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Conservative Judaism: Not dead yet

We all have a stake in renewing an intellectually honest and Torah-rooted Judaism that does not turn its back on the world.

By Rabbi David Wolpe | Nov. 20, 2013 | 2:45 PM | 12

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Deaths are more common than resurrections and therefore safer to predict. The demise of Conservative Judaism is widely and confidently pronounced. No one seems buoyant about its prospects, given the clear signs of seemingly terminal sclerosis. But before we pen another 'requiem,' as was done by my friend and colleague Daniel Gordis ['Requiem for a Movement' in the Jewish Review of Books], it is worth keeping several things in mind.

First, the rise of Orthodox Judaism is to be expected. As the old Yiddish phrase has it, Jews are like other people only more so. In an age when literalist faith is surging in Christianity and Islam, Jews too can be expected to turn religiously rightward. But sociological trends are not invariable laws. Fifty years ago, people were assuming the end of Orthodoxy. Now they are predicting the dissolution of liberal Judaism. For millennia Jews have been forecasting the end of Judaism – as Simon Rawidowicz reminds us in his classic essay, "Israel the Ever Dying People." There are many and serious reasons to be worried about Conservative Judaism, but the power of prophecy was long ago snatched from us. The future's greatest delight is confounding the present.

Jews are not walled off from others. Amid all the discussion about internal dynamics, remember that what happens to us has as much to do with the future of the lands in which we live as it does with our own communal arrangements. If you had asked a Jew in Germany in the 1930's about the future of the community, the skill of its leaders and Rabbis would have meant far less than the political storms that were stirring. Larger patterns or sudden crises can redefine faith communities.

Moreover, when the Jewish community mobilizes its resources it can accomplish astonishing things. I remember Elie Wiesel saying that when he began his career he hoped to help accomplish four impossible things: Creating a State of Israel, keeping alive the memory of the Shoah, freeing Soviet Jewry and maintaining Jewish continuity. The first three, he said, have astonishingly been accomplished. It is a little early to assume we cannot do four impossible things because we have thus far only ensured three.

We all have a great stake in keeping liberal Judaism alive. Jews from the liberal movements run the vast majority of the organizations, tirelessly seek to push the political process, lobby, fundraise and teach among non-Jews as well as Jews. Everything from AIPAC to Federations is the creation primarily of non-Orthodox Jewry. There are many and notable merits to the Jewish religious right, but widespread communal involvement has not been among them. A turn to wider involvement would be laudable, (though singularly implausible in the Yeshiva world) but such an opening will bring with it many of the challenges that Conservative and Reform Jews know all too well.

Then there is the simple question of truth. The intellectual power of modern biblical scholarship, of historical study, of science, is undeniable. Accepting computers and vaccines while disdaining carbon dating is intellectually schizophrenic. Sooner or later the traditionalist world will have to grapple with the power and implications of modernity. When it does, Conservative Judaism will be there, resources in hand, to help people contend with the meeting point of ancient traditions and contemporary innovation. When today's yeshiva student happens upon an old copy of "Origin of the Species," or learns more about ancient semitic societies, he will fall into the sturdy netting of Schechter and Heschel.

Daniel Gordis speaks about the mistakes the Conservative movement made along the way. He believes, with a considerable degree of justice, that it was so enchanted with the modern world that it largely abandoned the quest to create meaning in the lives of its adherents. The quest for meaning has not ended and it is not a function of numbers alone. There is a systolic/ diastolic movement to life. That which wanes today can wax tomorrow. Even the thinning out of ritual observance, for example, perhaps the most pointed indicator of Jewish decline, is not unidirectional. Some traditions, such as mikveh and pre-burial tahara, or purification of the body, have seen an upswing in many non-Orthodox communities as their poignancy has touched Jews previously unacquainted with the practices. A renewed understanding of the rapidly changing world and our place in it, can help revitalize institutions, spark intellectual inquiry, and reinvigorate a Judaism that does not turn its back on the world.

I am a Conservative Rabbi and the child of a Conservative Rabbi. Our successes were legion and our failures great. Liberal Judaism built remarkable institutions, summer camps, school and others, produced fine leaders and scholars and still saw many of its most gifted products abandon us. This is partly in the very nature of a free and mobile society. Shlomo Carlebach used to say, if he meets a student who says he is a Protestant, he knows he is a Protestant; if he meets a student who says he is a Catholic, he knows he is a Catholic. If he meets a student who says he is a human being, he knows he is a Jew. Utopian universalism is an intoxicating drug and has pulled many from Jewish moorings. An intellectually honest and Torah-rooted Judaism can be a potent counterforce, however. I witness its life changing possibilities every single day.

Israel should care deeply about the survival of Reform and Conservative Jewish continuity. Orthodox Jews too, should care, if we want to avoid a Jewish world that is insulated and unable (or uninterested) in influencing the larger world. You cannot be an *or lagoyim* (light to the nations) if you insist on being an *or haganuz* (hidden light). It is time to rise above triumphalism, lament and resignation. The proper response to the declining numbers is not a dismissal or a burial but call to action - put aside the sneers and the shovel and pick up a shofar. We have people to wake and work to do.

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