

Opinion

Conservative Movement In Flux

A Commitment To Diversity.

Rabbi Jerome Epstein

The new survey of Conservative movement reaction to recent decisions of its Committee on Jewish Laws and Standards clearly shows that the majority of respondents support the committee's work.

The survey, conducted by Professor Steven M. Cohen, went mainly to Conservative movement clergy, lay leaders and Jewish professionals. It found that significant majorities of respondents support the ordination of rabbis and the investment of cantors who are gay or lesbian.

The survey can be seen as a constructive tool that will provide guidance to their schools in formulating admission policies.

The Conservative movement's new landscape, as revealed by the survey, is a reality, but we need a new map as we learn to navigate it. Its paths may not be clear to some of us, and for others of us they might be frightening. Still others might find it simply unpleasant — and make their disapproval clear. The challenge is not to convince them that they are wrong or that they should change, but to help them accept the new reality by the way we attend to their concerns.

The fact that two-thirds of our clergy and laypeople sampled are in favor of the ordination of gay or lesbian rab-

bis and the investiture of gay or lesbian cantors shows that there is great support in the movement for accepting gays and lesbians in our seminaries. But we dare not ignore the full quarter of our clergy and laity who reject such ordination and investiture.

The fact that 63 percent of our clergy and 68 percent of our laity approve of same-sex commitment ceremonies is an indication of how broad the support for such change is. Yet the 28 percent of our clergy and 23 percent of our laity disapprove. That represents a large number of people.

The fact that nearly two-thirds of the sample was prepared to accept gays and lesbians as Camp Ramah counselors or United Synagogue Youth directors indicates significant acceptance. But the 20 percent who reject gays or lesbians in these roles are not trivial. In civil life, behavior and action are effectively decided by majority rule. In matters of religion, however, we are concerned not only with behavior and action but also with feelings and beliefs. We must not permit ourselves the delusion that legislation will govern feelings. People will believe ac-

ording to the way each one believes he or she hears the word of God.

In this realm, individual understandings are as

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'Often, change involves taking important themes and values from the past and putting them into a new context.'

The End Of Conservative Judaism.

Michael J. Broyde

Special To The Jewish Week

The Conservative Rabbinical Assembly's Law Committee announced nearly three months ago that Conservative Judaism will ordain homosexual rabbis, and while a lot of ink was spilled explaining this decision and its ramifications, I saw little long-term analysis. This, hopefully will fill that gap. I view the leftward move of Conservative Judaism as a positive development for American Jewry — quite literally, it is the end of the beginning of Judaism in America and now we can finally grow into adulthood as a Jewish community.

The truth is that there is a grand divide in the Jewish community worldwide between two groups: those who think that Jewish law (halacha) is really, truly, binding and those who do not. This division is both religiously and culturally important — it reflects a basic worldview about what being Jewish really means. Throughout the world, other than in the United States, this distinction formed the basic denominational divide and one could well understand the need for almost a schism over this issue.

Not so in America. For many decades, Conservative Judaism sought to bridge this gap, with a promise that was too good to be true. You could obey Jewish law, Conservative Judaism claimed, but ultimately Jewish



'For reasons that are historical and logical, Conservative Judaism is nearly finished as a movement.'

law was sufficiently malleable that whatever large segments of the Jewish community wanted was shown to be permissible, and whatever struck large segments of Conservative Jewry as wrong became prohibited. Indeed, the Conservative rabbinate has consistently delivered on that promise, whether it be driving to synagogue on Shabbat (permissible), smoking (prohibited) egalitarianism (permissible) and now homosexuality (permissible).

This approach gave deep comfort to a number of generations of Jews who felt complex yearnings to comply with Jewish law, but yet a profound inability to adhere to Orthodox standards in fact. One could have his cake and eat it, too, in the Conservative movement. For decades, Conservative Judaism was the largest denomination in America, even as it was

nearly nonexistent outside the U.S. and on deeply shaky intellectual footing in terms of technical Jewish law.

Conservative Judaism is nearly finished as a movement, I suspect, and the decision to permit homosexual conduct will only hasten its demise. The reasons are historical and logical. As the generations of Jewry that recall and romanticize life in Europe — either directly or through a parent — age and ultimately pass, fewer and fewer people who do not observe Jewish law as a central component of their live have an interest in even being told that their conduct is consistent with Jewish law.

Those who seek to observe God's word through halacha see the obvious — what Conservative Judaism is doing in the

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vital and valid as majority wills. Consensus must not be perceived as the implied consent of the minority.

At the same time, we must be careful to understand the difference between principled, religiously based rejection of the Law Committee's liberal decision and simple homophobia. We as a movement must reject homophobia as we do any other irrational hatred.

The Conservative movement is committed to face the challenge of creating new landscapes to inspire Jews in each generation. Often, change involves taking important themes and values from the past and putting them into a new context. We are committed to doing that. At the same time, we are committed to the reality that

the new landscape that results may not be immediately acceptable to many of our members, and it may never be acceptable to some.

Therefore, we must help all our members feel comfortable with the new possibilities and feel free to either accept or reject them. In the weeks since the Law Committee's decisions were made, I have received phone calls and e-mails from congregants who are not in the majority. They have told me of their fear that the movement or their synagogue will marginalize them because of their beliefs. They ask not to be condemned or cast out by the majority because their religious beliefs do not allow them to accept the majority's conclusion. We cannot allow them to be lost to us. If

Conservative Judaism is to remain true to its commitment to pluralism, then we must live that pluralism.

I can suggest at least three ways to start. First, we must learn truly to welcome diversity. We feel comfortable by associating with those who share our beliefs and values. To create unity out of diversity, we must accept our differences of opinion as an instrument in forming a more complete community by welcoming and embracing differences. A person is not wrong just because he disagrees with us.

Second, we must learn actively to encourage diversity. Those who reflect an unpopular opinion are often made to feel uncomfortable. We must change our language and invite those who disagree with

us to contribute to our unity through diversity by saying "Can you help me understand how you reach that conclusion?" Or, "I have a different belief on that point — but let's see where we agree." Third, we must learn genuinely to celebrate diversity.

We often view it as a weakness; our society prefers black or white, but in the real world colors combine and blend. It is the unity that is reflected in that blend — not gray, but a bright new color — one that is most authentic. When we reflect this true unity, we should be proud of it. ■

Rabbi Jerome M. Epstein is executive vice president of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, one of the commissioners of the study.

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name of Jewish law is bogus as a matter of Jewish law. On the other hand, those who do not seek to observe halacha find little comfort in being told that Jewish law can be reinterpreted to allow what is being done. There is no market left for Conservative Judaism.

So now that American Jewry has outgrown its adolescence, I predict a rosy future of two denominations, with many subcultures within each of these denominations. There will be one denomination

(called "Liberal" in most of the world) that denies that Jewish law is binding.

Of course, within that Liberal group there will be many different cultures, some of which still adhere to many of the frameworks of historical prayer (from laying tefillin to Hebrew prayer and public Torah reading) and others who are more creative and less traditional (from guitars in worship to services in the vernacular). Indeed, there will even be some in this group that

observe Jewish law, but deny that one has to. The common intellectual predicate will be that Jewish law is no more binding than any other historical legal system.

There will also be a second denomination (called "Traditional" in most of the world) that observes halacha religiously. Just as within the Liberal group there will be no cultural monopoly, so too here. The community of those who maintain fealty to the law will be quite broad — and it will even have a group that does not actually observe Jewish law, but merely wishes to. However, what unites this group is deep fidelity to Jewish law as the touchstone of all religious, ethical and legal decisions.

What will happen to Conservative Judaism, you ask? Nothing in the short run. In the long run, Conservative synagogues, institutions, rabbis and communities will

generally drift more and more visibly into the Reform community. Conservative synagogues will become institutions that are ideologically Reform with more traditional liturgy and practice.

Eventually, a merger will take place. A small number of Conservative synagogues will become Orthodox, as faced with the choice of abandoning Jewish law or clinging to it tighter, they will chose the latter.

All of this, I think, is a change for the better. The reorganization of American Jewry along the lines of acceptance or rejection of Jewish law will only help people make important choices in their own religious life.

We, as a community, will have entered our adulthood. ■

Michael J. Broyde is a law professor at Emory University and an Orthodox rabbi.

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