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Advancing Democracy, Pluralism and Mutual Understanding

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### Daniel Gordis

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Director, Jerusalem Fellow Program Mandel School, Jerusalem.

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Perhaps it is time that we focus anew on even the oft-quoted aphorisms that define our tradition. The Shema, perhaps the most famous of the tradition's injunctions about education, first insists: "Take to heart these instructions with which I command you this day" and only then adds, "Impress them upon your children." Would it be pushing the text too far to claim that it suggests that there is no use impressing these words upon our children if we do not first take them to heart ourselves?

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We are all in the debt of the leadership of the American Jewish Committee for having called our attention to the urgency of shifting our communal priorities and placing education once again at the center of our collective consciousness. This is an important statement, and if it is heeded by the policy shapers and agenda setters of American Jewish life, it may well play a critical role in helping to shape the direction and destiny of American Jewish life.

**Interreligious**

Change, however, may prove to be more difficult to achieve than even this document suggests. For a genuine shift in the effectiveness of American Jewish education will require not only a rethinking of our schools, camps, and other educational programs we have created, but of the religious worldview we model in general. Put otherwise, our educational ineffectiveness stems in part from our deep-seated inner conflict about the sorts of Jews we would like to educate and create. We do not educate well because we are not sure what we want our educational system to produce. We have sent our teachers and principals to the "front" to wage a battle for which we have provided no maps; the sad results reflect not on their dedication or talent, but on the nature of the task we assigned them in the first place.

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Though this situation is not unique to any one movement or denomination, let me illustrate the point with reference to Conservative Judaism, the movement in which I was raised, in which I trained, in which I worked until recently and which I therefore know best. The challenges facing each of the movements are distinct, and what ails Conservative Judaism may well not be an issue in other movements. But the central point, I believe, holds across the board: Jewish educational systems can succeed only to the extent that they have a clear conception (or conceptions) of the

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"ideal Jew" they seek to produce, and to the extent that the teachers in these institutions are able to articulate this sense and to transmit it with passion.

Conservative Judaism speaks often of the "ideal" Conservative Jew. This Jew is a person who observes the mitzvot such as kashrut, Shabbat, daily prayer, interpersonal commandments and the like, studies Jewish texts regularly, is devoted to Israel, and embodies a rich synthesis between the values of traditional Judaism and modernity. But whereas the movement—in its official publications or in the speeches of its leaders—often speaks of this "ideal," in reality few pulpit rabbis or community educators are very comfortable invoking this image. The fact has one important reason and one important consequence. The reason is that these educators (rabbis, teachers, and others) have no compelling arguments to make for why their pupils should live their lives this way. The consequence is that Conservative education takes place without an articulated vector, with no clear consensus on the basic goal of the education it provides.

Let's return to the "reason." A close look at the vocabulary of Conservative Jewish life indicates that Conservative educators have been issued no tools for creating the ideal prototype to which they're expected to give lip service. Conservative Judaism emerged from a nineteenth-century German intellectual movement known as *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, or the scientific study of Judaism. As important as this movement was to the academic study of Judaism, it was equally destructive of the religious dimension of Jewish life. Typical Conservative Jews, for example, are much more comfortable claiming that "God did not write the Torah" (for they have been taught that the document we know as the Torah is a compilation of several distinct subdocuments and worldviews) than they are at articulating what is sacred about the Torah. They are much more able to tell their children why they disagree with classic Orthodox theologies of revelation than they are able to explain why their view is different from one that ascribes no religious value to the Torah at all.

The "intellectual toolbox" that the creators of the movement crafted in order to justify the academic study of Judaism has shown that it has precious little to offer a population desperately seeking identity and authenticity in a postmodern world. Put otherwise, classical Conservative vocabulary ironically wages battles that no longer need to be fought in an age when virtually all Conservative Jews are university graduates, and steals much from the spiritual life of today's Conservative Jew.

The educational implications of this state of affairs are rather obvious. It is expected of "Conservative" teachers that they not purvey "Orthodox" conceptions of revelation, but neither are they to advocate a secular approach. What should they teach? They know that it has something to do with "the Torah's sanctity despite its human origins," but that is a highly complex, extremely subtle argument. Few people of any denomination can make that claim, and our teachers find themselves trying to convince their students of something that they themselves don't genuinely believe, or at least cannot articulate coherently.

The same phenomenon reigns when it comes to the place of halakhah, or Jewish law, in Conservative education. Having failed to convince anyone that the Bible is "God's word," Conservative educators are hard-pressed to make a compelling argument for why their charges

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"ought" to live in a certain way. They can speak persuasively, and often powerfully, of how Jewish tradition enriches their own lives, but ironically, it is often the highly personal nature of their accounts that suggests to others—perhaps correctly—that each of us must write his or her own narrative, and that what speaks to one person will not necessarily speak to another. Forced to rely on the personal nature of their odyssey, they invariably undermine the movement's claim of an "ought" or a commanding divine voice.

Nor do the movement's de facto decisions on Jewish law assist the educator in her or his role. When asked, most Conservative Jews define their movement's approach to halakhah by what it has changed, rather than by what it has preserved. They know much more about their movement's expanding the role of women, permitting driving to synagogue on the Sabbath, allowing electricity on the Sabbath and the eating of cooked fish in nonkosher restaurant, etc., than they do about what has not changed. The notion that Conservative Judaism is trying to conserve something precious is often missed entirely. Because of the decisions the leadership of the movement has taken, Conservative youth too often perceive halakhah as something to be changed when it can be, and transgressed if it can't be changed; how then can we expect our educators to work to create the "ideal Jew" of which the movement so often writes?

The resulting confusion runs deep. When polled, the overwhelming majority of Conservative Jews assert that to be a "good Conservative Jew" one must follow halakhah, but an equally impressive majority also claim that a "good Conservative Jew" can be married to a non-Jew! The nonsensical contradiction reflects not on the teacher but on the mixed message that an entire movement has communicated for decades. How much can we genuinely expect our teachers and their educational systems alone to alter this state of affairs?

In the case of Conservative Judaism, there is reason to expect that nothing fundamental will improve until the movement develops a new vocabulary with which to speak to its constituents. Conservative Jews are looking for something that Conservative ideology as it is presently formulated simply cannot provide; the disappointments we encounter in our educational institutions are effects, not causes, of the real problem. The movement's theological toolbox, designed in the nineteenth century to free people from a rigid, anti-intellectual theology, has nothing to offer a people already reared in the intellectual secularism of America who might be open to a demanding religious system if only its spiritual valence could be articulated thoughtfully and passionately. But that is the toolbox with which the movement equips its educators, and when study after study indicate that these educational enterprises have not succeeded, we unfairly seek the cause of the problem with the educators and not with the movement that defined their task in the first place.

It is not, of course, that there is no way to make arguments for the Bible's sanctity—and even divinity—in the aftermath of biblical criticism, or for the centrality of Jewish law even in the face of all that modernity has wrought. Ernst Simon's "second innocence," James Fowler's "conjunctive faith," Charles Taylor's notion of "inescapable horizons," and even subtle elements of Joseph Soloveitchik's Halakhic Man all offer elements of what could be a powerful argument for a serious dialogical engagement with Jewish law even at the beginning of this new millennium. But tragically, most Conservative rabbinical students (the future leaders of the movement) are much more familiar

of Israel

**December 2, 2002**

AJC On the Air: Cry Out Against Hatred

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with the names of Wellhausen and Freud than they are with Simon, Fowler, or Taylor. They are too often the products of either an antiquated theology that advocates loyalty to halakhah in terms that are highly unconvincing, or of a response to that theology that is so oriented to individual choice as to be virtually indistinguishable from traditional Reform theology. Either way, the movement does these rabbis and its other educators a profound disservice by asking them to advocate positions that the movement itself has never seriously invested in defending.

What happens when educators trained in this internally incoherent system meet the "real world" of the school and the classroom? They have no compass. The "ideal" toward which they have been asked to educate seems so thoroughly illogical to their students (and to those students' parents) that they soon give up. And having given up on this ideal, a problematic "noneducation" then ensues. Texts are taught with no clear conception of what religious message ought to be gleaned from them or of what impact they ought to have on the lives of those studying them. Laws and traditions are taught, but more often than not as a kind of "anthropological" investigation of some "other" Jewish world, thus widening rather than narrowing the Jew's sense of himself or herself as part of that tradition. Israel is taught with no clear conception of whether aliyah is or is not a Conservative ideal, so that what emerges is not much more powerful than the student's investigation of France or Brazil in their public school social studies class.

This state of affairs is troubling precisely because Conservative Judaism potentially has so much to offer. Our Jewish world desperately needs a compelling synthesis between the values of tradition and modernity and a hermeneutic for creating that synthesis; a reinvigorated and redirected Conservative movement might contribute much to this goal. And similar and equally compelling challenges face Ortho-

doxy, Reconstructionism, Reform, and other options currently available to American Jews. We all need to rethink our ideologies and our practices in light of what we would teach.

Jewish education is still a field waiting to be built and treated seriously, and we should all hope that this statement by the American Jewish Committee will move our community in that direction. But the solution cannot come from the teaching professional alone. The challenges faced by Jewish educators point to the need for each of the movements to rethink the degree to which it advocates a clear and consistent image of a vital and compelling Jewish life. The revitalization of Jewish education in North America calls not simply for a rethinking of the world of educators themselves, though that is surely important, but for an honest reexamination of the very tenets, beliefs, and ideals that the movements espouse. Nothing less is likely to have the impact our future so desperately requires.

