanding of what it means to be a Conservative Jew. I say this as a lay person who went from being a non-religious labor Zionist, through the Havurah movement, to become a *shomer Shabbat* Conservative Jew. Even if your vision winds up leaving me outside on the right of a newly constituted Conservative tent, I would still welcome it because neither the movement nor the Seminary will flourish without a laity that understands and embraces Conservative Judaism in its daily life.

*Martin Werber*

*Businessman,*

*Chair of the Ritual Committee and board member of Temple Israel of Great Neck*

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## Rebecca Russo, from page 1

arrival of Shabbat through song, dance, and Torah study. Attendance is optional, yet dozens of campers fill the room. This *mishmar* falls under the greater umbrella of the *Beit Midrash* program, a relatively new space of intensive Jewish learning where older campers can study rabbinic texts every day in place of the usual Hebrew and Judaica classes. They share the *Beit Midrash* with an egalitarian *kollel* – a small group of staff members who live in cabins, teach, and spend most of their day learning.

The Conservative movement must cultivate more of these magical spaces, where love of Torah and Judaism come alive for young people. It is astounding to see the way this *Beit Midrash* has flourished and reached out to so many campers. Yet this program is unique. Today, intensive text study is not yet part of most Conservative institutions, particularly places of informal Jewish education. Educators are often so desperate to *engage* youth in Jewish learning that the content gets lost. We must figure out how to make Jewish texts accessible, and yet undiluted.

As the incoming Chancellor, I could ask you to take a stronger moral position with regard to homosexuality, or mention the need to focus more energy on afternoon and Sunday schools. But you have heard these issues time and time again. I'd rather focus on the need to speak with both rabbis and laity about the seriousness of Jewish learning. We must embrace Jewish study and a critical approach to text as flagships of what we stand for as a

movement. We need to examine texts as living documents and determine their meaning and application in today's world. As Chancellor, you have the ability to inspire the passion and struggle that come with Jewish learning. If we want Conservative Judaism to see a vibrant future, we must teach people how to look into the texts of our faith with an open heart and a critical eye. This can happen by bringing intensive learning into mainstream environments such as Ramah camps, USY conventions, day schools, and synagogue events.

As the prophet Isaiah teaches, "When all your children are taught of the Lord, great will be the peace of your children" (54:13). In this verse, the second mentioning of the word *banayich* (your children) is typically interpreted as *bonayich* (your builders), as we read before the Aleinu each Shabbat. Those who study and engage with Torah are the builders, the ones who will bring peace to the world.

Rebecca Russo

Brown University '08, USY Advisor, KOACH Intern, Camp Ramah Counselor and Teacher

## Walking the Walk: *Derekh Masorti*

Rela Mintz Geffen

WHAT SHOULD the motto of Conservative Judaism reflect today? What would express the aspirations, needs, and best impulses of 21st-century American Jews? It was the genius of the movement in the mid-20th century to capture the mood of a generation past the first shock of immigration but not yet totally at home in America. It often made few demands but fed individuals and families a dose of familiar and comforting traditionalism; it was moderation with authenticity.

But a movement can't succeed without those who are "*meshuga ladavar*" wholly committed. And it may be impossible to nurture a substantial leadership cadre that is passionate about moderation. Or, perhaps, the issue isn't the lack of passion about being in the middle but rather a lack of clarity about the ideological positions of Masorti Judaism and a hesitation by leadership to make demands for fear of losing members.

Can a movement have one of its leaders stand up at a national convention and demand that the claim and commitment to being a halakhic movement be abandoned while others posit fealty to it? The time has passed when both "some of us think that X is correct and some of us don't" can be kosher. Today the movement must take a position and retain its committed core even if it loses some members. The Orthodox movement can teach the rest of U. S. Jewish leadership that having a smaller membership with strong convictions and maximum education generates more creative energy than the retention of large numbers of nominally committed, non-practicing adherents.

Making demands, having clearly demarcated boundaries, demanding sacrifices from

members and investing heavily in human capital nurtures fervor. Excitement is generated and less committed followers — "free riders" — are attracted to the group. But when the free riders begin to predominate, the committed core loses heart and excitement dissipates. This may have happened gradually to the Conservative movement over the last quarter of the 20th century.

Laissez faire attitudes, lack of clear group norms and expectations, minimal demands, and unclear boundaries do not make compelling associations. The mitzvah system has always been predicated on strong, intense, frequent interactions of Jews nurturing the organic solidarity so well described nearly a century ago by Emile Durkheim in his important work *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*.

To be compelling to 21st-century Jews, the Conservative/Masorti movement must have leaders who publicly and privately spell out its principles, group norms, and expectations of members whether they are at home, work, or in the synagogue or broader community. A movement that makes demands may lose some individuals along the way — or encourage them to explore other streams. This may sadden some but it is better to lose them because of demands than because of boredom or lack of meaning. Acceptance of the legitimacy of a pluralistic Jewish community (*arevut* or *ahavat Yisrael*) together with devotion to a clearly spelled out *Derekh Masorti* (Conservative path or way) — one enunciated with confidence and without fear — is the way to a rejuvenated movement. The new motto might well be "*Derekh Masorti*: We talk the talk and walk the walk."

Dr. Rela Mintz Geffen, a Sh'ma Contributing Editor, is President and Professor of Sociology at Baltimore Hebrew University.

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# Change in a Very Conservative Movement

Steven M. Cohen

WHILE CONSERVATIVE Judaism has contributed enormously to the American Jewish landscape — spawning the Reconstructionist and havurah movements, Jewish feminism, and recently a slew of independent congregations — decline and weakening of Conservative Jewry, and its many institutions, is the most likely consequence of current tendencies in the Jewish population. Should the movement fail to radically change its policies and program, decline is inevitable and eventual disappearance a real possibility.

What fuels the concern for the future of Conservative Judaism? In part, the sharp numerical drop in recent years. Conservative Jews fell in number from 915,000 in 1990 to 660,000 in 2000. Of Jews affiliated with the three major denominational movements, Conservatism fell from 46 percent (and first place) in 1990, to just 36 percent (and second place, behind Reform) in 2000. Although the startling increases in learning and observance among those who remain Conservative is certainly encouraging, these assets of quality may not out-weight the liabilities in quantity. Not only has the Conservative population shrunk; it has declined most precipitously in the younger age cohorts, setting the stage for even more shrinkage in the years (and generations) to come.

The geography of the three movements is also significant. Conservative Judaism continues to lead in areas of high Jewish residential density, parts of the country where Jews have been living for decades. The Reform movement, though, has been far more pro-active in organizing and investing in congregations in areas of new Jewish settlement where new and younger Jews live. While the Reform movement has been out-performing in regards to new congregations, the Orthodox movement has been ferreting away the most committed and most educated products of Conservative Jewry. From 1990 to 2000 the percentage of those raised as Conservative who switched their affiliation to Orthodoxy doubled from 5 to 10 percent. In the same period, Orthodoxy dramatically increased its own retention rates, and reduced its outflows to both the Conservative and Reform movements.

The losses to Orthodoxy of some of the best educated and most committed Conservative

Jews find a parallel in the rise of numerous independent, traditional-egalitarian *minyanim*, often led by highly trained Conservative young adults — graduates of the movement's schools and camps — and their Modern Orthodox friends. Rather than providing these committed and educated young adults with ongoing opportunities for movement involvement (retreats or reunions of fellow alumni of the movement's great educational system), and thereby grounding them in an alternate source of Jewish social networking, the movement has chosen to let escape many of its "best and brightest" youngsters.

To be sure, the decline of this once-powerful and still-critical centrist movement in American Jewish life derives in part from the decline of Jewish ethnicity, and the difficulty of projecting a clear and compelling vision

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Steven M. Cohen is Research Professor of Social Policy, HUC-JIR. His current research focuses on the identities of young American Jews.

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# Reinventing the Conservative Movement

Jacob B. Ukeles



THE CONSERVATIVE movement is the logical home for the large numbers of American Jews who are committed to Judaism as their religion and who seek a middle ground between the rigors of Orthodoxy and the laissez-faire of Reform Judaism. And the solution to the current malaise of the Conservative movement — noted in other essays in this issue of *Sh'ma* — is not about fixing ideology; it is about making Conservative synagogues exciting, compelling, and engaging places that will draw the finest graduates of the movement's outstanding educational and youth programs. The organization that should be leading the charge to revitalize Conservative congregations is the lay arm of the movement: the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism (USCJ).

The good news is that after an intensive three-year effort, the USCJ has a plan, backed by the former and current movement presidents, to *transform* itself into a high performance organization, with a core mission to re-energize its North American congregations.

The bad news is that while there has been some change since the plan was completed 16 months ago, the pace of change has been glacially slow.

The "Transformation Plan" would enable USCJ to:

- Support new and emerging congregations, especially in high-growth areas
- Identify the congregations and educational programs that are exciting and compelling and help other congregations learn from these "models of excellence"
- Develop and disseminate "inreach" strategies to help congregations connect with the large numbers of self-defined Conservative Jews who don't belong to a congregation
- Develop and disseminate outreach strategies to help congregations to connect with unaffiliated Jews
- Attract philanthropic leadership to the national movement to invest the resources needed to make Conservative congregations more engaging places.

The "Plan" argues that the USCJ requires fundamental reform of governance, as well

as organization and regional structure before it can help re-energize its congregations. A few examples will illustrate what changes are needed:

Synagogues, which are supposed to be the focus of the organization, have virtually no say in its governance. The members of United Synagogue are the delegates to the biennial convention rather than the constituent congregations. The ultimate authority in the United Synagogue needs to be a Board of Directors composed of congregational leaders, not a convention that at best, is attended by 600 people.

United Synagogue has 22 separate departments and each is understaffed. With so many separate departments, it is more difficult to set priorities or to shift directions because each department represents its own constituency and turf. The number of national departments should be reduced and existing staff resources should be consolidated to focus on a limited number of high-priority objectives related to the core mission of energizing congregations.

On this vast continent, connections with congregations must take place in the field. The United Synagogue has 15 regions; all but one, the New York region, is hopelessly understaffed. Substantial disparities exist in size, leadership, capacity, and strength in the regions. With resources spread so thinly, high turnover, and uneven staff quality, it is difficult to serve congregations, let alone to re-energize them. Staffing levels reflect resources based on dues collection, so areas of Jewish population growth in the West and South are under-budgeted compared with older centers of the Northeast and Midwest, reducing United Synagogue's capacity to help emerging congregations. Regional staffs need to be consolidated into a limited number of fully staffed, larger offices. The staffing levels and budget of each of these offices should reflect needs, not dues-paying capacity.

While some leaders of United Synagogue see the need for dramatic change, many do not. It remains to be seen whether an organizational culture so committed to maintaining the status quo can rise to the challenge of reinventing itself in the face of urgent necessity.

*Dr. Jacob B. Ukeles is President of Ukeles Associates, Inc., a New York based planning and management consulting firm with clients in the Jewish community, non-sectarian voluntary sector, and local government. Dr. Ukeles served as director of the three-year management review of United Synagogue described in this article.*

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# Letters Between the Generations

David Nelson and Harry Nelson

## Dear Dad,

You know that I take pride in our family's history in the Conservative Movement, including the fact that you're a second-generation Conservative Rabbi. I credit Schechter day school with giving me a first-rate Jewish education and Camp Ramah and USY with nurturing my love of all things Jewish. I still find the Conservative Movement intellectually engaging. So why did I stop identifying as a Conservative Jew?

It began, after leaving home, when I fell in love with a vibrant Modern Orthodox community where keeping Shabbat was normative. I have yet to find a Conservative community that is nearly as vital.

I was drawn to the seriousness of halakhah and davening in the Orthodox community. I experienced the Conservative Movement as too ideological. Revision and abbreviation of the liturgy, for example, impinged on my ability to pray with a sense of awe and to feel God's involvement in my life. Within the movement, I felt boxed into a small traditional minority losing a tug-of-war to a dominant liberal, non-Hebrew speaking majority.

When I look around at friends who also grew up in traditional Conservative families, my journey is hardly uncommon. The only things that seem to prevent the engaged, traditional younger Conservative Jews I know from drifting rightward out of the movement is either (a) feeling so committed to egalitarianism that davening with a *mechitza* and exclusively male *shlichei tzibbur* are not options; or (b) deciding to become Conservative rabbis.

If I could sum up my feelings, I would say that I was seeking a deeper sense of meaning and connection with God and the Jewish people than the Conservative Movement seemed able to provide. Did I fail the movement? Did it fail me? Where do we go from here?

Love, Harry

## Dear Harry,

Your letter was wonderfully challenging. You are named for a distinguished Conservative rabbi — your grandfather, Harry Nelson. He grew up in an Orthodox household, yet he chose to enroll in the rabbinical school of the Jewish Theological Seminary. He was initially drawn to the stimulating academic environment of JTS, and he felt highly

influenced by the intellectual honesty of the critical method of studying Judaism.

As Harry's son, I grew up as a Conservative Jew and chose to remain loyal to the movement, becoming a second generation Conservative rabbi, because I found profound meaning in the tension between "tradition and change." In the 1960s the appreciation of diversity and personal inspiration created a vibrancy and a widespread appeal.

Your religiosity is a prime example of the success of our schools — which provided outstanding secular and Jewish education — and Camp Ramah. As you mentioned, it was Conservative Judaism that made you who you are. While I respect your choices and your community, respect is a two-way street. I believe that you and your family personally respect the Conservative movement, but would you daven at my shul if I were not the rabbi? I sense that if your chevre learned that you davened with no *mechitza*, they might find it objectionable. Am I wrong?

How can we build mutual respect and inclusion that acknowledges both of our paths as equally valid? Will your sons Ami and Aiden be able to daven at the bar-mitzvah of their Conservative cousin Levi? What role will your daughter Noa play as she becomes a woman?

Conservative Judaism has the potential to be the most exhilarating Jewish experience of our generation. It has the space to be traditional, egalitarian, intellectually honest, and spiritually moving. There are and can be warm and embracing communities of observant Conservative Jews, where your wife and daughter can share equal status. But we need our best and brightest graduates to continue to build and shape them. The Conservative movement needs you, even as we sense that we've lost you.

Love, Dad

## Dear Dad,

One challenge in this dialogue is my ambivalence about being part of any "movement." I feel energized by the sense of autonomy and responsibility to make my own choices that led me to Orthodoxy. I anticipate that my children's lives will reflect this trend toward a more free-flowing Jewish path as well.

With respect to my daughter, Noa, I worry about how to ensure that she grows up with the same sense of inclusion as my sons. I'm committed to making sure she has the same

*Rabbi David A. Nelson, a community leader devoted to outreach, interfaith relations, and prison pastoral care, has served Congregation Beth Shalom of Oak Park, Michigan for 34 years.*

*Harry Nelson, an attorney specializing in health law in Los Angeles, is a member of KolDor ([www.koldor.org](http://www.koldor.org)), a group working to explore global Jewish peoplehood.*



## Discussion Guide

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tools as her brothers – Hebrew language and Jewish literacy – as well as the ability to study Gemara independently (frankly, something I got too little of in Conservative day school), so that she can make her own informed choices. But I'm not prepared to sacrifice the dynamism of our community – which I believe holds out the promise of imbuing her with a love of Judaism – for more egalitarianism. From Friday night through Havdalah, our kids experience Shabbat as a time of excitement. I worry that, in a less observant community, they would feel more isolated and restricted.

As for how to keep people like me from drifting away in the future, I think the answer lies in fostering vibrant communities that understand and speak to the post-denominational world, *i.e.* that encourage people to take their own Jewish journeys not bounded by Conservative or any other ideology. The thriving communities that exist within the Conservative Movement are simply too few and far between. There needs to be more focus on creating space for the “tradition” in “Tradition and Change” to breathe. Watering things down is not the way to challenge and inspire people to learn, pray, and connect more in their daily lives.

Finally, I feel badly if you (or anyone) interprets where I choose to daven as a sign of disrespect. I don't mean any statement by where I daven other than a desire for community and meaningful prayer. It's true that I haven't found Conservative shuls to be optimal for me. I still keep an eye out for interesting speakers and programs at local Conservative synagogues, and, even when something isn't for me personally (like “Friday Night Live”), I am in favor of anything that “puts Jews in the pews” of any synagogue. Celebrating simchas or invitations from family and friends, by the way, are the best reason to be anywhere, and, God willing, I look forward to davening with my sons at their cousin's bar mitzvah, no matter where it is.

Love, Harry

### Dear Harry,

While I respect the vision of pluralistic freedom you describe, the Conservative movement, not Orthodoxy, is the place where pluralism truly lives. Conservative Judaism is more receptive to honest exploration both in terms of theology and articulating norms that allow community to be both traditional and open.

This spirit — and by forging a path that synthesized halakhah and modernity — is how the Conservative movement flourished in America for the last 100 years. Today, the world has changed; where your grandparents rejected the rigidity of Orthodoxy, young people embrace it. Where my generation rejoiced at opening up religious participation, your generation either takes it for granted or rejects it.

Do you appreciate the extent to which the Conservative movement is indirectly responsible for many of the exciting developments in Orthodoxy and in the larger “postdenominational” Jewish world? For example, the expansion of women's roles in the Conservative movement was a catalyst for the emergence of *yeshivot* for young Orthodox women. And the pressure to establish “*eruvim*” in Orthodox communities resulted, in large part, from Conservative Judaism's commitment to make synagogue life accessible to young women with their strollers.

As your dad I wish you only joy in your Jewish journey. As a Conservative rabbi I wish Conservative Judaism had met your needs. Yet, I'm grateful that we share a mutual respect. Abraham's religious path was not Isaac's and Jacob also followed his own dream. Maybe that's where the answer lies. You'll take the best that Conservative Judaism gave you and create a space in your community with room for your personal ideals.

Love, Dad



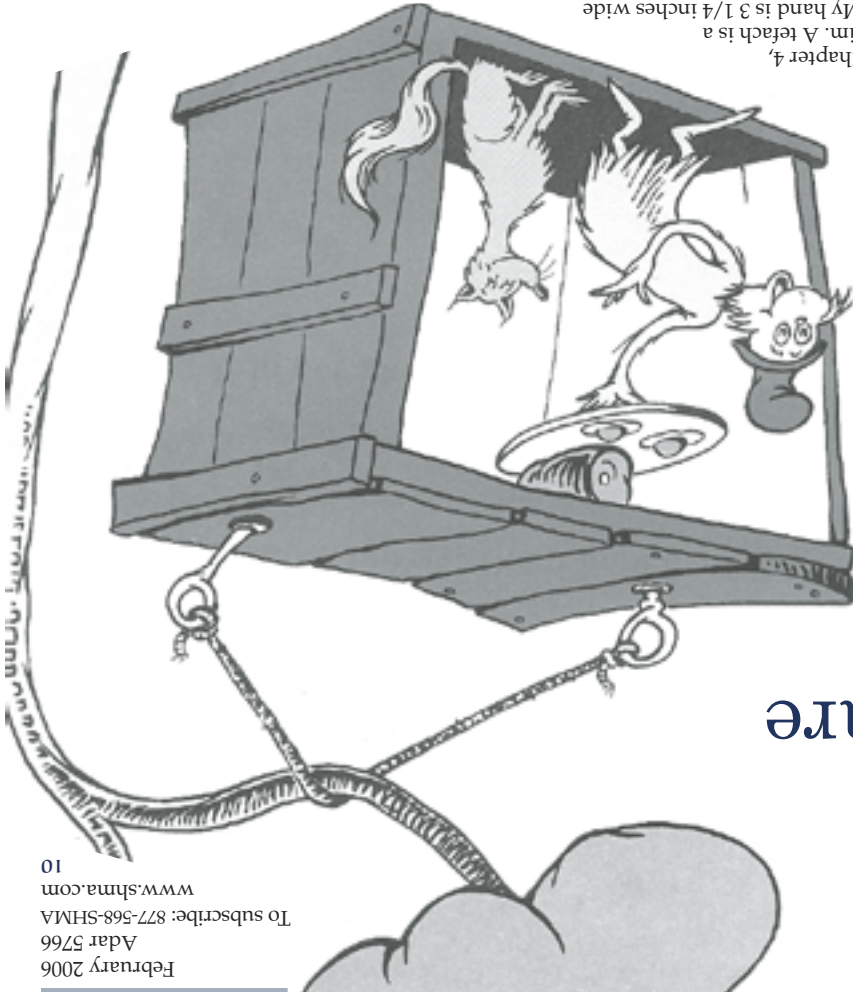

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### Change, from page 6

of “militant centrism.” At the same time, we cannot ignore the failure of the movement's policies, programs, and personnel. Of these, among the most glaring is the failure to tend to new areas of Jewish settlement. As well, the movement's regional and continental leadership has failed to create frameworks where the most educated, committed, and, arguably, talented younger Jews can find a place for themselves within Conservatism, even as they struggle to find a home in somewhat unfulfilling Conservative congregations. Those responsible for these failures, those who failed to heed the warnings of sympathetic observers in the past, and sometimes their own children, ought to draw the appropriate conclusions.



Sukkah rules are short and snappy... Enjoy Sukkot! Rejoice! Be happy!



Footnotes:

1. Maimonides (RMBM) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Sukkah, Chapter 4, Section 1. The minimum height of a Sukkah is 10 tefachim. A tefach is a measure of the width of the four fingers of one's hand. My hand is 3 1/4 inches wide for a minimum Sukkah height of 32 1/2 inches. The minimum allowable width is 7 tefachim by 7 tefachim. This would result in a Sukkah of 22 3/4 inches by 22 3/4 inches.
2. The maximum height is 20 Amot. An Amah is the length from the elbow to the tip of the middle finger. My Amah is 15 1/2 inches for a maximum height of 25 feet. Others say that 30 feet is the maximum.
3. According to RMBM the Sukkah can be built to a width of several miles. Shulchan Aruch also says there is no limit on the size of the width.
4. RMBM Hilchot Sukkah Chapter 4, Section 6.
5. RMBM Hilchot Sukkah Chapter 4, Section 11. RMBM states that one may construct a Sukkah by wedging poles in the four corners of the roof and suspending scakh from the poles. The walls of the building underneath are considered to reach upward to the edge of the scakh.
6. RMBM Hilchot Sukkah Chapter 4, Section 8-10 discusses the ins and outs of building your Sukkah in an alley or passageway.
7. There is a location referred to in the Talmud called Ashtatot Karnayim. According to the discussion there are two hills, with a valley in between where the Sun does not reach. Therefore it is impossible to sit in the shade of the roof of the Sukkah. I can't find the reference... hopefully next year.
8. RMBM Hilchot Sukkah Chapter 4, Section 6. You can go into a Sukkah built on a wagon or a ship even on Yom Tov.
9. RMBM Hilchot Sukkah Chapter 4, Section 6. OK, RMBM says a camel but dragon rhymes with wagon a lot better, don't you agree. Anyway, RMBM says you can build your Sukkah on a wagon or in the crown of a tree, but you can't go into it on Yom Tov. There is a general rule against riding a beast or ascending into the crown of a tree on Yom Tov.
10. Chapter 5 deals with the rules for the scakh. Basically, you can use that which has grown from the ground, and is completely detached from the ground. So, for example, you cannot bend the branches of a tree over the Sukkah to form the scakh. But you can cut the branches from a tree and use them as scakh.
11. This would be a violation of the rule cited in the prior footnote.
12. Shulchan Aruch, Hilchot Sukkah, Perek 636, Section 1. The Sukkah should not be built sooner than 30 days before the Hag. However, if the structure is built prior to 30 days, as long as something new is added within the 30 days, the Sukkah is kosher.
13. Of course it's a well known rule that you must sit in the shade from the roof of the Sukkah and not in the shade that may be cast by the walls. It seems that this might affect the height of the walls, depending on the longitude of the location where you are building your Sukkah. Technically, women are exempt from the Mitzvah of Sukkah. In our day we hope we know better than to read out half the Jewish people from the observance of Mitzvot.
15. RMBM ibid Chapter 6, Section 6 explains that you should eat, drink and live in the Sukkah for the 7 days as you live in your own home. One should not even take a nap outside of the Sukkah.
16. RMBM ibid, Section 10. If it rains one should go into the house. How does one know if it is raining hard enough? If sufficient raindrops fall through the scakh (roof covering) and into the food so that the food is spoiled - go inside!

This Purim spoof on the laws of Sukkot according to Dr. Seuss came to Sh'ma via the Internet without a known author. We print it, therefore, without acknowledgment, and hope the author will step forward. Designed by Janet Aronson.

# The Laws of the Sukkah



You can build it very wide  
 You can not build it on its side  
 Build if your name is Jim  
 Or Bob or Sam or even Tim.

Build it if your name is Sue<sup>4</sup>  
 Do you build it, yes you do!  
 From the Sukkah you can roam  
 But you should treat it as your home.<sup>15</sup>

You can invite some special guests  
 Don't stay in it if there are pests  
 You can sleep upon some rugs  
 Don't you build it where there's bugs!

In the Sukkah you should sit  
 And eat and drink but never ...  
 If in the Sukkah it should rain  
 To stay there would be such a pain.<sup>16</sup>

And if it should be very cold  
 Stay there only if you're bold  
 So build a Sukkah one and all  
 Make it large or make it small!

You can build it very small!<sup>1</sup>  
 You can build it very tall?<sup>2</sup>  
 You can build it very large<sup>3</sup>  
 You can build it on a barge.

You can build it on a ship<sup>4</sup>  
 Or on a roof but please don't slip<sup>5</sup>  
 You can build it in an alley<sup>6</sup>  
 You shouldn't build it in a valley.<sup>7</sup>

You can build it on a wagon<sup>8</sup>  
 You can build it on a dragon<sup>9</sup>  
 You can make the skakh of wood!<sup>10</sup>  
 Would you, could you, yes you should!

Make the skakh from leaves of tree  
 You shouldn't bend it at the knee!<sup>11</sup>  
 Build your Sukkah tall or short  
 No Sukkah is built in the Temple Court.

You can build it somewhat soon  
 You cannot build it in the month of June!<sup>12</sup>  
 If your Sukkah is well made  
 You'll have the right amount of shade.<sup>13</sup>

# Commandedness and Moral Authority

Jane Kanarek

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DURING MY SENIOR YEAR of college, considering rabbinical school, I went to visit the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. When I sat down to talk to one teacher, he asked me about my observance. I told him that I observed Shabbat and kept kosher. Perhaps thinking that I sounded like an appropriate student for the Jewish Theological Seminary, he asked me astutely, “Yes, but do you feel ‘commanded?’” I hesitated and then answered, somewhat tentatively, “Yes.” His question had taken me by surprise because, perhaps somewhat naively, I had never explicitly thought about whether I felt myself commanded. I kept Shabbat and kept kosher, put on tallit and tefillin (though not yet consistently) because I had come to believe that halakhah was an integral part of what it means to live as a Jew. But, did I really believe what I had answered him? Did I feel commanded to do these commandments? And if I did, by whom or what? And, if I was commanded, what else would that demand of me?

After many years of thought and practice, the answer I have come to is, yes, I do feel commanded by God and by Jewish tradition. While I do not believe that Judaism can or should be limited to the law, the four cubits of halakhah, I do believe that law is an integral part of what it means to live as a Jew; that without law, Judaism is denuded of much of its richness and historical depth. As Americans living within the United States we are automatically bound by American law. So too as Jews we are bound by Jewish law. Like Americans, while we do not necessarily follow all of our laws — sometimes intentionally and sometimes unintentionally — these laws continue to exist and to obligate us. Halakhah should exist as a defining element of our Jewishness but it should not necessitate a blind following of tradition.

Two classical ideas stand in tension with each other in the shaping of halakhah — that of *yeridat ha-dorot*, the decline of the generations, and that of *hilkheta ke-batrai*, the law is like the later generations. In the first case, those authorities living nearer in time to Sinai are viewed as closer to the revelatory event and thus closer to knowledge of what God demands of us. In the second idea, later

authorities are viewed as dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants — though further in time from the revelatory source, they have the ability to see a longer distance by building on the work of their predecessors. The first view demands a total humility and submission; the second view demands a slight arrogance in as much as we are saying that we know better than our ancestors.

When do we take the first approach and when the second? I do not question that *tefillin* need be black or that chicken in fact counts as meat. But I am going to question, work to change, and if necessary disobey, commandments that relegate another person to second-class status. I am going to count all adult Jewish women in a minyan. I am going to drink wine that has been touched by a non-Jew. I am going to perform gay marriages. What is important here is that I do not view feeling commanded, bound by Jewish law, as necessitating an abdication of my moral authority. Law should articulate our visions for the creation of an ethical society. As law that originates in God’s word, this is all the more true for halakhah.

The recognition that we are commanded entails not only an acknowledgment of and an acting on our obligations to visit the sick and to refrain from eating *hametz* on Pesach; it also demands a recognition that we are now obligated to shape our law in such a way that it continues to help us to create and live within ethical communities. Commandedness does not entail the acceptance of a legal world frozen in time — a snapshot from the 16th (or any other) century — but rather the acceptance of a dynamic and changing force that binds us to our past as it tells us that we must use that past in creating our futures.

For those of us within Conservative Judaism, commandedness should entail the recognition that as Jews we live — however imperfectly — within Judaism’s legal world. But living within that world does not necessitate an abdication of our ethical senses. Rather, precisely because we conceive of law as binding, we are bound to act — whether in small everyday motions of blessing food or larger ones of giving *tzedakah* — to further Judaism’s vision for our lives under God and with each other.

Rabbi Jane Kanarek received her ordination from the Jewish Theological Seminary. A Wexner Graduate Fellow, she is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Chicago and teaches Talmud and halakhah at the Rabbinical School of Hebrew College.

# Liturgy and Conservative Judaism

Joseph G. Rosenstein



THE JEWISH TEXT that Conservative Jews encounter most often is the siddur. But does the Conservative siddur convey what Conservative Judaism is all about? Conservative Judaism has for 100 years missed an opportunity to use the siddur as an instructional tool about its philosophy and values, and unaffiliated Jews often first come into contact with Conservative Judaism at a prayer service, and yet it doesn't have a welcoming prayerbook that facilitates outreach.

I recently published a traditional yet unconventional prayerbook, *Siddur Eit Ratzon* — with new translations, commentaries, and meditations, and a complete transliteration — designed to help people without strong Jewish backgrounds understand the prayer service. The siddur conveys a consistent view of what Judaism and prayer are about; it addresses major philosophical issues that arise in the siddur and provides alternatives for those who have problems with the traditional text. It addresses the reader's search for meaning and spirituality. It is being used in synagogues for both inreach and outreach.

Why hasn't the Conservative movement produced such a siddur?

The Conservative movement might begin by examining the traditional siddur to see how it already addresses each of the important teachings of Conservative Judaism. In cases where a teaching is represented in the siddur, it should be highlighted by appropriate notes. If teachings are not reflected in the traditional prayers, new verses or prayers should be composed and inserted, with explanations, into the service. Finally, where the traditional text is problematic for some Conservative Jews, the prayerbook might include notes discussing the various views of the issue and either new liturgical language to replace the traditional text or alternate language to accommodate different perspectives. (If the innovation is not identified and explained *in situ*, a teaching opportunity has been lost.)

Example. I don't think that belief in resurrection is fundamental to Conservative Judaism, yet this credo jumps off the page at those who are paying attention when they recite the *Amidah*. What options are there for people with doubts? If they stay, they learn not to look at the translation and not to take

the prayer seriously, and they come to believe that Conservative Judaism has nothing to say about this issue. Since Conservative Judaism embraces a multiplicity of views, wouldn't it make sense for their siddur to have a few sentences on that page that say that not all Conservative Jews believe in resurrection, to present midrashic alternatives to literal resurrection, and to offer liturgical options for those who don't believe in it, as do the Reform and Reconstructionist books?

The prayers were written and arranged by spiritual masters who understood that belief in God can make a difference in people's lives: When we enter into the *Amidah*, our private conversation with God, the words "*ga'al Yisrael* — redeemer of Israel" — should be on our lips and in our hearts. But the idiom and worldview of the spiritual masters is not the same as ours. The best literal translations often don't capture their insights. (Did the author of "*emet v'yatzio*" really intend to bore us?) So their spiritual messages are not well communicated. If Conservative Judaism values those messages, its siddur should focus on how those messages are conveyed.

As I was developing *Siddur Eit Ratzon*, I realized that an important way of bringing God into our lives — acknowledging our dependence on God by reciting petitionary prayers — is essentially unavailable to most non-Orthodox Jews. That is because Shabbat is the *only* day that most Conservative Jews are engaged in prayer, but in the traditional siddur, petitionary prayers are not recited on Shabbat. I suggest that the Conservative movement acknowledge this reality, reinstate petitionary prayers on Shabbat, and present a variety of Conservative perspectives on the meaning and value of petitionary prayer.

Modifying traditional prayers and introducing new prayers and explanations into the regular service are important ways of conveying the teachings of Conservative Judaism to its constituents. The Conservative movement needs to think about its important messages and find ways of developing siddurim (more than one may be needed) that reflect those messages.

Joseph G. Rosenstein, a professor of mathematics at Rutgers University, is the publisher of *Siddur Eit Ratzon* ([www.newsiddur.org](http://www.newsiddur.org)). He is a founder and former chair of the National Havurah Committee and its Summer Institute, and has been a member of the Highland Park (NJ) Minyan for over 30 years. ( See also [dimacs.rutgers.edu/~joer/joer.html](http://dimacs.rutgers.edu/~joer/joer.html)).

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# Defining a Conservative Jew

Jerome Epstein

AS WE SEEK to define Conservative Judaism, our immediate tendency is to focus on ideology or Jewish ritual. Only three decades ago, the overwhelming majority of Conservative congregations in North America were not egalitarian. Since then, increasing numbers of synagogue communities began to move toward religious egalitarianism based upon their religious leaders' understanding of *halakha* and Jewish values. Although this transformation happened fairly quickly, still it was evolutionary rather than revolutionary. Congregations evolved at their own pace through a step-by-step process. Today, a significant number of congregations maintain both egalitarian and non-egalitarian *minyanim*, and many have chosen to retain traditionally distinct roles for men and women.


When I'm asked to define Conservative Judaism — is it egalitarian or non-egalitarian, I reply that, in principle, Conservative Judaism is neither; its core fundamental value is pluralism. Steadfastly, I maintain that an appropriate metaphor for Conservative Judaism, as a centrist movement, is a tent. Unlike many buildings with inflexible walls made of wood, brick, or concrete, a tent's sides can expand. This does not imply, however, that every option is acceptable. A tent's walls have some give, but there is a limit to how much they can expand or contract.

But when it comes to defining Conservative Jews, theology, ideology and synagogue practice matter less than how a Jew chooses to express Jewish values in confronting life's challenges — that is, how Conservative Judaism inspires the way he or she lives. A Conservative Jew is a Jew who is committed to grow

in his or her level of Jewish living, shaped by *halakhah*. Where a Conservative Jew is on the ramp of Jewish observance is less important than the fact that he or she has begun the climb.

The Conservative Jew is willing to ask hard questions. The faith that is held must be tempered by the truth that is perceived. When the Conservative Jew reads the Torah, he asks "How does what I read support or conflict with what I *know*, using all the knowledge I have amassed and the world I have experienced?" The Conservative Jew seeks to understand what the narrative in the Torah that she is reading means to her in her own life.

Because of the way that Conservative Jews seriously question their reading of Torah, they strengthen the faith that helps them encounter God with both maturity and mystery. *Halkchah* is a way to bring God into their lives. Performing mitzvot is a vehicle for encountering God rather than an end unto itself. Perceiving a partnership with God, Conservative Jews struggle to help God create a world that is based on the ideals of justice, kindness, and *tikkun olam*. Thus, they will perceive the need to cry out for Darfur as boldly as they stand strong for Israel. They are as passionate about the need to eliminate hunger and homelessness as they are about the important of working for strong Jewish institutions and organizations.

Although it is easier to define the boundaries of Conservative synagogues than it is to define Conservative Jews, the real vision of Conservative Judaism is to inspire congregants to distinguish themselves by how they live as Jews. 

Rabbi Jerome Epstein  
is Executive Vice  
President of the  
United Synagogue of  
Conservative Judaism.

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## Reflecting on Conservative Judaism

Judy Yudof

THERE IS NO SINGLE catch-phrase that accurately defines the Conservative movement. As other writers in these pages have said, we are pluralistic and believe in an evolving *halakhah*. We publicly affirm that our tent is large enough to accommodate and respect the broad spectrum of ritual practices within our affiliated congregations.

Although we consider ourselves a *halakhic* movement, individual observance is neither


required nor enforced. We teach our young people about observing *kashrut* and the sanctity of *Shabbat*, but we raise few if any expectations within our adult congregational communities to do the same and when those children return to their homes and synagogue communities they often do not find support for the values and lifestyle they have come to embrace. Our youth quickly see through the hypocrisy of a "do as I say, not as I do" attitude,

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United Synagogue of  
Conservative Judaism.

which only serves to reinforce the schism between what they have been taught and what they see as observed in the breach. And if we lose these promising and committed young people to a more traditional stream of Judaism, we have also lost them as role models within the congregational community.

Are we afraid to ask or challenge our members to increase their own levels of observance? Why do the representatives of our synagogue membership committees discuss financial expectations with prospective and new members but seldom broach expectations of involvement in the ritual and communal fabric of the synagogue?

If we are a synagogue-based movement, then we should look to the synagogue as the locus of education, inspiration, and activities that will influence our members to aspire to engage in experiential Judaism. For example,

parents have to be instructed in the basics of how to prepare for *Shabbat* so that it becomes a joyful and meaningful home experience to be shared with family and friends. Adults of all ages should be given opportunities to read and discuss sacred texts and contemporary writings and to find a relevance to their everyday lives. USYers should be integrated as young adults within the synagogue by taking advantage of their ritual skills, their *ruach* (spirit), and their ability to teach by example. Rabbis must both teach and challenge us. We need to feel proud to identify as Conservative Jews if we are to have any enthusiasm for growth in our level of observance. And we need to learn to be genuinely warm and welcoming, both in our homes and in our synagogues if we are to attract and retain members and work to revitalize and grow our movement. 

## Dialectics, Humility and Strength


Einat Ramon

WHILE THE MAJORITY of Conservative Jews reside in North America, much of the movement's halakhic, theological, scholastic, liturgical, and social creativity is happening in Israel, Latin America, and Europe. And we, first-generation Conservative/Masorti Jews, have chosen the Conservative movement's ideology over other competing ideologies (Modern Orthodoxy, the Reform Movement, cultural secularism, socialism etc.). Many of us find that the dialectic blend — of humanistic values born of the enlightenment and ancient Jewish ways of life determined by halakhah — is the only sober and responsible option to which we can adhere. Other alternatives, certainly carrying clearer messages and fewer options, do not provide long-term existential responses to the crisis of modernity.

Within the Conservative movement, halakhah is not understood as a meticulous, counting of sins and good deeds or an obsession with "*mutar*" and "*asur*" — that which is permitted and that which is not. These are fundamentalist approaches to halakhah. A Conservative/Masorti approach to halakhah is a statement of humility. It expresses a willingness to challenge our convictions and put our perspective of truth in a historical context. It is an ongoing dialogue with our ancestors, whom we deeply respect and with whom we

sometimes disagree; it is a constant struggle concerning where we should deviate and grow and where we must not deviate. Conservative/Masorti halakhah means that without boundaries there can be no community or morality. And without community and morality human life has no value.

Israeli Masorti Jews want to extend this path to others. We know that if it were not for the growth of the Tali school system (founded by the Conservative movement in Israel) very few children in the Jewish state would receive a proper non-Orthodox Jewish education; that the graduate school at Schechter, attended annually by hundreds of community workers and teachers, is the only graduate program in Israel that requires all of its students to learn about Jewish pluralism, struggle with the critique of Jewish feminism, think seriously about the relationship between science and faith, Judaism and the arts.

We provide unique opportunities in Israel for couples to celebrate their marriages with egalitarian weddings, for mourners alienated by the state's religious authorities to plan funerals, for immigrants to convert without sacrificing their religious depth and honesty. We are proud that the Conservative/Masorti movement, despite or because of its complexity and dialectic nature, is our denomination. 

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## Koret Book Review

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Ken Koltun-Fromm is Associate Professor of Religion at Haverford College.

The Unfolding Tradition: Jewish Law After Sinai, Elliot N. Dorff. Aviv Press, 2005, 566 pp., \$19.95

ELLIOT DORFF has put together a masterful collection of Jewish writings on the meaning and function of Jewish law within the Conservative movement in America. As one of the leading American theoreticians of *halakhah*, Dorff strongly defends the authority, continuity, and flexibility of Jewish law in contemporary religious practice. In Dorff's view, legal authority is less about enforcement and far more about the social, political, and ethical factors that motivate behavior. Continuity with the law does not require slave adherence to it, but thoughtful exercise of traditional legal principles within new cultural and historical settings. And flexibility within the law will not yield social chaos so long as competent rabbis anchor their views in traditional legal categories. The title of Dorff's book echoes these views of Jewish law: the authority of "tradition" and "Sinai," the continuity implied in "unfolding," and the appeal to flexibility through an "unfolding tradition" after Sinai.

*The Unfolding Tradition* is really an invitation to read and argue in Dorff's classroom at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles (indeed, this book has its roots there). After a prefatory chapter on notions of philosophy and law, and another one on biblical and rabbinic legal theories that justify a Conservative approach to the law, Dorff then provides selections from various key figures within the Conservative movement, introducing each selection with his own view of its relative advantages and disadvantages. Beginning with Zacharias Frankel, and moving through Mordecai Kaplan, Robert Gordis, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Joel Roth, and Gordon Tucker, among many others, Dorff explores with his readers the messiness of Jewish legal theory in all its variety. He then compares these middle-of-the-road views to those on the right (Yeshayahu Leibowitz) and left (the Reform movement), together with some legal theories that appear just on the border of the Conservative movement (David Hartman on the right bank and Eugene Borowitz on the left). Dorff concludes with a chapter on conservative legal theories at work, including *responsa* on the Sabbath, women as witnesses, miscarriage, and letters pertaining to the ordination of women. All

this provides a fascinating, compelling, and wide-ranging survey of Conservative approaches to Jewish law.

There are two intriguing features of *Unfolding Tradition*: First, the relation between Dorff's commentary and the selections from other Conservative thinkers, and second, the exchange of letters between Dorff and Eugene Borowitz. I am sure that Dorff struggled with just how much to say, and not say, about each selection; for in stating too much he limits the reader's own interpretive freedom, but offering too little saps the reader's ability to recognize distinctive features of the text. Every good teacher worries about this balance, Dorff chief among them. But Dorff has managed to do something quite extraordinary: even as he makes his views clear, Dorff writes in a style that invites challenges and arguments from the reader. Indeed, the very structure of the book enables this kind of give-and-take. I found myself disagreeing with Dorff, for example, on his understanding of Frankel and the relationship between rabbi and community. But drawing forth this kind of response from the reader is one of the great strengths of the book. This becomes breathtakingly clear in the exchange of letters initiated by Dorff's review of Borowitz's *Renewing the Covenant*. Throughout *Unfolding Traditions*, I sensed that Dorff conflated notions of community with rabbinic authority, such that appeals to community were instead strong defenses of the rabbi to judge and determine law for the community. I wanted a fuller account of community, and Borowitz's response to Dorff does precisely that. Only when challenged by Borowitz does Dorff come clean, as it were, on his views of rabbinic authority and its relation to the community.

In these letters between two great scholars and rabbis, we witness the exciting accomplishment of Dorff's book: only when we confront the thoughts of others do we gain better clarity of the issues at stake, and in doing so the Jewish tradition really does unfold, *through us*, to inspire and sustain contemporary Jewish practice. Dorff's book performs his theory, as it were, and for this we are all his students — and so much the better for it.



# Visions for a Future

Gordon Tucker



## Taube New Visions

New Visions is an opportunity to think imaginatively about issues of relevance to the Jewish community. It is generously funded by the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life and Culture.

MY YEARS AS a rabbinical student at Jewish Theological Seminary (1971-1975) coincided, as they did for so many of my contemporaries, with a “critical awakening,” by which I mean a first serious encounter with what it means to understand religion historically. For those of us (nearly all of us) who had grown up with the Hertz Torah commentary, which had relentlessly polemicized against any source-critical approach to the text of the Torah, this encounter brought with it the all-too-natural thrill of tasting the forbidden fruit. In fact, we were acculturated in those days — if not exactly by design, then certainly as the effect of well-worn institutional habits — to revel in our ability to make committed, traditional halakhic observance (in those days, the Seminary had only a separate-seating synagogue) coexist with the cutting-edge and often iconoclastic ways of reading sacred texts that we drank up from our teachers. It was heady and supremely energizing. We never quite put it this way, but in effect we were smugly asserting our superiority over Orthodoxy and Reform. Here was the unspoken logic: we were more authentic than Reform because we were committed to traditional Jewish behavioral norms, and we were more authentic than Orthodoxy because we did not accept, fetish-like, beliefs about the text and about revelation that could not stand up to honest historical inquiry. That was our own quirky version of the phenomenon of Conservative Judaism defining itself by what it was not. It served the self-righteous needs of young, energetic students eager to explore new intellectual frontiers (and it always feels good to feel superior). But it was quirky nonetheless, and it is hardly an enduring formula for how to define an approach to Jewish study, observance, and action in the world.

Since healthy religious movements cannot be built on the sorts of things that motivate “wise-guy” students, it is no surprise that many adherents are currently feeling an ebb in Conservative Judaism’s “biorhythm.” Thus, the common denominator uniting so many of the vision pieces offered on the next pages and on the website of *Sh'ma* ([www.shma.com](http://www.shma.com)): the movement’s failure to put forward a positive vision of what Conservative Judaism is, a determination to live that vision out in practice, an aspirational mission for the future, and an

argument for why all of this is critical for the Jewish world, and not just an eccentricity of rabbis and others.

The ideas that follow need urgently to become part of the agenda of the leaders of the Conservative Movement. These include Judith Hauptman’s urging that the complementary relationship of halakhah and aggadah be taken seriously and made to have practical effect, Daniel Greyber’s reminder that we are a religious movement that must make the presence of God and the service of God palpable, and Aaron Brusso’s plea for an unapologetic argument for the nobility of belief in the ongoing human role in revelation — what I would call the “dignity of history,” the stage on which God, after all, chose to create and place all of us.

Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote (in his introduction to the second volume of *Torah min Hashamayim*): “Is it really appropriate to say ‘all is well with me’ when contempt outside the fold and indifference within take their toll, so that there is no peace? Just look, and you’ll see how powerless we have become to prevent wholesale loss of faith.” Powerless, that is, unless we articulate the power that our ideas have always had, far beyond the rarefied atmosphere of the academy. It is important that Conservative Judaism succeed, living as we do in a world in which religious fervor slides all too easily into fundamentalisms that deny history, that demote human responsibility in favor of divine intervention, and that promote linear visions of truth that ultimately dismiss and even demonize others. Heschel sensed this a half century ago, and the hour for exercising the leadership that will focus Conservative Judaism’s powerful ideas and resources (both here and in Israel) is very much upon us.

The next page introduces a series of “Visions for Conservative Judaism” offered by the movement’s rabbis. The pieces begin here and continue on our website ([www.shma.com](http://www.shma.com)), along with many more essays by rabbis and other movement leaders.

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## The Courage to be Conservative

Aaron Brusso

Conservative Judaism has the courage to articulate competing truths without blushing before those who question our consistency. And that is why I could not be anything other than a Conservative Jew. I have a deep appreciation for serious Reform and Orthodox Jews. And though I would count myself as one of them when it comes to larger questions of my place amongst humanity, through a narrower lens I see myself as Conservative.

We have the audacity to unapologetically study the human origins of our texts and still expect that God's voice commands us through them. We appreciate how brilliantly our midrashic tradition infused Judaism with creative change so that we would not come to worship a previous generation's truth. And we have the courage to realize that to hand this aggadic Judaism over to the next generation the same way we found it is almost as bad as not handing it over at all. Change is not only about sociological compromise; it is also about moral imperative. (more on [www.shma.com](http://www.shma.com))

## Soulful Self-Reflection

Sharon Brous

... In an age of disease, hunger, poverty, and violence, we have lost the luxury of a safe and self-absorbed communal agenda. We have neither the time nor the justification to focus attention and resources on the sustenance of institutions for their own sake. Narrow-minded concern with strategies of self-preservation fundamentally misses the point. Yet few have the courage to shift the paradigm away from building *Conservative* institutions, fortifying *Conservative* organizational structures, raising *Conservative* children.

The future of Conservative Judaism will depend on our ability to embody an ethic of passionate, committed involvement in the world that flows naturally from, and likewise directly informs, humble and courageous encounter with the Jewish tradition. We need to articulate the fundamental connection between a halakhic, Torah-centered life on one hand, and a serious concern for and engagement in the world on the other. We need to remember how to dance, how to daven with real intention, how to study text with passion and purpose. If the movement is true to its deepest aspirations, allowing the creative

tension between our tradition and modernity to fuel our religious existence, then it will undoubtedly inspire a new generation to become both actively committed Jews and agents of change on the world stage. (to read the full essay, visit [www.shma.com](http://www.shma.com))

## Ethically Driven Halakhah

Judith Hauptman

The next chancellor of JTS will succeed in reversing the downward trend of the Conservative movement only if he or she alters the status quo. As compelling as the message of Conservative Judaism was 50 years ago, that message fails to attract adherents today.

People are drawn to places of action. At the moment, the "hot" places are to the right and left of the Conservative movement. If we want to continue to offer people a Conservative option, then we need to develop zeal among Conservative Jews for the Judaism they practice. We need passion alongside Conservative piety. What can we do?

1. Re-articulate the Main Message
2. Educate Conservative Rabbis
3. Offer Free High Holy Days Services to the Disenfranchised
4. Take Cognizance of the Non-Jews among Us

(to read the essay, which fully examines each of these points, visit [www.shma.com](http://www.shma.com))

## Moving Beyond the Movement

Shoshana Boyd Gelfand

The time has come for the institutions of the Jewish community to transcend denominational boundaries. Choose the prefix you prefer: Post-denominationalism, Trans-denominationalism, Non-denominationalism. Whatever you call it, the trend is growing and all of the current denominations will soon need to struggle with the reality of a growing population that finds denominational categories irrelevant. Like the proverbial canary in the mine, the future of the Conservative Movement may prove to be the test-case for all non-fundamentalist movements in the Jewish world; for it seems that the Conservative Movement may be the first place where the future of Jewish Denominationalism (or rather, its demise) will play out. If so, then the fate of the Conservative Movement may depend on its ability to morph into something other than a movement. (more on [www.shma.com](http://www.shma.com))

Read full vision statements from this page on [www.shma.com](http://www.shma.com), as well as pieces by:  
 Martin S. Cohen  
 Daniel Greyber  
 Elie Spitz  
 Uri Monson  
 Aaron Weininger  
 David Wolpe

**A** movement is not a community; a shul is. If Jews, like all people, want grace-filled communities, we still need to ask, in what style shall I build mine?

Some young adults educated in the Conservative movement have built thriving communities that declare: We take seriously our encounters with tradition and traditional texts and also with egalitarianism, justice, and lovingkindness.

It is this combination that makes them distinctive and passionate. They define halakhic behavior (including both study and *chesed*) not as a minimum requirement but as the ground of their Jewish life — the framework for building their particular community of grace.

This rewarding combination is what Conservative synagogues can offer American Jews that is different from what they will find in other, also grace-filled, synagogues. If that happens, and these young institutions come to see the Conservative movement as an exciting way to support their own growth and leadership development, and to renew themselves by connecting with like-minded communities across the country and the world, then they, too, will choose to affiliate.

— Elisheva S. Urbas

**“The claim that we are a halakhic community is a paradigm in crisis.”**

— Neil Gillman, USCJ biennial speech

**I**n the last month, my wife and I have hosted in our home 55 new members of Temple Emanuel, a Conservative shul in Newton, Massachusetts. We asked them: what brought you to the shul, and what are you looking for?

No one said, we came because we read and liked *Emet v’Emunah*, or because we are attracted to the nuanced view of the Conservative movement’s theology on revelation and authority.

Theology and halakhic agonizing are *not* where it is at. That is a question for theologians and professors and rabbis and rabbinical students. It is not something that, for the most part, moves real Jews in the pews.

For them the real issue is: *are Conservative shuls places of grace?* Do our shuls embody the words of the prayer we daven every morning: *uteneinu hayom u’vechol yom l’chayn u’lechesed u’lerachamaim*, help us today and every day act with grace, love and compassion.

The *sugya* that should drive us is *Bavli Sotah 14A*, which depicts God as the master of grace, giving unearned kindnesses to people with no expectation of receiving anything in return. That is what makes real Conservative shuls thrive. Visiting the sick, comforting the bereaved, learning Torah, celebrating Shabbat with family and friends, praying with passion, doing *tikkun olam*, teaching our children, connecting with Israel, services exploding with dance and song, will radiate grace into the shul and therefore into the world. The question that matters now is: can we take our shuls *from good to grace*, making them places where we do favors that redeem the world one person at a time.

— Wesley Gardenswartz

**I** met him some 35 years ago, after joining Beth El, a Conservative synagogue. All in our community knew and respected him. Called “Reverend,” he was ritual director, bar/bat mitzvah teacher, Torah reader, and leader of the daily minyan.

Saul Friedler, of blessed memory, made our synagogue a welcoming and important part of members’ lives. Obser-

vant in his religious and personal life, he respected people who were less- or even non-observant. His mission was to get more people to enter the synagogue and benefit from its religious and communal programs. He combined a personal observance of halakha with recognition of the communal importance of inclusiveness.

I wonder how much stronger the Conservative movement would have become had it followed Rev. Friedler’s approach to Judaism. And I wonder whether its current leaders, while remaining true to Judaism’s basic values, will find ways to invite more people to enter its synagogues and revitalize the entire movement.

— Richard Kaufman

Wesley Gardenswartz, Senior Rabbi of Temple Emanuel in Newton, Massachusetts, is married to Shira Goodman and the father of Nat, Sam, and Jordana.

Elisheva S. Urbas, a freelance book editor in New York, is president of the Solomon Schechter School of Manhattan.

Richard Kaufman is Honorary President of Beth El Synagogue, New Rochelle, New York; Director of United Synagogue; Trustee of Brandeis University; and married to Rosalind Fuchsberg Kaufman.

Dr. Ray Goldstein is International President of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism and lives with his wife Jody in Rochester, Minnesota.

**T**he congregation to which my wife and I belong in Mendota Heights, Minnesota describes itself as a Conservative community committed to three fundamental principles of Judaism as enumerated in Pirkei Avot: Torah, *avodah*, and *gemilut hasidim*. While these traditional principles drive the community’s decisions, Beth Jacob Congregation is clearly a Conservative *kehillah*. What differentiates it from communities that are not Conservative but adhere to the same principles from Pirkei Avot? Our mission — of inspiring individuals to live by and observe the halakhic patterns as defined by the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly — and our pluralistic approach require education, understanding, and tolerance.

What differentiates Conservative Jews is the way we concretize what Rabbi Gardenswartz calls ‘grace’ — using halakha to shape the way we “do” Jewish living: visiting the sick, comforting the bereaved, learning Torah, celebrating Shabbat. Our challenge is to make that true for all Conservative Jews. Given the opportunity to perform mitzvot, as our teenagers have learned through the informal educational programs of USY and Ramah, our adult congregants would understand this paradigm and embrace Torah, *avodah* and *gemilut hasidim* as Conservative Jews.

— Ray Goldstein

## Sigi Ziering Ethics

This year, the practical ethics column will focus on personal and social ethics. Each month a guest columnist wrestles on paper with situations where ethical considerations tug on the heart and demand deeply thoughtful consideration. The column is co-sponsored by Shelley and Bruce Whizin and Marilyn Ziering in honor of Marilyn's husband Sigi Ziering, of blessed memory. The series of columns, with responses, is available on [www.shma.com](http://www.shma.com).

Sam Wyman is a senior partner at Wolfe & Wyman LLP, a law firm with offices in California and Nevada. He serves on the board of directors of the Jewish Federation of Orange County as well as the Orange County Community Scholar Program.

MOST SUPERVISORS and employers have fired someone for improper acts like theft, repeated tardiness, or insubordination. While no dismissal is easy, the moral texture of this kind of termination is relatively smooth; there is a cause and effect. A sense of justice, or at least a clear sense of fairness, prevails. But what about employees who, despite their sincere best efforts, simply do not cut it?

Our firm recently embarked on a process inspired by the management best-seller *Good to Great* by Jim Collins. Based on a multiyear comparison of companies that surpassed and fell behind others in their sectors, *Good to Great* concludes that the right people in the right jobs is a consistent hallmark of a great company. Collins advocates an honest and rigorous evaluation of all staff along with a culture of decisive selectivity, e.g., "Hire slowly and fire quickly."

The obvious bad apples were easy. But what about that good-hearted people who were with us forever but never really excelled? Collins suggests a simple exercise to determine if someone is right for an organization: "If that person were to announce tomorrow they are leaving for an exciting new opportunity, would you be disappointed or secretly relieved?" While that may be excellent business advice, what are the moral and ethical implications — the consciously Jewish concerns — of terminating a mediocre but good-hearted person when there is no "...exciting new opportunity" in his or her future? What if the individual has a family to support and would face a stretch of unemployment?

As Moshe Pava explained last month, "ac-

countability is at the very heart of business and organizational ethics." A supervisor or business owner must be accountable to the obligations of the organization, and, in the case of my firm, we owed an obligation to both our own families and the families of those who performed above and beyond our expectations every single year. If we were to honestly fulfill the obligation of accountability, we needed to build the best organization we could. Those who were not able to make themselves essential to the organization could not stay.

We phased out these employees over a six month period of time. Some, mercifully seeing the writing on the wall, resigned; others were asked to leave. These were all decent people and in some cases good friends. It was gut wrenching at times and left me feeling very sad. We offered generous severances where we could, and in the case of one senior employee, allowed him to stay on for two months until he found a new home.

It has been about six months since our last "good to great" termination. We have had a terrific year. Those who were always great have gotten even better and a few who were on the fence have really stepped up. While it is too soon to know if there will be more terminations, I feel we have crossed the road on our path to being a great firm.

Most everyone we let go has since found a job somewhere else; some even making more money than they did with us. I still lie awake at night wondering how my old friends are doing, but I try to comfort myself by knowing I had an obligation to do what I think was right. I really hope I did. 