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A "Basic Religious Datum":
Conservative Judaism, Zionism and the
Worldview of Michael Rosenak

Daniel Gordis

As I first became familiar with Professor Michael Rosenak's work in my years as a rabbinical student at the Jewish Theological Seminary, it was his vast corpus on philosophy of Jewish education to which I was first exposed. With time, though, his contributions to Zionist thought, and the place of modern Israel in contemporary Jewish identity, influenced me no less. Thus, when I considered how I might make some modest contribution to this collection of papers in honor of our teacher, it seemed to me that the nexus between these three major themes - the Conservative Movement, Zionism and Jewish education - might be the most appropriate place to begin.

In the pages that follow, I will reflect on the deep ambivalence

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regarding Zionism in the Conservative Movement and will illustrate
that, almost without exception, the leaders of the Jewish Theological
Seminary have been, at best, conflicted about the Zionist enterprise.
But when it comes to potential educational interventions that might
make possible a change in this stance, I argue, real impact will come
not necessarily from the Seminary’s leadership, but much more likely,
from the implicit and powerful messages that traditional Jewish praxis
conveys. The Conservative Movement’s abiding difficulty in creating a
laity devoted to Jewish practice has, I argue, implications not only for
the halakhic nature of the Movement, but for its Zionist commitments,
as well.

Conservative Judaism and Zionism: The Genesis of a Mythology

As rabbinical students at the Seminary in the 1980s, we were exposed
almost uninterruptedly to the mantra that the Zionist roots of Conservative
Judaism ran deep. Conservative Judaism, we were told often and with
great pride by the Seminary’s leadership, was the only movement that had
never had an anti-Zionist era. Naomi Cohen notes that “it has long been
commonplace in scholarly accounts to note the special bond between
Conservative Judaism and Zionism,” and cites Samuel Halperin’s claim
that “the American Zionist movement derived its most unanimously
enthusiastic and dedicated supporters from the ranks of Conservative
Judaism.” Much more recently, Ismar Schorsch, Chancellor-Emeritus
of the Seminary, listed a commitment to modern Israel as chief among
the seven prime commitments of contemporary Conservative Judaism
(the “sacred cluster”), writing:

The centrality of modern Israel heads our list of core values. For
Conservative Jews, as for their ancestors, Israel is not only the
birthplace of the Jewish people, but also its final destiny. Sacred
texts, historical experience and liturgical memory have conspired
to make it for them, in the words of Ezekiel, “the most desirable
of all lands” (20:6). Its welfare is never out of mind. Conservative
Jews are the backbone of Federation leadership in North America
and the major source of its annual campaign. They visit Israel, send
their children over a summer or for a year and support financially
every one of its worthy institutions. Israeli accomplishments on
the battlefield and in the laboratory, in literature and politics, fill them
with pride. Their life is a dialectic between homeland and exile.
No matter how prosperous or assimilated, they betray an existential
angst about anti-Semitism that denies them a complete sense of
at-homeness anywhere in the Diaspora.

Halperin is indeed correct, to the extent that he wishes to imply that
Conservative Judaism never evinced a blatantly anti-Zionist position,
for the other Movements did have specifically anti-Zionist elements or
periods. And though Chancellor Schorsch’s claims that Conservative
Judaism is a “dialectic between homeland and exile” may be somewhat
overstated (an issue to which we will return), his placement of Zionism as
one of the Movement’s seven chief commitments reflects the worldview
that Halperin describes.

To this extent, what we were taught as students at JTS was technically
correct. And interestingly, Professor Rosenak’s work on Zionism attests
to the objections to Zionism within other, non-Conservative, movements.
Orthodoxy, now perhaps the most ardently Zionist movement, has
long had elements with profound misgivings. As Professor Rosenak
notes, for the Neturei Karta and Satmar Hassidic sects, “Zionism is the
most pernicious movement in Jewish history, for it has flouted the oath

Renewed: A History of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York:
3 Samuel Halperin, The Political World of American Zionism, Detroit: Wayne State
4 Chancellor Schorsch’s article originally appeared in Conservative Judaism Magazine,
as an (unacknowledged) response to my critique of contemporary Conservative Juda-
ism, “Positive Historical Judaism Exhausted: Reflections on a Movement’s Future,”
in Conservative Judaism, XLVII: 1 (Fall, 1994), pp. 3–18. It was later published
separately as Ismar Schorsch, The Sacred Cluster: The Core Values of Conservative
Judaism, New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1995, p. 4. The text quoted here is
taken from the JTS website, at http://www.jtsa.edu/about/cj/sacredcluster.shtml.
5 How one measures the “Zionism” of a movement is, quite obviously, not simple.
However, every estimate of the percentage of American Jews who make aliyah
suggests that over 95% come from the Orthodox community (a community which
comprises less that 10% of American Jewry). The numbers of participants in
Orthodox programs during the second Intifada were also much less impacted by the
security situation than numbers in other non-Orthodox programs.
imposed upon Israel not to [...] attempt to conquer *Eretz Yisrael*, and not to rebel against gentile domination. In rebelling against the nations, Zionists have, in fact, rebelled against God and are thereby delaying the true redemption." Even more mainstream Orthodox movements have struggled with some of the complexities raised by Zionism, such as the work it requires in the public sector on Shabbat, or the uneasy alliance with radical secularists that it forces upon a much more traditional community.

Similarly, surprising though it may seem to some, given the passionate Zionism of Dr. David Ellenson, today the President of the Reform Movement’s Hebrew Union College, significant segments of the early Reform Movement, due largely to the movement’s principled universalism, also initially opposed the idea of a Jewish State. Professor Rosenak himself notes this dimension of Reform history, and asserts that classical Reform adopted a “theology of negation.” “Indeed,” he writes as he describes the Reform position, in the worldview of much of classical Reform ideology, “the dispersion of Israel was providential, making possible a realization of the biblical prophecy that Israel be ‘a light unto the nations.’ Zionism is thus a regressive conception, and the State of Israel seeks to narrow Jewish identity by creating a secular version of what was but an early stage in Israelite religion.”

Only in the Conservative Movement was a certain moderation on this issue always present. The Movement was never so universalistic as to deny the legitimacy of Jewish particularism and the specific needs of the Jewish people in the wake of the demise of European Jewry and, at the same time, was never so divorced from secular Jews or so committed to a theological stance, which demanded that the building of the Jewish State be relegated to a messianic era, that it could not support the efforts of the Zionist movement from the outset. Conservative Judaism’s Zionism, we were told, was as natural as the rising of the sun.

But the picture was always infinitely more complicated. Indeed, Schorsch’s predecessor, Gerson Cohen, noted in 1979 that “despite the consistently positive attitude toward Jewish nationalism within the...


existence, for it brings to Jewish life and culture its comprehensive social, political and particularistic aspects.”

If Conservative Judaism coheres so neatly with theologies of symbiosis, however, how are we to explain Professor Rosenak’s decision (whether conscious or not) not to mention it in his discussion of this theological approach? The answer, I believe, may be intuited from what he writes at the conclusion of his essay. There, he writes, “many Jews never think about the State of Israel in theological terms of any kind. [...] This inability or refusal to deal with Israel as a basic religious datum of contemporary Jewish life more than anything else reveals the crisis of present day Judaism.”

That description is an apt description of the Conservative movement’s attitude to Zionism and the State of Israel. Though Professor Rosenak may not have intended this point, one ironic fact is unavoidable: the very Movement which has prided itself on being the only movement never to have a non-Zionist or anti-Zionist element is also the only one of the three major American movements not to receive specific mention in Rosenak’s overview of approaches to Zionism. Could it be that the picture of Zionism and Conservative Judaism is more complex than the Movement’s contemporary proclamations might suggest? Might the Movement have escaped mention in Rosenak’s essay because it is so deeply conflicted about Zionism that it never articulated a position on the subject with any passion? Is it possible that in this Movement, despite all its claims to the contrary, the reality of the State of Israel has never become a “basic religious datum?”

Conservative Judaism and Zionism: Persistent Intimations of Ambivalence

Many observers familiar with today’s Conservative Jews will readily attest that Rosenak’s observation that “many Jews never think about the State of Israel in theological terms of any kind” is infinitely more apt a reflection of Conservative Judaism today than is Chancellor Schorsch’s poetic but illusory claim that Conservative Jews today live their lives as “a dialectic between homeland and exile.” Tellingly, not only has Conservative Judaism not articulated a clear theological stance regarding the religious significance of the Jewish State (not that that is an easy task), in the Movement’s literature, statements about the importance of Zionism are followed almost immediately and invariably by critiques of the State or evidence of its insufficiency for Jewish survival.

In Emet Ve-Emunah, for example, the Statement of Principles of Conservative Judaism, the authors write that they “rejoice in the existence of Medinat Yisrael,” “consider it to be a miracle,” and “celebrate the rebirth of Zion.” But, on the very next page, the authors write, “The Conservative Movement has not always agreed with Israel’s positions on domestic and foreign affairs, [and has] often suffered from discriminatory policies.” That there are only two pages about Zionism in the 57-page long pamphlet, and that the bitterness inherent in the Movement’s attitude to Zionism appears almost immediately speaks volumes.

Or consider Chancellor Schorsch’s comments about the centrality of Zionism in his “Sacred Cluster.” Just paragraphs after he waxes eloquent about the “dialectic” at the heart of Conservative Judaism because of the power of Zionist passion in the Movement, he writes:

This is not to say that Conservative Judaism divests the Diaspora of all spiritual value or demands of all Jews to settle in Israel. Ironically, the state of Judaism is far healthier outside the Jewish state, where Judaism is indispensable for a resilient Jewish identity. Most Israelis have sadly been severed from any meaningful contact with Judaism by the absence of religious alternatives and by the erosion of sacred Jewish content in the secular school system where 75% of Israel’s Jewish children are educated. And yet, the miracle and mystery of Israel’s restoration after two millennia out of the

12 “State of Israel,” p. 913. The discussion of Emet Ve-Emunah below will reflect language very similar to Rosenak’s phraseology here.
13 “State of Israel,” p. 916.
14 Emet Ve-Emunah – Statement of Principles of Conservative Judaism, New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, Rabbinical Assembly, United Synagogue of America, 1988 [hereinafter Emet Ve-Emunah], p. 37. Although Emet Ve-Emunah was written by Committee, given the fact that my grandfather, Rabbi Robert Gordis, was the editor of the project, I should note here none of the critique of the tone of Emet Ve-Emunah’s content on Zionism is in any way a critique of his devotion to Israel. He loved Israel with every fiber of his being, and it is important to me to make clear that nothing written here is meant to suggest otherwise.
15 Emet Ve-Emunah, p. 38.
ashes of the Holocaust continues to overwhelm Conservative Jews with radical amazement and deep joy.\textsuperscript{16}

Schorsch, like the authors of \textit{Emet Ve-Emunah}, finds himself unable to make the point of profound Conservative Zionist commitment without immediately tempering it with a critique of the very Zionist enterprise.

Anyone familiar with the state of contemporary American Jewry can certainly raise significant questions regarding Schorsch’s assertion that “the state of Judaism is far healthier outside the Jewish state.” At the same time, many of Schorsch’s implicit critiques are very much in place. But the fact that the Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary could not author this section of “The Sacred Cluster” without tempering his Zionism with an assertion that Judaism is healthier in the Diaspora or in the Jewish State belies a deeper, inner conflict. This is not to say, of course, that meaningful Zionism requires a denigration of the Diaspora, or \textit{shelilat ha-golah}, as it is known in Hebrew. Yet, there is undeniably a tension between passionate Zionism and continued wholehearted celebration of Jewish life in the Diaspora, and Schorsch’s language gives it expression.

But in this regard, Schorsch, like \textit{Emet Ve-Emunah}, reflects a Conservative Movement tradition that long pre-dates both. The real picture about Conservative Judaism and Zionism was always more complicated than either would like to suggest.\textsuperscript{17} Perhaps the classic illustration of this longstanding tension surrounded the question of whether Hatikvah could be played at the Seminary’s Commencement Exercises in 1948. An account of the events were written close to that time by Rabbi Gershon Winer, who later moved to Israel and who passed away in 2003, suggests that matters were more complicated. A brief segment of his long and fascinating account relates that:

The Zionist anthem [had never been] included in public ceremonies at the Seminary. With the date of graduation approaching, the nature of the upcoming exercises emerged on our agenda. These were the months preceding the establishment of the State of Israel and terrorist attacks by Arabs against Jews made daily headlines. We felt strongly that our commencement ceremony in the very midst of those history-making dramatic events should feature prominently our identification with our people and the Land of Israel by the singing of Hatikvah. [...] 

[But] Finkelstein was ideologically close to Judah Magnes, the chancellor of the Hebrew University and a pacifist. We gathered from what he told us that there were plans afoot to form a government in Palestine with Finkelstein’s participation, as an alternative to Zionist leadership. Apparently, he was in touch, if not in collusion, with the Martin Buber led Berit Shalom group which opposed the establishment of a Jewish State [...].

As to Hatikvah, the cause célebre, it was both part and not part of the graduation exercises. The orchestra indeed played the anthem of the new State of Israel, but only as a musical rendition, without singing it out for special attention, with the audience remaining seated.

The following year [...] a member of the graduating class wanted to make sure that the fiasco with Hatikvah not be repeated. Since the Seminary had a close relationship with the nearby Union Theological Seminary, and particularly its famed Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr [...] representatives of the student body, exploited these contacts to convince Riverside Church to make “a beautiful gesture,” by having the chimes of the church peal out the Hatikvah tune at a specified moment during the ordination ceremony [...].\textsuperscript{18}

Rabbi Winer’s fascinating account hints at a profound tension surrounding Zionism at the Seminary in those days. One wonders, however, given that he was a student at the time, without any special access to Chancellor Finkelstein or his thinking, to what extent he was fully aware

\textsuperscript{16} Schorsch, “The Sacred Cluster.”


\textsuperscript{18} Rabbi Winer, z”l, sent this account in an email to Ravnet, an on-line discussion group of Conservative rabbis, on Tuesday, October 8, 2002. He introduced his remarks as follows: “In response to Rabbi Richard Rubenstein’s request on Ravnet for more information on Dr. Finkelstein attitude to Zionism in 1948, I have excerpted the following from a book I am now completing. The specific episode was recorded not long after it occurred.” [As Rabbi Winer disseminated this in email form, it was understandably in somewhat informal style. I have corrected a few spellings and changed punctuations slightly. The rest remains unchanged from his original posting. I am grateful to a number of colleagues for their assistance in locating this posting, particularly Rabbi Leon Rosenblum, who was able to provide me with the entire text.]
of Chancellor Finkelstein’s motivations. Finkelstein’s son, Rabbi Ezra Finkelstein, offers his own suggestions. “Finkelstein’s adamant refusal to allow the Hatikvah to be sung at the Seminary graduation in 1948,” he writes, “was not merely a reflection of his ambivalence regarding Zionism but also his dedication to preserving the Seminary tradition that viewed the graduation and the ordination of Rabbis as a religious ceremony.”19

But it was more complicated than that, and Ezra Finkelstein acknowledges that fact. Thus, Ezra Finkelstein continues:

But [Chancellor Finkelstein] was also increasingly disenchanted with the leadership of the Zionist cause both in America and in Europe. Unlike Henrietta Szold and others, whom he deeply admired, the new Zionist leadership were not only not religiously observant, but they were clearly antithetical to religious tradition. He could not put his trust in such people to be the molders of a Jewish state that conformed to his spiritual vision. In addition the increasingly militant nature of Zionism ran counter to his personal pacifism.

With the end of the Second World War and the emergence of a serious global commitment to the creation of a Jewish State, Finkelstein’s hesitancies were perceived as “anti-Zionism.” In reality he had serious misgivings about the creation of the state. He understood the tension that would necessarily exist between the religious and non-religious elements within the society. He also understood the dangers that existed vis-à-vis the larger Arab and Muslim world within which the state would exist. And his study of the Rabbinic world of the Second Commonwealth led him to be pessimistic about the ability of the Jewish community to be self-governing and self sustaining in the world of realpolitik. In retrospect, it is clear that he, along with many others, underestimated the resourcefulness and determination of the Zionist leadership and the people of Israel. He was not alone.

In time, rumors of Chancellor Finkelstein’s antipathy to Zionism, or at least his lack of passionate endorsement of the cause, took on a life of their own. He is rumored to have strongly sought to dissuade those rabbinical students who sought to enter the newly created IDF from doing so,20 while another commonly discussed “incident” surrounds a moment “involving an Israeli flag which some of the students had unfurled at the Seminary and which [Chancellor Finkelstein] ordered removed claiming that it was the flag of a foreign country.”21 What exactly happened in each of these instances is undoubtedly subject to debate.22 What this “oral Torah” seems to indicate, however, is that while there was a tremendous sense of historical moment surrounding the creation of the State of Israel on campus in 1948, and understandable excitement, that excitement seems, however, not to have been shared by the Seminary’s leadership, Finkelstein in particular, to put things mildly.

The Chancellor, however, as his son notes, “was not alone.” He was not alone that year, surrounded as he apparently was by a Board of Directors apathetic to Zionism.23 Nor was he “alone” in the context of what happened to Conservative Judaism in the course of time.24

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20 Rabbi Chinitz also conveyed this story to me, in the name of Rabbi Simcha Kling, who was also a member of the 1948 class. One wonders, however, whether this might be an apocryphal rendition of the comment that Finkelstein made to Winer about “don’t fight me, go fight in Israel.” In one of his many notes to me on the matter, Chinitz remarked, in reference to Louis Finkelstein’s famed biography of Rabbi Akiba, “How sad that the biographer of Akiba was so neutral about Jewish liberty.”

21 My thanks to Rabbi Gordon Papert for relating this incident, which he heard about from Rabbi Gershon Winer, z”l. Naomi Cohen ascribes this event to the 1948 Commencement. Winer, apparently, remembered it otherwise.


23 One account shared with me, that I have not corroborated sufficiently, claims that “the story placed Dr. Finkelstein between the Seminary Board, who were members of Temple Emanuel – and anti-Zionists – and the graduating students, who were strongly Zionist. They wanted to sing Hatikvah as part of the ordination program, and he would not permit it, so as not to enrage Judge Simon Rifkin, the Board President.” For an account of the Seminary’s politics regarding issues of Zion and the formation of the Jewish State, cf. Cohen, “Diaspora Plus Palestine.”

24 Note, in fact, that the one student cited by Gershon Winer as having supported Finkelstein in his demand that the students back down from their request that Hatikvah be sung was Gerson Cohen, the next Chancellor of the Seminary. That small fact, when considered alongside the fact that Cyrus Adler, Finkelstein’s predecessor,
Conservative Judaism and Zionism:
Faint Beginnings Take Root

Chancellor Finkelstein, whatever one may think of his decision(s) in 1948, was not sui generis in Conservative Jewish life when it came to Zionism. Indeed, the more we look, the more it becomes clear that, mythology notwithstanding, Zionism (at least in any meaningful sense of that word that connotes more than support for the State of Israel in the public realm), is, today, hardly on the agenda of the Conservative Movement.

Decades after Finkelstein refused to allow the Hatikvah at the Commencement ceremony, the language of Emet Ve-Emunah demonstrated a profound ambivalence about Israel. We return to the passage cited above, in greater length:

We rejoice in the existence of Medinat Yisrael [...] in Eretz Yisrael [...] with its capital of Jerusalem, the Holy City, the City of Peace. We view this phenomenon not just in political or military terms; rather, we consider it to be a miracle, reflecting Divine Providence in human affairs.

How the authors of the document can speak of “Divine Providence in human affairs” about events culminating in 1948, just three years after the chimneys of murder camps across Europe ceased spewing Jews into the sky, is neither asked nor explained.

But the Committee’s claims about Israel become even more perplexing in the paragraphs that follow:

From time immemorial, Eretz Yisrael has played a central and vital role in the life and culture of world Jewry. [...] Throughout the ages, we have revered, honored, cherished, prayed for, dreamed of, and sought to settle in Jerusalem and the land of Israel. [...] Wherever we were permitted, we viewed ourselves as natives or citizens of the country of our residence and were loyal to our host nation. Our religion has been land-centered but never land-bound. [...] Indeed, there have been Jewish communities in the Diaspora from the days

was a “non-Zionist,” speaks volumes about the continuity of the tradition to which this section of the present paper points.

A “Basic Religious Datum”

of the Prophets. The relative importance of the Land of Israel and the Diaspora fluctuated through the centuries.

On the level of historical accuracy, the claims are unimpeachable. But Emet Ve-Emunah has often been accused of being tepid, as devoid of all passion. The word “miracle” is used, but in a vague theological sense with no itemization of what is miraculous about what has been created. There is, in this section, no mention of how the State of Israel has transformed the self-image of the Jew both in Israel and in the Diaspora, how it has revitalized Jewish culture in a way that could never happen where Jews are not the majority culture, how a sovereign Jewish State, even in the face of all the problems that power brings with it, has changed the condition of the Jew world over, or how Israeli society has restored and enriched the Hebrew language in a way that would have been unimaginable just decades ago. Nor is there any mention of the Shoah in the entire section on Israel.

To this reader, at least, the language feels perfunctory, almost an attempt la-tzeit yedey chovah. It is not the sort of language that inspires passion for the Zionist enterprise; nor, of course, is it the sort of language that might get people to wrestle earnestly with the topic of aliyyah.

To be fair, Emet Ve-Emunah does go on to mention aliyyah. But again, aliyyah is buried in a long litany of expressions of the Movement’s Zionist commitments. The Conservative Movement, we are told, has established a growing number of congregations, a rabbinical school, a kibbutz, a moshav, a youth movement, schools and adult education program.

27 For many Jews, the Shoah and Israel are inexorably connected, if not theologica]ly, then at least in terms of memory or reminders of the historical necessity for Israel’s existence. The Conservative Movement had often seemed intent on severing that link. Thus, the omission of the Shoah from the discussion of Israel in Emet Ve-Emunah, and interestingly, the omission of Israel from the Seminary’s main memorial to the Shoah. Cf. Lederhendler, “Ongoing Dialogue,” p. 243: “One cannot help but be struck by the distinction between this Holocaust memorial and any memorial that has ever been erected or designed in Israel. No Holocaust memorial in Israel is complete without a reference either to the heroism of the Jewish resistance during the war, or to the State of Israel as an embodiment of the spirit of the victims and an affirmation of the people’s collective will do live – usually both. The Seminary’s memorial studiously avoids any reference at all to the commonplace Israeli themes of memory. In its patriotic gratitude to the Allies, in the universalism of its last panel, it is an American Jewish memorial.”
Increasing numbers of Conservative rabbis and laypersons have gone on aliyah, and we encourage and cherish aliyah to Israel as a value, goal, and mitzvah. Each year, thousands of our teenagers visit and study in Israel, [...] and thousands of adults visit on pilgrimage and synagogue tours. [...] Yom Ha-Atzama’ut is observed joyfully in our congregations.  

The relative placement of these various elements suggests that these visits are sufficient, that aliyah ranks as about as important as celebrating Yom Ha-Atzama’ut in synagogue (and we know how peripheral those celebrations are in many of the American community’s institutions, synagogues included). Nothing at all in Emet Ve-Emunah suggests that the existence of the State of Israel mandates a radical re-thinking of what “home” might mean in our age, Schorsch’s notion of dialectic notwithstanding. Not that one would expect that Emet Ve-Emunah call for massive aliyah. But again, the Conservative Movement’s Statement of Principles seems to deny any sense that Zionism might raise profound existential questions in the souls of contemporary Jews. What it means to be a Zionist, what the phenomenon called the State of Israel actually requires of contemporary Conservative Jews, Emet Ve-Emunah never tells them. Indeed, the document seems the perfect example of Professor Rosenak’s above-mentioned claim that too much of Diaspora life has evinced an “inability or refusal to deal with Israel as a basic religious datum of contemporary Jewish life.”

When the Movement’s ideological statement finally does get to mentioning Hebrew and the all encompassing nature of Jewish life in Israel, it does so in the context of decrying the demise of religion in Israel, a pattern we saw repeated with Schorsch’s “Sacred Cluster.” “We do not believe that Jewish identity can be replaced by Israeli identity or the ability to speak Hebrew.” Fair enough. But can Jewish identity be maintained without the ability to speak Hebrew? Does Israel afford an example of thriving, vibrant Jewish culture that American Judaism can in any way emulate? No mention of any such issues appears in the pages of Emet Ve-Emunah.

In more recent years, indications of this ambivalence have continued. Leaders of the Conservative Movement in Israel have complained bitterly about insufficient funding for the Movement’s congregational arm in Israel, while the almost complete demise of the Movement’s Kibbutz Hanaton (certainly in radical contradistinction to the impressive success of Young Judea’s Kibbutz Keturah, or even the Reform Movement’s Kibbutz Yahel) is also indication of an effort that was never sufficiently central in the eyes of the Movement to merit the resources that genuine success would have required.

However, it is perhaps in the pages of the Rabbinical Assembly’s official publication, Conservative Judaism, that the absence of any real engagement with Zionist issues is most obvious. Consider the following observations about the contents of the journal in the past years. Although the journal published a special issue on the occasion of the 25th Yahrtzeit of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, z”l, 30 a special issue on health care, 31 and even an issue on theology, 32 there has been no special issue on Israel.

Astonishingly, the special issue on theology did not include a single article on the theological significance of Israel. Further examination reveals that there was no issue dedicated to the 50th anniversary of the creation of the State of Israel. Nor was there an issue dedicated to the signing of the Oslo accords (or even a series of articles on the subject), an event which at that time was considered one that could have dramatically altered the course of Israeli history. Noteworthy among the articles that have been published about Israel in the pages of Conservative Judaism is the article by Dr. Aryeh Cohen, of the University of Judaism, “Permeable Boundaries: Zionism, the Diaspora and the Conservative Movement,” which is essentially an argument for the diminution of the centrality of Israel in Conservative Jewish ideology. 33

This ambivalence is reflected in the Movement’s rabbinical schools as well. In the curriculum of the rabbinical school of the Jewish Theological Seminary, the only coursework on Israel or Zionism takes place during Year III, the year in Israel. (A year in Israel was not required until a policy change instituted by Chancellor Gerson Cohen, in 1974, 34 as part of Cohen’s ongoing attempt to strengthen the Movement’s relationship to Israel. 35) That, itself, is telling. But particularly since the worsening

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29 Emet Ve-Emunah, p. 39.
31 Volume LI, No. 2 (Summer 1999).
32 Volume LI, No 2 (Winter 1999).
33 Volume LIV, No. 1 (Fall 2001).
35 In this, Gerson Cohen’s attitude to Israel was much more positive than either that of his predecessors, Adler and Finkelstein, or his successor, Schorsch. Cf. Paula
of Israel’s contemporary security situation (and perhaps in light of the tragic loss of two Seminary students in a bus bombing several years ago), as the Seminary has de facto allowed more and more students to opt out of the Israel year, even that element of the program has been undermined, and no suitable replacement for the material that would have been covered in Israel has been devised for those students who remain in North America.

That attitude is, not surprisingly, then later reflected in the discourse of these students once they become rabbis. Observers of RavNet, the e-mail ListServ of Conservative Rabbis, will note that though issues of Israel appear often in the dialogue between rabbis, these conversations usually focus on debates regarding Israel’s policies in the current war, Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians, Israeli Arabs and, very occasionally, the status of Conservative Judaism in Israel. As a relatively careful reader of Ravnet (for the purpose of studies such as this), I cannot recall a single thread about the role of aliyah in Conservative ideology, or a discussion of what it means to be a Zionist when one has taken the existential decision to continue to live in the United States. The topic simply isn’t a central one for most Conservative rabbis today.

Interestingly, a recent study of Conservative rabbis and their conceptions of an “ideal rabbinate” showed that the rabbis rated the role of Zionism in their conception of leadership below that of pastor, Jewish educator, model of religiosity, spiritual guide, halakhic authority, community builder, visionary and social conscience. That “Zionist” ranked lower than “social conscience” reflects, it seems, the universalism that has long hindered a more passionate expression of Zionist commitments in the Movement. When lay leaders were polled, however, about their views of a rabbi’s ideal leadership, “Zionism” rated even lower. To the above list of categories that ranked higher than “Zionist,” lay leaders added the following categories: talmid hakham, worship leader, representative in the wider Jewish community and scholar.

Thus, it should not surprise us that with the outbreak of hostilities in Israel in October 2000, the precipitous drop in the numbers of participants in youth programs and the like in the Conservative Movement much more closely approximated the dramatic drop in Reform numbers than it did the change in Orthodox circles. Although there are apparently no specific statistics available, estimates I have been given by staff members of the Jewish Agency claim that the combined percentages of Orthodox and Haredi olim comprise almost 98% of American aliyah. The number of Conservative olim is clearly very small, and of those Conservative Jews who do come, many are rabbis or Jewish professionals. The number of


37 Matthew Eisenfeld, a rabbinical student at JTS’s Jerusalem campus, was killed, along with his fiancée, Sara Duker, in a bus bombing on February 25, 1996.


39 In the Conservative Movement, the two major summer programs to Israel are Ramah Seminar and USY Pilgrimage. In 2000, those two programs sent 230 and 650 participants, respectively. In 2002, they sent 72 and 76 participants, respectively. From a total of 880 participants in 2000, the total dropped to 148 in 2002, a decrease of 83%. In the Reform Movement, the NFTY Summer Program sent 1,400 participants in 2000, and 10 in 2002, for a drop of 99%. NCSY, by contrast, the Orthodox community’s main nationwide program, sent 439 teenagers in 2000 and 208 in 2002, a decrease of 52.6%. While 52.6% is undoubtedly a dramatic drop, it is still much less than the 83% and 99% drops in Conservative and Reform circles, respectively. My thanks to Dr. Ezra Kapelowitz of the Jewish Agency Education Department for making the raw data available to me.
Conservative laypeople who make *aliyah* is miniscule. And this from the Movement that represents 33% of the synagogue-affiliated American Jewish community.40

The picture is, therefore, more complex than the one my fellow students and I heard at the Seminary almost a quarter of a century ago. Conservative Judaism has never had an official anti-Zionist period; that is true. But to deduce from that fact that the Movement is a seriously Zionist one would be, I suggest, a mistake. Zionism, even the question of what Zionism can mean for those committed to living their lives in America, is simply not on the agenda of the Movement. The historical picture has been well documented by a number of historians, several of whom we have cited. But even if the early political and institutional issues have now been laid bare, the question that must now be asked is whether there is anything about the Conservative Movement’s religious worldview that makes the sustaining of Zionist commitment difficult.

Here, the work of Professor Rosenak proves immeasurably instructive, and suggests, I believe, that a full appreciation of the Movement’s tepid Zionist commitments cannot be fully understood without an examination of what has happened to its halakhic underpinnings, as well.

Conservative Judaism and Zionism:
Creating Communities of “Ultimate Concerns”

As Professor Rosenak envisions the Jewish communities of the future, communities characterized by both passion and tolerance, he asks whether “most Jews today live in communities that can confirm Jewish culture and education, and that can bring people to conform to standards and obligations.”41 Not surprisingly, he concludes that they do not. What communities need, he asserts, is an “agenda.” He then spells out what such an agenda entails:

Traditionally, when people spoke of “the community,” they meant

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40 This is the figure provided by the 2000 NJPS. The 1990 NJPS figure for Conservative Judaism was 38%, indicating a drop in the percentage of American Jews describing themselves as Conservative. Reform has risen proportionally in the same time period.


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a normative cultural and religious agenda. The agenda meant common practices and purposes. […] Although for a small section of the Jewish people community remains the blatant social and existential reality, today that blatancy is exactly what alienates others. The concepts of identity, authority, and “agenda” […] are unacceptable to all who see themselves as living consciously in the modern world.42

But how does one create a community with an “agenda”? I would suggest, even though Professor Rosenak does not stress this element in his paper on “Educated Jews,” that a critical dimension both in his thought and in the reality of today’s communities is that of praxis. Rosenak alludes to the centrality of praxis in his reference (above) to communities that “bring people to conform to standards and obligations,” when he refers to a “normative cultural and religious agenda” (also above), and in his distinction between language and literature,43 with regard to which he suggests that “two or three centuries ago […] almost all Jews considered the halakhic principle to be fundamental to Jewish language (that is, there could be no Judaism without it), and looked upon the minutiae of Jewish sacred literature, in practice indistinguishable from the language itself.”44

Yet while Professor Rosenak does not explicitly tie his work on Zionism with what he has written about normativity and praxis, I would like to combine though two elements of his thought. Without praxis, I now suggest, it is virtually impossible to imagine the creation of Jewish communities with an agenda. And without an agenda, it is difficult to create communities driven by ideology, and without ideology, in today’s settings, it is difficult to imagine Jewish communities particularly committed to Zionism.45 Thus, counterintuitive though it may seem,
my claim here is that without praxis at their core, American Jewish communities simply cannot engender a commitment to Zionism. For the Conservative Movement, then, the introduction of Zionism as a critical element of its religious culture, or the making of Israel into a “basic religious datum,” will require more than a dramatic shift in the leadership we have described above, but in addition, will require an engagement with the world of traditional Jewish praxis that has long eluded Conservative Jewish communities.

Why is that? The absence of a communal praxis that also permeates the lives of its adherents, I believe, prevents the creation of communities with what Rosenak calls “ultimate concerns,” communities built around that which is “important, engaging, ‘deep’ [and] specifically in the idiom [...] of Judaism.” To the extent that most liberal American Jewish communities do have “ultimate concerns,” those concerns tend to be those corroborated by the larger American culture in which they are situated. But these concerns generally do not achieve significant communal status when they cut against the grain of general American sentiment; commitment to the State of Israel in a way that transcends passive advocacy is a case in point.

Again, though, we must ask “why.” Why is praxis so critical in the creation of communities with these sorts of “ultimate concerns”? In the pages that follow, I would like to offer four preliminary suggestions. I will suggest that praxis, for Jewish communities, has created, among many other influences: (1) a profound and ongoing historical awareness, (2) a sense that profound Jewish living is, in part, about a limit on the self, (3) a countercultural thrust to Jewish life and a separateness from the prevailing cultural modes in society, and finally, (4) an attachment to Zion, the result of which has been a set of “ultimate concerns” that explains the presence of profound Zionism in the Orthodox (read “praxis-imbued”) community, and its absence in other Jewish communities.

Let us take these claims in order. How might Jewish traditional praxis contribute to a sense of historical awareness? Quite simply, much of Jewish ritual preserves and transmits a sense of immediacy surrounding events that in point of fact took place long ago, many of which were, obviously, pivotal in the life of the Jewish community in Zion. By virtue of their observance of these rituals, contemporary Jews thus continue to “live” those ancient events, and along with them, a sense of connection with and commitment to the larger “concerns” those events addressed.

A young child who attends synagogue with her parents on a regular basis usually experiences the synagogue as a place of joy, of song, of comfort. It is, by and large, a locus of celebration, a place where Jewish life thrives. If this child is raised in a traditional community, however, the day will eventually come when she comes to synagogue, not on a Shabbat, and sees her parents sitting not in their chairs, but on the floor. Instead of joy, the synagogue is permeated by a sense of sadness. If she asks, she’ll also learn that her parents are not eating or drinking on that day. They are not wearing leather. Something, she will deduce, is clearly “wrong.” And if she asks the “why” that so much of Jewish rituals tries to evoke from children, she will be told what Tisha B’Av symbolizes, what happened to the Temple in Jerusalem in both 586 BCE and in 70 CE. Soon, she will deduce that her parents, indeed everyone that she can see in her community, feel a connection to a place perhaps far away from her current home, a place that even this many years later can bring an entire community to a state of mourning.

From everything that we know about the formation of religious and communal identity, and from all the anecdotal evidence about the effectiveness of informal education, we know that this sort of encounter is infinitely more powerful than anything that she might be taught in a more frontal manner as she grows older. Yet without ritual, even ritual that seems to defy or deny the “reality” of a rebuilt Jerusalem, this evocative moment would never have occurred.

With time, of course, children who are raised in these environments

the appearance of Mel Gibson’s film, The Passion of Christ, do have the capacity to arouse a base sense of vulnerability, leading to a sense of shared mission that Soloveitchik would have called berit goral, or a “covenant of destiny.” But this is not enough, I believe; the educational agenda has to be to produce communities that share an agenda even in less threatening times, and for that, I am arguing, “praxis” has to be a central element of the community’s educational stratagem and of its “language and literature.”

46 “Educated Jews,” p. 186.

47 I am purposely steering clear of the term halakha, though that is obviously in large measure what is intended here. The reason for this choice in nomenclature is to make clear that what is at stake is not the theological question that usually surrounds inter-movement discussions of halakha, but a different sort of impact (as opposed to theological significance) that praxis (even if it usually is halakhic practice) has on the community.
experience infinitely more. Minor fast days, such as the Tenth of Tevet or the Seventeenth of Tamuz contribute to the amalgam, as do the “Three Weeks” of subdued mourning between the Seventeenth of Tamuz and the Ninth of Av.

And the list goes on. Even practices such as using salt with motzi, or the custom of removing knives from the table when reciting the Grace After Meals (both practices evoking the Temple cult, obviously located in Jerusalem), all evoke a recollection of a very different time and place, a place which happens to be Zion.

Though these examples barely scratch the surface of the list that could be gathered, the point should be clear. The chief motivating factor for many Jews’ observance of traditional Jewish practice may well be theological, or even sociological, but the resultant historical sensibilities are undeniable. So, too, are the implications for identity formation. For Jews shaped by the world of Jewish praxis, it seems natural, indeed unavoidable, that we live not only in the present, but in the distant past as well. And much of that distant past focuses on events that took place in Zion. Much of that distant past comes to shape how we feel and what we express, even if we are thousands of miles away from Zion. The world of Jewish praxis communicates a sense that we live not only in the here and now, but in the “there and then,” no less. Given where that “there and then” was centered, I suggest, a likelihood of commitment to Eretz Yisrael and Medinat Yisrael flows naturally.

Another way of articulating this point relies on Charles Taylor’s notion of “inescapable horizons.” In his critique of contemporary moral relativism, Taylor argues that “when we come to understand what it is to define ourselves, to determine in what our originality consists, we see that we have to take as background some sense of what is significant. Defining myself means finding what is significant in my difference from others.” And history, Taylor argues, is critical in this self-definition, in this process of defining the “horizons” against which the significance of my “self” emerges:

The agent seeking significance in life, trying to define him- or herself meaningfully, has to exist in a horizon of important questions. That is what is self-defeating in modes of contemporary culture that concentrate on self-fulfillment in opposition to the demands of society, or nature, which shut out history and the bonds of solidarity. [...] Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God, or something else of this order matters crucially, can I define an identity for myself that is not trivial.49

The Conservative Movement’s focus on intellectual acuity and theological honesty have been among its most laudable and valuable contributions to contemporary discourse. But that very intellectual acuity has also made arguments for the ongoing significance of traditional Jewish praxis much more difficult to sustain, and, not surprisingly, the elements of praxis discussed above are thus present in the lives of only a small minority of those who identify themselves as Conservative Jews.

For some, that absence of praxis may be a troubling theological issue. That is not our concern here. In this setting, my claim is that the diminution of the centrality of praxis also erodes the historical sensibility at the core of Jewish life, and that erosion, in turn, dramatically weakens what has been one of the lynchpins tying that traditional Jew to Zion.

The second major byproduct of a life in which Jewish praxis plays a central role has nothing to do with history. It has to do, rather, with a limit on the autonomy of the self. In an American culture in which commitment to and service of the self has become paramount, the implicit claim of Jewish praxis that it is not the self, but, rather, a larger “ultimate concern” (to borrow a phrase from Paul Tillich)50 that governs the decision-making of the Jew, is a potentially profound influence on that person’s priorities. Most discussions of halakhah in Conservative circles focus on issues of theology, or authority and autonomy in light of reconsidered claims about revelation. Those issues are critical. But discussions limited to classic theology when considering the ideal role for praxis in the life of the Movement ignore the critical fact that a life centered on Jewish praxis communicates in an ongoing way that satisfaction of the “self” cannot be the central pillar of a life meaningfully lived.

How so? What the Jewish tradition does, quite simply, is to take those matters that in general Western culture are considered exclusively matters of personal taste and preference, and turns them into arenas in which

49 Ibid., pp. 40–41. Emphases in original.
personal autonomy is distinctly limited. Food, time, money, sexuality and the use of language are among the most common examples. Many other dimensions of human existence, from the most intimate to the most banal, are given contour by the Jewish tradition.

This dimension of Jewish life is further illuminated by the notion of “language” which lies at the core of much of Professor Rosenak’s work. By and large, those communities that are the most committed to Jewish praxis are also the most engaged in Jewish textual learning. And textual learning, too, focuses the learner on limitations on our autonomy, the very autonomy which contemporary culture celebrates and encourages. For in the “Jewish bookshelf,” the classic, pre-modern canon of Jewish literary life, it is difficult to locate a single text which does not assume praxis as a central pillar of Jewish community and living. Even those texts that are not explicitly about praxis assume it. The radical difference between the newfound engagement with Kabbalah today and Kabbalists of old is that the traditional Kabbalists could not have imagined a Jewish religious life without the rigors of praxis at its core. For the post-modern newcomers to Kabbalah, Kabbalah is a replacement for traditional praxis. That, quite clearly, was not the “original intent” of those texts.

The implications of this limitation on the self for Zionist engagement are obvious. For the vast majority of Jews who choose to move to Israel, that decision involves some (relative) hardship. The hardship is financial, in part, but extends to the fact that such olim remain immigrants for the rest of their lives, conduct their affairs in a language which is not naturally theirs, leave their families, accept a level of personal risk that may be higher than elsewhere, and more. A move such as this only makes intellectual sense if one’s worldview is not predicated on the notion that the betterment of one’s self ought to lie at the core of one’s priorities.

Though it is difficult to imagine what would constitute a “proof” of such a thesis, it is my assertion that part of the reason for the Orthodox community’s success in sending many students, even from middle class families, to Israel, and often doing so in times when other communities shield their children (and themselves) from the perceived dangers of life in Israel, stems from the message of Jewish praxis that it is not their own desires that have the ultimate call on them. Their religious and national heritage, this praxis has trained them to understand, has the capacity to make demands on them. After all, throughout their life, their commitment to praxis communicates to them that their money, their time, their food, their sexual selves, their choice of clothing and much more are not entirely “theirs.” Something much larger, some other “ultimate concern,” is at play in Jewish life, they have been taught. The reality of life in Israel and the perceptions of Israel abroad make serious Zionist engagement much more difficult for those who have not internalized this notion.

The third byproduct of a life centered around Jewish praxis is the notion that Jewish life is, by definition, somewhat countercultural. This notion has, of course, been long recognized. The British poet and critic, Matthew Arnold (1822-1888), once remarked that the purpose of Greek philosophy was to make the Greek comfortable in Athens, while the Hebrew prophet sought to make the Jew uncomfortable even in Jerusalem. Much earlier, the midrash made a similar point about Judaism and standing “outside the mainstream.” Referring to the first time that Abraham was called a “Hebrew,” it makes a play on the meaning of the word ivri, related at least by sound to the Hebrew word ever, leading the midrash to suggest that “Abraham was on one side of the river, and the rest of the world was on the other.” To the extent that contemporary Jews see themselves as outside the mainstream, or moreover, to the extent that contemporary Jews see their raison d’être as being outside the mainstream, as representing a moral and cultural call that intentionally differs from the larger culture in which they are situated, a tie – at least emotional, and perhaps ultimately physical – to a land far away is a much more plausible and natural dimension of religious life.

Ismar Schorsch would have us believe that for contemporary Conservative Judaism, that sense of dislocation, that “dialectic between homeland and exile” continues. Would that it were so, for that sort of dialectic is precisely what would be required to make of Israel and

51 It is worth examining, in a different context, the degree to which such learning might also be considered a “praxis.” In other words, is “learning” a separate category even if correlated with praxis, or might it be considered a form of “praxis” itself. This question has significant implications, I believe, for how learning ought to be conducted, if one accepts the notion that praxis is a significant dimension of Jewish identity formation in general, and of Zionist identity formation, more specifically. I am grateful to Dr. Jen Glaser, a faculty member at the Mandel Leadership Institute, for encouraging me to think about this distinction.

52 Genesis 14:13.

53 Genesis Rabbah 42:8.
Zionism what Rosenak calls a “basic religious datum of contemporary Jewish life.” But, sadly, precisely the opposite trend is afoot in American Jewry. The majority of American Jews do not visit Israel. Among synagogue-affiliated Conservative Jews, only half do.\footnote{Dr. Bethamie Horowitz, a consultant to the 2000 NIPS study, tells me that 51% of Conservative Jews have visited Israel. Dr. Steven Cohen, who also worked on the study, gave me a figure of 57%. According to Cohen, among Reform Jews who belong to a synagogue, the rate is 43%. For Conservative Jews, again synagogue members, the rate is 57%. For Orthodox Jewish synagogue members, the rate is 75%. Rates clearly plummet when we include those American Jews who do not belong to a synagogue. My thanks to Drs. Cohen and Horowitz for these figures.} But that fact is but a statistical indicator of a larger cultural trend, one which I believe is reflected in positions such as the following passage by Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky:

To sum up my argument: America satisfies the major requirements for a Jewish homeland as articulated by early and visionary Zionists such as Herzl. In America, Jews live within, and help to create, a tolerant and peaceful society, marked by pluralism, choice, and diversity. In America, Jews have private personal lives (of which they are not ashamed) and, when desired, political ones as well, with connection and commitment to country and community (sometimes troubled, to be sure). In America, liberal Jews tend to believe that Judaism has survived into our own time because it has adjusted to change and circumstance, not because it has remained frozen in the past. In America, Jews not only regard, but emphasize, difference among our own kind; that is, in America Jews live openly as Jews in whatever way they wish and acknowledge each other as Jews without bias or hostility. In America, Jews have choices among forms of Judaism, and accept Orthodox as legitimate religious expression, but so, also, Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist Judaism (and other variants as well). In America, Jews have the luxury of seeking definition – and the luxury of ambivalence, if we desire it – because we do not live under the distorting pressures of historical exigency: we are at “war” with no one, not even our sometimes contradictory selves. Moreover, in America Jewishness has, and continues to be, a strong and vital component of the mix of races and ethnicities that compose this extraordinarily multicultural nation.


Golda Meir may or may not have been myopic. But for a Jew for whom traditional Jewish praxis is key, the sort of comfort that Rubin-Dorsky discusses is much more difficult to achieve outside the Land of Israel.

A full discussion of how this countercultural element works in Jewish life is clearly beyond the scope of this paper. But several elements can be cited. For traditional Jews, the thrice-daily obligation for worship is a critical and defining element of their waking hours. But during these ritualized moments, regardless of where the individual finds himself or herself, an ever-present “need” to locate East (the direction of Jerusalem for most westerners) is an omnipresent reminder of a gravitational force that no mere words can convey. Rubin-Dorsky’s sense of at “at-home-ness” in America is undermined by the simple physicality of tradition praxis.

Similarly, the tradition’s stipulation that a person living in Israel must affix a mezuzah the day that he moves into his home, but that in the Diaspora, such a person has fully 30 days before the mezuzah is required,\footnote{Shulhan Arukh, \textit{Yoreh De’ah} 286:22.} speaks volumes about where the tradition sees permanence as possible, and which places it sees as necessarily ephemeral. Again, a subtle but potent claim about what is home, and what is not.

Those stipulations, coupled with limitations on dress (or many other practices related to personal modesty) that make current fads sometimes beyond the pale of acceptable practice in traditional communities, reinforce the notion that Jewish commitment requires, at times, an ability to withstand larger societal pressures and currents.

But Conservative Judaism has evinced, if anything, an inability to
withstand pervasive cultural trends. There are those who would argue that the current engagement with the issue of homosexuality, in the face of clear halakhic prohibitions, is an example of this. But that argument is weakened by the powerful moral issues at stake. A better example, in which critical moral issues are not at stake, is that well known and now classic “driving responsa.”

Even in the face of extraordinary halakhic problems, the Movement essentially permitted driving on Shabbat due to the new reality of Jews and suburbia. But the responsa, which we cannot discuss here in detail, did more than tell people they could drive because of the unavoidable reality of suburbia; it actually told them that driving was halakhically permissible. Yet to a sophisticated audience, even if not halakhically schooled in the classic sense, a claim that driving on Shabbat was “permissible” while the Movement continued to argue that the use of fire at home remained forbidden due to the general prohibition on fire during Shabbat, communicated, I believe, that the overarching principle in question was the need of the Movement to accommodate itself to the reality of American suburban life. The emerging ethic concerned more than driving—it articulated a sense that what contemporary life could not bear, the Movement would first accommodate and then legitimate. That is a dramatic contrast to the consistent (some might say relentless) insistence within Orthodox circles on remaining outside the mainstream. In ways numerous and varied, traditional Jewish praxis does embody a countercultural ethic, an ethic, I believe, which makes attachment to Zion all the more natural by making Rubin-Dorsky’s worldview appear too facile.

Fourth, and finally, the world of traditional Jewish praxis fosters an attachment to Zion simply by virtue of its virtually incessant mentioning of Zion, in word and in deed. Though the amidah, the central pillar of the Jewish liturgy, covers a wide array of subjects, Zion is never far from the consciousness of the worshipper. The amidah contains a petition that God “sound a great shofar for our freedom” and that this freedom result in our being “gathered together from the four corners of the earth.” To where? The intent is so obvious that the prayer need not say. Shortly thereafter, the amidah continues with “And may You return speedily to Jerusalem and dwell there as You have promised.” The conclusion, just a few words later, praises God, the “builder of Jerusalem.” And again, just paragraphs later, “May our eyes see Your return to Zion in mercy. Praised be You, Lord, who restores His presence to Zion.”

A “Basic Religious Datum”

Nor do just the explicit mentions of Zion or Jerusalem make this point. The supplication that God restore our judges as they once were implicitly reminds the reader of where those judges were when they judged ancient Israel. Similarly, the prayer for agricultural bounty varies with the seasons not where the Jew reciting the prayer resides, but the seasons in Israel. The wording recited during the summer is the wording recited everywhere, during the summer in Israel. Even those worshipping in South America or Australia in what for them is the dead of winter, recite the formula for the summer, for their winter months are summer in Zion, and the effect of the prayer (one dare not say “purpose,” as it is highly unlikely that the rabbis gave much consideration to Jews living south of the equator) is to remind Jews living in radically different seasons that even when it is winter for them, it is summer for Jews everywhere, including them.

Birkat Ha-Mazon, the Grace After Meals, which seemingly ought to have no particular geographic grounding, and which presumably could be recited in New Jersey over bread made from grain grown in Idaho, similarly has Zion as its focus. It contains both a blessing giving thanks “for the Land, and for food,” the Land being one obvious specific place, and an even more explicit statement of gratitude to God, “who [re]builds, with mercy, Jerusalem.”

We have already mentioned the evocative power of requiring the worshipper to locate her/himself relative to Jerusalem for each and every service, whether alone or in a group, and the way in which that seemingly simple requirement creates an ongoing reminder that the Jew’s existential home is, potentially, very far away from where she/he currently lives. While the list of both prayers and rituals that make this point could easily be expanded, these suffice to make the point. To paraphrase Matthew Arnold, the traditional liturgy and its accompanying rituals seem to have been designed, intentionally or otherwise, to remind the Jew virtually everywhere in the world that she/he may live outside of Zion, but she is not at home there.

And yet, whom does this message manage to permeate? This sort of influence is difficult to measure, but it stands to reason that it would have a much more profound effect on those for whom the words and the rituals of the liturgy are a matter of daily fare. And because of this, as well, it should not surprise us that for the traditional elements of the community, for whom this liturgy is regularly recited, a connection to Zion becomes more than a theoretical commitment. It is transformed
into a “basic religious datum” that receives expression in a variety of observable manners.

Conservative Judaism and Zionism: Some Concluding Thoughts

It would be facile to suggest that the attachment to Israel that is so evident in the American Orthodox community is a result exclusively of these four praxis-related influences. The picture is undoubtedly much more complex and nuanced, and has to do with the general political tendencies of American Orthodoxy, the sorts of dispositions that draw people to Orthodoxy in the first place, the educational mentors and messages to whom and to which Orthodox students are exposed throughout their formative years, and much more.

Nor can we ignore the fact that it was not traditional Jews, but rather secular Jews, who, by and large, created the Zionist movement and built the yishuv and the State. The reasons for Orthodoxy’s resistance to Zionism are well known, and are far beyond the scope of our discussion. Today, however, the State exists. Today, the ideological backbone (for better and for worse) of Zionism is largely among the religiously traditional. And in the United States, it is in Orthodoxy that one sees powerful and ongoing commitments to Zionism, while in Conservative Judaism, the Movement that prides itself on never having had a non-Zionist phase, that support is much more tepid, at best.

Traditional Jewish praxis cannot be ignored as a powerful source of Zionist awareness and yearning, and even if the roots of Conservative Judaism’s ambivalence about Israel and Zionism had their roots in other domains such as the Movement’s leadership, the Movement’s abiding inability to make Israel the object of passion than it is in more traditional movements is due at least in large measure to the absence of the regular engagement with praxis that one finds in more traditional communities.

The era of effortless transmission of Zionism’s early mythologies is over. The myths on which many of us were raised, myths about Jews who made the desert bloom, who relentlessly sought nothing but peace, who welcomed all Jews regardless of color with open arms have all died, or have been radically transformed. All of this makes passionate Zionist education even more difficult than it was just a few decades ago. And, of course, in a community as comfortable as American Jews are, it was never easy to begin with.

Thus, if the Conservative Movement is serious about engendering a serious Zionist agenda, this paper has argued, it will have to acknowledge the linkage between the commitment to praxis that it has long articulated but never succeeded in inculcating in its laity. The many challenges that the Movement faces are interrelated.

Ismar Schorsch is wrong when he says that dialectic, or cognitive dissonance, powerfully colors the religious and spiritual life of today’s Conservative Jew. It does not. But he is certainly correct that it should. What the Conservative Movement has yet to acknowledge is that it may well be impossible to preserve that dissonance without praxis at the core of Conservative religious life in a way that is infinitely more omnipresent than it is today.

This is not to suggest that Conservative Judaism needs to become Orthodoxy. That would serve no purpose whatsoever. Some of the central characteristics of Conservative Jewish thought, such as historical consciousness in the study of text, an unapologetic theological openness, a renewed understanding of this halakhic process and many others have enriched contemporary Jewish life and could well continue to do so. But this intellectual openness comes with costs, costs that also have implications for the Zionist convictions and commitments of the Movement.

The critical challenge facing the Conservative Movement on this front is not to become Orthodox, but rather to retain the elements that make it a unique contribution to contemporary American Jewish life and, at the same time, to foster the re-engagement with praxis that it has always said it sought (and wished to “Conserve”) so that the Zionist commitments which this praxis communicates might truly become, for today’s adherents of the Movement what Professor Rosenak so adroitly calls an “agenda” and a “basic religious datum.”