

# Conserve Judaism – Live Jewishly

by Rabbi Jerome M. Epstein, Executive Vice President, United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism

**Orlando, Florida, November 30, 2007** – Most of us care whether or not the Conservative movement grows and Conservative Judaism remains vibrant. We expend energy strengthening our congregations and the United Synagogue as well as many other institutions within our movement.

But did you ever stop to ask yourselves why we care? Does it really make a difference whether or not Conservative Judaism or the Conservative synagogue exist? Do Conservative synagogues have a distinct mission that matters – or are we so similar to other Jewish institutions that our existence is superfluous? Often I am confronted by people who say that it doesn't make a difference whether you are a Conservative Jew or not, as long as you are Jewish. If we are not distinct in our ideology, mission, behavior, and values, then is there any meaningful reason for the Conservative movement or the Conservative synagogue to continue to exist?

For the 30 years that I have visited congregations on behalf of United Synagogue, I think the question I am asked most often has been “What is Conservative Judaism?” I could understand the question coming from Reform Jews, Orthodox Jews, secular Jews, or even non-Jews. What concerns me, however, is that most frequently this question is asked by members of Conservative congregations; people who call themselves Conservative Jews. They don't understand our mission and thus they can't share our vision.

Most Conservative Jews think that “conservative” means “non-liberal.” They assume that our name describes our position on the spectrum of Jewish life; that we are a movement in the middle, somewhere between Orthodox and Reform.

One of the first times the word “conservative” was used to describe our approach to Judaism was in the opening exercises at the Jewish Theological Seminary on January 2, 1887. Alexander Kohut, a professor of Talmud, explained the seminary's purpose this way: “The spirit should be that of Conservative Judaism, the conserving Jewish impulse which will create in pupils in the Seminary the tendency to recognize the dual nature of Judaism and the Law; which unites theory and practice... and acknowledges the necessity of observing the law as well as of studying it.” The distinguishing and purposeful goal of this new approach was to conserve Judaism.

Despite the widely held assumption, Conservative Judaism was not born as a reaction to Orthodoxy. It was, instead, an approach that responded to the widespread disregard for Jewish living and the lack of Jewish practice shared by many Jews at that time. The initial premise of Conservative Judaism was that its ideology and approach to Jewish living would conserve authentic Judaism. That remains our mission today. The evolutionary changes were not made to create a new and “easier” Judaism but rather to conserve authentic Judaism.

It does matter that Conservative Judaism thrives! Our problem is that we have been too timid when we explain why it matters.

I often am struck by the statement of disaffected Conservative Jews who claim that they don't live as Conservative Jews because we are not clear about what we stand for– as if the solution to our problems would be to define ourselves better.

I am not against coming up with a clear definition of Conservative Judaism. Indeed, several years ago I

detailed eight behavioral expectations for a Conservative Jew. I was gratified by positive responses from clergy and lay leadership alike. Certainly, this is not the only valid statement defining Conservative Judaism. The movement is not bereft of clear and concise definitions; although they are not identical, they share many beliefs and practices. We advocate daily prayer, kashrut, Shabbat and yom tov observance. We define ourselves by our endorsement of the priority of inmarriage and lifelong Jewish learning. We emphasize mitzvot of ethical behavior and acts of kindness. Although there is some variation from rabbi to rabbi in how we interpret these values— just as rabbis from other denominations would differ – the basic definition is clear. The Conservative definition of how to mark Shabbat and yom tov includes lighting candles, making kiddush, and making the day special. It does not include going to the mall or the theater. Simply defining Shabbat and yom tov as special days is not enough, if congregants don't believe that we really mean it, and part of our hope for them is that they will live them too. Our definition of kashrut does not include eating shellfish or meat at a nonkosher restaurant. Teaching kashrut in ways that infuse it with meaning is not sufficient. Congregants must perceive that we mean for them to keep kosher, just as we do. Our value system does not exempt adults from Jewish learning, visiting the ill, helping the homeless, protecting the environment or speaking out against the genocide in Darfur.

We don't need more definitions or descriptions of Conservative Judaism in order to make Conservative Judaism come alive. What we stand for is abundantly clear. What we do need is commitment on the part of Conservative Jews to live the definition. We have been too timid in declaring our vision. Because we have been too reticent in educating congregants about the real message of Conservative Judaism, much less doing it with conviction, we should not be surprised by their lack of commitment to it. Rather than spending time on defining, we must spend time on inspiring and motivating. It is only through living Judaism that we will conserve Judaism.

Resources are readily available. United Synagogue has produced a wealth of materials and created meaningful programs designed to help us in this task. Too few congregations, however, actively promote serious Jewish living, for fear of being perceived as irrelevant or intrusive by those for whom regular Jewish behaviors and values are not yet important. Unless we resolve to focus on our real mission, we will succeed in membership acquisition but fail in membership transformation.

Congregations devote energy to increasing their membership but often they lose sight of the truth that our end goal is not to increase membership but to change lives. Membership is just a way to that ultimate objective.

Until people join our congregation, our ability to influence them is limited. Even after they have joined, unless we consciously seize the opportunity to connect with them and inspire them we will have squandered the gift that their affiliation has given us. No longer can we be satisfied with simply affiliating members. That act may conserve our synagogues – but by itself it will not help us fulfill our mandate to conserve Judaism. We must measure our congregation by the lives it changes.

Because the Conservative congregation's major purpose really is conserving Judaism, the religious services and educational programs that form the foundation of our synagogues can serve as a catalyst for Jewish transformation. But we won't succeed if we merely offer programs and services. We must carefully design those programs and services to affect participants' Jewish commitments. Our measure of success must no longer be how many people attend a religious service, but how many are transformed because of it. The measure of success must not be limited to the number of participants in the synagogue program but must include the number whose lives are changed by it.

We are confronted by a unique challenge in the Conservative movement. Many who become congregational members are not yet committed to Conservative Jewish living. Because we quite properly

perceive it to be our mission to engage the not yet committed, we tend to develop our programs solely to do so – but in doing so we often sacrifice our ideals. Paradoxically, we frequently ignore those people who are most interested in what we stand for and most committed to our vision and values in the name of reaching out to the uncommitted. Dissatisfied with what we offer them, many who have been inspired to live as Conservative Jews turn to other movements that approximate in their practice and programs that which we in reality stand for. Frequently, they drift to Orthodox or Chabad institutions, not out of belief or ideology but because they find there much that we could offer and should offer but don't offer. They find much that reflects the essence of Conservative Judaism. Many of our most Jewishly connected members don't feel that our religious services respond to their spiritual needs, so they turn to other movements. What they are seeking in principle we should have: Joyous, inspiring, religious experiences in which the community seeks God together. But there is a gap between our principles and they way we implement them. Our principles are right. Our implementation must be improved. Many of our most intellectually vital members do not find serious Jewish study in our movement, and they turn elsewhere. What they are seeking is part of our ideology, but there is a chasm between our vision and our reality. Unless we and our congregations live our core vision, we cannot and will not conserve Judaism.

In his often-quoted 1994 essay, Dr. Laurence Ianncone, a social economist, counterintuitively says that people frequently choose affiliation with “strict churches” because they offer a better product. He suggests that in return for all the time and effort that committed church members put into their demanding religious institutions, both the institutions and the members are more likely to be passionate; deeply involved, and deeply caring. Community members are more involved in others' lives and share dreams and values. That is what religion should provide. In his book *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam weaves a compelling case for the creation of religious communities to fill a void in society.

Many people who do not find a Jewish living community in Conservative congregations seek it elsewhere, but living Jewishly in community is a core value of Conservative Judaism. The time has come to practice what we say we stand for. It was right to provide options regarding egalitarianism and to encourage edud to the intermarried. But these changes in and of themselves will not conserve Judaism. It was important to consider the rights of gay and lesbian Jews, but that change alone will not conserve Judaism.

We will not conserve Judaism without making our mission and our values the fabric of our congregations. That will require us to refocus our agenda in order to create a powerful intensity of Jewish living and learning communities within our congregations.

Let us benefit from the Orthodox experience in America. Fifty years ago Orthodoxy was in an abyss. Congregations and schools were struggling. Prominent sociologists predicted its demise. Observers called for Orthodox leaders to modify their core values to attract and hold those who were leaving. But those leaders wisely concluded that their mission was more important than their numbers. They changed where they could without destroying their integrity. They kept their focus with great determination and in so doing held on to those who believed in their message. As their core constituency became more committed, new adherents joined.

If we will it, we, too, can fulfill our mission of conserving Judaism. But it will require a commitment to boldly sharpen our focus toward that mission. The synagogue agenda must be dedicated to enriching those who want what Conservative Judaism has promised: an authentically rich Jewish living experience, infused by Jewish texts that are interpreted by creative rabbinic scholars committed to evolutionary but binding halacha. At the same time, if we do not reach out and inspire those who are not yet committed, we will be shirking our responsibility to the largest number of those who identify as Conservative Jews but are not yet committed to the behaviors or values we teach. They, too, must be engaged, not just with our congregations but also with our mission to conserve authentic Judaism. They

must be engaged, not with shallow religious services, ephemeral gimmicks or superficial educational experiences but with rich services and education that will help them connect to God. Our task is not to dilute Judaism by reducing quality but to conserve Judaism through heightening intensity. We constantly must remember that our prime goal is not just conserving our synagogue but conserving authentic Jewish life.

To be successful will require new ways of thinking about congregational life. It will demand creative partnerships among lay leadership, clergy, and professional staff.

What would it really take to better engage congregants and stimulate Jewish growth? We have learned that people are influenced more by other people than by programs. A congregation's greatest power is its human resources. We must capitalize on that strength.

Congregational leaders often view their role as making congregants comfortable and responding to their requests and desires. These are important responsibilities. But Conservative congregational leaders also must lead Jews in directions that will conserve Judaism. Their job is not to follow their members as they ignore the call to grow Jewishly. Leaders must motivate congregants toward personal transformation leading to Jewish growth.

Too few congregants have regular contact with their synagogues. Most come for an occasional religious service, a social or cultural program, or to drop children off for religious school. We engage them too rarely to have an impact on their lives.

What would happen if we restructured congregational priorities so that a team of congregational leaders visits each member at home once a year? It would be an opportunity to engage people and families in the real business of Conservative congregations, transforming lives and conserving Judaism. Such a home visit would provide an opportunity to communicate and directly inspire personal and tailor-made Jewish growth. To achieve our goals, we have to be willing to think differently about expectations of lay leader, professional, and clergy alike.

Creating the relationship is important, but it is not enough. We know from interactions with our children and grandchildren that they make the greatest strides when they know that we expect them to grow and they know that we will support them. Our congregants provide our challenge but they also provide us with great opportunity. We must be sensitive to what they want, but we must also give them what they need. Rather than merely informing congregants of the joys of Jewish life without making it clear that we expect them to experience those joys, let us develop synagogue initiatives that will inspire them and stimulate their participation. To conserve Judaism, we must do more than offer. We must translate our values and ideals into practice.

It has been 120 years since Alexander Kohut shared his vision of how to conserve Judaism. We have created the dynamic institutions that empower us not only to conserve authentic and dynamic Judaism but also to infuse congregants' lives with the richness of Jewish living. Let us leave this gathering with both the commitment and the will to return to our communities revitalized with the passion to refocus our congregations toward that great, vital and noble task.