

# Conservative Judaism

Vol. XLIII, No. 2 Winter 1990-91

A Publication of The Rabbinical Assembly

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### ON OUR COVER

This cast bronze oil-burning *Hanukkiyah*, made in eighteenth-century Holland, incorporates pitchers of oil into its design, and is topped by a crown.

*From the collection of the Jewish Museum, New York.*

# The Changing Paradigm of the Conservative Rabbi

*Neil Gillman*

My scholarly interest in the ideology of Conservative Judaism dates from the academic year 1983-84 when I was asked to teach a required Rabbinical School course on that topic. The history of that course is itself a striking commentary on the Seminary's engagement with our movement. The course was offered for the very first time just fifteen years earlier (about eighty-five years after the founding of the Seminary!), in the academic year 1974-75, when it was taught by our late colleague, Professor Seymour Siegel *z"l*. Dr. Siegel taught it for eight years; Chancellor Schorsch taught it in 1982-83; and I taught it for six years, from '83-'84 to '88-'89. It is no longer offered as a separate course; but much of its material is now included in the required Seminar which is the heart of the new Rabbinical School curriculum, on which more later.

I recall vividly the frustration, amounting almost to a sense of paralysis, which overwhelmed me as the start of the semester drew near and the course was to begin. I had mounds of data. What I did *not* have was a conceptualization, a structure, a way of organizing the material into a meaningful whole. That structure finally came to me, rather suddenly as I recall, in one of those flashes of insight that every scholar hopes for and treasures. In time, it led to a number of articles and a book-length manuscript, which will be published next year.

First, a commonplace. The Seminary was the founding institution of the Conservative movement. It created the movement. And during the movement's formative years, at least until the mid-forties of this century when the Rabbinical Assembly began to assert its independence, it dominated the movement. What is less of a commonplace, however, is the immediate corollary of that earlier claim, which is that, for better or for worse, the culture of the Seminary decisively shaped the culture of the movement: the Seminary got the movement it wanted.

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From the outset, the decisive influence on the culture of the Seminary was its commitment to the *Wissenschaft* style of scholarship. For the school's founding fathers, as for their predecessors in Europe, *Wissenschaft* was more than simply a scholarly methodology, more even than an ideology. It was nothing less than their ticket of admission into the emancipation, into modernity and into the intellectual community of the West. The symbol of that integration would be the introduction of Jewish studies into the academic agenda of the modern university and its scholarly community. That could be achieved only if Judaism would be studied by the very same canons of scholarship used for the study of any other culture or body of literature. *Wissenschaft* was perceived as making Judaism *worthy* of belonging to the modern West, worthy of being respected.

Thus, though Seminary rhetoric trumpeted its claim to be both a great academy *and* the "fountainhead" of an American religious movement, it was in fact, mainly the former. Just look at the Rabbinical School curriculum, at the way texts or history were studied in class, at the publications of its faculty, at the criteria for faculty appointments, or at the symbolism of what it always called—note well—its Commencement Exercises, with its academic robes, its "degrees in course" and the rest.

In retrospect, it is clear that Chancellor Finkelstein's primary goal was to make the Seminary into the successor of the great academies of learning that have dotted Jewish history from Palestine in the first century to Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. If the goal was to have the Seminary serve as the newest link in the 2000-year-old chain of great centers of Talmud Torah, *that* goal was achieved. If the goal was to open Judaism to serious intellectual and scholarly inquiry in a modern vein, *that* goal was achieved, and achieved spectacularly. The dramatic symbol of that achievement? Louis Ginzberg's honorary degree at Harvard's tercentenary celebration in 1936. A Talmudist! At Harvard! Almost singlehandedly, Seminary graduates and their students can take credit for creating the cadre of academicians that populated the steadily increasing Departments of Jewish studies in American universities and in Israel as well. For these accomplishments, we should be particularly grateful. It should also be acknowledged that for all of the school's problems, studying at the Seminary was a scintillating intellectual experience.

But the inevitable trade-off of that accomplishment was the impact of this style of scholarship on the Seminary's *religious* posture, on its role as the fountainhead of a religious movement, and on the Conservative rabbinate. Whatever else the rabbi was—scholar, *posek*, pastor, educator, administrator—he (and in those days, the rabbi was *only* a "he") was surely to serve as a *religious* role model. But what standing did Jewish *religion* have in a school dominated by the scientific, critical and historical mind-set of a faculty committed to *Wissenschaft*; in a school whose culture was increasingly secularized? A Seminary rabbinical education did many things rather well. The one thing it did *not* do in any kind of systematic way was *religious*

education. Paradoxically, then, rabbinic education at the Seminary was subversive. Not only did it neglect to train the rabbi for his main role; it actually *undermined* his ability to function in that role. For the better part of the century, the Seminary-trained rabbi was a prisoner of his education.

Equally paradoxically, the second major shaping impulse behind the culture of the Seminary, its halakhic traditionalism, did nothing to alleviate this subversion. If anything, it exacerbated it by further confusing its implicit message. For we all wondered: How do you combine a critical approach to Torah and halakhic traditionalism? Either Torah is the explicit word of God, in which case halakhah is eternally binding (but you don't study it critically) or Torah is a cultural document which you *can* study critically (but then why is its halakhah eternally binding?). The only way to resolve that tension is by attacking, frontally, the theological assumptions behind the entire enterprise: the nature of God, the status of Torah, revelation, the authority of the mitzvot and the rest. But with the exception of Mordecai Kaplan, nobody at the Seminary "did" modern Jewish theology. Finally, as the Conservative rabbi soon learned, certainly until the post-war years, halakhic traditionalism just did not work in the real world outside of 3080 Broadway.

In short, in contrast to the traditional yeshivot, where the school's academic program was itself suffused with religious meaning, at the Seminary the nexus between the academic and religious dimensions of rabbinic education was irreparably split.

It is fully understandable, then, why, until 1988, the movement could never articulate a clear statement of principles, why our congregants defined themselves in negative terms as "*not* Orthodox and *not* Reform," why our entire educational program from the Rabbinical School down to the local congregational Talmud Torah lacked a sharp, distinctive ideological/theological thrust. And since the movement grew like topsy, largely because we were in tune with the sociological currents of the age, we felt no strong impulse to do anything to produce one. That period of rapid growth came to an end in the sixties, precipitating a crisis of identity from which we are only beginning to recover and which, to our good fortune, forced us to take a new look at what we stand for.

In this context, it is easy to appreciate Mordecai Kaplan's contribution to the culture of both school and movement. Briefly, he alone integrated theology, ideology and program. He alone did religious education and rabbinic education, of course as he understood it. That was his unique accomplishment, but that was also the problem. For his theology was subtle and sophisticated and his program radical. That's why few of his students bought Kaplanism in its entirety, and that's why he eventually left the school and struck out on his own. But at the Seminary, there were simply no alternatives, and not only at the Seminary but even elsewhere in the Jewish theological world, at least until the mid-fifties, when Herberg and Heschel began to write and teach. In the end, most of the students picked up a bit of Kaplan's naturalism and a bit of Finkelstein's traditionalism, eclectically,

and combined them into a rough and ready package which was enough to make it possible for them to function.

Thus the dilemma of the Conservative rabbi. His role demanded that he function as the very paradigm of the religious Jew, but his training was almost totally secularized. To put it another way, he was to function *within* the tradition, but his training located him *outside* of it, contemplating it with detached, scholarly objectivity. His role assumed the continuing validity of a specifically Jewish, religious reading of the world, of nature and history, and of human experience. But the one topic he *never* studied was religion. A forthright theological inquiry, or an inquiry into the phenomenology of religion could have begun to refashion the package, but neither was on the Seminary agenda. What then was God? What happened at Sinai? Why are the mitzvot authoritative? What happens when we pray? Except by Kaplan, all of these questions were studiously avoided.

But the rabbi was supposed to have answers to all of these questions. What then what was he to teach, to preach, to advocate? How was he to pray? To observe anything? To say a *Mi Sheberakh* or an *El Maleh*? What meaning did these prayers and rituals have? Why should his community pray, observe Shabbat or kashrut, or anything for that matter? And why are some observances dropped and others retained? Why can we now drive to *shul* on Shabbat, when oysters are still *treif*? The rabbi was left to vacillate from one posture to another, moving from within the system, out of it and back into it as the occasion demanded, at what cost to his personal integrity we can only surmise. For what he did not have, and therefore could never help his congregants to achieve, was precisely an integrated, religious understanding of his tradition or of his role.

And, equally painful, how was the rabbi to mobilize the resources of the Jewish religious tradition to address the human issues that were brought to him? What did Jewish religion have to say about life and death, guilt, sexuality, suffering, the search for intimacy and community, loneliness and alienation, suicide, homosexuality, marital tensions, rebellious children and the rest? Performing a wedding or a funeral is much more than saying certain words and making certain gestures. It is an opportunity to address the central, persistent issues raised by human life. But how were they to be addressed? What did Judaism have to say about them?

Paradoxically, then, the students who were most helped by their Seminary education were those who consciously sought an academic career. Their education was perfectly crafted for their role.

Thus, also, the dilemma of the Conservative congregant. For the rabbi could not transmit to his congregation what had not been transmitted to him. Is it any wonder that we have failed to create an observant or religiously committed laity? The Conservative layperson, even the one who attended synagogue for worship and study on a fairly regular basis, heard little about God, prayer, revelation or mitzvah, little that would induce him or her to transform a home or a life experience on the basis of Judaism.

Inevitably, then, the congregant too became the prisoner of the rabbi's education.

Thus, my judgment is that for the better part of the movement's first century, there were really three forms of Conservative Judaism at work. First, the Seminary's distinctive combination of critical scholarship and halakhic traditionalism; second, the Conservative rabbi's rough and ready blend of moderate Kaplanianism and moderate halakhic traditionalism; third, the Conservative congregant's amalgam which in large measure was indistinguishable from that of his Reform neighbor down the block, except for the address to which he mailed his dues and which he attended from time to time, mainly on the High Holidays, for Yizkor, sometimes for late Friday night services and for rites of passage. It was a fragmented Jewish expression, restricted to the synagogue and to specific moments in time—as fragmented as that of his rabbi. And as for the Jewish education of his children? That too was fragmented, relegated to six hours a week for five years in the Synagogue school.

It's not that the Seminary lacked a paradigm for the modern American rabbinate. It had a paradigm, but the paradigm was shaped by academicians, most of whom were far removed from the rabbinic role. The Conservative rabbi was supposed to be a miniature version of his teachers—a Jew who had mastered the classical texts of his tradition, and a halakhic traditionalist. Now there is nothing inherently wrong with that paradigm. It has a long and noble history in the Jewish past. The *Rav* was always distinguished by his scholarship. The Seminary's problem, however, lay in the modern transformation of that paradigm, in its secularization at the hands of *Wissenschaft*.

*Wissenschaft*, first, made that paradigm dysfunctional in terms of the rabbinic role in modern America. Second, it was simply unachievable by most rabbinical students, let alone a layperson. Third, at least on the surface, it seemed to be internally contradictory. Is it any wonder, then, that the Conservative rabbi felt unprepared for his work, or even abandoned by his school? Is it any wonder that the Seminary was perceived as being very far away? In fact, to the extent that there was a Conservative movement out there, it was created not by the Seminary but by an extraordinarily competent group of rabbis and their congregants. For most of the century, the school looked upon the movement with benign detachment, and at the evolving religious posture of the Rabbinical Assembly with a good deal of mistrust. That's why it took eighty-five years for the Seminary to offer a course on Conservative Judaism to its own students.

Looking at the picture as a whole, I suggest that the reigning educational paradigm for the movement was one of infantilization. The Seminary infantilized its faculty. A Seminary faculty meeting of the past was a startling illustration of the faculty's subservience to the central administration, but indeed, until the sixties, where else could they teach but at the Seminary? The faculty, in turn, infantilized its rabbinical students; all of us who studied

in Seminary classrooms can testify to that experience. And the rabbis proceeded to infantilize their congregants. Just look at the message conveyed by the classical suburban “cathedral” synagogue sanctuary, and the respective roles of Rabbi/Cantor and congregant in the service of worship.

But nothing was more infantilizing of the congregant than the message of minimalist expectations that he received from the rabbi. Certainly the movement grew like topsy. Why shouldn't it have grown? The synagogue package provided just the right mix of authentic Judaism and Americanism. Reform was too “goyish” and Orthodoxy (at least until the fifties) was simply unacceptable. But beyond membership and occasional attendance, absolutely nothing was expected of the congregant! Nothing was demanded! Not even that the synagogue president should be a *shomer Shabbat* and *shomer kashrut*. But those of us who have children know full well that the most effective way to infantilize our children is to absolve them of all responsibility. “Why should the congregants have a role,” you ask? “They are *ame-haaretz* and unobservant!” But why were they that way? And what did we do to help keep them that way? Were we not penalizing them for being the way we created them?

Infantilization was the inevitable result of the Seminary's rabbinic paradigm, of its commitment to *Wissenschaft* and to halakhic traditionalism. That elitist package was simply beyond the reach of anyone but the Seminary faculty.

But let's take a look at *Wissenschaft*. The problem is not with the method itself. Indeed, what other method can we use? Our intellectual integrity is at stake here, and none of us would even dream of reverting back to an uncritical traditionalism. The problem lies elsewhere. In fact, our commitment to *Wissenschaft* poses a triple-layered problem.

First, it poses a problem for theology. Like it or not, *Wissenschaft* carries an implicit theological message about the status of Torah. Whatever God had to do with Torah, *Wissenschaft* implies that this is a human, cultural document, much the same as the sacred literature of any other community. *Wissenschaft* inevitably leads to relativization. But then, wherein lies the sanctity of Torah, its specialness, its authority? Those theological issues were never pursued.

Second, it poses a problem for halakhah. It implies that the authority for the mitzvot rests, not with God, at least not explicitly with God, but rather within the community. On this issue, there is a clear line of continuity from Zechariah Frankel to Solomon Schechter to Mordecai Kaplan. But, again, Kaplan alone drew the natural implications of this claim. As he kept reminding us, what the community decreed, the community can change *if it wishes*. This is not to say that it *must* change anything. We can, of course, retain both *Wissenschaft* and a posture of halakhic traditionalism. But then we must understand that we remain traditionalists because we want to, not because God wants us to, because that's where this community wants to set its parameters, not because that's where the parameters are intrinsically. At

the same time, we must acknowledge that other portions of the community can put the parameters elsewhere, and that is their right, as much as it is ours to remain traditionalist. That legitimization was never acknowledged.

Finally, there was no awareness that *Wissenschaft* was itself but one of many possible structures of meaning that could be used to read the data of the Jewish experience, as subjectively selected or imposed on the data as the “religious” alternative it was designed to replace. It has no inherently objective validity. The data itself is mute; it has to be read, and it can be read in many ways. The issue, then, is to choose a structure of meaning, a syntax, and to retain a measure of distance, a recognition that we are reading the material in this particular way because we choose to do so; and that there are other, equally legitimate ways of reading the data, one of which can also be religious.

This measure of distance would have permitted the *Wissenschaft* scholar to do his work, and to go beyond it, to proceed by studying Judaism as “religion,” to reconstitute the system as the religious system that it is, and to acknowledge that this perspective is simply indispensable to rabbinic education today. What separates us from Orthodoxy, of course, is the recognition that this “religious” reading of Judaism is just as much the work of a human community, trying to make sense of the world and of its experience, and not exclusively of God.

The entire purpose of the new Rabbinical School curriculum can be summed up in one sentence: It is designed to educate the rabbinical student to function as a religious Jew, without the slightest sacrifice of a modern mind-set, and to educate his or her congregants to do the same.

Just as we have to get beyond *Wissenschaft*, we also have to get beyond infantilization. Infantilization won’t work, first because it is simply demeaning, second because as an educational strategy it is counter-productive, and third because our community won’t abide it; they are highly competent men and women, masters of their own fields, well-educated and very much concerned with asserting their individuality. I speak of our congregants and students, but all of this applies primarily to ourselves. Just as we today would not allow ourselves to be infantilized, why should they succumb?

The alternative to infantilization is empowerment, and my sense is that we have no choice but to pursue that course, again from the top down, from the Seminary classroom to the congregation. The theological groundwork for an empowerment model is explicit in *Emet Ve’Emunah*. If indeed, all of our God-talk is metaphorical, if revelation includes a substantial human component, and if halakhah is Israel’s understanding of God’s will (not—note well—God’s will, pure and simple), then in fact we have enthroned the community as authority in matters of belief and practice. (By “community,” of course, I mean not all Jews, but rather the caring, learning and committed community—Schechter’s Catholic Israel—in a modern vein.) That is, admittedly, my own selective reading of *Emet Ve’Emunah*, but all of those claims are explicitly in that document and they cannot be written off.



We too, then, have finally integrated theology, ideology and program. Torah means what the caring community reads it to mean, and our task is to create that community. To my mind, that sounds the death-knell for any form of religious authoritarianism. If no human being knows explicitly what it is that God demands of us, then we have *ipso facto* democratized Judaism's authority structure. That redefinition is already in the works, for example, in the spread of havurah-style services of worship within our congregations, in the gradual abandonment of the "cathedral style" design of our sanctuaries, and in the implicit message we convey when we replace the traditional sermon with a Torah discussion in which we descend from the *bimah* to join the congregation on its level, and listen, as well as speak. The new model is all there, in germ.

In any retrospect, my sense is that the decision to ordain women will loom as a monumental turning-point in the history of the movement, and Gerson Cohen's role in presiding over that turn-about will be recognized as crucial. For the first time, school, rabbis and congregations all together faced a complex theological/halakhic/religious issue. For the first time, the school listened to the call for guidance from the movement and responded. For the first time, the school fulfilled its role as fountainhead of a modern, religious movement. Here is integration, and with a vengeance!

This new model has been concretized in the Rabbinical School Seminar which is at the core of the new curriculum. We sit around a table, not in a traditional classroom. There are no grades, just extended narrative evaluations of each student, twice a year, and these evaluations are shared with and signed by the student before they go to the Dean. And we also do a great deal of listening to *Divrei Torah*, to personal diary entries, and to position papers—not research papers, but personal statements—on topics such as: What do we mean by sin? Why do we read this particular Torah reading on Yom Kippur morning? Why is there no liturgy preceding the eating of the *Afikoman*? What is the meaning of *Yahatz* at the Passover Seder? What is going on in the sanctuary and among the congregation when the Torah is being read? And next year, with theology as the Seminar's agenda: How do we conceive of God? What happened at Sinai? Why mitzvah? And the rest. . . .

Of course, we expect *Wissenschaft*-style research; that's assumed before we walk into the classroom. But the class itself works on going beyond that stage of understanding, and the focus is always on what is happening within the room, around the table, on what the text or the ritual or the idea means to all of us, and how can it be translated or transmitted into a meaningful statement for our congregants. The classroom becomes an arena for a shared inquiry into issues of personal meaning, a prototype for what should happen in the synagogue itself.

Indeed, the paradigm change from infantilization to empowerment has to begin at the Seminary. It became possible because, since 1970, the Seminary has offered its own Ph.D. in Jewish studies, separate and distinct from rabbinic ordination. In fact, largely because of these changes, students are

now free to choose an academic career or the rabbinate. We are now free to look at each of these tracks and determine the kind of training each requires. We are now free, then, to train a rabbi to become just that—a rabbi.

There is no underestimating the resistance to the new model on the part of just about everybody. Our congregants resist it because with empowerment comes responsibility. We now have the right to expect of them that they will be as responsible about their Jewish decisions as they are about the other decisions they make in their lives—medical decisions, for example. It's much easier to be infantilized! The faculty resists because the new curriculum makes demands of us that have never been made before, that we were never trained to fulfill, and that are not as yet fully considered when decisions about tenure and promotion are confronted. And we rabbis resist because we believe we are being asked to relinquish some of that authority which is ours by virtue of our training, our status and our prior experience.

But our students are thrilled; the best of our congregants will welcome the responsibility; and there are sufficient members of the faculty who are more than willing to teach in a different way. They do not share their teachers' need to accommodate Judaism with modernity. That task has been achieved. They view *Wissenschaft* as one of many possible structures of meaning with which a tradition can be studied. They feel totally free to go beyond it.

And as for us, my sense is that we have largely come to understand that what we are experiencing is not the diminution of our authority, but rather its recasting in a different mold. We see ourselves as teachers, as enablers, as mentors. A piece of us is thrilled as we watch our congregants become more knowledgeable, more serious and more responsible about their engagement with Judaism. Their increasing strength is the greatest testimony to our effectiveness.

In the last analysis, we will be ready to empower our students and congregants to the extent that we ourselves feel at ease with our own authority, our own sense of inherent power. And I can think of no better one-sentence summary of what I consider the essential mandate of the Rabbinical Assembly than to do all in its power to enable the congregational rabbi fully to appreciate and feel in his or her very bones the full authority of the rabbinic role.

Our model? Clearly the man who never for a moment doubted the extent of his own authority and who could therefore exclaim (Numbers 11:29): "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord put His spirit upon them!"