



SHEFANETWORK.ORG:

THE CONSERVATIVE MOVEMENT DREAMING FROM WITHIN

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USCJ & the Future of
Conservative Judaism

Dear Shefa Readers:

I am a board member in a large shul. We, like everyone, will be forced to make expenditure reductions for the upcoming year--some at the expense of full educational programs. My challenge is that we spend an extraordinary amount of money in USCJ dues. In our community's situation, possibly similar to most synagogues, we don't use any logistical or educational support that USCJ provides. I question why we should still be paying dues to USCJ. There is a need for something *like* USCJ, but in its current state it is infective in creating meaningful change and is a large financial drain on individual congregations when shuls are fighting to survive.

For those of us forced to make expenditure reductions, our rally cry is that we want to make meaningful decisions that ultimately will make us stronger. USCJ is in dire need of a new direction--perhaps this is our moment to move them in that direction! I am curious to hear how many other congregations are having the same conversations.

Thoughts?
Zack

Shalom Zack and Chaverim,

Let me take a pragmatic stab at addressing your some of your comments and add a few of my own. The boards of a number of shuls of the USCJ are having this very discussion on and off over the past several years. This year because of very difficult economic environment even more shuls are having these discussions.

We saw this in Canada most recently with several synagogues were you had both religious differences along with an economic judgment on the value of the USCJ and you hear this both publicly and often privately among synagogues presidents and board members.

The Mission of the ShefaNetwork is two-fold: To bring together dreamers from within the Conservative Movement and to give their dreams an audible voice.

The argument is typically a business argument as you have outline below which is namely: what is the value of my synagogue being affiliated with the USCJ? On a certain level it is the same argument any Jew can make for why being a member of a congregation either before or after my children have had a bar or bat mitzvah ceremony (and some even make the argument when they have children of religious school age as well and just want the event).

In all of these economic argument cases critics of the USCJ argue that the organization does not do much for their synagogues and their members. The money spent on USCJ dues could better by the individual synagogue to enhance their services and programs, allow them to hire more or better staff and clergy

Editor's Note:

In many ways, this Journal is a response to a crossroads in the life of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. While the details of each contributor's thoughts might be directed towards a number of specific programs, the whole enterprise of the USCJ is the general theme.

A set of potential "best-practices" as well as a possible restructuring approach are included in this new ShefaNetwork Journal, which is an edited version of selected posts to the online listserve of the ShefaNetwork between February 17 and February 22, 2009. The entire archive is available at ShefaNetwork.org.

May the yearnings in this journal be met by meaningful responses from within the institutional life of Conservative Judaism.

Rabbi Menachem Creditor
Shevat 5769 / February 2009

(and in this economic environment help them keep and retain needed staff), help improve their marketing and outreach and in-reach to new and existing members, keep their own synagogue dues lower etc.... On top of all this others will add that the USCJ is poorly run, out of touch with the needs of the synagogues, question how it has allocated the dues given to it by the congregations. Finally others will continue to argue that the USCJ is part of a behemoth and fractured Conservative Movement that has a lot of fiefdom organizations that act as silos with little coordination and cross planning, poor economic efficiency overall, and cannot cohesively define itself to attract more Jews to become part of the movement.

If you are a businessman and the Conservative Movement was a company your question validly becomes: Should I continue to partner and invest in an organization who market share is shrinking and needs a major overhaul or simply spend that money to improve my own local synagogue and get whatever services I might need from the movement by developing them internally or through other vendors?

My answer to this is twofold:

- First if the synagogues abandon the USCJ the Conservative Movement as a whole becomes weakened and eventually will disappear. If your synagogue believes in the basic principles of the Conservative Movement and wants to be a Conservative shul then in the true Jewish spirit of sticking together during difficult times your synagogue needs to be part of the USCJ, support the Conservative Movement and work to make it grow stronger. A stronger USCJ and Conservative Movement will ultimately lead to stronger local synagogues and this is an investment the synagogues need to currently make as otherwise a greater number of synagogues will go out over the next several years and while some may survive well now down the road it will ultimately more difficult to compete.
- Second, there has been a call for change in the USCJ and throughout the Conservative movement and that change is starting and you are starting to see the very beginning of some results but like all change of large organizations it does not occur overnight so your synagogue needs to give it some time. Additionally, the USCJ is about to undergo a leadership change as well and in my mind a lot rides on who will be the new leaders of the USCJ. Will they have the vision and skill set to both set out goals and objective and then effectively execute change in organization to make it more supportive and more valuable to the synagogues? Will their actions help make the synagogues stronger? Will they be able to breakdown the fiefdoms within the movement and work with the leaders of the other parts of the movement to create a better and stronger and more cohesive movement overall? Will they be able to define the movement in a simple and clear way to the masses? Will their efforts start to attract more younger people to join the movement and its synagogues?

All of the answers to these questions are unknown at this time but will become more apparent in the next 1-3 years. A synagogue leaving the USCJ and turning its back on the needs to the Conservative Movement at this period in its history when very positive changes could be in store is both a mistake from a business perspective and is in my view morally not the right thing to do. We should be working together to help the redefine and reshape the Conservative Movement in this difficult time. If it turns out several years from now that the movement's leadership was not able to turn the behemoth organization around then maybe it will be time to ask if the Conservative Movement in its organizational form at that time is worth saving and affiliating with as a synagogue.

Steven Katz
President , Temple Sholom
Greenwich, CT

Dear Chevre --

I can tell you that in this neck of the woods, we very much need access to USY . . . AND we have a very healthy, vibrant, and fully-functioning youth program (our chapter – whose catchy acronym is COSUSY [coh-SOO-see] -- was named International

USY Chapter of the Year this past December). It is access to sub-regional, regional, and international conventions and programs which allow our kids to have contact with teens outside of their own neighborhood. The central Florida Jewish community

is not particularly large, and affiliation rates are (at best) around 20%. The next sizeable Jewish community is in Jacksonville, 2 hours away, and the big-city Jewish community is in south Florida, 3+ hours away.

The irony of it all is that we, too, struggle with the cost of USCJ affiliation. We've long since outgrown our 35-year-old building. We bought land and launched a capital campaign long before the current financial crisis hit, so the fiscal landscape is a particularly challenging one. Yet, we've seen the net impact on teens in nearby synagogues that have dropped their USCJ affiliation to reduce congregational dues.

But USY isn't the only significant congregational benefit of being a USCJ affiliate. Each summer, we send around 35 kids to Ramah Darom (not including staffers). Our Sisterhood is extremely vital to the functioning of our synagogue and our youth program (among our Sisterhood members is the current Florida Region president of WLCJ). Our Men's Club has made a comeback, too, and hosted a sub-regional leadership meeting a few months back.

Granted, many of these things -- or close approximations of them -- could be accomplished without USCJ affiliation. Yet, I cannot believe that the best approach for revitalizing the Conservative movement is to abandon the central congregational organization. The way I was taught, if something isn't working right, you look for the source of the problem and correct it. I think that's what Shefa is supposed to be about.

Bididut,
David

Rabbi David Kay
Assistant Rabbi, Congregation Ohev Shalom
Orlando, Florida

With an abundance of love and respect for each one of my brothers and sisters on this list, I offer the gentle (hopefully) tokh'h.ah that what has been missing from the Shefa mix is the true spirit of activism.

It's all well and good, my friends, to talk and discuss and debate, to have conferences and y'mei limud and Israel missions. Good stuff -- GREAT stuff, really. Necessary stuff, to be sure. But, at the end of the day, a discussion or debate or conference or mission never changed anything. It was, is, and always will be people rolling up their sleeves, getting (if I may be so indulgent as to quote myself again) off the soapbox and into the trenches. My greatest concern for this group of admirable and remarkable people is that, instead of becoming the change we want to see, we are in danger of becoming what we wanted to see changed.

Perhaps it's my inner child-of-the-60s skepticism of institutions, but I believe it's a truism that every organization -- no matter how grass-roots its origin and no matter how informal its organization -- develops a certain inertia. Overcoming inertia requires the practical APPLICATION of energy. Not the theoretical equivalent of a good swift kick in the tuchus, but an ACTUAL kick in the tuchus.

What I would love to see Shefa do is get into the right pair of shoes and start taking aim -- loving, constructive, compassionate aim, but aim nonetheless.

Yishar Kokhekha, Steve.

Thank you for your well written response. Two items to which many congregational leaders seem to be oblivious:

- Almost all congregations make considerable use of USCJ youth programming (USY, etc.). This is also a major component of the USCJ budget.
- Every congregational president, or their designated representative, is a member of their Regional Board. Every Congregation has voting rights through their delegates to the USCJ Biennial Conventions.

As I wrote in January, the vast majority of International Board members are past presidents of their respective congregations. Generally, these are people who have decided to make a difference at the Regional level.

The key point is that, as you noted, WE are USCJ. We have a choice of sitting back and remarking on the organization's defects or jumping in and trying to be agents for change. (I'm IPP at my Shul, a Regional VP and a member of the Int'l Board).

USCJ is currently engaged in a strategic planning effort. It's too early to discuss any details, but some of the issues on which we are focusing are:

- What is our role, relative to the other major CJ organization (the seminaries, Rabbinical and Cantorial Assemblies, Women's League, Federation of Men's Clubs, etc.), and how can we improve collaboration with the other entities to maximize synergies and minimize redundant services?
- Drawing on the answer to the first question, what are the priorities of our member congregations, and how do we best serve

Kol Tuv,
Fred

Fred Passman,
VP, NJ Region USCJ

Although I also believe that USCJ is in dire need of looking outward and reinventing itself (along with most of the other institutions of the movement), one thing to remember is that USCJ dues aren't only about your shul. Like Dues within the synagogue, the money that goes in isn't a fee for service, it's intended to build and support community. Thus, in theory, at least, the USCJ should be spending that money not on your excellently run synagogue, but

Rabbi Alana Suskin

those priorities in rural and well as metropolitan areas?

As I've posted to the Presidents' List Serve, my current priority is lay leadership development. Our pilot project in NJ is going quite well. My plan for next year is to refine and formalize the modules, creating facilitator guides and videos of the course sessions, so that we'll subsequently be able to distribute the course (10-months, 1 2h session/month) to all of the regions.

A final note, USCJ offers numerous underutilized services to our congregations. A critical component of leadership training is creating awareness of the services that are available to our congregational leaders. Your analogy about the relationship between congregants and the congregation is quite apt. Folks need to take advantage of what the community offers in order to get full value for their dues. How many organizations charge < \$70/y for dues? That's the cost of USCJ membership. What is that as a percentage of the annual dues charged by the congregation? The \$70 sum adds up and looks big when you multiply it by the number of members for whom the community is remitting dues payments to USCJ, but on a per member basis, it's a bargain.

on those synagogues in out of the way places that have trouble surviving, whose access to resources are more limited, or whose potential members are fewer.

(On a more cynical note, as soon as our movement realizes that many of these places are outside of New York, we'll really be getting somewhere!)

Did anyone read the Forward's article on Conservative Judaism this week? The USCJ president, Raymond Goldstein basically says the USCJ doesn't know how to begin solving problem's within the movement. He is quoted as saying, "If you have the answer, we'll buy it from you."

One part of my vision would be that my shul would take the money that goes to USCJ dues and put that money towards health care and better wages of our own support staff. I would like to see my own shul live up to the standards of the Heksher Tzedek. If Conservative Judaism can tell kosher food companies that they should provide better health care and wages to their employees then why can't we do introspection where it is needed so that we can provide our own employees with nothing less than we demand of others? Are there any Conservative Jewish organization (shul, school, seminary etc.) that provides health care and good wages towards its employees to the same degree the Heksher Tzedek demands of kosher food companies? That would be the shul I would like to join.

Sincerely,
Jonathan Loring
Pittsburgh, PA

I basically second David's comments to our list. I take it that one of the reasons Shefa started was because a number of us were frustrated with what was being done by various institutions in our movement, such as USCJ or our local synagogue, and that this was detrimental to a movement we cherish. We have found various low-cost and frankly low-commitment ways to do this, better web content, and sharing ideas about how things are done locally. Taking on USCJ, (ie, holding it accountable for poor use of resources and lacking vision etc.) is a lot more complicated and would require strategic thinking and coordinated action.

So, I have three questions:

- 1) How could members of USCJ actually reach the ears of the most powerful persons of the organization to have our voices heard about what we think the priorities and vision of the movement should be. I take it for granted that if we are paying dues, we are entitled to a voice. And I assume my congregation's officers "represent me" to USCJ conventions etc. But how does effect the organization's day to day operations?
- 2) How could we, as individuals, work on a local level to raise awareness of what USCJ is in a way that could create a few more activists who would be willing to change the organization from the ground up?
- 3) Most importantly, what do we want USCJ to do? What are our priorities for the national movement?

B'Shalom,
Rabbi Bill Plevan

Excerpted from
Conservative Judaism's 'Vision Thing'
(Forward, Feb. 11, 2009), by J.J. Goldberg:

Conservative Judaism ...faces a crucial juncture this spring in its quest to halt a lingering decline. The United Synagogue, the movement's congregational arm, is set to hire a new executive officer, completing a wholesale generational change of guard in Conservative Judaism's three major institutions. The leadership change could offer the movement a rare opportunity to reverse its fortunes.

But in an interview with the Forward, United Synagogue lay president Raymond Goldstein, who is directing the job search, hinted at difficulties in articulating a vision of future Conservative renewal. That could make it hard to find a transformational CEO able to implement such a vision. Asked at one point what changes the movement might need to achieve renewal, Goldstein replied, half in jest, "If you have the answer, we'll buy it from you."

..."The United Synagogue is having a hard time convincing its member synagogues that it matters," said Rabbi Menachem Creditor of Congregation Netivot Shalom in Berkeley, Calif., who heads the ShefaNetwork, an online community of vaguely dissident Conservative "dreamers." "The next executive director has the opportunity to reach into the synagogues and beyond and create a compelling narrative."

--- Read more at
groups.yahoo.com/group/shefa/message/2362

There is also a problem with USCJ spending. According to the Forward article:

"Currently, each of the United Synagogue's 15 regional offices draws funding from its own region's resources. Regions with many large congregations, such as New York and New Jersey, accumulate large budgets and support staff. Sparsely organized regions with growing Jewish populations in the South and West — precisely the areas with greatest growth potential — receive little support. [Consultant Jacob] Ukeles recommended changing the funding rules. [USCJ President] Goldstein says he can't see it happening. 'We still have more Conservative Jews in New York than in other parts of the continent,' he said. 'So to say we should shift more dollars to places that don't have numbers just doesn't make sense'."

It would be nice if we had a bit more of a pioneering spirit. I'd think it would be good to have shuls and other forms of Jewish communities in places where Jews are now moving to and living. I'm sure there are reasons why I'm wrong... why it's simply impossible to contemplate such a thing... why it's too radical, or something.

I wish I DID know what to do about it. I've racked my brains, and the only thing I've thought of is, in 2013 when I'm ordained (God-willing and if financial aid holds out), to pack up and go to such a place and try to gather a community. But I'm not sure the movement would support that. At least I haven't seen much evidence that it would. I DO hope I'm wrong about that.

Kol tuv,
Anne Pettit
Rabbinical Student, JTS

The fact of the matter is USCJ has been the driving force as the face of the Conservative movement for many years and, for the last 20 years or so our movement has been shrinking. USCJ's answer has been to put the onus on our synagogues, telling us that we need to be more welcoming, need to make change, etc, etc, ad finitum. The fact is that most of our synagogues are very welcoming, have made great changes over the years and do a great job. The problem is that USCJ has done a terrible, almost non-existent, job of marketing us so that we have more people coming to our doors, interested in joining the movement. We, the members of USCJ, are caught between a rock and a hard place. We can go on the

way we are without USCJ and save a lot of dues money each year. But without a properly functioning USCJ we will continue to decline in numbers until we fade away. Or, we can stay with USCJ and throw our money away. OR...

We can lobby for drastically needed change and force them into doing the things that are necessary. It's become clear that the USCJ isn't going to change unless they are forced into it. Because of that, some shul presidents have started a new list serv whose purpose is to discuss ideas for needed change and to figure out how to force change in USCJ before it is too late.

Ira Fink
President, Temple Beth Sholom
Manchester, CT

Todah Rabah to our Shefa Chevre for changing the tenor of this string!

I have yet to encounter a perfect organization. USCJ is certainly imperfect. As I wrote earlier, but feel that it's worth repeating, a confederation of nearly 700 congregations ranging in size from barely larger than a Minyan to > 2,000 members, ranging in theological perspective from all four corners of the CJ tent, and ranging in geographic dispersion from <1 block to > 1,000 miles separating the two closet congregations, USCJ leadership is aware the range of needs and expectations of our member congregations and constantly struggles with the issue of how best to meet those needs.

One may argue that the organization's structure contributes to what some call its unresponsiveness. USCJ's professional staff at both international headquarters and at the regional headquarters is very lean. The entire staff

directory is listed on the USCJ website. One of our Chevre suggested that the Regional staff in congregation-dense regions is substantially larger than the staff in less populated regions. I don't believe that this statement would withstand actual research. Yes, regions serving 60-100 congregations, may have 1or2 more folks than those serving fewer congregations. However, there is regular communication as collaboration among regions. As an organization, USCJ is working on strategies to improve the support available to CJ communities that are dispersed. No one would argue that there isn't substantial opportunity for further improvement.

As far as I can tell the prime driving force for USCJ is the collaboration between the headquarters leadership and the Council of Regional Presidents. As the name implies the Council membership includes the presidents of each region. Presidents elect and past presidents also serve on that council. The balance of the USCJ Board of Directors is made up of folks like me who serve as regional and congregational representatives. We serve on committees and do our best to make USCJ relevant and effective. **The size of the Board and demographic spectrum represented is both its strength and perhaps its weakness.** Identifying a single set of priorities that fits the needs of all USCJ congregations is not a trivial exercise. Moreover, even the best ideas require process. By this I mean that seminal ideas need to be refined into executable plans. The plans need to be funded. People who will execute the plan must be recruited. Sometimes this means going to existing service providers. Often volunteers pick up the plan and run with it. But before an idea gets translated into action, it needs to be vetted by the Board. Except for crises response, process can't happen in a matter of days. Almost all of the stakeholders are volunteers with responsibilities to families, jobs, congregations, etc. As personally invested as we are to CJ and USCJ, we aren't available 24/7.

I'll take this opportunity to make a related point. Forgive me for using myself as an example. It's my impression that most synagogue lay leaders serve their entire tenure without any real understanding of their congregation's relationship with USCJ or the services available to them just for the asking. SULAM is a wonderful lay leader training program, but it's held only twice a year. Moreover, fewer than 10% of our congregations have leaders who have attended SULAM. After developing a leadership development program for my own community (rural NJ, 340 member congregation), I proposed developing a similar program for our region. We are now half-way through our first year of what I consider to be a pilot program. We are learning as we go and identifying potential means for making this training available throughout USCJ. My perspective on this is that if we don't have the content right, adding technology to disseminate a sub-standard program will benefit no one. It may be another two years before we have a program ready for dissemination. I've received terrific support from Headquarters, several senior members of the Headquarters staff are participating as course facilitators. We are receiving and acting on the feedback that we are receiving from participants (on average 40 NJ Region lay leaders from approximately 15 congregations). My point here is that each of us as a member of USCJ has an opportunity to make a difference. Your idea won't gestate into a finished program overnight, but good ideas can flourish.

Some of the critics of USCJ are quick with their rhetoric, but slow to roll up their sleeves and become change agents. My suggestion to all who would like to see USCJ change is to start by working locally. Test your idea and build local and regional support for it first. A concept that may be perfect for a particular congregation may not translate well into a universal program. At each Biennial Convention, USCJ presents Solomon Schechter awards to congregations who have developed exceptional programming. Getting the opportunity to glean ideas from the award winners is worth the cost of attending the convention.

I'll now turn to Bill's questions:

1. On the short-term, your congregation's delegate at the USCJ Biennial convention will have little impact on USCJ's day-to-day operations. However, through dialogue with the Regional team, congregational leaders can and do have substantial influence. The regional staffs exist to serve the congregations. Any leader who needs help on an issue has only to make a call to their Regional Executive Director.
2. Would that I could answer your second question. In our congregation we have a Past President of METNEY (Metro New York), the Immediate Past President of the NJ Region and a NJ Region VP. Or rabbi is a strong advocate for USCJ. We've had Rabbi Moshe Edelman (USCJ Director of Leadership Development), Barry Mael (USCJ Chief Service Delivery Officer) and Lisa Glass (Executive Director, NJ Region) conduct leadership development training for our Board. Still our Board members and other lay

leaders take little advantage of the USCJ services that are available to them. I would love to know how to do a better job of raising local awareness.

3. I'm glad that you asked the third question. I invite all Shefa activists to respond to Bill's question: What do we want USCJ to do? What are our priorities for the national movement? When you offer your suggestions, please mention the size of your congregation and your location.

My personal perspective is that USCJ is and should be the primary resource for synagogue operations. We should also be able to be an effective Shidduch – connecting congregations with the CJ entities that are the primary resources for other congregational support needs (for example formal educational programming and content). For those of you who have never explored the USCJ website (www.USCJ.org) you might be surprised to find the breadth and depth of resource material currently available. There are several hundred documents addressing various synagogue administration and leadership issues. USCJ offers free website hosting for congregations. I've already mentioned the Listserves – there are several hundred from which to choose). Yes, there is tremendous room for USCJ to do better. But I suggest we keep things in perspective. Like oxygen, no one gives it a second thought until it's not there. Low awareness is our biggest threat. The myriad services currently provided by USCJ are all irrelevant, unless they aren't there when you need them. For those who would like to see USCJ thrive I have a short list of recommendations:

1. Explore the USCJ website – find out what USCJ already does well and identify one thing that you think USCJ could do better.
2. Have a conversation with your Regional Executive Director and President. Explore your needs and the possible means of addressing them.
3. Work collaboratively with your regional leadership to develop effective solutions. Your Regional President and Executive Director will share these solutions with their peers. Some of the local successes will evolve into International successes.
4. Be persistent but patient. First and foremost understand that both the professional and lay leadership of USCJ, like, you are people who are passionate about CJ and who have invested much of themselves in USCJ. Starting a discussion by dismissing or discrediting their efforts is not likely to open ears or win friends.
5. Recognize that each of us is like one of the five blind folks trying to describe an elephant. Needs that are patently obvious to the leaders of a small rural congregation may not be so obvious to those of a large metropolitan congregation. Programs that resonate with congregations in densely populated regions may be totally unsuitable for those in sparsely populated regions. Have the humility to recognize that leaders who are responsible for a broader range of constituent congregations may have a more global view. There's a balance between global context and local detail. Both are important, but it's difficult to focus on both simultaneously.

For those of you who've had the patience to read through this entire post, Todah Rabah. We have work to do. Let's be supportive of one another. Let's focus on what we *can* do and check the negativism at the door.

Bididut,
Fred Passman

H.evre --

I agree wholeheartedly with Fred that a kvetch-fest, while cathartic and somewhat therapeutic, is not the same as effecting solutions. At the same time, identifying symptoms and tracing their causes are invaluable diagnostic tools. One of the most common degenerative pathologies in any organization is when the primary goal (in reality, not on paper) becomes the perpetuation of the organization. This is typically the result of key personnel whose primary goal (in reality, not on paper) is to perpetuate their roles as key personnel.

In my pre-rabbinic life, I spent 13 years with a small, progressive, and extremely effective animal welfare agency. At a professional staff / board development workshop our Executive Director brought us to, the facilitator asked each of us the same question: "If I could show you incontrovertibly that the agency could move forward

significantly if you stepped down from your position, would you do it?" **Every one of the professional staff said "Yes," but most of the board members said "No."**

Current USCJ Mission/Vision Statements:

Our Vision: *The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism promotes the role of the synagogue in Jewish life in order to motivate Conservative Jews to perform mitzvot encompassing ethical behavior, spirituality, Judaic learning, and ritual observance.*
Our Mission

The Mission of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism is to strengthen and serve our congregations and their members.

We create, develop and disseminate educational, religious and tikun olam programming to meet the needs of our congregations and their members.

We seek to create communities of conservative congregations in each of our regions and throughout North America.

We work in concert with other institutions and organizations of the Conservative Movement to promote, nurture and foster a vibrant Movement.

We are both an advocate and a spokesperson for the congregations of the Conservative Movement.

We are dedicated to strengthening the connections between North American Conservative Jews, the Jewish People and the State of Israel.

From

www.uscj.org/Mission_Statement6402.html

It was the dedication to the MISSION of the agency by the professional staff that made the scope and impact of our work go light years beyond the size and financial resources of the organization. And it was the entrenchment and inertia of board that eventually pushed out all that staff and brought the agency down from a national leader to a neighborhood program.

I'm mystified at the failure of our movement to articulate its identity. In my personal encounters with the powers-that-be the only reason is that same sort of entrenchment and inertia. Constructive criticism is met with defensiveness, positive suggestions are dismissed as logistically or financially impractical, requests for enfranchisement in the process are ignored or brushed aside.

I don't mean to make it sound like I'm belittling our movement leadership. I believe they are sincere and committed. However, I do also honestly and lovingly believe they have either lost their perspective, or have a perspective which is far too narrow.

Perhaps the place to start is to (re-)introduce the concept of "service" into what we look for, expect, and actively cultivate in both our leaders and our constituency (who are, after all, the source of our leaders). "Avodah" in the theological sense is giving of oneself and one's resources for the benefit of others, not because of an expected (or even deserved) reward, but because it is the right and righteous thing to do.

Much is said about the culture of privilege in these United States, but it's not a new phenomenon. **When people become entrenched in their positions and that entrenchment is encouraged and strengthened by institutional inertia, those people understandably come to the conclusion that what they want is what's best for the organization -- which is essentially the polar opposite of "avodah" (wanting what's best for the organization).**

Bididut,
David

Dear Chevreh,

What a magnificent conversation Zack pushed us into! Whereas there is certainly so much work to do at the USCJ, this conversation points to some of our deepest dreams for what that work is meant to accomplish. Shefa, back when it was founded, first slid into "kvetch-fest" territory. Some of the earliest Shefaniks suggested what has been articulated once again in this thread: that's not the best use of this forum, nor will it make the difference so urgently needed in the institutions of our Movement's continuum.

So perhaps the question is this: What is the reason USCJ must exist? In other words, since a mission-statement explains "why I exist in the world", let's pretend there isn't already a mission and we have been charged by the USCJ leadership with crafting mission language worthy of the dreams and capable of meeting the needs of our

Movement. *Let's craft that language together, on Shefa, and see what comes of it.*

There are many USCJ professionals on this list, many volunteer leaders of the Movement, USY'ers, professors, etc - let's articulate a mission for an institution clearly in need of grassroots energy, sharing it with many in the position to most directly empower and implement that voice. In terms of David's wise suggestion to focus on mission, there is a wonderful article from the Alban Institute, called "Who Owns the Congregation" which ultimately suggests that our job as stakeholders in the conversation is to find the mission we belong to, the real owner for whose benefit we hold and deploy the organization's resources.

May the dreaming continue, Chevreh - who knows what may emerge?

Rabbi Menachem Creditor
Congregation Netivot Shalom
Berkeley, CA

The job of congregational leaders—boards, clergy, lay leaders, and staff—is not to "give the members what they want." For one thing, if the only mission is to current members, the congregation will soon die. And so the mission must be not only to change the lives of members but of others yet to join. A real problem with democracy in congregations is that future members do not vote. If they did, at every meeting they would make up a majority. Another reason congregations cannot simply "give the members what they want" is that part of the mission is to teach people to want things that they don't want. Members of vital congregations testify to many ways the congregation has drawn them out of themselves into voluntary service, sacrificial changes of career, and hard work for social justice. Sometimes I ask such people, "What would you have done if someone warned you how joining this congregation would transform your life?" Generally they admit, "I would have run the other way!" Pleasing people—members, future members, leaders, or anybody else—is not the mission. The mission is to change lives. -----From "Who Owns a Congregation?" by Dan Hotchkiss (adapted)

In response to Rabbi Creditor's post:

I think it is time for USCJ to re-examine the immediate goals and to change direction, at least for the immediate and foreseeable future, to growing and nurturing the fiscal and physical presence of the Conservative movement in the US. When that has been accomplished, we can then add some of the old goals back in while we maintain and expand our new accomplishments.

We need to get USCJ lean and mean. We need a new presence made up of a name that better defines the movement and a sound bite slogan that accurately conveys the definition.

I think that United Synagogues of Contemporary Judaism is a better reflection of the movement. Perhaps a slogan along the lines of, "Redefining tradition for modern living" also fits us better.

We then need to market the "brand" in a professional manner, including a new USCJ website and a weekly newsletter that can be spread virally through the Internet. A good example is Aish.com's newsletter. They have 260,000 subscribers and they make money on their website and their newsletter. If you haven't seen their newsletter, they have 10-12

articles a week pertaining to various aspects of Judaism, some video, some audio and some in print. I always find at least one thing worth reading and often, I forward articles on to friends. I'm sure that many of them have subscribed to the newsletter and they, too, pass on articles to their friends. This is viral marketing. With 700 USCJ member synagogues I can't imagine having any trouble coming up with 10-12 articles a week between rabbis, cantors, teachers, students, etc. - many of whom would love a forum for their stories, sermons, etc. We mail the newsletters out to our members and let them forward them on to their friends. That should give us 10's of thousands of email addresses to start with and the growth should be explosive if the newsletters are done well.

We need a PR department that will make sure that the movement is constantly in the news, whether lighting a chanukia at a hockey game or working with Habitat for Humanity, or doing public mitzvahs. Visibility will bring membership! We need an advertising campaign, professionally prepared and geared toward the unaffiliated Jews who make up 60% (I've been told) of the Jewish population of the US. It makes little sense to market to our own

members and not much more sense to market to those already affiliated to other movements.

What we need from USCJ is to develop a complete marketing and public relations program with these goals. This has to be done by professionals with a perspective that is not tainted by being part of USCJ, not by in-house staff.

While preserving and strengthening the tenets of Conservative Judaism is our goal, it is money that keeps our doors open so we can pursue those goals. And money comes from membership dues, donations and fundraisers created by helping hands.

Ira Fink

Increasing membership will fix almost all of our problems.

USCJ needs to start acting as a business. They are the "McDonald's Corporation" of Judaism to the synagogues' status as franchisees. If they don't create the menu specials, the advertising and the PR we, the franchisees will lose business to the competition. That is exactly what has been happening for the last 20 years. USCJ needs to start minding the store! Increased membership has to be our immediate goal.

While we are engaged in the exercise that Rabbi Creditor suggested of collectively discussing the mission of the USCJ I would like to see if people are interested in taking it a little higher up the ladder as well. Right now there are at least sixteen independent arms of the Conservative Movement. The complaint is often that the different arms of the movement do not work together enough and often act as silos and there is no overall plan or strategy for the movement. If we had to start from scratch how would you ideally structure the movement so it could operate effectively from the top?

How would the Movement be governed overall? Which of the arms should really either be collapsed or placed under the divisions of the overall organization?

I have admittedly not thought all of this out but when you get down to it I think the movement really have only a few components to it.

- a) The Law Committee (responsible for interpreting and modernizing where applicable Jewish law)
- b) Professional Education (the seminaries and related school turning out Jewish professionals falls under here)
- c) The Jewish Professional Organizations (RA, CA, Jewish Educators, Executive Directors all fall under here)
- d) Youth Education, Camps and Groups (Schechter Schools, Ramah, USY)
- e) Congregational and Member Services and support groups (USCJ, Sisterhood, Men's Clubs)

This may be simplistic but it would seem much easier to manage if the Conservative Movement collapsed all these independent organizations into 4-5 organizations with the heads of each one forming some sort of Central Council to govern the Movement overall. I would be interested in hearing others thoughts about restructuring the movement overall as the way it is set up to operate now is one of its biggest problems.

Steven Katz, President
Temple Sholom
Greenwich, CT

Dear Chevreh,

I agree that USCJ needs positive advertisement. However, I think that the problems within the Movement and USCJ itself need to be looked at first. While we can advertise both as progressive and evolving, we need to be able to advertise when we are as comfortable as possible with clear, informative statements of what both stand for and can provide. I realize that this goal is not easy to accomplish. However, I believe that the community we have will be able to meet such a challenge. I look forward to accomplishing what Rabbi Creditor has suggested.

I think that Steve's ideas of restructuring sound great. Where would MERCAZ USA and Masorti Olami fit? Perhaps another section for Israeli Affairs should be created. Then again, Masorti is more than just Israeli affairs. I would also include all of AJU, not just Ziegler.

I am also glad to see that many are choosing to not be pessimistic. It is this spirit that keeps us hopeful and innovative. As a USYer, I am proud that a bright future for the Movement is being ensured.

Shalom u'vracha,
Nina Kretzmer

Hi Nina,

I don't think that this is as complicated as you make it out to be. If USCJ focuses on cleaning up its own house and promoting the movement with the aim of increasing membership, it will have little time to vie with the rest of the movement to be the "leader of the pack".

The area of cooperation and control has to be between the RA, JTS and USCJ. I rather liked the idea of creating a council made up of members of each of the Big 3 to guide the movement. I think that is an equitable way to bring equal representation to the movement and have decisions of the council guide the movement so the Big 3 work in a symbiotic nature with one another. This way, no single organization cedes control to one of the other two organizations. That should stop competition and breed cooperation between them.

This whole thing is possibly no more complicated than deciding 4 things:

- 1) What are the RA's responsibilities?
- 2) What are JTS's responsibilities?
- 3) What are USCJ's responsibilities?
- 4) What responsibilities will the joint RA-JTS-USCJ council have?

Ira Fink

Dear all,

As a rabbinical student, I usually don't respond to these posts because I want to be very careful with my words, but as a Ziegler student, I feel obligated to respond to the last two posts. I don't want to get into the issue of reorganizing the movement, as I still have much to learn, but I think some facts need to be clarified.

- 1) the reason that AJU as a whole is not included on that list is because only Ziegler itself is specifically affiliated with the Conservative movement. The rest of the school's programs function independently of the movement, like any other private school.
- 2) please keep in mind that JTS is not the only school that ordains clergy. Ziegler has been in the business of ordaining rabbis for over a decade now, and to ignore that and

consider JTS the only school that does (and part of the "Big 3" at that) leaves out a major organization that helps keep alive, among other things, the spirit of pluralism and diversity that is so much a part of what makes Conservative Judaism interesting and worth the effort of reorganizing in the first place.

I am well aware that the presence of multiple organizations doing similar things makes our reality as involved Conservative Jews more complicated, but it is the reality that we have, and the reality that we must face if we are to conduct any sort of realistic assessment of where we are as a movement in order to move forward.

I make no claim at knowing what, if any,

reorganization would best suit the movement; I merely hope to keep everyone on the same page in terms of what organizations are in play and how they relate to the movement as a whole. I look

Kol tuv and b'hatzlacha,
Matt Shapiro
Ziegler Rabbinical Student

I started my exercise with a blank sheet of paper on restructuring the movement so I can dream how I would like it to be if I started again. For me I would not separate out Masorti into its own separate group as I would have one global movement not North American and the rest of the world. So all of the Masorti functions I would incorporate into each of the 5 areas that I listed and make all of those 5 areas cover the Conservative Movement worldwide. This gives the added advantage of having the Israeli component of the Movement fully integrated and part of what goes on in the diaspora which in my view would enhance the bonding of diaspora synagogues and the synagogues and institutions in Israel and would all the movement to operate in a more cost effective manner in Israel. Mercaz functions I would probably primarily put under under Congregational Member Services and support groups since Zionism is an integral part of our synagogues and spread or integrate some of those functions in the Youth sections and the Jewish Professional Educations sections as well.

The goal would be to have the 5 sections work together in defining and creating a more unified movement that is attractive to modern conservative Jews. For example, I have said for a while that the Law Committee needs to take a more regular and organized approach for reviewing and modernizing halachah so it can stay within the realm of Jewish law but realistically reflect how conservative Jews live today as one of our issues is that only a small percentage of conservative

Steven Katz

As an Israeli, I am not sure that integrating Masorti into a global movement would help Masorti, especially if global (read "US") leaders do not understand that needs here are different. Programs that serve American CJews in Israel (i.e., the Conservative Yeshiva) do little if anything to help the local Israeli movement. A few Jerusalemites might benefit but the movement as a whole does not. Being branded as an "American import" is one of the things that is holding the Israeli movement back. This needs very careful thought with full participation of the Israeli leaders, What is good for the Zionist awareness of North American congregations and congregants may not be the best for helping the movement here grow. A delicate balance needs to be struck.

Shoshana Michael-Zucker
Kfar Saba

forward to reading the responses of others and hope that many more interesting and useful thoughts will come of this dialogue.

Jews actually follows much of the halachah based on how it is currently written. For many areas you cannot make changes but for others you probably can and should. For example you can drive back and forth to shul on Shabbat if you live in the suburbs. Technically however you cannot go to a friends house for Shabbos dinner or after shul to have a shabbos afternoon together. Makes very little sense to me. The result is most Conservative Jews do it anyway as it is not reflective on how they actually live. More synagogues are incorporating music into some of their services. Should this be allowed halachicly? The seminaries that feed the geographical areas of the movement where this is becoming more popular need to start training their Rabbi's and Cantors in a different manner to incorporate this if this is the trend (and in fact JTS to its credit is starting to do this).

Perhaps the Cantoral Schools and the USCJ should would together to have a more contemporary song book for Cantors and song leaders and provide ongoing training in this for existing Cantor (right now the Conservative cantors have to turn to the Reform movement for this). However to think about making the movement more appealing by giving options within halachicly acceptable limits and then being able to roll them out to the congregations require thought and coordination among all parts of the movement that within its 16 independent arm structure is very difficult to achieve but in a more slimmed down structure would be part of its overall mission and collaboration.

H.evre --

Once again, may I suggest that ANY sort of structural change first requires a guiding principle or principles around which to restructure. I do NOT, by any stretch of the imagination, wish to encourage or re-open the "Who are we?" philosophical discussion. I believe what my beloved classmate and our friend and teacher, Rav Menachem Creditor, has set before us is a "tuchus af'n tisch" challenge -- that we've gone about as far we can go with the speculative, now it's time for the practical.

It should be clear from the brief exchange in this forum that it is highly unlikely for any theoretical restructuring of the extant organizations in the Conservative movement will come to pass, and certainly not any time soon (despite our best intentions and efforts). Yet it is equally clear that SOMETHING constructive and rather radical MUST happen NOW. These two points would appear, on their face, to be irreconcilable. This is precisely why articulating the message is, l'fi aniyut da'ati, both the perpetual failure of our movement and the single most pressing need to right a listing ship. Some two years ago in this forum, we were asked to finish this sentence: "Conservative Judaism is . . ." The result was several essays, running from a full paragraph to several. Each was, understandably, replete with qualifications and alternative interpretations, as befits a pluralistic movement.

The problem, however, was exactly the same as it has always been: if articulating a core value takes a full paragraph, people are bound to stop listening, get confused, or be captured instead by something which is clearer and stated with more apparent conviction.

It is wise, I believe, to observe other movements and

Bididut,
David

organizations and learn from their successes and mistakes. It is foolish, I believe, to draw direct parallels between our movement and those other movements and organizations. To do the latter is to IMMEDIATELY compromise our own uniqueness, our own identity, our own integrity.

For the past few years, I've been the interfaith liaison for our local board of rabbis. As such, I'm often called upon to explain the major streams of Judaism in the proverbial nutshell. Likewise, I have been teaching a conversion class for the past several years, in which that explanation must be detailed, clear, succinct, and presume no prior knowledge -- all at the same time.

The core concept of Conservative Judaism, as I've understood it from a lifetime of being a Conservative Jew of widely varying degrees of involvement and observance, is this: preservation of ancient tradition as the foundation for adaptation to the needs and challenges of the contemporary world.

In other words, "Tradition and Change."

There has not been a group I've spoken to -- Jews, non-Jews, or a combination thereof -- which has not come away from hearing this definition feeling like Conservative Judaism is authentic, sensible, intellectually stimulating, and spiritually satisfying (or, at least should or could be).

When a sports team, athlete, musician, dancer, writer, etc., falters, getting your groove back ALWAYS starts at the same place -- the fundamentals. We haven't lost our way -- we've neglected (or taken for granted) the power of our fundamental message.

Dear Shefa Friends:

As we think about/dream about the Conservative movement, I want to share that there already is a gathering (quarterly) of the lay and professional heads of each of the Conservative movement organizations called the Leadership Council of Conservative Judaism (LCCJ). The chair position rotates among the groups (currently it is chaired by the heads of the Women's League) and the LCCJ has created during the past year two movement wide Commissions, one on Keruv, and the one which I chair on Social Justice and Public Policy. The LCCJ has also created a movement-wide web site and periodically puts out policy statements (including recent statements on

immigration and the War in Gaza).

As a gathering without paid staff and as a gathering of organizations that are often zealous about maintaining their institutional autonomy, the LCCJ has not been a powerful or well-known body, but it exists and provides a framework for creating change (that is, for enhancing how Conservative Jews work together).

Finally, I note that the Commission on Social Justice has two levels to facilitate its work. One level includes representatives of all the bodies included in the LCCJ. The other includes representatives of 7 groups: the Women's League, Federation of Men's Clubs, Rabbinical Assembly, Cantor's Assembly, USCJ, Zeigler and JTS.

Our first work product (supporting sustainable energy) is Massekhet Hahammah, the Sun Tractate, which can be used for the upcoming blessing of the sun and siyyum on erev pesach. Details on my blog, rabbilenny.blogspot.com and at ritualwell.org and blessthesun.org. The RA publications office will soon be offering the tractate along with a Sun Siddur.

Rabbi Leonard Gordon
Germantown Jewish Centre (Philadelphia)

I agree with Steve. In the Reform world, the URJ is "the" organization of the movement. In our world, the USCJ is merely the organization of synagogues, which is a step down the ladder. Part of this is a material theological difference: Conservative Judaism is, in principle, based on halakhah as interpreted by our local mara d'atra, not on a "brand." For practical reasons, we do need to reach people through an emotional connection to a global movement. I would say JTS currently has the strongest brand in the movement, which is well deserved but probably not sufficient to inspire the majority of our members, such as myself, who did not train for our careers at a seminary.

I propose the following:

- Currently, there is an optional donation to JTS on my synagogue dues bill. I know I'm also paying USCJ dues, but the average congregant could be forgiven for equating support of the movement with support of JTS. JTS and USCJ should both agree to stop fundraising to "average" congregants, and instead every member family should be encouraged to contribute to an expanded Leadership Council for Conservative Judaism that, similar to a Jewish Federation, would be a patron of the various seminaries and other movement organizations.
- The Ramah Camps are owned by JTS, and compete with USCJ's own youth programs, which are large sources of both cash and direct personal connection to families for both organizations. USY and Ramah, along with Schechter schools and synagogue religious schools need much closer ties to create a continuous educational experience, and possibly take advantage of economies of scale in their administration.
- The ConservativeJudaism.org website and new magazine representing the movement as a whole are good starts, but barely significant. Much more movement information needs to be put under the ConservativeJudaism.org domain name, at the expense of the "branding" most resources as either from JTS and USCJ. The magazine should be issued at least 4 times a year and needs more engaging content to replace politically-correct platitudes, or it's not really worth having at all. A few years ago USCJ sent us a Chanukah CD which was a great antidote to "seasonal" music on the radio - we need more contacts like this. (Unfortunately you can't even buy these CD's online, much less download the MP3's!)
- The central operations of USCJ and the movement as a whole need to be distributed around the country, where ever there are Conservative Jews. Not in New York City, which, love it or hate it, is not a typical Jewish community!
- USCJ should provide employee benefits (health care) and technology to all member congregations - these are things that even large congregations are not large enough to do well on their own. All USCJ congregations should be connected by a computer network so that information on national and regional initiatives can be targeted to appropriate families based on their ages and involvement, based on up-date-

date information. Just like when you fill a prescription and it's available in other stores in the same chain and on a website.

- These are all chicken-and-egg problems: they require giving the movement more money, but we don't want to give the movement more money unless they do a better job. We all need to work together for a stronger movement.

Marc Stober
Newton, MA

My only comment to Rabbi Kay's wise and thoughtful remarks is that I do agree we need to be able to easily define ourselves as a movement but organizational restructuring is a business issue not a theology issue.

Our theology may be unique but our business which is providing religious services, programming, education and socialization to people primarily through local distribution channels (namely local synagogues) with some other regional distribution efforts (camps and schools and some limited regional programming) is not. Many religions do the same thing. We need a good product to sell and convey a simple message to tell what it is about (which is why you need to simply define what conservative Judaism is) but then delivering the goods and services via the distribution channels and cross marketing some of the goods and services we offer is very much a business function that requires an solid organizational structure, good leadership and proper allocation of resources.

I hate to sound so business-like but the truth is that being Jewish today and being an active part of a religious movement is for many people an optional exercise that competes with other potential activities (just ask any Educational Director of a religious school) and belonging to a synagogue is an

Steven Katz

optional expense for many families as well. You have stiffer competition from places like Chabad, the Reform Movement and even Modern Orthodox - and your organization has to be able to compete.

For those who say it is unlikely the organization will change because it is so entrenched I beg to differ. It will change either for the better by restructuring (which does not take as long as one might think if people really want change and are vocal about it; numerous business examples here) or for the worse by the continuation of losing members and the closing of synagogues. The question is which type of change will occur. It is very ironic that the movement that espouses tradition and change as its main message seems at times so incapable of balancing the two aspects in order to improve and advance its organization and operations.

It is good for us to dream and discuss organizational change as dreaming of change and getting others to raise their voices and take action to support change is what started the movement to begin with, is why an African American was able to be elected as our President, is why we have the internet accessible to just about everyone and is why forums like this one are able to exist and get so much good feedback from Conservative Jews around the globe.

Thanks for more great discussion. I changed the subject for my email just to make the point that I am not going to get too much into the "structure" question. I want to respond to Fred Passman's last post, in which he responded to my three questions. The last question was what should USCJ do? Fred responded to this very thoughtfully, but I think his response revealed what I take to be the major flaw of what USCJ has been doing in the last decades. He said: "My personal perspective is that USCJ is and should be the primary resource for synagogue operations"

I am sorry Fred, but this sentence should not appear in a mission statement for USCJ. No matter how well USCJ serves existing congregations (and I think they should do this), this model does not empower USCJ to think creatively and strategically about growing the movement beyond the existing synagogues. Its one thing for USCJ to assist a community to start a new but otherwise conventional synagogue; its something else to be proactive on a national level by looking at demographic and institutional trends and creating new synagogues and new types of

communities that are movement oriented. Our movement wide malaise is largely due to the fact that institutionally we have had very little to offer that meets the changes in Jewish communal life in the last twenty to thirty years. We are an old stand-by for a lot of people who like what we have to offer, but as a result we are a demographically old movement. Yes, day s school attendance has increased, but how much of that is accounted for by Jewish abandonment of public schools?

What I have heard in this discussion are criticisms of different aspects of our movement. Some are about "message" (not theology, this is different); others about "marketing" (how to get the message out there); some about "structure" (who has power, how do institutions operate in relations to each others); and others about "programming" (what should institutions actually do). I think these are all important, but in this email I am only addressing programming. And here are two concrete suggestions:

- 1) We need to look the independent minyanim, what made them so successful and what we can learn from this. I do not suggest any pat answer to this, but I suspect the most important thing is that demographically they are young whereas our synagogues are old. What does this tell us?
- 2) A former JTS Dean supposedly said that there are ten prerequisites for Rabbinical School and nine of them are Hebrew. Well, I think the same could said for ways to reinvigorate our movement. The value of Hebrew literacy is very practical for us. The more people know Hebrew (and really well, not just reading words), the more they will appreciate what our congregations uniquely offer, Hebrew services, long Torah reading etc. But we have to create that Hebrew literacy to create a new generation of Conservative shul-goers, and we can do it by radically rethinking what we do in congregational schools. But that is for another email.

Best,
Rabbi Bill Plevan

Bill Plevan wrote: "But we have to create that Hebrew literacy to create a new generation of Conservative shul-goers, and we can do it by radically rethinking what we do in congregational schools. But that is for another email."

I'm going to pre-empt his second e-mail by making a stab at the radical rethinking: Hebrew language immersion (ivrit be-ivrit), and making this the attraction of Conservative Hebrew schools - because hardly anyone else does it in the U.S.

Zack Berger

Rabbi Bill commented on my remark: ""My personal perspective is that USCJ is and should be the primary resource for synagogue operations." Point well taken when you write: "I am sorry Fred, but this sentence should not appear in a mission statement for USCJ. No matter how well USCJ serves existing congregations (and I think they should do this), this model does not empower USCJ to think creatively and strategically about growing the movement beyond the existing synagogues."

You are quite correct, the USCJ tagline is:

The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism promotes the role of the synagogue in Jewish life in order to motivate Conservative Jews to perform mitzvot encompassing ethical behavior, spirituality, Judaic learning and ritual observance. The mission of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism is to strengthen and serve our congregations and their members.

So what does this sentence mean?

Again, speaking for myself, I take "promotes the role of the synagogue in Jewish Life..." as the operative term. We do that through leadership development, through youth and adult programming (Pre-Kadima through Hazak, with a bit of a hole for college graduates who aren't yet qualified to join AARP). My personal experience is that the

thing USCJ does best is provide mentorship and other support to congregational leaders, both lay and professional. The USCJ resource library about which I wrote earlier is heavy on documents designed to help leaders run their communities. There are also resource documents on out-reach, in-reach, and myriad other Jewish life issues, but guidance on organizational issues predominate.

Moreover, if we look at the professional staffing as it exists today within USCJ headquarters and regional offices, the focus is on supporting leaders and supporting youth programming.

We assume that the clergy doesn't need USCJ guidance on ritual or Halakhah issues. Those are in the purview of the R.A and Committee for Jewish Law and Standards.

We must also assume that the Davidson School and UJA provide our educators with the tools they need to be effective in our communities. Some argue that JEA is essentially a union. Perhaps, but it's CJ's organization of professional educators. They are the heart and soul of Jewish education. Perhaps it's not too outrageous for me to suggest that they should be the primary CJ entity responsible for Jewish education with the Conservative movement. Does it make sense for USCJ to develop educational content when we have seminaries, graduate and undergraduate schools dedicated to Jewish learning?

One of our Chevre wrote: "the Federation of Men's Clubs and Women's League clubs are not in leadership positions as far as the big picture." I suspect that their leaders would take exception to this statement. Both entities participated in the development of *Emet ve Emunah*, and both have lifelong Jewish learning programs of which they are quite proud.

Perhaps it would be better to identify USCJ as the CJ entity that is organized to promote synagogue life in the sense that within USCJ lies the expertise and organizational structure to support the efforts of community leaders. Other entities within CJ have greater expertise in matters of Halakhah and spiritual life. Other entities with CJ have a concentration of expertise in education. USCJ also does a great job with youth programming. But beyond youth programming, our true focus, glamorous or not, is as a resource to Jewish community leaders. If we do that well, then we will accomplish our mission of promoting the role of the synagogue in Jewish life. I don't mean synagogue as a structure. In this context I mean the community,

whether it be an alternative Minyan of 20-somethings who meet in members' homes or a mega-shul with > 2,000 members; median age >50.

In my opinion, that's what USCJ already does more effectively than the other CJ entities, and that's where we should focus our limited resources as we strive for improvement.

Having said that, I also feel strongly that focusing on this piece is only a luxury that we can afford if we collaborate closely with the other CJ entities and reach mutual agreement among all of them about the needs and priorities for CJ, and the role of each entity in meeting those needs. As I understand it, leaders representing each of the CJ entities are engaging in dialogue over these very two issues. It may be appropriate for USCJ to play a coordinating role. I don't know that for certain. What I do feel with some degree of certainty is that more collaboration is needed as is unity of vision. Given the size of our big tent (consider the underwhelming response to *Emet ve Emunah*) our vision statement may not be accommodated by a 3-5 word phrase. But it needs to be articulated in a single voice by all of our flagship entities. USCJ should play an active role in the process, but we are a confederacy of congregations. We don't own CJ. We share the privilege of and responsibility for putting forth our best collaborative effort to build a strong future for CJ.

As we continue this wonderful discussion, I suggest that we start thinking along two lines? What does CJ need in order to flourish? Which of those needs are best met by which of the movement's flagship entities?

Once we have the second question answered, we'll have a list of recommendations/requests for each of the lead entities, including USCJ.

I'm sure that our network includes leaders from all of CJ's flagship entities, and would expect them to share some of their wisdom and experience with the Shefa community as our discussion moves forward.

Remaining mindful in all of our postings that everyone participating, monitoring or affected by what we write is B'tselem Elohim, I am confident that we can create a powerful, shared, grass roots vision that will inspire the lead organizations to respond favorably and to move in the direction needed to revitalize CJ. I think that it's safe to say that everyone who serves in leadership roles within the flagship organizations is passionate about CJ. We may have varying perceptions that drive our

respective passions, but we must be sensitive to the impact our words may have on others who feel as strongly about CJ as we do.

My apologies for a very long response to Bill's very insightful comment.

Kol tuv,
Fred Passman

I would love to do that - In fact, my long-term goal is to create something like that: the drawback - it can't be done in five hours a week - at least not on two days a week - minimally, you would have to have people bringing their kids an hour four or five days a week, and parents just do NOT want to do that, IMO.

I would love to hear some thoughts on how to overcome parental reluctance to bring their kids to school more than twice a week.

Rabbi Alana Suskin

Just a quick comment on the synagogue education / Hebrew language issue:

I believe that the only way to successfully implement a program in a "supplementary" context that would promote real Hebraic literacy and fluency by the end of high school is to think creatively about the structural constraints we have designed into our current models of congregational education. These constraints include:

- 1) the idea that the primary (exclusive?) venue for learning will be the 4-5 hours per week spent in religious / Hebrew "school";
- 2) the idea that we must teach everything to every student in pretty much the same way;
- 3) the idea that every synagogue has to offer its own program for its own members, and that all need to be pretty much alike;
- 4) the idea that we can do most of our work disconnected from the latest developments in language learning and teaching and from technology;
- 5) the idea that our primary goal should be to prepare young people to participate comfortably in religious services.

Imagine a different model: Imagine that in every community with a number of Conservative synagogues in reasonable physical proximity (this includes many, but, admittedly, not all communities), these synagogues jointly sponsored a set of "magnet" programs offering different options for families belonging to any of the synagogues. Several might be fairly conventional programs as we see them today. But, there might also be an intensive Hebrew program, an arts based program, a totally experiential program of retreats, camping, and informal youth activities, a family-oriented Shabbat program focused on tefillah and textual learning, a social action-focused program emphasizing mitzvot in the community, a program with totally flexible hours and heavy use of technology for learning at home, etc. (All of these exist today, somewhere, but only as isolated models.) Not every community might have all of these, but where there was a critical mass of interested families, the options would exist and could thrive by operating outside our self-imposed constraints.

It's a radical model, I know, with lots of kinks to be worked out in practice. But, my point is that we can have a much more diverse and richer educational landscape (including Hebrew language learning) both in and beyond the Conservative movement than we do today. We just need to decide that we want it and are willing to do the work to challenge what my colleagues at the Rhea Hirsch School of HUC-JIR in LA call our "limiting assumptions."

Jonathan Woocher
Chief Ideas Officer
Director, Lippman Kanfer Institute
JESNA

Our foundation texts and liturgy are all in Hebrew (and Aramaic). Offering Hebrew immersion may not be the drawing card, but enabling our people to read our texts with comprehension can have a tremendous impact on their connection to Judaism. In most curricula, language immersion is also culture immersion. Jewish – and particularly Hebrew – illiteracy is one of the root causes of the feeling of loose/remote connectedness many cotemporary Jews have with Judaism. In Israel, where Hebrew has become primarily a secular language, this linkage between language and religion is not longer particularly strong (understatement). But for those of us who live in the Galut, learning the language tends to go hand in hand with learning the tradition. From my perspective, that's what makes it so important to CJ in North America.

Many adults, particularly high-functioning adults, have certain expectations of themselves. Decades of

Shabbat Shalom,
Fred Passman

weak, supplemental religious school programming, with no emphasis on Hebrew language skills has created one or two generations of adults who are illiterate in Hebrew and Judaism. As common response to this illiteracy is to devalue it. Had it been important, our parents would have ensured that literacy in these areas would have been integrated into our childhood curriculum. The encouraging news is that there's a growing minority of adults who realize the precious opportunity that they missed as children, and have decided to send their children to Jewish day schools. However, the majority of our children remain products of supplemental programs that, at best, teach our children to recognize and pronounce Hebrew words. Our educators need to develop effective programming that incorporates the Hebrew language into the supplemental school curriculum. The alternative is to continue the cycle of Jewish illiteracy.

I have drafted so many responses to this thread that my head is spinning, but I realized today that they all boil down to one idea: there is an attitude of "father knows best" running through many of our institutions that, I think, stands in the way of true change. I have seen this at many levels and in many contexts of our movement.

It occurs when executive committees end the contracts of rabbis and cantors and even regular shabbat attendees are shocked and hurt and surprised. I have seen this happen three times, at three congregations, in the past five years, where board members react with anger and resentment that their decisions are questioned--because they know what is best.

I have seen it when the laity of the movement is so desperate for a web presence that we create our own websites, only to be told that the LCCJ really knows what is needed. Now, there is a pretty website, but I still look to chabad.org and aish.org for inspiration and learning. But, our leadership knows what is best.

I have seen it when the Law Committee decided on the status of gays and lesbians in an apparent

vacuum: a responsa being decided without reference to particular people or particular cases.

Now, I see in this discussion of missions and values and institutions the same thread. I've read the USCJ mission statement over and over again. There is nothing in it for me. It is an institution talking to other institutions about what institutions do. That is nice, and I know that many dedicated people make up those institutions. We are urged to work our way up in those institutions to make change. Nice idea, that, 40 years ago. The state of the art now, though, is that those institutions need to come to us--the dedicated synagogue attendees, the average Jews in the pews, the affiliated but uninvolved and the uninvolved and unaffiliated. They need to talk with us and hear us and listen to us. They need to make us feel part of the process because there are plenty of other institutions willing and able to include & inspire us without asking us to dedicate years to getting our voices heard.

I want to be very clear about this: it does not mean sending out surveys. I've seen a lot of surveys in the last few years, but very few of them ask the right questions. I would love to see town-meeting style events where WE tell the USCJ and the LCCJ and the

Law Committee what is important to US--real people, real searchers, real Jews. Even better would be if they didn't require paying for a \$75 seat to get access to movement leadership.

My family has suffered four deaths in the last several months and protracted illnesses over the last 2 years. Through all the changes in synagogue leaderships (I've watched 2 rabbis and 1 cantor be dismissed without any real reason), there has only been one clergy-person who has been constant in

our lives--a Lubavitch rabbi. Honestly, I'm not looking for the right programming, the ideal institutional materials, a school of excellence. I'm looking for a Jewish community that nurtures and supports my family in times of need and that can share our joy in times of happiness. I'm looking for connection, not institutions. I'm looking to be a part of the process, a part of the conversation, even if I haven't got the energy right now to become a regional leader in some organization that I can't quite tell the purpose of.

Shabbat Shalom,
Dahlia Schwartz

Dear Hevreh,

I couldn't agree more with Jonathan and I hope that the following is helpful.

Many years ago, I was Rabbi and Principal of a medium suburban congregation that had real commitment to education. They reinforced my prior experiences at Ramah, my own congregation growing up and my professional experience until then - and then they shaped much of what I hold now as possible and useful for many congregations.

We offered tracks - albeit more traditional tracks in the 70's - with three classes per grade. Lest you think it "ideal" trust me that it was not! We had 5 classrooms including re-setting up a nursery program rooms, a sanctuary except when it was a bingo hall that could be subdivided by non-soundproof dividers, and an end room and chapel/library.

We operated some years in triple shifts with overlap sessions led by the Cantor or me in the sanctuary area which could hold roughly one-third the students. In spite of that, we ultimately opened a Hebrew High with more than 100 students in a 4th shift for some teachers! 3-9 PM on Tuesdays, 3-7 Thursdays, Sunday 9-1.

We also had support from top to bottom, officers through Board through education committee and the membership that everyone had to attend the Shabbat morning service every two weeks, arriving not later than 10 AM or leaving early, with a parent present to take attendance with "the box." When we did once "postpone" a Bar Mitzvah for this - and admittedly other reasons - the support was there and compliance was a non-issue! We added asking them to attend Friday evenings on the "off-weeks" and many of them did so, and we integrated them as possible into the service, just as we did on Shabbat. Rosh Hodesh bentching was done with the Cantor's Makhelat Noar of more than 50 kids. Megillah readings for all the megillot were done by adults and youth, with as many as 100+ for Purim - which also meant Hagim attendance. I remember these parents and students, officers and leaders, and teachers with incredible appreciation and respect.

One track was for learning challenged students, kept to a low per-teacher student ratio. Our major goal was Hebrew reading unless that was beyond reason, and if a student just needed some tutorial assistance, we could mainstream them to the middle track and if anyone needed some tutorial assistance move that student "back" for what they needed.

One track was the mainstream, traditional program of the standard fare of (1) Hebrew reading with an emphasis upon Siddur and Bible -Humash and Haftarah in particular; ritual for home and synagogue; Siddur goals by grade; Haggadah goals by grade; overview of Jewish history using the available books, most often Behrman and KTAV; ethical decision making built into the other lessons; synagogue music.

The super track required PEP for Aleph and Bet and then later Parent Education course meetings to keep up with the content of the classes. These students were also taught MELTON Bible by a trained instructor. We offered

various modern Israeli Hebrew speaking/comprehension programs with the best technology available then - records, tapes, etc. but above all with a trained, experienced Israeli Hebrew speaking specialist. Didn't work as we hoped for the obvious problems, but we were further along in terms of using Hebrew in phrases and situations within the school and then the service.

In addition both the "top" two tracks were taught:

- (1) Hebrew reading in Aleph and double-checked with testing for problems - and we continued to monitor Hebrew reading throughout their progress -
- (2) then Siddur and Bible reading in Bet, including the introduction of Torah trup with Shema and the first and third paragraphs. [I can't emphasize how important Cantor -now Rabbi - Moshe Meirovich was in the implementation of this design and instruction, and then my next colleague Cantor Jeffrey Shiovitz for continuing in this mode.]
- (3) With the approval of Rabbi Professor Shaul Lieberman zt"l, we introduced the kids reading Torah in non-BMitzvah shabbatot in our Shabbat worship, NOT aliyot but as baalei k'riah. As we moved Bnot Mitzvah from Friday nights to Shabbat morning, we encouraged celebrants to invite their friends to read at their simcha, and it became a common custom if not a sense of how much they were well regarded by their peers.
- (4) by Daled they learned the trup for Haftarah and were invited to chant a portion in the service without recitation of the blessings kept for their parents - increasing participation
- (5) by Hey they could read Torah, Haftarah using Hebrew and trup; many had also learned one or more megillot
- (6) we introduced the Golden Kipah award created by our colleague and teacher Bernie Raskas, and then with the addition of the megillot, we introduced the Red Kipah (cardinal red!) and presented them each Shavuot.

NOTE:

- (1) The Cantor wisely realized that as BMitzvah instructor and an increasing number of BMitzvah candidates a year it was to his personal and professional advantage to teach others to teach, to teach them to assist him in reading;
- (2) The synagogue made sure that we always had a professional back-up Torah reader - just in case, for many years the Cantor.

In the Tefillah units, the Cantor insured through group minyanim that they became familiar with the texts, melodies and sequence of mincha, maariv, Kabbalat Shabbat and Shabbat/Hagim mornings.

Thus BMitzvah was a slam-dunk requiring only for the Cantor as BMitzvah teacher to finesse their skills, not start the education process but conclude it with an already acquired sense of self-esteem.

We "grew" our membership on educational excellence, accomplishment and "stardom," NOT on surrounding congregations' "programmatic" approaches, such as "the Marriage Encounter Schul" or the "quick and easy BMitzvah program-least hours required."

We then introduced several youth activities conceptualized as "Informal Education" supplementing the Religious School - not a Hebrew School. We introduced Torah-Dojo, a karate program. We had the teens take over the Shabbat afternoon Mincha-Maariv with a rather elaborate seudat shlishit and learn program. NOTE that the teens and occasionally a few adult would read Torah. We developed and participated actively in Kaidmah and USY, and I served for years as one of the Rabbis in Residence at USY Kadima Encampment. We supported and encouraged Ramah. We also were supportive of those who chose to opt for Young Judea. And we offered an Adult Bar/Bat Mitzvah program for those who didn't have a ceremony, and a number of teens, especially girls, took advantage of our offer to remediate an attitude of some that "girls don't need it" or kids who "tried" school and left for a variety of reasons.

Jonathan is right. We now have the technology at a reasonable expense, new and exciting publishing programs for Hebrew instruction with various goals, and the experience of what has worked. Every area - if a single synagogue

can't do it alone - should conceive of a "broader campus" for magnet schools and magnet programs.

Money is an issue but can we afford not to be creative?

Dov

Rabbi Barry Dov Lerner
'1969 MHL 1970 Rabbi JTSA 1995 DD JTSA
President, Foundation For Family Education, Inc.
Associate Rabbi, Congregations of Shaare Shamayim

Marc & h.evre --

Shabbat is fast approaching, but I wanted to get this thought out while it's fresh.

I can't reiterate strongly enough how much I feel it is a grave error to make direct comparisons to or attempt to critique ourselves by what Chabad does. There is, as I've said before, much to learn from every other movement's strengths and weaknesses (as well as from our own). However, Chabad is significantly different from Conservative Judaism from top to bottom -- not just structurally and institutionally, but ideologically and theologically.

Apropos of this particular conversation, we are a dues-based organization -- Chabad is not. There is only so much value in comparing apples and oranges. Unless we intend to become an orange, of course . . . :)

Shabbat shalom,
David

Rabbi David Kay

Dear Chevreh,

Jonathan's wonderful sense of a magnet school is significant for Hebrew language instruction, as we are hearing/reading current news about proposals to set up (1) Hebrew language instruction programs in public schools, and (2) of greater import the creation of a full-time private school that is - for lack of a better description - going to appeal to Israelis and American Jews who want Jewish culture with an emphasis on Hebrew language and literature skills.

I support completely the perception that our potential educational clients - while the majority of them are indeed shopping for a Bar/Bat Mitzvah support/supply system as well as often a Jewish identity via a movement or post-denominational - prefer to have what is the current American approach to most aspects of our lives: *choice*.

I also agree that if a community of synagogues could indeed coordinate a cooperative program of schools which could offer magnet programs including (1) a Hebrew language program, (2) a "performing arts" program [music, drama, dance, vocal, cantillation,

etc.], (3) a hands-on Jewish ritual arts [sculpture, paint, metals, engraving, glass, etc.], (4) technical {film, photography, video, internet, etc.} (5) even perhaps a sports league school, and so much more when we are creative.

Like the schools of performing arts, one can provide a special interest program in which there is embedded a basic curriculum that will satisfy the needs of the Jewish community as a "Jewish" school. It is possible that Bar and Bat Mitzvah skills could be made an optional or additional supplementary program for those who are not pursuing a ritual track.

I would add the important opportunity for those who prefer an alternative learning style, not unlike public schools who have discovered that the appropriate need for a school style that meets the students where they are rather than requiring all of the students to meet us where we are.

Finally, let's not overlook the special opportunity of

this project to provide a track for the seriously committed students of Judaica, with the possibility of sub-specialities in Bible, Rabbinics, theology,

rituals, etc. We have some unusually able and interested students who want to be challenged and really study.

Shavuah Tov
Dov

Dear Hevreh,

In the San Francisco greater Bay Area we did have a magnet school system that met on Monday nights. For many years (before I participated) I heard that it was a great success. However my first year (Freshman year) and the programs last year it started to go downhill. I don't know from the operational side, but from the learning side it seemed very bad. Most of the kids there went more as a social gathering then anything else (a reunion of the Jewish elementary school being that most kids went to public or non-Jewish private high schools). As well, do to the large range of knowledge among the student body, and a sense of tiredness after full day of High School, the classes could never be that intense and were often mostly discussion based on lower lever subjects. Some classes, for example Judaism in Culture, seemed to go well, but it is hard to say how much true learning was going on.

Concerning teaching Hebrew in Sunday school settings. As a student of 13 years of Jewish education, and a part time teacher at the Sunday school at my synagogue, I came to realization that Israeli and good Hebrew teacher are not synonymous. Too often are the Hebrew teachers some random Israeli picked up on the street. For example my Hebrew teacher from the 6-8 grade was previously the security guard at the school and only when one of the other Hebrew teachers was sick did he start his new career path.

Only after coming to Israel (on Nativ 28!!) and having real teachers teaching me Hebrew did I realize that there is more to it. Just like our English teachers aren't random Americans so to our Hebrew teachers should be well trained.

Send your kids on Nativ!!
Aryeh Canter

Dear Hevreh,

I don't want to beat a dead horse - too much. But the fundamental insight of Jonathan Woocher I believe is helpful albeit fraught with reality issues.

1. Magnet schools must assume that synagogues and institutions cooperate. That means thinking "team" rather than "turf." Unfortunately synagogues often are in outright competition for membership, and this notion of cooperation may be seen by professionals and laity as threatening the existence of any one synagogue, particularly those more on the margins numerically and financially.

Here is the important role USCJ can play if they are willing and have the staff with these particular negotiation skills.

2. Instituting change in a system we probably can all agree is challenging, at the least. Sustaining change and institutionalizing those changes may require

professional organizational/behavioral/psychological/sociological training for which we may need to call in for consultations - and they cost money.

3. Funding may call on Foundations - and most are in trouble one way or another with the market and the economy, on Federations which are themselves in deep trouble, but most importantly create a need for negotiation to re-think our business models in the synagogue and religious school - what is subsidized and for what do we pay.

4. It may be that piggy-backing - for college credit - on local Jewish colleges and community colleges if not nearby Jewish Departments in colleges and universities can create an environment in which it is a win-win-win, for the synagogues, for the professionals in Judaica/Jewish skills and thus for the families in planning the cost of college for their

children. Again, creative thinking and planning is critical.

5. I agree also with Aryeh that time spent in Israel in Ulpan situations are prime, but it is possible that we can't expect as many to spend a summer or semester in Israel if only because of the current economy, and therefore we have to plan for the majority of interest in any particular track, especially modern Hebrew.

6. Lastly, and perhaps most challenging of all, these teens who are more serious, and whose families are more concerned, are often the most time-pressured with an eye to college entrance.

Whether or not one should aim for a major name college/university or consider an alternate route is often not our decision. Parents and the family situation speak louder than we can ever influence a decision - if indeed we should influence that decision. My only objection to parental planning is when parents require students to work instead of

study, especially their Judaism, to save a few dollars for college or indulge a car. The latter is important to the family and especially the student as a mobile peer, but I would hope that we can make the argument for education and Jewish education in that mix.

But the majority of teens I teach and with which I come in contact are tired, over-programmed, stressed, too little time for day-dreaming, and often use college as a place to find relief - harder to get into a school sometimes than to stay in school, especially for good students with solid skills. Are we prepared then to go into active competition for the limited time - and dollars - for these programs, knowing that it is *l'shem shamayim*, for the sake of the individual students and for the Jewish community of the future?

Tough choices in tough times. Perhaps we need several experimental areas to begin the process. Anyone feel their community is ready for thinking out of the box?

Dov

I'm pleased that a number of Shefa participants agree that we can and need to think more expansively about options in order to revitalize "supplementary" Jewish education. There have been some very promising endeavors over the last 15 years to help synagogues re-think and redesign how they do congregational education, with a strong emphasis on "systemic" change: the Experiment in Congregational Education (ECE) and Re-Imagine projects, launched by the Rhea Hirsch School at HUC-JIR in LA; Nurturing Excellence in Synagogue Schools (NESS) from the Auerbach Central Agency for Jewish Education in Philadelphia; La'atid from the Commission on Jewish Education in Hartford; the Legacy Heritage Innovation Project; the Partnership for Effective Learning and Innovative Education (PELIE), an initiative of a group of funders; and others, including movement-initiated projects. During this period we've also seen a number of alternative models developed, both in and outside of synagogues, some of which have spread beyond their original sites.

Many of you, I'm sure, are familiar with these, but (at the risk of some institutional self-promotion), the JESNA web site (www.jesna.org) now has several publications both cataloguing efforts at congregational educational change and describing alternative models and synthesizing some of the lessons learned about how to make change effectively.

Most of the work thus far has been what I would call "site by site," i.e., working with the individual synagogue or program as the unit of change. This work needs to continue, but I believe that we also need to think beyond the site by site approach about new ways of organizing the educational delivery system in order to meet the diverse needs of today's "market." (See Jack Wertheimer et al's outstanding book, *Family Matters*, for a description of the current educational environment and the role of choice.) This is where a "magnet program" approach might fit in, and there are undoubtedly other options as well (bi-lateral partnerships, bringing in outside resources for specific purposes, consortia for enrichment programs, etc.). One interesting model I'm aware of that is being implemented currently is the Kehilla Partnership in Bergen County, NJ, involving the JCC there and a number of synagogues working together on arts programming, Israel education, and teacher training.

I would not argue that re-invigorating our supplementary schooling is the key to re-invigorating the Conservative movement as a whole (there are certainly lots of other issues to deal with). Nor do I want to deprecate in any way the work of USCJ, JTS, or AJU in this arena. But, I believe that, the economy notwithstanding, this is a time for positioning the movement at the cutting edge of change in this arena. Given how many families do join synagogues in order to educate their children (and, hopefully, themselves), we have a real opportunity if we can demonstrate decisively that we are a) genuinely interested in being their partners in creating a personally meaningful educational experience for them and their children, and b) capable of providing *or helping them to find* that kind of experience as part of our community.

Dr. Jonathan S. Woocher

A Closing Thought:

Some have suggested that Conservative Judaism is a “lab”, where our successful “products” are experienced without the brand of their birth-context. Reconstructionism, the JCC movement, and the Chavurah movement were each born from within the Conservative Movement. In fact, most of the trans/post-denominational phenomenon is also being lead by “products” of the Conservative Movement (for example: Hebrew College (David Gordis, Art Green), CLAL (Irwin Kula), Mechon Hadar (Ethan Tucker, Elie Kaunfer, Shai Held) and the Academy for Jewish Religion, NY (David Greenstein, Ora Horn-Prouser)).

I believe this should make us proud, and keep us humble. Our Movement – any movement - is, after all, utilitarian. It serves to strengthen the particular spiritual identity of its affiliated communities in an effort to work for the betterment of the world.

We hope, and work towards, a healthy Conservative Movement. The idea of Conservative Judaism could live without institutions. But Conservative Jewish institutions need to be (or become) compelling in order to endure. But we can do much better than endure. Conservative Judaism is a particular path to God, a spiritually demanding and rewarding journey which deserves better institutional support and leadership than it has received in recent memory.

If Conservative Judaism continues to exist (and I believe it will), it will be because large numbers of Jews and their families will know their roots and dreams are cherished, challenged, and loved by an institutional system as responsive as the sacred tradition from which it was born.

Rabbi Menachem Creditor
Shevat 5769 / February 2009