

The Sociological Study of Conservative Judaism in America

Jews in the Center: Conservative Synagogues and their Members, edited by Jack Wertheimer (New Brunswick, N.J., and London: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 407 pp.

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Jews in the Center is the culmination of a project funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts to study the Conservative movement and its members. The project was organized in 1994 by the Ratner Center for the Study of Conservative Judaism at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. Jack Wertheimer, the director of the Ratner Center, recruited a number of sociologists to work together on the project. This is the main feature that distinguishes this collection from most other such volumes, where numerous contributors each send in a chapter and a single editor works them into a cohesive volume. The result is a uniformly impressive series of studies that helps us to understand the dynamics taking place within the Conservative congregation today. Although there are no “bombshell” conclusions similar to the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) finding of a 52 percent intermarriage rate, the research is superb and the final articles are illuminating.

In this case, a group of sociologists worked together for several years with approximately six thousand Conservative Jews who provided data in one form or another. The Ratner Center undertook a number of original studies that were intended to complement the information available in the 1990 NJPS. These included a congregational survey conducted by Ariela Keysar and Wertheimer in which the rabbis of three hundred and seventy-eight out of the seven hundred and sixty United Synagogue congregations participated. Also, Steven M. Cohen and Paul Ritterband conducted a membership survey that studied the responses of seventeen hundred individuals from twenty-seven randomly selected congregations in North America. In addition, Barry A. Kosmin conducted a survey of nearly fifteen hundred recent Bar and Bat Mitzvah celebrants, along with one parent for each youth. Finally, Samuel C. Heilman and Riv-Ellen Prell undertook two separate ethnographic studies. Heilman studied two

Conservative congregations in New York while Prell studied two in Minnesota.

The research team met regularly over the course of about two years in order to discuss the findings and to coordinate the various research activities. Although some of the information gathered has already been reported upon, this volume is the first in which that data is presented in a comprehensive manner. As Wertheimer explains in his introduction, "The goal throughout was a coherent and unified study rather than a series of loosely connected projects."¹

The Centrism of the Conservative Movement

All of the authors stress the "centrism" of Conservative Jews and Judaism. Although many of its leaders do not particularly like this designation, the Conservative movement is usually considered to be the "middle-of-the-road" Jewish denomination. Despite the fact that this may not please the ideologues in the movement, it may very well be precisely because of this centrism that the movement has been able to appeal to such a wide spectrum of people. Sidney and Alice Goldstein write that they expected that individuals who identified themselves as Conservative Jews would show levels of religious identification lower than that of the Orthodox and higher than that of the Reform, and indeed the data from the 1990 NJPS confirmed this presumption. It also indicated that Conservative Jewry have sociodemographic characteristics that in many cases are also between those of the Orthodox and those of the Reform. As an example, it appears that Conservative Jews have higher levels of general education than the Orthodox, but lower levels than the Reform. In terms of mobility, Reform Jews are the most likely to move and the Orthodox the least. Conservative Jews fall somewhere in the middle.

The Goldsteins point out the obvious but important fact that just because someone identifies as a Conservative Jew, it does not mean that he or she necessarily follows a certain line of belief or a certain approach to ritual practice. Rather, "Jews identifying themselves as Conservative cover a broad spectrum of behavior, from the very observant to those who are only marginally connected to Judaism."² The authors then try to differentiate between members and nonmembers, finding that nonmembers tend to be younger people who never marry or who have been divorced, while members tend to

be older, married, and with children age fifteen and older, living at home.

A Smaller But Stronger Movement

Steven M. Cohen argues that despite the fact that many Conservative Jewish leaders have expressed an almost constant sense of disappointment with their movement over the course of many decades, the movement remains relatively “strong,” “healthy,” and “vital.” While the Conservative movement is in the process of shrinking in terms of its relative percentage of the American Jewish community and perhaps even numerically, the Jewish “quality” has been increasing. Cohen writes that the “quality” of the younger generation “generally surpasses that of the older members.”³ The author argues that “they are more observant, more active in the synagogue, more Jewishly educated, and more committed to Conservative Judaism.”⁴

Cohen attempts to explain why it is that the Conservative movement will experience a decline in its numbers at the same time as its younger generation appears to be more committed than the previous generation. His explanation is that very few Conservative-raised adults now in their twenties, thirties, and forties who have intermarried have joined Conservative synagogues. Since the intermarrieds come disproportionately from homes that were less active in their synagogues, their departure means that a higher percentage of those left come from much stronger backgrounds. Cohen explains that “[t]he selective impact of intermarriage...is part of the explanation for the changes in the character of Conservative Jews now underway.”⁵ The author argues that the Conservative movement is better off stressing that it remains committed to retaining high formal and informal demands and that any effort to slow numerical decline by lowering standards will fail in the long run. Cohen argues that the Conservative movement should sharpen and exploit its qualitative edge rather than attempt to compete with the Reform movement for the less committed.

Regional Differences In Affiliation Patterns

Sidney and Alice Goldstein, the authors of *Jews On The Move*,¹¹ not surprisingly stress that one of the key factors in the growth of the Conservative movement in the 1950s and 1960s was the dramatic

population movement from cities to suburbs. Though this resulted in a massive synagogue building boom, a lack of congruence between the official ideology of the Conservative movement and the beliefs and ritual behavior of the congregants created an anomalous situation. The Goldsteins believe that since only about 41 percent of American Jews affiliate with a synagogue, the many American Jews who are unaffiliated with a synagogue, but nevertheless identify themselves as adherents of a particular denomination, are ignored. Therefore, they argue that any sociological study should include not only those formally affiliated, but also those who are unaffiliated but still identify themselves with the movement.

The American Jewish population has been extensively redistributed throughout the United States, and this has had a dramatic impact on the Conservative movement. Many Jews who had lived in the Northeast and the Midwest have moved to the South and the West. Large numbers of new residents have arrived in cities such as Phoenix, San Diego, Denver, Las Vegas, and Atlanta. As a consequence of this demographic shift there has been a dramatic growth in the number of Conservative Jews living in the South and the West. As an example, nine out of ten Conservative Jews living in the Northeast in 1990 were born in that region, whereas only one out of four Conservative Jews in the South were born there and one out of three of those in the West. But the Goldsteins state that during the period of 1985-1990 the pace of change slowed down, and this may give the communities in the various cities in the South and West time to reorganize. Also, migration has been multidirectional. Nevertheless, the migration patterns suggest that Conservative synagogues in the Northeast and Midwest will have a very different type of social profile than their counterparts in the South and West. Although the Goldsteins do not explore this question in great depth—such a task could take a book in itself—the data that they do bring indicates that it is becoming increasingly difficult to speak of a uniform Conservative movement nationwide.

There were also significant regional differences in affiliation patterns. A high percentage of members are concentrated in the Northeast, whereas nonmembers are most likely to live in the South and Midwest. Members are more likely to have higher levels of education—both general and Jewish—while nonmembers are more likely to have less. Since affiliated Conservative Jews are the most

visible to the leadership of the movement, their characteristics have been assumed to be representative. But this is not the case, since nonmembers are far less active than are members. The Goldsteins argue that these individuals therefore "...represent a population in need of outreach through special programming geared specifically to younger persons, to those not in traditional families, to those who may be financially constrained, and to those alienated from the formal structure of the Jewish community."¹² Reaching these unaffiliated individuals who nevertheless identify themselves as Conservative Jews is critical for the future of the Conservative movement. This is particularly true because other potential sources of new members such as the non-observant Orthodox have been depleted or because, as in the case of the intermarried, the Conservative movement is unlikely to successfully attract large numbers.

Dramatic Socioreligious Changes

What becomes apparent throughout the book is just how many socioreligious changes have occurred in the Conservative synagogue. One of the most noticeable and important has been the acceptance of egalitarianism. Whereas a generation ago virtually every congregation restricted the ritual roles that women could assume, today the situation has changed dramatically.¹³ The Jewish Theological Seminary has been ordaining women as rabbis for more than fifteen years¹⁴ and women can also become Conservative cantors, ritual directors, educators, and administrators. Seventy-nine percent of Conservative synagogues have had a woman president.¹⁵

There has been much discussion in recent years over how the baby boomers approach religion and how that has changed the American religious landscape.¹⁶ In terms of the Conservative movement, the shift in leadership from an older generation to the baby boomers has had a dramatic impact on how lay leaders and synagogue professionals interact. As a result of their high educational and occupational achievements, younger leaders tend to be much less deferential to rabbis and other synagogue professionals. They also expect to play a much more central role in shaping congregational policies and programs, and exhibit a much greater willingness to innovate than did their elders.

The baby boomers have been strongly influenced by a new

approach to culture and society. Americans today are much more informal than they were a generation ago and they expect to actively participate at a far higher level than did their elders. They like being spontaneous and are far more willing to “seize the moment.” When applied to the Conservative synagogue, these sensibilities have had a dramatic impact on the religious and social atmosphere.

The younger generation of Conservative Jews has on the whole been exposed to a much broader range of Jewish educational experiences than have their elders. In addition to a Hebrew afternoon school or even a day school, many participated in a youth movement, a Jewish summer camp experience, one or more visits to Israel with their family or a group of teenagers, and so forth. Whereas for many of their parents being Jewish was a “Phillip Roth” type of experience, the baby boomers see it as a logical manifestation of a multiplicity of formal and informal educational experiences.

Conservative Judaism as a Postmodern Phenomenon

One of the most interesting essays in the collection is the conclusion by Nancy Ammerman of Hartford Seminary’s Center for Social and Religious Research. She suggests that there are “deviant cases” or “outliers” that do not seem to fit into the modernist paradigms that have created two major alternatives for those who would continue to be religious. Either one develops a creative synthesis that takes modern sensibilities into account along with traditional faith or one retreats into a cloistered community which actively works to keep out any modern influences that are felt likely to be corrupting. A third group is of course those who choose to reject or ignore religion entirely.⁶ Ammerman sees the case of Conservative Judaism as not fitting in with any of the above three options. She finds this particularly fascinating because by spotting nonconformist trends, the astute sociologist of religion is perhaps able to see how patterns are changing and developing. Ammerman sees the survival of the Conservative movement as part of an emerging new paradigm that she calls postmodernist. This is not the postmodernism of radical deconstructionism, but rather

[T]he postmodernism I mean is one that has a “yes, but” character. It begins with the realities of modern reason, individualism, and pluralism and looks for the ways in which

those modes of explanation are no longer sufficient. To invoke a postmodernist paradigm is to suggest that the realities of the modern situation are still with us, but their limits are recognized and overcome. Reason, specialization, and pluralism are not likely to go away, but we are beginning to recognize that what looked solidly modern has all sorts of cracks and crevices in which new forms of life are emerging, and old, unnoticed ones have been thriving all along.⁷

Ammerman reaches conclusions similar to that of Cohen. "While losing adherents is never good news, it has had a kind of winnowing effect, shedding those least involved in belief and practice and leaving the more devoted core."⁸ This core will seek out higher levels of Jewish education alongside a new-found commitment to the centrality of God in a manner that exemplifies the "postmodern acceptance of multiple modes of knowing."⁹

Ammerman writes that the fact that Conservative Jews are building a distinctive denominational culture while at the same time increasingly interacting with the broader culture is typical of urban religious communal identities of all types. It doesn't surprise her that under these circumstances you have a new paradigm emerging. Young committed Conservative Jews are increasing their levels of observance by modern (or postmodern) choice rather than premodern necessity.¹⁰

Recent Controversy

Orthodox Rabbi Avi Shafran recently attacked the Conservative movement in *Moment* magazine. In an article titled "The Conservative Lie," Shafran argues that while the leaders of the Conservative movement proclaimed loyalty to Halacha, they have actually "trampled" it.¹⁷ This essay has generated a great deal of discussion and anger. *Jews in the Center* does not provide any clear-cut answer to Shafran's charge, in large measure because there is no simple sociological answer to what is a complex ideological and theological debate. But the book will certainly provide a great deal of information that can be useful, not only by scholars but for partisans arguing with each other through the pages of the *Forward* or from the dais of the 92nd Street YMHA. This controversy is only one aspect of a broader

debate over the future of Judaism in the United States. The Conservative movement will play an important role in reconnecting with the many alienated Jews who constitute a hefty percentage of the American Jewish population.

One can expect that as the debate over how to stimulate a “Jewish Renaissance” heats up, the question of how the Conservative movement can best market itself will attract more and more attention. Already one can see a heightened interest in the Conservative movement. The Wertheimer volume is one indication of renewed scholarly interest. The late Daniel J. Elazar and Rela Mintz Geffen published another work just a few months later. Their effort is titled *The Conservative Movement in Judaism: Dilemmas and Opportunities*.¹⁸ This second work is a very different type of manuscript. Although Elazar and Geffen touched on the same issues, they write on a much more popular level and are not hesitant to confront difficult realities. Already on page 5, they bluntly state that the Conservative movement faces a major problem because of its “lack of clarity of ideology, mission, and purpose.” The authors outline this and other problems and make detailed suggestions for confronting and overcoming them. For the serious reader interested in the subject, the Elazar/Geffen book is a highly suitable complement to the Wertheimer volume.

Jews in the Center is a masterful collection that shows how scholars, religious leaders, and members of congregations can work together to produce a manuscript of the highest caliber. Although not an easy book to read for the casual browser, the book is a source of a great deal of valuable information and insightful analysis. I recommend it highly.

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NOTES:

1. Jack Wertheimer, “Introduction,” in *Jews in the Center: Conservative Synagogues and their Members*, edited by Jack Wertheimer (New Brunswick, N.J., and London: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 6. Unless otherwise stated, all essays come from the Wertheimer volume.

2. Sidney Goldstein and Alice Goldstein, “Conservative Jewry: A Sociodemographic Overview,” 78.

3. Steven M. Cohen, “Assessing the Vitality of Conservative Judaism in North America: Evidence from a Survey of Synagogue Members,” 46.

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4. Ibid.
5. Ibid. 47.
6. Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 286. Roof has recently charted the emergence of five distinct subcultures: dogmatists, born-again Christians, mainstream believers, metaphysical seekers, and secularists. Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999).
7. Nancy T. Ammerman, "Conservative Jews within the Landscape of American Religion," 366.
8. Ibid. 375.
9. Ibid. 385.
10. Ibid.
11. Sidney Goldstein and Alice Goldstein, *Jews on the Move: Implications for Jewish Identity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).
12. Ibid. 80.
13. For an overview on Jewish women in twentieth-century America, see Joyce Antler, *The Journey Home: Jewish Women and the American Century* (New York: The Free Press, 1997). For a slightly dated but still useful introduction to American Jewish feminism, see Sylvia Barack Fishman, *A Breath Of Life: Feminism in the American Jewish Community* (New York: The Free Press, 1993).
14. On women in clerical positions, see Paula Nesbitt, *The Feminization of the Clergy in America: Occupational And Organizational Perspectives* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). For an overview of the impact of feminism on religion, see Rita M. Gross, *Feminism & Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).
15. Jack Wertheimer, "Introduction," 7.
16. See for example Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys Of The Baby Boom Generation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994).
17. Avi Shafran, "The Conservative Lie," *Moment*, February 2001, 52–55. Shafran stood by his article but did note that the title was chosen by the *Moment* editors.
18. Daniel J. Elazar and Rela Mintz Geffen, *The Conservative Movement in Judaism: Dilemmas and Opportunities* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000).