

Yom Kippur 5767  
A New Day for the Conservative Movement – Part II  
Rabbi David Englander

I'm not entirely sure when it happened. But I have a memory that it actually did. It was Jerusalem, of course, in one of the most religious neighborhoods. I was with a friend from what seemed like a former life. Something was different, and I was about to fully realize what that was. We had stopped for a snack, at a bakery. I got a Danish – I don't remember what she had. We went outside and she started eating and walking toward our next stop. I went outside, started eating, and stopped walking. She said – come on, let's go. I said I can't. She asked why. I said Jews don't walk and eat at the same time, because that's how dogs eat. She said, "You have gone crazy" – but she didn't use those words exactly.

I was in Israel that year studying in a traditional environment. One of the classes was in, no surprise, traditional modes of Jewish behavior. Our main text was the mishna brurah, a compilation of an important 16th century compendium of Jewish law known as the Shulchan Aruch, along with an early 20th century commentator on those laws. There is not a person in that community who has not heard of it. If he says don't walk with a Danish, you don't walk with a Danish. And I didn't.

I tell you this story to introduce what I want to share with you in our continuing discussion about the status and possible fate of our Conservative Movement. It is a discussion which I feel comfortable having, even today, because whether or not we feel strongly about the topic at this moment, the questions we can ask and the answers some have offered are directly related to what we think about Jewish identity. Whether we do or don't define ourselves as this-kind-of-Jew or that-kind-of-Jew, today of all days is a day to think and talk about where we are, and where we might be going, as Jews. The challenge of Conservative Judaism at a turning point in its century-plus history is one lens through which to view the issue – it's not by any means the only important one.

The little vignette about walking in Jerusalem, from what feels like a past life, came to mind in part because of the transition that I began to talk about on Rosh Hashanah, and to which many of you spoke to me in person and by e-mail so thoughtfully. I made a conscious transition away from that community, not because there was something wrong with it but because it wasn't right for me. My exit from that world, and my re-entry into the kind of community where I envision spending not only my life but which maintains the values I hope my kids will absorb as well, is one I am continually happy that I made. I consider myself an observant Jew – this declaration doesn't surprise you – but I am also challenged by the notion of Jewish law as an overarching and commanding force in my life. I struggle with the place of personal choice within an observant Jewish lifestyle. And I live in a community that I know exercises freedom of choice when it comes to Jewish observance that would have been very foreign to the one I left behind.

Your messages to me between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur indicate this truth about the Conservative movement that was articulated by Professor Neil Gillman this year – we

are not a movement whose membership considers Jewish law – at least in its most comprehensive form – obligatory. Still, some responses did indicate that their attraction to Conservative Judaism lies in feeling you can do as much as you are comfortable with and not be judged for what you don't do. Striving for more knowledge and also for higher observance levels of ethical and ritual mitzvot remains a hallmark of what we stand for. Whether striving for a high or comprehensive level of Jewish ritual observance will remain part of who we are in an era where individual choice clearly rules the day is, I think, doubtful. The phrase: Committed to comprehensive observance of Jewish law is not on the bumper sticker that sums up our core values.

There are many other options for the text of our so-called bumper sticker. Some would focus on study, some on social action, some on Israel, some on prayer. Many would articulate a combination of two or more of those building blocks of Jewish identity. One rabbi has compared Conservative Judaism to a peacock, which as we know is a very beautiful bird that almost never flies – its evolution overshot its effectiveness. So too our movement, which through the last century built many grand buildings and institutions and performed many great deeds throughout the Jewish world but which – according to him – moved away from its core mission, which is to bring people to participate in sacred ritual, thus bridging the world as it is with the world as it can be imagined. Commitment to sacred ritual – that is a good slogan for a bumper sticker, but that's not exactly what is on mine. Before I tell you what is, I want to tell you about somebody else's.

On Rosh Hashanah I spoke about the Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary who retired in June, and a bit about some of his many accomplishments and commitments. In a period of transition now, the Seminary - and by extension, the movement – awaits the ascension of its chancellor-elect, Professor Arnold Eisen, who is finishing his work at Stanford University before becoming Chancellor effective in June of 2007. He is a world class scholar and his expertise is the sociology of the American Jewish community. He is equally at home before crowds of laypeople and academics. He has delved admirably into the texts of our tradition and he is a committed Conservative Jew. He is not a rabbi and he is not a scholar of Jewish law. But he is, by all accounts, an insightful and engaging man, and I think he is going to do a great job. Upon hearing of his appointment, I wrote him a letter.

April 12th, 2006 Erev Pesach 5766, Dear Chancellor-designate Eisen,

I am writing to congratulate you on your appointment as Chancellor-designate of JTS. Your acceptance of the nomination of the board indicates a deep commitment to and profound sense of responsibility for the future of the Conservative movement and American Jewry. As one voice of many, I find your desire to take on this mantle of leadership inspirational. We will be fortunate to have another Chancellor with impeccable academic credentials. First and foremost, it is a visionary scholar with a passion for teaching who deserves to be at the helm of 3080 Broadway. Your predecessors embodied those qualities, and I believe you do as well.

Your deep understanding of the fabric of the American Jewish community, your passion for the texts and history out of which our tradition continues to grow, and your unparalleled comprehension of the nature of the challenges we face all point to an “Eisen Era” of forward-thinking growth and mature exploration of pathways to a bright future for our movement.

I extend my best wishes to you and your family for a good year of transition, and beyond that a successful and personally meaningful Chancellorship. We look forward to welcoming you back to Boca Raton at your earliest convenience.

*Chag sameach*, Rabbi David Englander

And wouldn't you know it, he wrote back:

May 12, 2006, Dear Rabbi Englander,

Thanks very much for your good wishes on my appointment as the next Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary. I share your hope that we can work to transform the American Jewish community, reconnect it with its tradition and escape the downward trend that has characterized American Jewry in recent decades.

I look forward to working hard to make JTS a major instrument in the transformation of American Judaism for the benefit of our country and our people. I look forward to accepting your invitation to visit Boca Raton again in the near future.  
Take care. Yours, Arnie

It would be unwise to read too much into a simple reply to a simple letter of congratulations. I don't assume, except for the coming back to Boca part, that I'm the only one who received this letter. Still, there is something about it that is worth pointing out, and I don't think it is too much of a stretch to imagine it as part of the foundation of the aforementioned Eisen-era.

He mentions the American Jewish community, he states his expert recognition of its decline in recent years. What he does not mention is Conservative Judaism. Combined with his multiple quotations of his predecessor Solomon Schechter at his opening address to the Seminary community, this Chancellor does not appear to see his job solely as bettering the fate of Conservative Judaism. He sees Conservative Judaism as an important, leading instrument in bettering the fate of all of American Jewry. Many of you, by the way, echoed this sentiment in your replies to my Rosh Hashanah challenges. In fact, if you felt insulted at all, it was by feeling you were being pigeon-holed into one approach as opposed to another – most of you who replied on this point see Conservative Judaism as part of a path toward Jewish connection, but are uninterested in the restrictions that labels put on us. I applaud you for those sentiments.

In distancing himself from a specifically Conservative mission, Eisen is going back to the future. Neither Louis Finkelstein, arguably the most influential Jew in the United States

through the middle of the twentieth century and the President and then Chancellor of the Seminary, nor Solomon Schechter, you know, the guy named after the day schools, wanted Conservative Judaism to be a well-defined movement, distinct from other segments of American Jewry. They saw Conservative Judaism as a meeting ground for Jews and other Jews, for interfaith dialogue, for scientists, for academics, for theologians, and more. It wasn't a movement but a kind of umbrella, not an independent entity but a unifying idea. Under Arnie Eisen we are going to be hearing about, and will be asked to participate in, a lot of dialogue. Where that will go, and whether he is setting up the Conservative movement to thrive once again as a meeting place for people with all sorts of good ideas to learn from each other, will be very interesting to witness.

He is not going to ignore his role as the recognized head of the Conservative movement. Arnie Eisen wrote his bumper sticker, at least for the great institution he has been chosen to lead, and presented it in his opening address to the Seminary: "The mission of JTS is to teach Torah to, and educate leaders for, the conservative (*sic*) movement, the Jewish people, and America." How he sees the future of the Conservative movement of whose mission he will be the authoritative voice is something we will also be hearing much more about. But we know that the core values he represents as our new voice on the American Jewish scene include the movement as a central address for sincere Jewish dialogue and the education of teachers who can lead that dialogue with knowledge, wisdom and understanding.

If you didn't happen to catch a version of my Rosh Hashanah sermon, I ended by asking for responses to a few questions about people's personal impression of Conservative Judaism. The last thing I want to share with you before I give you my answers to those questions is to quote you to you. Since this is an invitation to dialogue, you should know what your neighbor is thinking. Your responses – both verbal and by e-mail – have given me a great deal of hope. You speak of the balance of tradition and modernity in our services, and a lot about the ability to find yourselves somewhere on the continuum of Jewish observance without being looked down upon by anyone, and that the movement endorses the value of being able to ask any question without being criticized for it. If you have found such tolerance here or in other Conservative synagogues with which you have been affiliated, I think that is great praise for those places.

An overwhelmingly popular theme was that of "I feel comfortable in a Conservative synagogue – it is where I was raised and where I feel I belong." When you get right down to it, just about every element of the challenge of Jewish continuity is answered by this sentiment. If we want our kids to maintain the movement, if we want them to be sitting in our seats in twenty or thirty years, or better yet next to us, they need to have the sense about synagogue life that it is a home for them, that other experiences, while valid expressions of faith and practice, are strange – not objectively strange or wrong, but strange for them. Why do people think some things are strange and some things feel right? Mostly because of what they have become accustomed to – as parents it is our job to make sure our kids become accustomed to the places, practices, and traditions we think are important. And it is the job of the community and its leadership to make sure it is a welcoming place for them and for you. There is no guarantee they will absorb these

values as their own, but as you wrote in your responses, many of you are here and not elsewhere because of your own earlier exposure to places with similar commitments.

Your slogans for the movement were terrific. A sampling: Tradition and modernity – the best of both worlds. Conservative Judaism: Praying With God in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Unity, acceptance, and understanding. Tradition with responsibility and choice. Conservative Judaism: A happy medium. Conservative Judaism: where the spirit soars and the mind sharpens.’ From a youngster: Conservatives save tradition. One that sums up a common theme: Keeping Jewish Traditions Alive.

And, all but a respondent or two had hope that the Conservative movement would still be around in another 100 years, but you were cognizant that many forces out of our control might cause either the resurgence of the movement on the one hand, or outright extinction on the other. If the world itself does not implode, if economic conditions continue to develop and not recede too badly, if Jews do not become the target of evil-minded forces again as we have been in the past, the sense was that Conservative Judaism will still be here in a century’s time. It may be bigger, it may be smaller, but it will probably be an even more tolerant and inclusive movement, as well as one that is much better at communicating its message to the Jewish people, which many of you pointed out is a current weakness, and one that I think the new Chancellor will be able to address with great effectiveness. And now...

I am a Conservative Jew because God gave me a brain to think with, a soul to pray with, hands to help with, and for reasons beyond my ability to comprehend, the treasure-trove of a birthright of a glorious, complicated, beautiful tradition. For me, the best entrée into and path through that tradition in all of its amazing depth is the path of Conservative Judaism.

I belong to – and spend a whole lot of time in – a Conservative synagogue because our potential to impact the Jews who come through our doors is immense. We can meet a challenge that has defeated previous generations: we can be fully immersed in the American experience while setting limits and boundaries for ourselves required by our pursuit of Jewish knowledge and our ever-increasing commitment to Jewish practice. I think that our future lies in a meaningful blending of stimulating ritual worship and beyond-the-basics adult learning opportunities.

As for a slogan for the movement, I want to share one last story with you. The same year I had the aforementioned incident with the Danish – remember? – I was deeply impressed with a number of teachers, including my instructor for Talmud study. I really wanted to ask him something but couldn’t approach him in the beit midrash – the study hall – to do that, and these rabbis don’t exactly keep office hours. So I devised a plan to spend the night in Jerusalem with relatives and then to take the same bus as he did down to school. I would plop down next to him and then we could chat. You are expecting this elaborate plan to not work, I can tell – but it did, to a ‘T’. So here we were with about 20 minutes to talk and after some pleasantries I said I don’t know if you know this, but I’m studying in your yeshiva to prepare to enter the Conservative rabbinical school at JTS, to become a

Conservative rabbi – would you mind if I asked what you think of that? He was a pretty direct guy but I wasn't expecting this answer.

Look, he said – life is the pursuit of truth. It is unlikely that we are going to find truth in this lifetime, but we can get closer to it day by day. I think, as an Orthodox rabbi, I've found the best path to get as close as I can to discovering truth. If you think you have a better path, then you should go down that path. It wasn't an endorsement – not by any means – after all, here was a guy who had likely already forgotten more Torah than I would ever know, and he basically said 'you think you have a better path?'

Well, for me, I think I do. Not for him, not for my Reform friends or those who think that denominations are irrelevant at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. My bumper sticker: Conservative Judaism: A relevant, authentically Jewish path toward Truth.

Shanah tovah, g'mar chatimah tovah.