



Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

FINDING STRENGTH IN A CHALLENGING WORLD

We have lived through a very difficult series of years. Assaults from without and within have besieged our beloved State of Israel. Forces within North America – both internal and external, have buffeted around the Jewish community, and we in the Conservative Movement have faced particular challenges as well. Recently the UJC spent \$6 million to create a demographic study of the Jewish population. The findings have been criticized, but the salient issues for us as Conservative Jews is that the numbers demonstrate a continuing decline in our total. Even if that trend is exaggerated, even if our numbers are merely constant, it does show, relative to the other movements, a lack of numerical growth. Yet, at the same time, that same study shows that Conservative Jews are growing in their learning, their observance, and their intensity. We are becoming a leaner, more passionate, and less flabby movement. We are becoming, finally, a movement that takes that takes our own integrity and the holiness of Torah seriously. Some may decry the lack of numbers; I do not. I celebrate our renewed strength and our living up to our convictions and our promise. This intensification offers a sign of long-term hope, which should encourage us all.

But I'd like us to address contemporary challenges, and then look to Judaism to see what comfort and what strength we can derive. In thinking about the challenges that we face in the world, I'd like to suggest the following:

We Jews, like most moderns, are challenged by the rampant consumerism that is threatening to absorb and dissolve all moral values in today's world. Ultimately we, as human beings, have two very simple choices: We can either approach the world as consumers, asking ourselves "what's in this for me?" and reducing all human activity to a transaction, or we can approach our relationships in a spirit of service. In that case, rather than asking, "What's in this for me?" we would ask ourselves, "What do I have to give?" "How can I be of help?" "How can I bring healing and sustenance, nurturing, and hope?" All of us in the modern world live in a remarkable economy that is driven by consumerism, and our consumerism extends even to the way people conduct their religious lives. During the High Holy Day period, you know as I do that hundreds of thousands of American Jews engage in what they brazenly call "shul Shopping," in which the choice of what religious community to join is treated no differently than the question of what shoes to purchase, or what car to drive. The consumerism that has generated the economic miracle and the high material standard of living that we

rightfully celebrate has, at the same time, produced spiritual barrenness, as everything is reduced to a commodity, and all of our choices a mere exchange.

No surprise, then, that we have reduced human beings to mere objects. We evaluate people for their potential worth – and by “worth” we mean their ability to perform economically, to rise to social prominence, to impose themselves on our attention. Some people, by that calculus, matter more and some matter less, but all of us are cheapened as a result. Have you watched the way young people speak to old people? Mostly, they don’t. But when they do, they speak slowly and they shout, as though being old implies being stupid. Have you looked at the way children with special needs are ignored when they walk through a hallway, or into a room? Sometimes these children are noticed only long enough for the parents to be told to remove the offending child. In so many ways we have joined a culture in which some people matter more than others, and some people are simply invisible, while others are allowed into our presence provisionally, provided that what is unique and special about them remains outside the room. The reduction of human beings to objects is the logical outcome of the rampant consumerism that afflicts us all.

All of these, I believe, are constrained by the flattening secularism that grows increasingly strong with each passing year. To publicly espouse religious virtues and religious values is to mark one as hopelessly benighted and backward in some circles, and public displays of religiosity termed “dangerous” in many circles. Because of that animosity toward faith, public discussions seldom reflect the deep aspirations and hopes of our best possibilities, instead reducing themselves to cost-benefit analyses. Even within Jewish circles, this mistrust of public religiosity constricts our vision. I spoke recently to a group of influential Jews who displayed to me their horror at our continuing insistence on using Hebrew in our prayers. They said to me, “But Jews today don’t speak Hebrew!” I asked them, “When you attend an opera, do you criticize Verdi for being performed in Italian? Do you think about how much better Shakespeare would be if rewritten by the Reader’s Digest?” Why is it that it is only when it comes to the classical heritage of Torah, Siddur, and Talmud, that our expectation is not that we should grow in learning, but that we should dilute the tradition? If we approach encounters as consumers, it is certainly our right to expect to have to make no effort to grow into our religion. Consumerism is the primary threat to Judaism today.

The second great threat is radical autonomy. By “radical autonomy” I mean the mistaken notion that each individual can have an identity separate from the people around us, and that it is therefore possible and meaningful to be able to make decisions about our own self-interest separate from the wellbeing of the people we love. We live in a culture that encourages that kind of delusion, that encourages people to think only of themselves, to look out, as they say, for Number One. Pursing personal self interest, we are surprised to discover that radically-autonomous people can feel radically isolated, lonely, and unable to connect! This isolation is so chronic that many people cry out for ways to reach each other, and often turn to false satisfactions on the Internet, to chat rooms, and then are surprised when their loneliness persists.

And the third threat that flattens our humanity is the ever-growing indifference that afflicts our culture. I live in a major urban center, and to live in a city means that when you choose to go out to dinner you literally step over starving people to enter your restaurant. In order to survive, we train ourselves not to see what has become – in our eyes – human trash. We treat these people as unworthy. We harden our hearts, and we deaden our souls to disregard the hungry, to despise the illiteracy and the suffering that pervades our cities. We harden our hearts so that we don't see children starving in Africa; so that we don't feel the pain of the victims of terror in Israel; so that we don't have to deal with the humanity of other human beings. If we emerge from this convention with nothing else, my friends, I pray that we leave with circumcised hearts, hearts that are once again open to feeling the pain and the yearning of other human beings.

I'm afraid at this point that I will sound hopelessly old-fashioned. The solution that I would propose to the callous indifference of modern culture, to the rampant materialism that deadens our souls and threatens our minds, to the flattening secularism that would strip us of holy days and the cycles of times celebrating the sacred, is nothing less than a reaffirmation of the traditional convictions of Judaism. (Let me now remind you, that Conservative Judaism was founded not to be a branch of liberal religion, but to be a reassertion of traditional religion. We are to be traditional Judaism under the guise of social freedom.) We take our cue from Torah in the broadest sense, from the classical literature of our prophets, sages and rabbis throughout the ages. So permit me to remind you of the five affirmations that remain our strength, our grounding and our core:

- The first of these is God. In life we face a simple choice: We can live as though our lives are mere happenstance; as though being alive is simply a meaningless fluke of cosmic evolution signifying nothing and ending soon enough with our personal extinction. There is some evidence to support that cynical and hopeless view. Our tradition has affirmed, however, that we are nothing less than an eruption of the Divine in the world, that we have been summoned into being by a living and good Creator who blesses us with the gifts of consciousness, life, and connection. For us, the universe is a reflection of the divinity of God, "*Ha-shamayim mesaprim k'vod El*, "The heavens, declared the glory of God" when we learn to look at them with Hebrew eyes. When we look to the stars we see the miracle of an ordered cosmos; one that was, as it were, **designed** for human habitation; one that has flowed in a cascade of life, diversity, and love, to create a world that would support human energy and human ingenuity. The cornerstone of our understanding is that the Holy One is the fundamental reality calling to us, beckoning to us, guiding us. We affirm that God, in a spontaneous and unnecessary outpouring of love, created all that exists.
- The second affirmation on which we stand, is that the world is not simply meaningless and coincidental, but is purposeful creation. We affirm that, in creating the world, God gives us a role to play in its continuous unfolding. We understand creation to be not something that happened in the past, but to be a

dynamic and continuing process, an evolution of life, a symphony of difference of which we are to be the stewards, the conscience, and the caretakers.

- We affirm that God's love is manifest for us not only in the natural world around us, not only in the starry skies above us, but that God's love for us is concretized and made manifest in the gift of Torah. And here I wish to say, boldly, that Conservative Judaism affirms that the Torah is the Word of God. We are also a Movement that says, equally boldly, that the Torah is not the *words* of God. (There is all the difference in the world between those two positions.) We know God to be the energy that creates through the words of the Torah, that the Torah is the place where God and Israel meet. We, too, are active partners in the creation of Torah, and it is for that reason that we turn to Torah to again encounter God. We Conservative Jews turn to Torah, not out of antiquarian interests, and not simply to be window-dressing for our own predilections, but as a place to have a serious and nuanced encounter with the generations that have listened for God in Torah in the ages past. We turn to the Book and the process that is Torah, ultimately, to encounter the God who flutters above each and every page. My teacher, Rabbi Simon Greenberg, taught me to define Judaism as the Jewish people's application of Torah to life. The translation of Torah from book to life is the task of every generation of Jews, implying that we are bound to the Torah and bound by the Torah. We receive our marching orders through the Torah, as we interpret and understand it to be a reflection of God. Which means, of course, that for us the multiplication of *mitzvot*, the 613 Biblical commandments, the hundreds and thousands of additional rabbinic commandments, these – for us – are each of them signs of God's love for us and our love for God. Maimonides points out that the *mitzvot* served three purposes: The first of them, he says, is inner peace. Many of the *mitzvot* are designed to create a quiet corner in your soul where you can contemplate and know yourself, and through that knowledge come to know the one who called you into being. The second purpose of *mitzvot*, Rambam teaches, is of social order. The Torah is a profoundly political book. Because human beings are intrinsically social, we need each other's company, we live in each other's presence, and so much of the Torah is a book that reminds us to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to shelter the homeless. And then the third purpose of the *mitzvot*, say Rambam, is to procure for us *olam haba*, the coming world. I understand this reference in two ways: *Olam haba* is the world that comes after we are no longer living in this world, but it is also the taste of eternity whenever we are able to create access to it. When we light Shabbat candles, we live for that moment in *olam haba* in this world. When we sit in a *Sukkah* we enter a timeless space that is *olam haba* now. When we convene in this hall and we celebrate 90 years of United Synagogue bringing traditional Judaism to North America and around the world in a spirit of enlightenment and openness, that is a taste of *olam haba*, now.
- God's love through Torah and *mitzvot*, are given (here comes the fourth affirmation), not to the rabbis, not to the cantors, not to the educators, and not to the synagogue administrators. God gave the Torah to the entire Jewish people – men, women, and children. One of the most interesting laws I know about Torah

is that when you cause a Torah to be written, a Torah that omits as little as a single letter is *pasul* –not permissible to use for ritual purposes. The Torah is like *Am Yisrael* (the Jewish people) – when as little as a single Jew is not allowed into the room, then we as a community are *pasul* – we have invalidated ourselves for ritual use; we are no longer vessels of God’s holiness. Our Torah is a Torah of fullness, of inclusion, of welcome, and of love. And we must reflect that fullness and that inclusion by welcoming into our midst all of our brothers and sisters – every one. *Am Yisrael* is not simply a fact, but a locus of holiness. Which means we as Conservative Jews must celebrate and affirm the life of Jewish communities everywhere that Jews live.

- We must remain open to expressions of affirmations of Jewish life from all segments of the Jewish world, and most supremely of all in this age of assault, we must stand with our brothers and sisters in Israel. The miracle of an autonomous, Jewish nation in our own land is so grand that it has almost escaped our attention! We treat Israel as a fact, when indeed Israel is an eruption of the Divine into the world. Let it be stated here and now, that this Assembly, with this Movement, will not be separated from our love for Zion, and our solidarity with Israel.
- Last of the five affirmations – Judaism has always affirmed that we are visitors here; that our true reality is spiritual, and that we are sent into material creation to care for it, to nurture it, to learn from it, and then to bring those lessons home. You are undercover agents, the brothers (and sisters) from another planet. You are meant to be here to be *sh’lichim* (messengers) for God’s, advocates for God’s vision. Your task is to live in this world and this life from the perspective of the Divine, knowing that our story does not end with our mortality; that there is a life beyond in which we will live truly and eternally in the mind of the One who made us.

Integration, perfection and holiness.: these are the tools that Judaism, traditionally understood, has brought to a world desperately in need of healing. In a world that would seek to obliterate the divine image in human beings, Judaism has affirmed that God has fashioned all human beings as images of the Divine. In a world that would seek to worship wealth, and power, and pomp, Torah has reminded us of the quiet and abiding beauty of holiness. And in a world that seeks to value conquest and might, Judaism hallows the small and private sacred deeds of lovingkindness and of justice. Let us then recommit ourselves as traditional Jews, as Conservative Jews, to the life of the mind, and the heart, and the soul, in the service of God through Torah, so that we, like those who have gone before us, can bring God’s light into the world, and make of this world a place worthy of our children’s presence.
Shalom.

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