THE VIEW FROM THE LEFT

Inherent Contradictions in Conservatism

IRA EISENSTEIN

I USED TO BE A CONSERVATIVE JEW. I AM one no longer. Perhaps that is an overstatement, for I continue to maintain my membership in the Rabbinical Assembly. But, to all intents and purposes, I have withdrawn from the "movement," after more than thirty years of active participation. I was graduated from the Jewish Theological Seminary; both synagogues which I served between 1931 and 1959 belonged to the United Synagogue; and, until Reconstructionism became a movement, I allowed myself to be identified as a member of the "left wing" of the Rabbinical Assembly. It was a misnomer at the time—but let that stand. Today I am an "outsider" and it is as such that I was invited to share in this symposium on Conservative Judaism by the distinguished editor of this journal.

If it took me so many years to decide upon withdrawing, it was because Conservatism has many virtues; its strengths are not to be minimized. The emphasis upon Zionism (and later Israel); the recognition of the importance of the Hebrew language; the reverential approach to the Tradition; the high level of scholarship represented in the Faculty of the JTS and among its graduates; the promise inherent in Schechter's notion of "catholic Israel"; and, perhaps most of all, the association of Mordecai Kaplan with Conservatism instilled in me a deep respect and demanded that long deliberation precede any fundamental break with the institutions of the movement.

I believed in the declared purposes of "conserving" the Tradition, and in the seriousness with which Conservative leaders went about making Judaism once again dynamic. If Orthodoxy's image was that of rigidity, Conservative's image was that of adaptation and change. Conservatism satisfied—for a while, and partially—my hunger for continuity, and my zeal for necessary changes.

But I was disappointed. Throughout the years of my association, I was torn; my psyche was in constant conflict. I felt almost schizoid. The reasons should become clear as this essay proceeds, but I pause only to apologize for the personal approach to the problem. There is, for me, no other way to describe Conservatism and evaluate it, except through my

IRA EISENSTEIN *is president of the Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation and of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, as well as editor of the Reconstructionist Magazine.*

Inherent Contradictions in Conservatism

by EISENSTEIN, IRA

Judaism, 07/1977, Volume 26, Issue 3

THE VIEW FROM THE LEFT

Inherent Contradictions in Conservatism

IRA EISENSTEIN

I USED TO BE A CONSERVATIVE JEW. I AM one no longer. Perhaps that is an overstatement, for I continue to maintain my membership in the Rabbinical Assembly. But, to all intents and purposes, I have withdrawn from the "movement," after more than thirty years of active participation. I was graduated from the Jewish Theological Seminary; both synagogues which I served between 1931 and 1959 belonged to the United Synagogue; and, until Reconstructionism became a movement, I allowed myself to be identified as a member of the "left wing" of the Rabbinical Assembly. It was a misnomer at the time—but let that stand. Today I am an "outsider" and it is as such that I was invited to share in this symposium on Conservative Judaism by the distinguished editor of this journal.

If it took me so many years to decide upon withdrawing, it was because Conservatism has many virtues; its strengths are not to be minimized. The emphasis upon Zionism (and later Israel); the recognition of the importance of the Hebrew language; the reverential approach to the Tradition; the high level of scholarship represented in the Faculty of the JTS and among its graduates; the promise inherent in Schechter's notion of "catholic Israel"; and, perhaps most of all, the association of Mordecai Kaplan with Conservatism instilled in me a deep respect and demanded that long deliberation precede any fundamental break with the institutions of the movement.

I believed in the declared purposes of "conserving" the Tradition, and in the seriousness with which Conservative leaders went about making Judaism once again dynamic. If Orthodoxy's image was that of rigidity, Conservative's image was that of adaptation and change. Conservatism satisfied—for a while, and partially—my hunger for continuity, and my zeal for necessary changes.

But I was disappointed. Throughout the years of my association, I was torn; my psyche was in constant conflict. I felt almost schizoid. The reasons should become clear as this essay proceeds, but I pause only to apologize for the personal approach to the problem. There is, for me, no other way to describe Conservatism and evaluate it, except through my

IRA EISENSTEIN *is president of the Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation and of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, as well as editor of the Reconstructionist Magazine.*

experience of having attempted, long and patiently, to reconcile myself to the contradictions inherent in it.

* * *

Perhaps the key to my disappointment lay in the unfulfilled promises of Schechter's writings. It was he who led me to believe that Judaism was, indeed, an evolving phenomenon; that each generation of Jews defined Judaism in terms of its age and the cultural environment in which it operated. After all, the Judaism of the Bible was dramatically different from that of the Rabbis—and so on. It is not necessary to belabor the point. But when I looked about and saw how radically the Jews of the 20th century in the western world differed from their forebears, in their perception of the cosmos, in their cultural and political condition, in their identification with the life about them, I could not help but hope that the Judaism of my generation, and that of my children, would take full cognizance of these changes and act accordingly.

Instead, I was offered the possibility of change on highly restricted terms. Conservative Judaism was either too timid or too shortsighted to make fundamental changes. It demanded that the *process* by which adaptation was to take place must itself be sanctioned by the Tradition. That is to say, the method of interpretation, by recognized authorities, with adequate approval—explicit or implicit in the Oral Law—was the only way to modify the halakhah. Conservative rhetoricians have always been fond of comparing the Torah to the American Constitution; the Supreme Court decides what is constitutional and what is not. But they carefully avoid pointing out that the Constitution, unlike the Torah, is subject to amendment, and that a branch of governemnt known as the Legislature is constantly functioning.

Throughout the years when the poor *agunah* was waiting in anguish for relief, the RA and the Faculty of the JTS continued to seek sanction for some loophole in the law by which her suffering might be alleviated. And when the "new" *ketubah* was finally issued (and described by one of the scholarly leaders as historic, in a class with Hillel's *prozbul*), I could detect more zeal for the halakhah than for the *agunah*. Indeed, what was most disconcerting was that the rabbis were assured that the Orthodox would not be able to find a flaw in this resolution of the problem.

It was at that time that I asked one of my distinguished teachers why we could not cut the Gordian knot, and legislate something akin to the Enoch Arden law. I was told that the Torah forbade it. I took my professional life in my hands and asked why we could not amend the Torah. I will let the reader supply the answer that I was given.

It happens that I am a dyed-in-the-wool American, besides being a Jew; and my whole education (secular, of course) had led me to believe that law was intended to reflect the consensus of the people; that it was

enacted by representatives on the theory that people must be governed only by their own consent. I could not believe that Judaism's conception of law was of a lesser kind. I knew my congregants, and the general run of American Jews, and I sensed that they, too, were imbued with the democratic faith. Hence, the schizoid character of my life as a Conservative Jew.

I confess that the argument against legislating for Judaism through elected representatives made sense so long as the Torah was truly believed to be divine. But I was at the same time aware of the historical studies brilliantly executed by my professors, which clearly indicated that the Sacred Writings were the result of combining many sources, the final consequence of many redactions. All of this seemed to convey the message that the Written and the Oral Law were clearly the products of human endeavor—extraordinary, to be sure, unique, unprecedented, to be sure, but "divine" only in a tenuous and, perhaps, metaphorical sense.

And if one took a closer look at the phenomenon of Jewish life, one saw at once that the "authority" of the Torah and the Tradition was honored more in the breach than in the observance. I saw the rabbis driven farther and farther into either hypocrisy or evasion. The RA had its Committee on Jewish Law (and Standards, added later). But the Committee was no help, for the RA placed upon the shoulders of the rabbi the dubious honor of being the *mara d'atra.* In plain language, this meant that when the Committee split (as it invariably did, by virtue of its very constituency), the rabbi was "free" to follow the majority or the minority. For me this was not law, nor did the Committee provide leadership.

I was frequently weighed down by the unhappy thought that the rabbis, if left to their own devices (and if the laity were permitted to speak out openly), would demand more radical measures. But, in the Conservative movement, scholarship was king—and not just scholarship but expertise in halakhah. (*Aggadah* and history, for instance, were often described by those who taught those subjects, as "minors.") Consciously or otherwise, the scholars overawed the rabbis and the laity; the scholars had little respect for the rabbinate as a learned profession, and the laity—what did they know, anyhow? As a result, the JTS had the best of both worlds: it was the "fountain head" of the movement, when that suited its purpose and it was an independent, academic institution when that was most convenient. No one was going to tell the faculty how to run an academic institution.

The schizoid condition extended to ritual matters. Students at the JTS were expected to pledge their adherence to *kashrut, Shabbat,* and daily prayers. Obviously, the faculty could not be expected to do less. Yet, when certain scholars who were not observant Jews were engaged to teach, an interesting distinction was introduced between real faculty and adjunct faculty. (Martin Buber, for instance, who was married to a Christian, was warmly embraced—as an adjunct.) Yet, if a student were discovered making a telephone call on *Shabbat* he was liable to severe reprimand, or worse.

Once, when a conscientious layman asked a Conservative rabbi whether it was not inappropriate for him to accept the presidency of a congregation because he was not kosher, and violated the *Shabbat,* he was told: "Who asked you?"

But the facade had to be maintained, because the overriding concern was ever to impress upon the Orthodox that the Conservatives were just as *frum* as they. Recently, for example, the question arose (once again), whether Conservative rabbis in Israel should not be permitted to function as rabbis, inasmuch as they followed the halakhah to the last jot and tittle. At this writing they have not been given that right. But they are indignant because they consider themselves as qualified as the Orthodox.

What disappointed me (though no longer a Conservative) was that, instead of fighting for a change in the law, they persist in presenting themselves to the Jewish world as staunch adherents of the law. In Israel they seek to disassociate themselves from the Progressives in order to protect their credentials while, in the USA, they pride themselves on their close relationship with the CCAR.

* * *

When we turn to more theoretical questions, theological and ideological, we fare no better. Are the Jews a chosen people? Yes—and no. Does the Jewish people have a covenant with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? Well, yes and no. Is reward and punishment a central teaching? Yes and no. Do Conservatives believe in *ha-olam ha-ba?* Yes and no. Do they believe in the Messiah of the House of David, who will come to redeem Israel from exile? Yes and no. Is the Torah revealed? (See above). Should Conservative Jews believe in God as a Supernatural Being? Well..

A careful reading of the liturgical works issued by the Conservative movement generates serious educational dilemmas. The young people of the last quarter of the 20th century are confused; their roots are shallow; they are swept from day to day by the latest winds of fad and fashion—whether by the Jesus freaks or the Moonies. They are hungry for knowledge, but they do not get clear answers to their questions. They want guidance, and the *mara d'atra* cannot speak with authority. For lack of deep conviction and consistency and principle in their congregations, they are turning (the lucky ones) either to Hasidism or to Reconstructionism. In the one house they are offered the warmth and reassurance of certainty; in the other, the bracing challenge of intellectual adventure.

And I write these words with sadness, because I had hoped that the kind of synagogue in which I was brought up, and the Alma Mater in which I was trained to be a rabbi, would sustain me, and those I was charged with leading, in a faith, a way of life which could withstand the most careful scrutiny. I had hoped that I would be whole and at one with

myself; that I would not have to double-talk, and squirm, and apologize, and equivocate.

No one will deny that tens of thousands of American Jews manage somehow to find fulfillment in their Conservative affiliation, but I submit that what they are enjoying is the companionship of Jews like themselves, who are not troubled by ideologies, who love their rabbis and who experience a deep loyalty to the *institutions* of Conservative Judaism.

But I must add that, in my brief experience outside of the movement, I have perceived that when new congregations are formed, when Jews of a variety of backgrounds come together to organize for themselves and for their families, they look to Conservative Judaism in vain for the kind of direction and clarity, the kind of sophistication and intellectual challenge for which their college and university training gave them a profound yearning.

Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if Solomon Schechter had lived. Would his brilliance, his insights, his understanding of the true meaning of catholic Israel have impelled him to establish a clear distinction between Conservatism and Orthodoxy; would the logic of his researches have forced him to bring Judaism into the 20th century with boldness, with faith in the resiliency of Jews' historic civilization?

An Affectionate Letter to my Conservative Colleagues

ROLAND B. GITTELSOHN

IT WOULD BE FOOLISH TO PRETEND that a critique of Conservative Judaism from outside the movement itself could be more completely objective than a view from within. Each observer must be tainted, to some extent, by his own special interest, in the one case to defend that which is precious to him, in the other, by implication at least, to make his own preference seem more attractive. With this danger clearly acknowledged, let me try to be as fair and unbiased as possible.

In two respects the Conservative movement has made appreciable contributions to Reform Judaism. In the first and most elementary sense, it has enlarged the base of Jewish dissent, of those who are convinced that, if Jewish tradition is to survive, it must be adapted to modern circum-

ROLAND B. GITTELSOHN *is rabbi of Temple Israel, Boston.*