



Rabbi Weiner's March 2007 Bulletin Article

Last January (2006) I wrote to the congregation with some thoughts regarding the future of Conservative Judaism. At the time, Jewish media was regularly reporting on a large drop in membership, our lack of passion, and our “crisis of confidence.” Some even went on to predict (some happily, others with great sadness) our eventual demise as a significant force in American Jewish life.

I responded to these concerns with optimism. I believe in our values, and our religious perspective. I also believe that when we refrain from labels and simply ask Jews how they feel about Jewish life, Jewish observance, and Jewish responsibility, their responses articulate a vision of Judaism that is fully consistent with what we stand for. Respect for Jewish law, commitment to the traditional liturgy, a reverence for Jewish life, and an acceptance of the need for religious standards, especially at key points of our lives—these are where many if not most American Jews who have not fully assimilated find themselves. The question is not only whether they are practicing these ideals in their everyday life, but whether they expect their institutions to maintain them.

The recent controversy regarding the decision of the committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly (the Professional Organization of the worldwide Conservative Rabbinate) regarding the subject of the ordination of Gay and Lesbian Rabbis, and Rabbinic officiating at commitment ceremonies has demonstrated to many the inherent weaknesses and difficulties inherent in our movement. After all, what does it mean to be part of a movement where a majority accepts such a decision, and yet a sizable minority rejects it. Complicating matters is that each claims that their position is not only consistent with, but mandated by Jewish law. If the Rabbis themselves cannot make up their minds, what message is sent to those who look to us for guidance and inspiration? Last year I based my hope and confidence in the future on our respect and acceptance of Jewish Law as a fundamental principle, our devotion to Klal Israel (the Jewish community in its broadest sense), and our record of support for the State of Israel. But can these principles convince the layperson of our viability when it seems that we cannot reach consensus over such a basic issue?

I have spent a great deal of time wrestling with these issues this past year. (Especially as I and our synagogue have always occupied a more traditional perspective in a movement that is perceived as drifting to the left) Yet

nonetheless, just as last year I remain optimistic, and hopeful. For the first time some of our best minds are thinking not only of numbers and percentages, but about our message and how we share it with those who perceive themselves as Conservative Jews. At the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, the recently elected Chancellor is on a “listening tour” where he has earned rave reviews for his desire to hear the concerns of both leaders as well as the lay community. He has also made known his intention to maintain the pluralistic nature of our movement. New voices are emerging that have heard both the critique from without, as well as the concern from within and are committed to improving our ability to articulate the significance of our religious perspective, and answer the basic questions people have regarding Conservative Judaism. It’s a start, but an important one. Certain historical and sociological trends helped build and increase our type of Judaism in the Post WWII era. Now there are new factors and challenges that are understood as working against us. I am betting that we will be strong enough to transcend them successfully.

It’s going to be a bumpy ride. Occupying the theological middle ground is never comfortable, but ultimately, most satisfying. And I remain confident that we will emerge from this period of challenge stronger and better able to address the real religious needs of those we serve.



Jewish Community Center of Paramus
E. 304 Midland Ave., Paramus NJ 07652
Phone: (201) 262-7691 Fax: (201) 262-6516
© 2007 Jewish Community Center of Paramus