

Conservative Judaism and Denominationalism

Menachem Creditor

A Denomination-less Judaism?

A denomination-less Judaism is not incoherent, but hard to imagine. This in no way reduces its potentiality for limitless creativity and power, but places an important stumbling block before its straightforward acceptance. The “just Jewish” category has always been an attractive option and seems to be growing rapidly as of late, perhaps due to the visibly limited success of the Jewish establishment, both denominational and federation-based. The response by many, typically younger, Jews to so many recognizable Jewish institutions is to run in the opposite direction, searching for meaningful, smaller creative Jewish directions. Others, sometimes daughters and sons of the inherited frameworks, struggle to find that same value within. Both end up causing strain on the system, challenging it to stretch in unexpected ways.

The debate between new expression and establishment was most succinctly demonstrated in the passionate debate between Mara Benjamin, then a postdoctoral fellow in Judaic Studies at Yale University and the prominent Jewish research team of Steven M. Cohen and Jack Wertheimer, in the October 2006 issue of *Sh'ma*. In it, Team Cohen/Wertheimer poses a “Jewish Peoplehood” version of our “Jewish Denominationalism” question to Benjamin:

We agree with you that the claims of Jewish peoplehood no longer have the same hold as in the past . . . If we read you correctly, you and we disagree over whether it is desirable to resist the erosion of connections to Jewish peoplehood. Certainly, conceptions of Jewish peoplehood must evolve so as to inspire Jews today. Like you, we too welcome a polyvocal and diverse notion of peoplehood. But unlike you (perhaps), we seek conceptions that would inspire Jews to attend to their distinctive needs as a global people, one sharing common concerns and interests, and, too often, common threats and tragedies. In our view, the dichotomy between universalism and Jewish particularism is not only false; it is also misleading and counterproductive. Empirical research finds that caring about Jews as a people and making a commitment to broader human needs are positively related.

Reframed into a denominational context, the Cohen/Wertheimer claim is that whereas movements must continue to shift in focus and structure in order to remain relevant to newer generations (each more loosely connected to any specific Jewish ideas than the generation before) the need for denominations is, if anything, more urgent than ever. For if nurturing a deep sense of the particular can increase the odds of a Jew feeling directed to be a purposeful global citizen, then the distinct idea and community of a given denomination ideally should provide a healthy launching ground for universal concern and action.

But woe to us all if Benjamin’s response should be overlooked:

Concepts such as ‘global extended family’ and ‘the chosen people’ provide us with essential language for articulating a bond that is palpable and yet tests us in its sheer abstractness. But when these ideas are translated into tools for testing loyalty rather than for opening up discussion,

we miss the point. The relevant question in this discussion is most assuredly not whether I am sufficiently concerned about the Jews and duly attentive to their needs. Merely asserting ‘connection,’ as you have invited me to do, to ‘family, community, people, and Jewish statehood’ shuts down potentially fruitful discussion precisely where it should begin. Instead, educators, policy makers, communal leaders, parents, and other laity must enter into an open debate about the critical elements and core values of the Jewish people. And they must be prepared to hear conflicting answers. Any such rigorous questioning can be productive only if it is entered into with the expectation that we will disagree about the boundaries and priorities of our people. Thus I believe we should focus not on the essentially pedagogical question of how to inculcate a commitment to Jewish peoplehood in the next generation, but the essentially philosophical and practical question of what manifold forms such a commitment to peoplehood can take. This is the spirit that can guide a useful discussion of our distinctive needs and obligations as Jews.

Too often Conservative¹ rabbis are placed in the uncomfortable role of advocating to synagogue boards the importance of continued affiliation to US CJ, the Conservative Movement’s congregational body. This is an expensive affiliation, and the ‘returns on investment’ are regularly questioned by boards entrusted with the fiduciary responsibility for their local institution. Rabbis scrounge for fading denominational nostalgia amongst a leadership mostly concerned (and charged, of course) with meeting their particular community’s spiritual and material health, knowing that what links one denominational synagogue to another is highly subjective and any examination is likely to generate as many similarities with local synagogues of other flavors as with sister denominational synagogues across state borders, not to mention discrepancies between denominational sibling communities across the globe.

Benjamin’s argument is the answer to the conundrum of denominational apathy. If the goal of today’s Conservative Jews is the support of the Conservative Movement’s institutions, we should just close up shop, for all we’d be doing is recalibrating a pedagogic approach instead of asking the big, important questions which generated Conservative Judaism in the first place. The triumphant Conservative denominational claim of “tradition and change” rings empty in the face of our modern variegated world of Feminist Orthodoxy, NeoChasidism, Traditional Reform, and untold permutations of Jewish expression.

The question for Conservative Judaism is not “how do we teach Conservative Judaism?” but “what *is* Conservative Judaism?” This question, asked with passion, conviction, and readiness for change, would turn the tide for many, many Jews looking for a spiritual home.

God/Halakhah

To limit authentic access to God to one denomination’s path, one people’s faith, is to embrace the worst of spirituality. But to abandon any discrete path’s claim to a relationship to God for fear of fundamentalism is a sad abdication of holy purposefulness. It should be, must be, possible for me to desperately – *and legitimately* – love an Infinite God

without precluding an equally infinite number of other legitimate lovers their right to connect. In fact, an Infinitely Loved God serves as the Universal Conduit for humankind to meet, to love, to finally come face to face as One without rejecting sacred individuality. My way into God, the discrete path known as Conservative Judaism, is my way to being part of the larger Jewish family. Furthermore, if belief in God can be understood as the two affirmations – a) that there is more than me in the world and b) that every individual is infused by a divine spark – then it falls upon each of us to nurture our particular souls to hear the call and act on behalf of every other in the world. The deepest religious sensibilities would then be aligned with the deepest human sensibilities, born from within a specific entry-point.

Again, adapting Benjamin's critique of the 'essentially pedagogic' questions, this approach to God serves as an argument for rigorous traditional Jewish practice based on a radically transformed theology. As opposed to the traditional understanding of *Kashrut* as a practice for Jewish separation from the wider world, this newer approach would have *Kashrut* serve as a point of Jewish mindful connection to the world. As opposed to the traditional understanding of *Tefillah* as the fulfillment of external obligations, this approach would see *Tefillah* as the strengthening of Jewish identity in service of God's universe. The differences are sizable though outward appearances might appear the same. Whereas the original rationales for traditional observance see particularism as the highest ideal, this newer framework seeks a universalism strengthened by each holy voice. Judaism's voice is rapturous, and improving mastery of a particular Jewish voice, when wed to the yearning for a better world, is redemptive and, dare I say, compelling.

Conservative Judaism

This could provide an 'essentially philosophical and practical' approach for recapturing the spirit of Conservative Judaism, allowing a new underpinning to buttress the blend of ethics and halacha that have defined Conservative Judaism, sometimes against the wishes of the leaders of that very denomination.

As Rabbi Judith Hauptman has advocated:

[In the 1970's and 80's, on the question of egalitarianism, the Conservative movement's leadership instituted a series of halachic changes affording women] the honor of leading the community in prayer and teaching the sacred texts of the past. It was at this point that the Conservative movement lost its moorings. In the wake of its egalitarian transformation, the leaders needed to actively advocate the point of view that this change fulfilled the mandate of the founders, that it was the highest order of good. They needed to tell people that Conservative Judaism was about holding on to the practices of the past – Shabbat, kashrut, daily prayer, study of Jewish texts and so on – but that it was also about responding to evolving ethical sensitivities of the present. They needed to say that this accommodation would ratchet up Judaism to a new level, one predicted by the prophets of old and not realized until the 20th century. But they failed to do so. Instead of aggressively promoting equality for women as a grand and welcome new ethical truth, the leaders gave a choice to Conservative synagogues: to integrate or not to integrate women into leadership roles. Both options remained equal-

ly valid. If the Conservative movement wants to stop losing members, it needs to clarify its moral vision. It must withdraw permission to be anything other than fair to women. Talmudists like me know with precision that feminist changes, and others on the agenda like the ordination of gays as rabbis, are all doable within the framework of halacha. . . . Until the Conservative movement articulates its message of an ethically driven halacha, which is, at bottom, what makes Judaism so appealing to so many, it will continue to have difficulty attracting adherents. I pray the new leadership will rise to the challenge. If it does, it will shore up the movement, thereby preserving an excellent choice for American Jews.

Hauptman's claiming the concept of Conservative Judaism as an 'ethically driven *halakhah*' is both traditional and revolutionary. Whereas it is clear that, as Rabbi Elie Spitz has taught:

As a halachic movement we look to precedent to find the tools with which to shape Torah. For the most part, we rely on the strategies of old. At the same time, we are willing to do explicitly what was largely implicit in the past, namely, to make changes when needed on moral grounds. It is our desire to strengthen Torah that forces us to recognize explicitly the overriding importance of morality, a morality which we learn from the larger, unfolding narrative of our tradition. (EH 4.2000a)

However, it has also been pointed out by Rabbi Elliot Dorff that in Rabbi Joel Roth's methodology for justifying the ordination of women in the Conservative Movement, the very codification of the change Hauptman claims as evidence of an ethically driven *halakhah*, Roth "based his argument solely on what he could find in precedents *without mentioning morality as even one of several motivating factors for the change.*"²

Whereas Hauptman has likely hit the proverbial nail on the head with her pithy description of Conservative Judaism,³ she has also imposed a new idea onto a system that has resisted any definition at all. When, in 1946, Rabbi Robert Gordis became president of the Rabbinical Assembly and founded the journal "Conservative Judaism" as a clear indication of a movement with a distinctive philosophy, the title was strongly opposed by several faculty members of JTS on the ground that it introduced divisiveness into the Jewish life. "I am a Jew without labels," one colleague said.⁴ And as recently as 2006, Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson has asked, "If we can only be a Movement with those who think, talk, and practice precisely as we do, then what hope is there for embracing the entire Jewish people, let alone all humanity?"⁵ Within the sixty years between these two vignettes, the driving to shul, egalitarianism, and gay ordination have become *halakhic* for Conservative Jews. While there remains a diversity of practice, and healthy debate between denominational leaders, modern Conservative Judaism is identifiable with Solomon Schechter's concept only as much as a *tallit*-and-*kippah*-wearing female Reform rabbi is identifiable with the menu-deciders of the Pittsburgh banquet, as much as Religious Zionists are identifiable with the yeshiva world of Volozhin, perhaps only as much as Rabbi Akiva's teaching was identifiable with Moses.⁶

In other words, *Hauptman's vision is Conservative Judaism.*

There are, of course, important balances to this philosophy of responsive traditionalism, including deliberately strengthening the integrity of the *halakhic* system while celebrating every ethical advance. If Conservative Judaism affirms malleability of inherited

Jewish legal codes, then the ideological construct should be no less vulnerable to scrutiny.

And if this is the case, then all the more so the institutions of Conservative Judaism should be subject to critical analysis, retaining core elements while shifting form over time. When a group of Toronto synagogues recently broke away from the USCJ to form the Canadian Council of Conservative Synagogues (CCCS), they claimed that “the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism is not the Conservative Movement.” They were correct. The USCJ, created in a time of centralized national headquarters might perhaps be an outdated model, unable to meet the needs of a movement with less need for centralization.

Institutional structures, ideologies, and practices are not sacrosanct. But they can be sublime when they work.

The authenticity of a denominational voice and the parameters by which it is defined must include the wisdom gained by experience and an expansive openness to the innovative needs of every generation of spiritual seekers.

I Believe

I am a proud Conservative Jew.

This, of course, has many implications – some surprising, some predictable. It means, for some, that I have aligned with a denominational framework in the face of increasing strength within independent and trans-/non-denominational communities and rabbinical schools. I choose to see my commitment as a statement of faith in a resurgent Conservative Movement, finally laying claim to its legacy as an ethical/*halakhic* Jewish ideal, capturing the imaginations of many, many people.

Whereas new movements may reveal themselves in the years to come, I see them in much the same way as I see several *minyanim* under one roof. Different entry points for deepening Jewish identity are good for the Jews, and good for the world. If a meditation *minyan* can coexist with a *halakhically* structured *minyan*, simultaneous to Adult Torah study and *kiddush* preparation in one shul, new denominations defined by a deepening Jewish experience can and should claim – and be granted – a place at the table. We do not dream of a uniform vision for the future. Rather, the future of Judaism should be found, as suggested by Gerson Cohen, the former Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary (which remains to this day one of my *axes mundi*), in its “varieties.”

For me, the question of denominational identity begins and ends with God. Does my denomination increase the sense of God in the world? This should determine its worth, a separate question from its institutional viability. A gross misunderstanding of the Jewish world leads to the idea that denominations must continue to exist in perpetuity or all is lost. This simply ignores the evolving consciousness, and therefore the unfolding civilization Judaism has always been, and must continue to be.

Pharisees weren't quite rabbis, priests were determinedly not Pharisees, and yet we teach – and claim – uninterrupted authenticity. When the rabbinic imagination tells the story of Moses' inability to understand Rabbi Akiva, *who teaches in Moses' very name*, every denomination's leaders and members should read very closely. Akiva is a later religious leader, as are we in comparison. Our worlds resemble each other because rootedness in Torah (our sacred center) and God (our spiritual trajectory) remain the same. The very terms mean different things in every generation, but when a denomination changes its rootedness or its trajectory, it abdicates Jewish authenticity. What I mean by God is not the same One who, in Moses' vision, denies culpability while Akiva reads the *Shema* and has his flesh played until he dies.⁷ When I invoke Torah I refer to the unfolding narrative of the

Jewish people, not restricted to a corpus of inherited text. I also do not consider myself free to choose which parts of tradition fit my life best. I am a Conservative Jew, and I believe that means I am commanded by an evolving ethical sacred system.

Conservative Judaism is the framework in which I experience the deepest commitment to our people's source and dreams. This does not mean that I deny authenticity elsewhere. It rather affirms my sense of home within the world of Conservative Judaism. In any other home I would feel like a visitor. I could perhaps adjust, as we attempt when moving into a new home. And perhaps in time I will, if our institutional establishment shifts. But I'll need my books, my family photographs with me in order to know that I'm truly home. I'll need those things that I've fallen in love with through my life's journey as a Conservative Jew.

Some have suggested that Conservative Judaism is a "lab," where our successful "products" are experienced without the brand of their birth-context. Reconstructionism, the JCC movement, and the Chavurah movement were each born from within the Conservative Movement. In fact, most of the trans-/post-denominational phenomenon is also being led by "products" of the Conservative Movement.⁸ This makes me very proud, and keeps me humble. A denomination is, after all, utilitarian. It serves to strengthen the particular spiritual identity of its affiliated communities in an effort to work for the betterment of the world.

I do hope for, and work towards, a healthy Conservative Movement. The idea of Conservative Judaism could live without institutions. But Conservative Jewish institutions need to be (or become) compelling in order to endure. But we can do much better than endure. Conservative Judaism is a particular path to God, a spiritually demanding and rewarding journey which deserves better institutional support and leadership than it has received in recent memory.

If Conservative Judaism continues to exist (and I believe it will), it will be because large numbers of Jews and their families will know their roots and dreams are cherished, challenged, and loved by an institutional system as responsive as the sacred tradition from which it was born.

¹ I can speak best from my own perspective, but imagine that, at times, other denominational clergy experience similar situations.

² Dorff, *For the Love of God and People: A Philosophy of Jewish Law* (JPS 2007), p. 57 (emphasis mine).

³ For an earlier version of Hauptman's approach, see Seymour Siegel who suggested that the healthy limitations of behavior (i.e., *halakhah*) should be judged by their "fairness." ("Conservative Judaism and Jewish Law," p. xxiii).

⁴ Gordis, "The Struggle for Self-Definition within Conservative Judaism," reprinted in the *Shefa Journal* (Vol. 1, pp. 60-72), accessible at www.shefanetwork.org.

⁵ *USCJ Review*, Fall/Winter 2006.

⁶ BT Menaḥot 29b.

⁷ Though, perhaps, the rabbis were challenging the very notion of God accepting (let alone decreeing) Akiva's fate. (See also BT Berakhot 61b for the challenge of God coming from the angels instead of Moses.)

⁸ For example, Hebrew College (David Gordis, Art Green), CLAL (Irwin Kula), and Mechon Hadar (Ethan Tucker, Elie Kaunfer, Shai Held).