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Jews and Others, Continued

The search for balance between preserving Jewish distinctiveness from non-Jews and joining with others in partnership and dialogue is, for Conservative Jews, part of the larger dual commitment that defines our Movement. We are pledged to full engagement with Judaism—its practices, texts, and history—and we are pledged as well to full engagement with the societies and cultures of which we are a part.

The balance between “particular” and “universal” is sometimes difficult to locate and still harder to maintain. I offer the following seven suggestions, based on my own experience and that of communities of which I’ve been a part:

1. Conservative Jews need to make clear to ourselves and others that we will continue to maintain both the commitment to Jewish tradition and community and the commitment to the well-being of our society and the world. Critics to our “left” and “right” often claim that these two foci of Jewish attention and resources are mutually exclusive. We must demonstrate that, on the contrary, they are fully compatible. Each strengthens the other.

Let’s affirm without equivocation or apology that we will continue to take care of Jews, for no one else will. We will build synagogues, camps, and schools, provide for elderly and needy Jews, study and practice Torah, protect our interests, guard and develop the State of Israel. All this is basic to our Judaism. But Jewish tradition also demands that we assume our share of responsibility for human beings who are not Jews, reach out to them in friendship, and join with them in taking responsibility for God’s creatures and God’s earth. This too is basic to Judaism. We value both commitments.

2. Conservative communities and individuals need to carefully negotiate that balance, both in what we say and what we do. Neither the prophets nor the Rabbis specify the proportion of energy or resources that should go to Jewish as opposed to universal causes. Nor does our tradition tell us exactly how to manage Jewish relations with other communities, nations, and religions. Resources will always be scarce in relation to what is needed. Now, as ever, the Pirkei Avot teaches that “the day is short and the labor great.” We will not complete the work, “particular” or “universal,” but neither are we “allowed to desist from [either part of] it.”

It is obvious to me (though not to Jews of purely universalist mind-set) that there can be no Judaism in the world without Jews, and that protection of Judaism—
including its distinctive balance of “particular” and “universal”—requires defense of Jewish lives and Jewish interests. That is why I am a fervent Zionist. I believe that the survival and thriving of Jews and Judaism alike depend on a strong, sovereign, Jewish State of Israel, as well as a strong, active, and confident North American Jewish community. We also need to support the array of educational institutions and programs that—at a time when Jews choose whether and how to be Jews—make Jewish life attractive, meaningful, and compelling. These efforts require a huge and continuing investment of resources.

It is no less obvious to me (though not to Jews of purely particularist mind-set) that there will be no Jews in the world without Judaism, whether Judaism is defined as “religion” or as “civilization.” One of the glories of our tradition, and a feature that renders Judaism persuasive to Jews in open, pluralist, and democratic cultures such as America, is its call to join with non-Jews to build a more just, compassionate, and sustainable world. Just as Conservative Jewish individuals give time and money to support societal and global causes, so too should Conservative communities.

3. We must make study of traditions other than Judaism a regular feature of the learning that we do, and make partnership with non-Jewish groups a regular feature of social action programs. Let’s not leave the former to academics or the latter to the Anti-Defamation League and the Jewish Community Relations Council. All Jews have a lot at stake in the precious American experiment of religious, ethnic, and cultural pluralism. We need to do all we can to make that experiment a success, knowing that if cooperation and respect among religions is not achievable in America, it is unlikely to happen anywhere. Every investment made in intergroup relations at the grassroots level—by clergy and congregants, educators and teens, agencies and havurot—will be paid back many times over in cooperation at moments of crisis as well as in the pleasure of forming relationships across boundaries and differences.

4. Give our children guidance in navigating the immense challenges (and reaping the priceless rewards) of living in multiethnic and multireligious societies. We need to explain to them how, for Conservative Jews, our “Jewish” and our “human” commitments go hand in hand. Let’s not leave this for our students to puzzle out on their own—or worse, allow them to conclude that their Jewish and human sides are unrelated and so require a choice: either be a faithful Jew or get involved alongside non-Jews in larger concerns such as environment or homelessness.

5. Don’t shy away from friendships with non-Jews or alliances with non-Jewish groups out of concern that they will threaten or inhibit our Jewish commitments. Quite the opposite is often the case. One appreciates Judaism more by seeing it through non-Jewish eyes, and grasps its distinctiveness through comparison with other traditions. Jews have much to learn as well as to teach.
6. Pluralism, as it applies to Jews and non-Jews, requires a comparable level of mutual respect and cooperation among Jews of differing commitments. One can’t expect acceptance of or from non-Jews if we Jews do not afford it to one another. Jews should be able to disagree without putting each other down, and work together despite disagreement. This is very difficult for Jews to do. It is necessary now more than ever.

7. Make every single member of Conservative communities feel welcome and respected, including single Jews, gay and lesbian Jews, Jews of color, and non-Jewish spouses and children. Let them know they are valued. Assure non-Jews that they will always be welcome and that we value their contributions to our communities, while expressing the hope that they will someday choose to take on full membership in the joys and responsibilities of the Covenant by means of conversion. We owe everyone in our communities honest, forceful expression of what Jewish tradition demands of us, without fear of articulating the full measure of Jewish “particularism” that has always nourished the distinctive Jewish commitment to “universalism”—or vice versa.

This is who we are and who the Torah wants us to be. Let’s be proud of the Covenant’s dual focus, give it eloquent voice, and put it into visible practice that makes a difference to us and to the world.