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Looking Back, Looking Forward
For My Students

It’s been nearly 60 years since Marshall Sklare referred to Conservative Judaism in his pioneering sociological study—*Conservative Judaism: An American Religious Movement*—as “Orthodoxy in transition,” and almost 40 since Sklare’s afterword to the book’s second edition expressed surprise that the Conservative Movement had not only held its own in the meantime but become, by far, the most successful American Jewish denomination. I cannot make that claim today. Just as social and cultural forces assisted the rise of Conservative Judaism over many decades in the 20th century, such forces (and others, too) now help to weaken affiliation with Conservative (and other) synagogues, schools, and organizations. What I can say, however—and want to stress as we conclude this particular series of blog conversations and look forward to the future—is that Conservative Judaism now, as much as ever, has the message and the means to make a major impact on the ways Jewish tradition is taught, practiced, and revitalized in North America and beyond.

The emphasis in these posts has fallen on-message, though I and those who engaged me in dialogue have paid ample attention to “means” in postings about community, education, mitzvah, prayer, and Jewish relations to the larger world. Nothing I have read or heard in the last year on this site or others has changed my view that with better communication of what Conservative Judaism stands for, better “quality control” in synagogues and schools, and a restructuring of how the various Conservative organizations operate (one that ensures more coordination than in the past)—the prospects for Conservative Judaism are excellent. I can say that soberly and confidently—and not only out of hope and desire—because the Torah is a tree of life to those who hold fast to it. Because Conservative Judaism is a path that is joyful and profound, attractive and compelling; one that offers the meaning that contemporary Jews need to live rightly and well and to raise their children that way. Because Conservative Judaism is a recipe for building communities that are vibrant and engaging.

What is more, if one traces the historical arc of Conservative Judaism from its founding by Zacharias Frankel in the middle of the 19th century through Schechter’s restatement of core principles at the start of the 20th and further revisions by Finkelstein, Heschel, Kaplan, and others in the middle of the 20th century, one sees—as my students and I did in the course I taught on the subject last spring—that Conservative Judaism exemplifies its slogan of “tradition and
change." I am not a big fan of that slogan, because it seems to say that “tradition” and “change” are opposites that need balancing, and that “tradition” is an object—like a Torah scroll, say—that is passed down from generation to generation, withstanding or succumbing to revisions along the way. I see tradition, rather, as a process of constant change-within-continuity and continuity-within-change. We are faithful to our tradition when we alter it lovingly and with learning from inside devoted practice and commitment.

That is why the “tradition and change” slogan does not please me. It does, however, get at an essential truth about Judaism and certainly at a cornerstone of Conservative Judaism. I learn things every day from Frankel and Schechter, as I learn from Kaplan, from Heschel, and (especially as JTS’s chancellor) from Finkelstein. But I head an institution that—in keeping with Frankel’s founding declaration of “positive-historical Judaism” and the evolutionary changes in Jewish law approved by the RA law committee—does things that some previous Conservative leaders would not have approved and could not have imagined. The Jewish Theological Seminary ordains and invests rabbis and cantors who are women as well as men, gay and lesbian as well as heterosexual, recent converts to Judaism as well as individuals raised in traditional Jewish homes. The *Mahzor Lev Shalem* moves contemporary hearts and minds so deeply because the traditional liturgy is flanked on the page by explanations aimed at 21st-century readers and by commentaries that reflect a wide range of viewpoints and centuries. JTS students take classes in Bible and Talmud, just as previous generations of students have done, but bring insights and experiences to the Beit Midrash that make Torah live for them and for the rest of us.

Conservative Judaism, now as ever, can and does inspire Jews with Jewish texts and Jewish history—and inspires all the more because the arts and sciences are welcomed into our minds and synagogues—and no question or doubt need be suppressed. We dance around the Torah to new melodies as well as old, and power enduring commitments with new ideas. We hold that the beliefs and practices of Judaism as our tradition developed over many centuries are fully compatible with the best of modern convictions and sensibilities—pluralism and reason, democracy and human rights, global citizenship and social justice—and that our love of Torah, Israel, and God is strengthened, rather than weakened, by full participation in the societies and cultures of which Jews are a part.

You know as well as I do that this position is not widely held among the religions of the world in 2011 and is increasingly rare among the religions of America. Many rabbis in Israel, and even some in North America, make pronouncements in the name of God and Torah that dismiss science, attack Jews like me, preclude respect for non-Jews, demean women, and mandate self-segregation from the larger world. We need Conservative Judaism to say loud and clear, from inside deep Jewish learning and intensive Jewish practice, that this is not the Judaism of our ancestors, not what the Torah had in mind, not the diversity-within-unity that characterized our tradition for many centuries. We must not allow ultra-Orthodoxy a monopoly on the definition of “Jew” or “religious,” must
stand up for the importance of communal norms and practices (mitzvah and halakhah), and must not allow Torah to be squeezed between extremes of fundamentalism and militant atheism. Too much is at stake in the world. Too much is at stake in our communities, our families, and our souls.

I dedicate this blog post to my students, as the season of return and renewal approaches, because they are the source of my confidence in our future. Their minds and their smartphones are working to transmit our heritage to their peers and to their elders; their souls are fired with love of Torah and the desire to serve it; their questions to me and themselves are tough, devoted, and on-target.

Thanks to all who read and responded to these posts. After the High Holidays, this blog will continue in a revised format that features more personal commentary by me, as well as spirited conversation on a wide range of issues facing the Conservative Movement and the Jewish community.

May 5772 be a good and sweet year for all of us.