



Jewish. Fearless. Since 1897.

**Opinion** »

## Conservative Judaism at a Crossroads

August 29, 2007

Next week Arnold Eisen will be officially installed as the seventh chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Conservative Judaism's flagship educational institution. While Eisen's appointment as Conservative Judaism's new de facto head has sparked a great deal of excitement, he will be inheriting a movement widely perceived as being adrift.

Conservative Judaism, once America's largest Jewish denomination, is now second in size to the Reform movement. According to the National Jewish Population Survey 2000-01, only 33% of congregationally affiliated American Jews identified with Conservative Judaism, down from 43% a decade earlier. Indeed, JTS's outgoing chancellor, Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, described Conservative Judaism in his 2006 commencement address as suffering from "malaise" and a "grievous failure of nerve."

Is Conservative Judaism suffering from malaise? If so, what is the nature of the problem? And how should Conservative Jews steer their ship into the future? The Forward invited prominent Conservative leaders and some outside observers to weigh in on these questions.

---

### David Wolpe

Covenantal Judaism. That is our philosophy and should be our name. Renaming heralds our rejuvenation. We believe in an ongoing dialogue with God. Not everything significant has already been said, nor is the modern world uniquely wise. Our task goes beyond mere clarification of the old or reflexive reverence for the new. As with a friendship, we cherish

the past but are not limited to its formulations or assumptions. Venerating the teachings of Maimonides does not negate that tomorrow, with the tools of modern study, a new Rambam may arise. The Judaism of relationship. Covenantal Judaism. Such is our creed, our dogma, our gift.

Covenantal Judaism holds aloft the ideal of dialogue with God, with other Jews of all movements, and with the non-Jewish world. In holding each of these as sacred we stand in a unique position in Jewish life. Ritual is language, part of the way we speak to other Jews and to God. Learning, ancient and modern, is essential to sustain the eternal dialogue. “I have been given the power,” said the Kotzker Rebbe, “to resurrect the dead. But I choose a harder task — to resurrect the living!” Resurrection of passion, of faith, of community requires not the touch of the Divine, but the touch of another human being.

Together we stand at the mountain and receive the Torah. We dare not permit it to turn into a fossilized faith or a sacrifice to the seductions of modernity. The Zohar teaches that we are children from the chamber of yearnings. All of Judaism is part of our conversation. *Brit*, covenant, holds together our history and our destiny.

*Rabbi David Wolpe is the rabbi of Sinai Temple in Los Angeles and the author of several books.*

---

## **Alan Silverstein**

Conservative Judaism is suffering from a “malaise,” as did Orthodoxy in the 1960s and Reform in the 1970s. Paraphrasing historian Jonathan Sarna, in each instance “discontinuity” was transformed back into “continuity” by reassessing direction and focus. The renewal of Conservative Judaism is particularly important. Jews living in freedom need a spectrum of religious alternatives if maximum numbers are to remain creatively Jewish. Conservative Judaism must remain as a viable “center” of that spectrum. It must represent the option of being both traditionally Jewish as well as modern. Its adherents must continue to serve as the core of Jewish communal institutions and of pro-Israel affinity groups. Its members and ideology must serve as a bulwark on behalf of Jewish peoplehood in an era of rampant individualism.

Conservative Judaism’s institutional renaissance will require:

1) Proactively seeding Conservative congregations in areas of demographic growth  
 2) Creating incentives for a higher percentage of Conservative rabbis to serve in Conservative pulpit positions  
 3) Forging a feeling of revitalization and optimism within the halls of JTS, the University of Judaism, as well as within all other movement institutions  
 4) Encouraging intensity in local congregational life for Jews who want to engage meaningfully in adult and youth Torah study, diversity of prayer experiences, in acts of loving kindness, and in social justice and environmental responsibility  
 5) Forging a sense of being a world movement by prioritizing the growth of Masorti Judaism in Israel as well as in Europe, Latin America, the FSU and other Diaspora communities  
 6) Nurturing a “pioneering spirit” among Conservative rabbinical, cantorial and educational students, sending them systematically to serve in emerging as well as isolated Conservative communities  
 7) Engaging non-pulpit and retired rabbis in part-time opportunities for service to this renewal of the movement  
 8) Restoring the perception of being a pluralistic (“big tent”) movement in which creativity is welcome both on the left and on the right of the centrist component of the Jewish religious spectrum

*Rabbi Alan Silverstein is a past president of the Rabbinical Assembly and of the World Council of Conservative/Masorti Synagogues.*

### **David Shneer**

I have plenty of friends and relatives who belong to Conservative synagogues (my parents included), but I know very few people, particularly younger Jews, who walk into Conservative synagogues with a sense of passion for Judaism. Why do so many American Jews find Conservative Judaism uninspiring? Perhaps because the movement does not foster in its leaders something that has fostered the dramatic recent growth of some other streams of Judaism such as Chabad — a deep sense of spiritual calling and mission.

Chabad rabbis spend their lives in places most Conservative rabbis would not choose to live — rural towns in Iowa, rowdy college campuses and desolate cities in the Russian Far East. Why? Because Chabad rabbis see their *kiruv* work, bringing other Jews closer to “true” Judaism, as part of a profound spiritual mission. Chabadniks live frugally, work hard and, for better or worse, hold little self-doubt that they are doing God’s work. They project a confidence and charisma that is often lacking in mainstream synagogues.

Conservative rabbis are trained to be educators, service leaders and experts in Jewish law. Most exude intellectual rigor, a passion for ritual and a desire to teach and learn with their congregations. But for many Conservative clergy, the spiritual side of their job only comes out in pastoral care, which treats the soul as something needing to be healed, not elevated. Important work, to be sure, but not something that necessarily draws people in. Pulpit rabbis (an odious term that shows how mainstream Judaism has aped its Protestant counterparts) become CEOs of synagogues, appointed by boards of donors and charged with communal operations, moving yet further away from the spirit. Perhaps if Conservative Judaism spent more time allowing its rabbis to cultivate their own spirit and personal charisma, more of them would see what they do less as a job and more as a calling, and more Jews would approach Conservative shuls with passion.

*David Shneer is director of the Center for Judaic Studies at the University of Denver and author, most recently, of “New Jews: The End of the Jewish Diaspora” (NYU Press, 2005).*

---

### **Scott A. Shay**

Chancellor Arnold Eisen is a first-rate scholar, a creative thinker and possesses what seems to me to be boundless energy. I cannot contain my enthusiasm for his appointment. However, the risk in his appointment is that the leadership of the Conservative movement will conclude that they have made their bold move and can go back to business as usual. The reality is that the Conservative movement and its underlying assumptions and operations must be re-imagined for the movement to return to its past strength. To accomplish this a whole new cadre of lay and professional leadership needs to join Chancellor Eisen throughout the national and regional levels of United Synagogue and perhaps through other organs of the movement. The goal should be a total turnover of incumbent leadership over a two- to three-year period to a new group of energized grassroots leaders. This should be accomplished with *kavod*, compassion, but urgency as well.

In my view, the future of the Conservative movement will depend on transforming it into a series of mini-movements bound by practice and closely attuned to its constituent members. Theological differences should be consigned to boundary issues.

In the 20th century, both the Reform and Orthodox movements experienced periods in which their membership fell to less than 10% of American Jewry. In response the Reform movement jettisoned its Pittsburgh Platform and has replaced it with an umbrella concept. Likewise, Orthodoxy's unexpected strong revival came because of a willingness to include more diversity in very different senses and due to a sharp focus on day-school education. If the Conservative movement does not revitalize itself, it will fall to third place among the movements within 10 years.

*Scott A. Shay is the author of “Getting Our Groove Back: How to Energize American Jewry” (Devora, 2007).*

---

### **Douglas Rushkoff**

The best thing Conservative Judaism can do is return to its true and evermore urgently needed competence as the “brains” of this religion. That’s right: I see Conservatives as the nerds of Judaism in the best sense — the people who actually read Torah, understand it, and thoughtfully apply its teachings to their daily lives in the quest to make the world a better place. It’s the hardest of the paths, along with Reconstructionism, because it requires individuals and communities to wrestle with the text themselves, and confront legend and law from the bottom up. Conservatives are unique in Judaism because they are required to be literate, but not required to obey. This makes them uniquely qualified to shepherd Judaism’s continuing evolution through contentious times.

If Conservatives surrender, as did their sister movements, to the seemingly pressing but ultimately transient matters of racial fidelity and international politics, they will have abandoned the true calling of this movement, and left the rest of Judaism to flounder.

*Douglas Rushkoff is the author of “Nothing Sacred: The Case for Open Source Judaism” (Three Rivers Press, 2004).*

---

### **Jay Michaelson**

Outgoing chancellor Schorsch was right that Conservative Judaism is suffering from malaise, but 180 degrees wrong on the remedy. For Schorsch, *wissenschaft* remains the answer: more rational, moral Jewish thinking and sober textual reading. But American religion today — Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and otherwise — is not about rationality.

First, we live in an age of terror and unprecedented change, and the religions that are responding effectively to those conditions are the ones which get us in our *kishkes* — in the non-rational, spiritual, primal, mythic and even mystical aspects of ourselves.

Second, American Jews today are pragmatists: They want what works. Meditation works; serious, lively text study works (for educated elites, anyway); drum circles work; spirituality works. Rattle-your-jewelry Judaism, old clichés about antisemitism and Israel, and the sober, boring conventionality of much of Conservative Judaism just doesn’t work. Nor do dead theologies and dogmas which no one believes anymore.

Finally, the Conservative movement spent so much energy worrying about whether gays could be good Jews that they forgot to ask why anyone would want to be. Now it needs to ask, “What do we provide that nothing else does?” The answer isn’t community, ethics or culture; Jews can get those elsewhere. But the spark of divinity, the charge of holiness, the power of myth — these are treasures that we can’t get anywhere else. We just have to dare to embrace them.

*Jay Michaelson is the director of Nehirim: GLBT Jewish Culture and Spirituality and a professor at Boston University Law School.*

---

## **Naomi Levy**

The Conservative movement needs to send out an army. We must plant 50 new spiritual communities across America with the mission of reaching out to unaffiliated and disaffected Jews. I say spiritual communities because I am not referring to synagogues or *havurot*.

We need rabbinically led experimental communities. We need to offer training and seed money to rabbis who want to be *shotlim*, planters of new spiritual communities. *Shotlim* will start outreach services to welcome the unaffiliated, interfaith and disaffected. These services will take place in non-traditional, non-threatening settings that are more conducive to participation than passivity. *Shotlim* must be encouraged to experiment and fail and ultimately uncover what works, knowing all the time they are supported by their movement.

Under Arnold Eisen’s leadership we have a unique opportunity and a holy obligation to spread the transformational message of Conservative Judaism. We can inspire Jews with high-level learning, soulful prayer and a Judaism that challenges them to turn their deepest prayers into acts of kindness and social responsibility. We must infuse them with a sense of mission, purpose and meaning.

It doesn’t take much money to plant a new spiritual community. But it does take vision: a belief that Conservative Judaism is ready to grow, not just tread water. A faith that we have something unique to say to the world — a message of tolerance, relevance, intellectual honesty, justice and deep soulfulness. A dream that our movement can move beyond its insular hand-wringing and inspire Jews to wrestle with our texts and then struggle to heal our world.

*Rabbi Naomi Levy is the spiritual leader of the Los-Angeles-based Nashuva: A Soulful Community of Prayer in Action and author of “Talking to God: Personal Prayers for Times of Joy, Sadness, Struggle, and Celebration” (Knopf, 2002).*

## Harold Kushner

I don't believe the Conservative movement is mired in a malaise. What I see is an adjustment from being the movement of choice for much of the 20th century — the moderate alternative to the extremes of Reform and Orthodoxy — to a movement that has less appeal to a new generation of Jews.

But in terms of internal Conservative dynamics, the problem I see is that there have always been two Conservative movements vying for legitimacy. There was the Conservatism of the academy, of Zechariah Frankel, Solomon Schechter and Louis Ginzberg, which insisted that the traditional halachic process contained within itself mechanisms for keeping up to date as times changed. Then there was the Conservatism of the street and synagogue, hundreds of thousands of Jews who had never heard of Frankel and assumed Schechter was the wealthy donor of the local day school, but saw themselves engaged in an ongoing effort to be fully Jewish and fully American at the same time, recognizing that this called for frequent compromises on one side or the other. I once defined a Conservative Jew as someone who knew that Tu B'Shevat fell on February 3 and the Super Bowl would be played on February 11, and planned to celebrate both occasions.

That is why I have high hopes for the revitalization of the Conservative movement under Arnold Eisen, who is a learned Jew but one whose background is essentially in Jewish community more than in Jewish text.

*Rabbi Harold Kushner is rabbi laureate of Temple Israel in Natick, Mass., and the author of several best-selling books.*

---

## Elie Kaunfer

Labels are useful only to the extent they describe something specific. For decades, “Conservative Judaism” has not been a useful label. Observe Shabbat until noon on Saturday? A Conservative Jew. Walk three miles to synagogue? A Conservative Jew. Think God wrote the Torah? A Conservative Jew. Don't believe in God? Also, a Conservative Jew.

Bemoaning the decline of Conservative Judaism misses the point. This decline is a problem for the survival of Conservative institutions that are supported primarily by brand loyalty. But if the true mission of Conservative Judaism is to foster an engaged and empowered Jewish community with a commitment to Torah and mitzvot, declining affiliation may actually be positive. It signals an age in which Jews care enough about their expression of Judaism to resist an ill-defined label.

What is the role for Conservative institutions in this new reality? Three suggestions: Lose the “Label yourself Conservative” mentality. Try instead: We encourage Jews to seek meaningful, empowered engagement with Judaism. Wherever that leads, we trust them, even if it is outside the Conservative menu of options.

Embrace the free market. If brand loyalty is waning, only the best Conservative institutions will survive. While restructuring is painful, it should result in vibrant organizations that attract people through quality programs.

Don't fear “splitting the movement.” No use pretending Conservative Judaism is unified, so why encourage everyone to share a big-box tag? Differentiation will allow Jews to make clearer choices about which organizations to connect to.

Conservative Judaism as a brand is weakening. But an empowered, expressive Judaism that reflects certain values of Conservative Judaism is on the rise. If Conservative institutions adjust to this reality, they may have much to offer 21st-century Jews.

*Rabbi Elie Kaunfer is executive director of Mechon Hadar in New York.*

---

## **Judith Hauptman**

Sabbath morning services in Conservative synagogues are attracting fewer and fewer regular attendees. Many find the services boring and don't show up. What can be done?

JTS trains future rabbis and cantors, but as of now it does not give them the opportunity, during their long years of study, to figure out how to run engaging services. Most students flee JTS on Shabbat morning to pray elsewhere. If, as suggested by the incoming dean of the Rabbinical School, JTS services are turned over to the students — breaking the decades-old tradition of faculty control — future rabbis and cantors will devise ways of making them a draw. Recent JTS graduates have done exactly that a little to the south.

Now that JTS is no longer the northernmost outpost of Jewish life on the Upper West Side, because high-rise buildings are springing up farther and farther uptown, the institution is poised to become a center of new Jewish life. Here lies an incredible opportunity.

JTS can model Shabbat for the leaders and laity of the movement. Students can keep experimenting until they find out what works. After services, everyone can join for lunch, and after lunch, for Torah lessons. Let people come together on Shabbat to pray, study, shmooze, socialize, sing and eat. On the East Side, too, the Jewish Museum, a JTS affiliate, could

host the same kinds of Shabbat programs, offering art in the afternoon instead of text study. Will Jews of all ages show up? I have reason to believe that if you offer it, they will come.

*Rabbi Judith Hauptman is a professor of Talmud and rabbinic culture at the Jewish Theological Seminary and the founder of Ohel Ayalah, a free, walk-in High Holiday service for young Jews.*

---

## **David Ellenson**

The notion that “malaise” grips the Conservative movement strikes me as overstated. While membership is admittedly smaller, larger percentages of Conservative congregants display increasingly greater commitments to traditional Jewish practices and educational standards. The major educational institutions of the movement — Ramah camps, the Schechter day schools, JTS and Ziegler — are robust. If the movement is becoming “leaner,” one can also argue that it is becoming “meaner.”

However, all this success only underscores the particular challenges that confront the movement. The emergence of Modern Orthodox Judaism and an eclectic reconnection with tradition in liberal religious precincts have subverted the monopoly Conservative Judaism formerly possessed on arriving at a “proper balance” between “tradition and modernity.” Furthermore, while all the movements have to confront the reality of an American Jewish community where there are record numbers of intermarried and unaffiliated Jews, for a movement as connected to Jewish folk patterns as the Conservative movement has been, these demographic changes present a special problem for they have exposed the tensions implicit in the twin ideological foundations upon which Conservative Judaism is constructed — fidelity to Jewish law and devotion to “Catholic Israel.”

Reconciling commitment to Halacha with the individualism that characterizes contemporary American Jews is not easily achieved. Nevertheless, the need for the Conservative Judaism to succeed in galvanizing a non-fundamentalistic and egalitarian commitment to commandment and community on the part of American Jews who remain in need of meaning and structure constitutes the greatest contribution the Conservative movement can yet make to American Jewish life.

*Rabbi David Ellenson is president of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion.*

---

## **Menachem Creditor**

The deepest teacher to call the Conservative movement home was Abraham Joshua Heschel, who prescribed the medicine required for rediscovering a dynamic Conservative movement. He wrote: “To understand the meaning of the problem and to appreciate its urgency, we must keep alive in our reflection the situation of stress and strain in which it came to pass... and the necessity of confronting and being preoccupied with it.”

We, the inheritors of a Conservative Movement which has allowed itself to become more institutionally conservative than personally moving in recent decades, have spent enough time complaining about what is. It is time to confront where we are, armed with a surging hope for what can be.

We must see the birth of healthy movemental communication. The Web sites and publications of our core institutions represent fragmented visions of the whole at best. Where are the Conservative Jewish ArtScrolls and Aish.com’s we so desperately need? Our institutions have begun the process of sharing the conversation, but that simply isn’t enough. There needs to be a groundswell of organizing around the core ideas of Conservative Judaism, in a conversation of parity including clergy and lay leaders.

Our progressive/halachic blend can be both seductive and compelling, and our decisions should be celebrated as steps forward. Egalitarianism and gay inclusion must be markers for pride, fulfilling the traditional dream of traditional Judaism to stretch and include. If we believe in Conservative Judaism, we must sing about it from rooftops, advertising our particular brand of faith as a redemptive experience.

The “middle road” can also lead to God. We just need to decide it’s our destination.

*Rabbi Menachem Creditor is rabbi of Congregation Netivot Shalom in Berkeley, Calif.; founder of ShefaNetwork.org: The Conservative Movement Dreaming from Within, and co-founder of Keshet Rabbis: The Alliance of Gay-Friendly Conservative Rabbis.*<sup>[1][2][3][4][5][6][7][8][9][10]</sup>

---

## **Elliot Cosgrove**

Pundits of American Jewry are oddly fixated on proclaiming the imminent demise of Conservative Judaism. Dismissed as an ephemeral product of mid-20th-century sociology, America’s once-largest Jewish denomination is repeatedly characterized as bereft of purpose and short on self-confidence. As the Jewish Theological Seminary enters a new era under Arnold Eisen, we would all do well to consider if the core values upon which Conservative Judaism was founded and continues to be infused by remain compelling for contemporary Jewish life.

With religious discourse increasingly polarized between fundamentalism and secular atheism, Conservative Judaism insists on a reasoned faith that pulls at both the head and the heart.

In a time when the single most shared experience of American Jewry is a college education, Conservative Judaism continues to position itself at the intersection of the worlds of critical scholarship and religious faith.

As the religious and social chasms among Jews, both here and in Israel, grow ominously wider, Conservative Judaism consistently places *klal yisrael*, concern for the well being of the entire Jewish community, at the forefront of its agenda.

In a world where Jews are increasingly called upon to understand the claims of their particular faith in the context of a common humanity, Conservative Judaism strives to formulate a message that celebrates the distinctive contribution of the Jewish community within a pluralistic society.

Finally, as the confrontation between personal autonomy and rabbinic authority grows ever more acute, Conservative Judaism boldly faces the issues of our time, seeking a synthesis between the permanent values of tradition and the needs of the hour.

To be fair, Conservative Judaism cannot lay sole claim to the above values, nor do we have a perfect track record in communicating them throughout our movement. Indeed, as we enter this new era, our profile, internal structures and perhaps even our name may need to be reconsidered. Nevertheless, we should not confuse changing tactics with enduring values. It is the degree to which Conservative Judaism stays true to its proud mandate that will ensure our lasting, if not increasing, relevance in the years ahead.

*Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove, a rabbi at Anshe Emet Synagogue in Chicago, is a doctoral candidate in modern Jewish thought at the University of Chicago.*

Join thousands of readers and give today to help fund the **Forward's** reliable reporting, intelligent analysis, and a Jewish voice you can trust on news, culture, lifestyle and opinion. Thank you for making a generous donation now.  
**SUPPORT FEARLESS JOURNALISM**

**GIVE TODAY**

Copyright ©2018 The Forward Association, Inc. All rights reserved. | [Contact](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms & Conditions](#) | [Trademarks](#) | [About](#)  
| [Jobs](#)