

Reformative Judaism

I often attack the inconsistencies and abuses of Orthodox Judaism. But I must say, sometimes our problems do seem to pale into insignificance compared to those of other denominations!

There was a time when Reform Judaism was the largest and most dynamic branch of Judaism in the United States of America. This was at a time when the movers and shakers of American Jewry were refugees or descendants of the Central European communities that had started Reform Judaism in the nineteenth century. American Reform was even more radical than the original German Reform and tried desperately to be as WASP-ish as possible. At one stage it moved the Sabbath to Sunday, and at its Pittsburgh Conference in 1885 the rabbis explicitly rejected Jewish dietary laws, saying that "all such Mosaic and rabbinical laws as regulate diet, priestly purity, and dress originated in ages and under the influence of ideas entirely foreign to our present mental and spiritual state." They disavowed a hope or goal of returning to Zion and declared their belief in following "only [the] moral laws, and...only such ceremonies as elevate and sanctify our lives, but reject all such as are not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization." Apparently they also arranged a pork and lobster meal on Yom Kippur to make their point.

Then masses of Eastern European Jews arrived. A few stayed loyal to their old ways. Many assimilated right away, but others wanted some way of retaining their Jewish traditions in the New World in a way less censorious or strict than the Orthodoxy they remembered at home. So was born the Conservative movement, founded by rabbis who were traditionally religious but more tolerant and open minded and wanted to make life a little easier for their congregants.

In principle they were committed to Jewish Law and tradition, but felt that some changes were necessary and they accepted a critical, scholarly approach to Judaism that saw the law as evolving, and rather than immutable, as did the Orthodox world. When Solomon Shechter became head of the Jewish Theological Seminary, it became a major institution and the Conservative movement attracted many very distinguished and learned men from Orthodox backgrounds, such as Shaul Lieberman, who were of Eastern European origin and were regarded as scholars by the most Orthodox. At one stage it looked as though Conservative Judaism would eclipse orthodoxy.

But in practice a system that allowed for flexibility soon became too elastic. Some congregations ended up virtually the same as Modern Orthodox synagogues, except for mixed seating, while others were almost the same as Reform. There was supposed to be a committee of rabbis who formed a sort of Beth Din to decide what was acceptable and what was not. But like most such committees it was pulled in all directions. Some of its members tried to remain loyal to tradition. Others thought that change should be the norm.

Some Major Conservative rabbis were virtually indistinguishable from Orthodox

rabbis in their commitment to halacha. Others were indistinguishable from Reform. Each community ended up making its own decisions and appointing its own rabbi to coincide with its particular preferences. But over the past twenty years Conservative Judaism has been pulled farther and farther away from Orthodoxy, particularly over its attitude first to women rabbis, and more recently to homosexuality.

In Britain the Liberal movement is the equivalent of American Reform. Both these movements allow for patrilineal definitions of who is a Jew (if your daddy is Jewish that's good enough), and have cut themselves off from Orthodoxy to the point where many of their members are not regarded as Jewish. The Conservative movement in the USA was the equivalent of Reform in the UK, where many of its rabbis were graduates of the JTS. But, in fact, UK Reform was closer to the liberal wing of Conservative Judaism, rather than the more traditional wing.

Until recently Reform and Conservative movements were the larger, more dynamic and more confident wings of Judaism in the USA. But in recent years they have been losing ground to a resurgent Orthodoxy, usually ultra-Orthodoxy, and they have lost a great deal of their confidence and old ideology as numbers dwindle to assimilation and marrying out. It is now this segment of Jewry, rather than the Orthodox, that is terribly concerned about survival and the future. So they have tried all manner of devices to reverse the trend—more tradition, less tradition, discourage mixed marriages, encourage them, proselytize, reach out to non-Jews, free trips to Israel, and so other simple solutions.

There's a cute joke that at an Orthodox wedding the mother of the bride is pregnant, at a Conservative wedding the bride is pregnant, and at a Reform wedding the rabbi is pregnant! Except that now at a Conservative wedding the rabbi could well be a pregnant lesbian. I don't have a problem with this, if that's what people are happy with—I just do not see how much it can claim to be the same religion that I am talking about. They might be the same people, the same ethnic group, but not the same religion any more than an ethical, Bible loving, Seventh Day Adventist who rejects the Trinity is.

Last week the Conservative movement had to decide on whether to ordain gay and lesbian rabbis. The way it dealt with the issue is a perfect example of the problems of cutting loose from a structured tradition, and the sort of chaotic indecision that will ensure that the movement drifts further away from its origins.

There is rabbinical committee which decides on all halachic issues for the Conservative movement. Rabbi Eliot Dorff of California presented a paper saying that homosexuals should be ordained, but that anal sex between men was still forbidden. Rabbi Joel Roth, representing the traditional wing, opposed ordination of gays and lesbians, saying it contradicts Biblical (and Rabbinic) law. And Rabbi Leonard Levi called for a therapeutic approach in dealing with the causes of homosexuality. All papers were presented and—can you believe it—they were all adopted. In other words, they decided that all three positions are kosher in the Conservative movement. It reminds me of the Judge who said, "You're right," to the prosecution and, "You're right," to

the defense and, "You're right," to the guy in the dock.

In practice, of course, this means that individual congregations will choose rabbis of sex and sexual inclination according to their own preferences. That's how it has been in Conservative Judaism for a long time, anyway. All this does is to reinforce the lack of consistency or standard in a movement that really doesn't seem to have one.

Conservative rabbis were trying to make the best out of it with such silly remarks as, "This is typical of the rabbinic approach to have different points of view." Come on! Sure there are different points of view and very, very rarely totally contradictory ones, but debates are settled. In Talmudic times if there was a legal debate, they either accepted a superior authority or took a vote. There was a conclusion. It was never, "You're right, you're right, and you're right" (except perhaps in matters of custom).

Another justification is, "This is what or movement is all about, being inclusive of different points of view." In one way that's rather admirable and tolerant. Sadly there's another side to this coin—confusion, contradiction, and weak leadership. No wonder so many secular Israelis can make sense of Orthodoxy, even if they hate the rabbis who apply it, but simply laugh at the shilly-shallying confusion of self-contradiction, not on marginal issues of dress codes and hats, but on essential morality.

How can totally contradictory halachic versions and varieties possibly be all right? When the Supreme Court hands down a decision it may, indeed, record minority opinions, but at least it decides. What could better illustrate the bankruptcy of a religious movement than its desire to please everybody? And, of course, it never works. The traditionalist rabbis have already resigned, and the gays are upset that the rabbis have not declared that the Torah and God approve of anal sex.

I don't agree with Conservative Judaism, and certainly not with Liberal Reform Judaism. But neither do I believe that rigid Orthodoxy is the only answer to Jewish identity. So I applaud attempts to try to keep Jews within the fold. But where these attempts are drifting further and further into anarchy and self-contradiction they cannot possibly succeed or be good for any kind of Jewish unity. I'm glad there are places for all Jews to go to feel comfortable and validated, but if anything goes, then one can legitimately wonder where it will end.

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