

Jerusalem Letter:

VIEWPOINTS

the Jerusalem center

JERUSALEM INSTITUTE FOR FEDERAL STUDIES • CENTER FOR JEWISH COMMUNITY STUDIES

Daniel J. Elazar, Editor and Publisher • David Clayman, Executive Editor

ISSN: 0334-4096

VIEWPOINTS #11: March 31, 1980/14 Nisan 5740

THE FUTURE OF CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM IN THE UNITED STATES

Charles S. Liebman

Three recent surveys of American Jews must give pause to anyone concerned with the future of the Conservative movement. (The surveys and some reports of their findings are listed in the Appendix.) All these surveys point to the same conclusion. Conservative synagogues confront membership declines as the nature of the American Jewish population changes. Conservative synagogue members are found in disproportionate numbers among older population groups and among those whose parents are not native born. In fact, more American Jews with two native born parents report they are affiliated with Reform synagogues than with Conservative ones.

According to the 1971 National Jewish Population Study, 11 percent of Jewish adults identified with Orthodoxy and 7 percent claimed Orthodox synagogue membership; 42 percent identified with Conservatism with 24 percent claiming synagogue membership; 33 percent identified with Reform with 17 percent claiming synagogue membership. Fourteen percent had no denominational identification. Table I, based on Bernard Lazerwitz's analysis of these data, shows how even then the percentages varied substantially by generation.

* * * * *

Professor Liebman, Vice Chairman of the Center for Jewish Community Studies, is Chairman of the Department of Political Studies, Bar-Ilan University in Ramat Gan.

The opinions expressed by authors of Viewpoints do not necessarily reflect those of the Jerusalem Center.
Subscriptions: \$25 per year Copyright. All rights reserved.

TABLE I
 JEWISH ADULT DENOMINATIONAL GROUPS
 BY GENERATIONS IN THE UNITED STATES (in percentages)

Jewish Denomination	All U.S. Jews	Foreign Born	Both Parents Foreign Born	Both Parents Native Born
Orthodox				
Members	7	17	6	2
Not Members	4	9	3	1
Conservative				
Members	24	26	27	19
Not Members	18	21	20	11
Reform				
Members	17	6	15	21
Not Members	16	8	17	20
No Denominational Identity	14	13	12	26

BASE	100	100	100	100

One could cite a variety of measures which point to the declining base of the Conservative movement. For example, let us look at data on the age composition of male synagogue members based on a random sample of conservative synagogue members in one of the recent studies.

TABLE II
 AGE DISTRIBUTION OF MALE SYNAGOGUE MEMBERS (in percentages)

Age	Percent	Age	Percent
under 30	2.6	56-60	13.5
31-35	5.5	61-65	11.1
36-40	8.5	over 65	16.6
41-45	10.4	No answer	3.8
46-50	13.1	-----	
51-55	14.9	TOTAL	100.0

The peak age cohort is the 51-55 group. There is a continued decline in the number of males in each of the lower aged

cohorts. By the time we get to age group 31-35, we find only 5.5% of the total sample. Even allowing for late marriages, this 63% reduction from the 51-55 age cohort is striking, particularly in light of the fact that the 31-35 age cohort were born in the years of the baby boom. But it is the generational data which seems most ominous. As Table III indicates, the vast majority of Conservative synagogue members were raised in either Orthodox or Conservative homes. Conservative synagogues have never attracted many members raised in Reform homes, and those from non-affiliated homes constitute a small proportion of the Conservative movement. [Figures are presented for men only but the data for women are similar.]

TABLE III
AGE OF MALE CONSERVATIVE SYNAGOGUE MEMBERS
BY TYPE OF HOME IN WHICH THEY WERE RAISED
(in percentages)

Parents Home	Age Group								
	under 31	31-35	36-40	41-45	46-50	51-55	56-60	61-65	over 65
Orthodox	9.1	8.7	16.4	27.0	35.6	39.4	48.5	55.1	64.3
Conservative	55.4	53.9	51.1	43.5	37.6	33.2	29.7	28.3	22.8
Reform	6.6	9.1	7.9	5.0	4.3	4.1	2.9	2.7	1.0
Reconstructionist	-	.8	-	0.2	.2	.1	.5	.2	.1
Cultural Jew	11.6	9.4	7.7	6.9	6.7	6.6	4.8	3.1	2.5
Just Jews	11.6	14.2	12.8	15.5	14.3	14.6	11.9	9.0	6.0
No Answer	5.8	3.9	4.1	1.9	1.3	2.0	1.7	1.6	3.3
TOTAL	100.1	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

The pool of Orthodox Jews from whom Conservative synagogues might draw has declined so dramatically, as Table I shows, that even if Orthodoxy had not experienced an ideological upsurge among the offspring of its adherents, their numbers are too few to provide a significant replacement pool for the aging Conservative population. This leaves the children of Conservative synagogue members as the only realistic reservoir for future members. But, according to a sample survey of Conservative synagogue members, only 39 percent of their married children are affiliated with Conservative synagogues, 35 percent are non-affiliated, 13 percent are affiliated with Reform synagogues, four percent with Orthodox synagogues, 0.6 percent with Reconstructionist synagogues, one percent gave some other answer and seven percent did not respond.

If we analyze our respondents' offspring by age we find that among the married offspring 46 years or older, 53 percent are affiliated with Conservative synagogues. That percentage drops to 39 percent for those age 41-45, 41 percent for those age 36-40 and 35 percent for those age 31-35. It is highly improbable that as the younger cohorts grow older they will reach the affiliation levels of the older age cohorts. Yet, even if they do so, the Conservative movement is in very serious trouble given the average family size of 2.2 children.

The Conservative movement will confront serious membership declines in the next decade or two. I know of no survey which suggests any other conclusion or any study that is sanguine about the future of the Conservative movement. I know of no American Jewish sociologist, regardless of his religious or denominational affiliation, who has challenged this conclusion.

This leaves Conservative Judaism with the question: where does it go from here? I have no simple solution. Indeed, in membership terms I see nothing that Conservative Judaism can do that will halt its decline -- at least in the short run.

What I recommend is that immediate steps be taken to build for the long run. The survey data do not dictate how the rebuilding process should take place but they can answer whether recommendations have a foundation in reality. My recommendations, I should add, are not only based on survey data but on my impressions from observations of the Conservative movement and discussions with rabbis and laymen.

My recommendations stem from the assumption that one builds on one's strongest rather than one's weakest link. There is a core group of Conservative synagogue members who report that they are both strongly committed to Conservative Judaism and that they observe Jewish law. (The measure of observance was "keeping" kashrut.)

Five percent of the men and 6.4 percent of the women affiliated with Conservative synagogues report that they observe kashrut both inside and outside the home, and 29.2 percent of the men and 28.8 percent of the women have kosher homes although they do not observe kashrut outside the home. Let us lump both these categories together and focus on the roughly 34 percent of the respondents who have a kosher home. Forty-five percent of the men and 46 percent of the women in this group report they came from homes where kashrut both in and out of the home was observed, and 30 percent of the men and 31 percent of the women report they came from homes where kashrut was observed only inside the home. To put it another way, the parents' home is strongly associated with kashrut observance. Kashrut observance, in turn, is strongly associated with the Jewish education the parents give their

children. Of all the children who have received or are receiving a day school education, 66 percent come from kosher homes; of all those who attended Camp Ramah, 53 percent come from kosher homes; this despite the fact that only 34 percent of all the parents report their homes are kosher. The differences are even more dramatic if one bears in mind that a disproportionate number of older Conservative synagogue members have kosher homes which means that their children were educated at a time when day school education was much less widespread in the Jewish community, many areas had no day schools at all, and there were no Ramah camps.

Kashrut observance, in turn, is also related to the institutional commitment to Conservative Judaism. Among all our respondents, 23 percent of the men and 25 percent of the women agreed strongly that being associated with Conservative Judaism is extremely important to them. But, 30 percent of the men and 35 percent of the women who had kosher homes agreed strongly whereas only 19 percent of the men and 18 percent of the women who didn't observe any laws of kashrut agreed strongly with the statement. This group, I believe, should serve as the reference group for the restructuring of the Conservative movement. But it is the offspring of this group who affiliate in disproportionate numbers with Orthodox synagogues. (Table IV.)

TABLE IV
THE SYNAGOGUE AFFILIATION OF CHILDREN (OVER 18 AND LIVING AWAY FROM HOME) BY KASHRUT OBSERVANCE
(in percentages)

Synagogue Affiliation	Not Kosher at all	Buy Kosher meat	Kosher only in Home	Kosher in Home & Outside
Orthodox	1.7	1.8	4.4	13.1
Conservative	24.3	29.4	33.6	43.1
Reform	6.9	8.0	5.9	5.3
Reconstructionist	.3	.5	.6	.3
Other	1.5	1.1	1.5	1.0
No Synagogue Affil.	47.2	40.8	34.8	20.1
No Answer	18.1	18.4	19.2	17.1
TOTAL	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

If one is committed to Judaism and to a religious way of life one seeks institutional affiliation with a movement that stands for more not less of that which one believes in. Surely one

doesn't need statistical tables to understand that if Conservative Judaism is searching for a core group whose loyalty it can enlist to rebuild itself, it is going to find such individuals among the observant rather than the non-observant.

It comes as no surprise, however, to learn that this is the group which is opposed to such innovations in the Conservative movement as the proposal to ordain women as rabbis. Whereas, 24 percent of the men and 39 percent of the women who don't keep kosher at all favor women's ordination only 16 percent of the men and 24 percent of the women who keep kosher inside and outside the home favor women's ordination. By contrast 18 percent of the men and 12 percent of the women who don't keep kosher at all oppose ordination whereas 57 percent of the men and 42 percent of the women who report they keep kosher both inside and outside the home oppose the ordination of women as rabbis.

TABLE V
ATTITUDES TOWARDS ORDAINING WOMEN AS RABBIS
BY KASHRUT OBSERVANCE (in percentages)

Attitudes	No Kashrut Observance	Kosher in Home & Outside
<u>Men</u>		
Favor Ordination	24	16
Oppose Ordination	18	57
Neutral or No Answer	55	27
TOTAL	100	100
<u>Women</u>		
Favor Ordination	39	24
Oppose Ordination	12	43
Neutral or No Answer	49	33
TOTAL	100	100

It will be argued that the vast majority of Conservative synagogue members are not religiously observant and do not oppose innovations. The majority are closer in practice and ideology to Reform than to Orthodoxy. Therefore, it can be said, Conservative Judaism should direct its appeal to the less observant and not to the more observant group. I find this argument unpersuasive. As long as Conservative Judaism continues to pay lip service to such halachic principles as Sabbath observance or kashrut observance, it cannot compete with Reform for the allegiance of the

non-observant. The worship services in many Reform congregations is only slightly less traditional than in many Conservative ones; Reform is no less insistent on the principle of support for Israel and Jewish peoplehood; but it is surely more willing to accommodate to the dictates of contemporary notions of morality and it is less demanding of personal religious observance.

The present posture of Conservative Judaism appears to me as a movement which pays only ceremonial obeisance to Jewish law. To a younger generation, in particular, this is inherently unsatisfactory. By way of example, if one finds kashrut observance inappropriate then it is hypocritical to affiliate with a movement which deems it an essential of Jewish behavior. But if one deems it to be an essential, it seems hypocritical to affiliate with a movement which never makes kashrut observance an issue in the personal lives of its members or makes systematic efforts to encourage its observance. Evidence in the survey data confirms what every observer of the Jewish scene appreciates. There is a decline in the level of kashrut observance among Conservative synagogue members from the level of their parents even when their parents were also Conservative synagogue members. The condition is reinforced by the low priority level which observance of Jewish law has on the agenda of concerns of the movement. What we have seen, however, is that levels of kashrut observance are associated with levels of Jewish education, levels of attendance at synagogue services, and levels of reported Jewish commitment.

The absence of concern by Conservative leaders with the low level of observance among their members is both a reflection but also a cause of the movement's present malaise. Unless it chooses to abandon the principle of religious observance Conservative Judaism must, in my opinion, make halachah and mitzvah an operative principle. But if it seeks to raise the level of religious observance among the vast majority of Conservative Jews the movement must look for leadership from that very group which is increasingly antagonized by its present halachic posture.

The argument is not, as some will say, a matter of interpretation of Jewish law. The issue of interpretation divided the left and the right of the Conservative movement in the past. Perhaps, within the definition of what constitutes Jewish law one can reasonably argue that it is acceptable to use electricity on the Sabbath, or to ride to Sabbath services under certain conditions, or to ordain women as rabbis. But these are not the real issues, regardless of the passion they evoke. History, I feel, will judge the real issue within the Conservative movement today to be whether Jewish law is law. The question is whether, regardless of how one interprets the mandates of the law, there are obligations and duties which a Jew is commanded to fulfill regardless of whether he finds them satisfactory, meaningful, or even moral. Unless all sides can honestly answer "yes" to this question, they are not

disputing the interpretation of Jewish law but whether one is bound by Jewish law; in other words, whether Jewish law is law. Traditionally this is what separated Conservatism from Reform. Today, it is what divides some nominally Conservative Jews from others.

* * *

Appendix

- I. The 1970-1971 National Jewish Population Survey sponsored and financed by the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds based on a complex probability sample of the total Jewish population of the United States. I rely on data reported in:
 1. Fred Massarik, "Affiliation and Non-Affiliation in the United States Jewish Community: A Reconceptualization," American Jewish Year Book, 1978, pp. 262-274.
 2. Bernard Lazerwitz and Michael Harrison, "American Jewish Denominations: A Social and Religious Profile," American Sociological Review (August, 1979), pp. 656-666.
 3. Bernard Lazerwitz, "Past and Future Trends In the Size of American Jewish Denominations," Journal of Reform Judaism (Summer 1979), pp. 77-82.
- II. The 1975 random sample of the Jewish population of Metropolitan Boston. I rely on data reported in:
 1. Floyd J. Fowler, 1975 Community Survey (Boston: Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston, 1977).
- III. The 1979 survey of a random sample of members of Conservative synagogues reported by Charles S. Liebman and Saul Shapiro, "A Survey of the Conservative Movement and Some of its Religious Attitudes," an unpublished report distributed at the 1979 convention of the United Synagogue of America.