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### **Mussar: The Aggada of the Conservative Movement**

I was fortunate again this year to be invited to serve on what is called the Chancellor's Rabbinic Cabinet. This is a group of about 50 Conservative Rabbis from across the country which gathers each year with the Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Rabbi Ismar Schorsch for two days of rather intense discussions on an issue affecting the Conservative Movement and the Jewish Theological Seminary. The discussion this year was focused on the recently published Jewish Population Study which many of you will have heard and read about during the last few months. At our sessions the historian Dr. Jack Werthheimer and the sociologist Dr. Steven Cohen, both affiliated with our Movement, made presentations regarding the specific implications of the population study for the Conservative Movement.

For those of you at all familiar with the document the tone of the discussions will be self-evident. The report does not include encouraging statistics for our Movement. We continue a pattern of shrinkage that has been proceeding apace since the 1960's. We continue to age as a community not only in line with the general aging trends of the wider American community, but faster than our sister Jewish movements. Without an interventionist strategy aimed at growing the Conservative Movement in a very purposeful way, the outlook for its continued existence is not rosy. On an institutional level, this is of course of grave concern to the Jewish Theological Seminary, but also to other institutions of the Conservative Movement including our own synagogue.

Yet, equally of interest during the sessions was the fact that the 50 Rabbis represented, in the main, successful, growing, thriving institutions. Like our synagogue, the others represented were in the midst of renaissances in which growing participation by young people and younger families is the norm, in which the level of observance and general Jewish seriousness continues to grow and in which a myriad of innovative and involving programs continue to be developed. There was, you might say, a disconnect between the national report and the experience of the movement on the ground. It was, in

fact, difficult to get many of the Rabbis to take the implications of the population study all that seriously. It is true, we all agreed that there were things that the national bodies of the movement, JTS, United Synagogue, etc, could do to strengthen the Movement, especially seeding new congregations in areas of new Jewish settlement, providing more united leadership and a higher profile nationally on major social and political as well as religious issues of the day, but for the most part, the supposed seriousness of the implications of the study were not appreciated.

Of particular interest to me amid the statistics is the fact that the Conservative Movement has the most trouble hanging on to its young people. Both Orthodoxy and Reform not only do a better job, but also benefit from the influx of Conservative trained youngsters into their movements. Those youngsters most intensely trained, our best and our brightest, our USY leadership and Camp Ramah graduates and Day School Alumni tend to end up in the Orthodox world primarily because they do not experience Conservative synagogues as congenial to Jews living observant Jewish lives. They do not experience serious davening at services, serious learning in the community nor do they experience the social amenities of an observant Jewish community: the invitations to homes for Shabbat and Yom Tov lunches and dinners. Those youngsters less intensely educated or socialized, the larger cohort of our Congregational Hebrew Schools, while often remaining attached to Judaism and the Jewish community in higher numbers than products of less affiliated Jewish homes, drift to Reform as a more convenient and basically less demanding venue for Jewish affiliation for their families when they grow up, marry and have children.

Of course, if our goal is to preserve Jewish Community regardless of denominational adjectives, we are doing well. At least as well as anyone else. At least as well as one can speak of doing well within the context of a population study which shows that only about 30% of the total population that identifies itself as Jewish is affiliated at all, with anything. So if we ignore the catastrophe of 60% Jewish unaffiliation and the clear implications that the study provides that such unaffiliated Jews will, in fact, likely no longer identify themselves as being Jewish at all in another generation, then we are doing well. But if our goal is to promote Conservative Judaism, then we are certainly not doing well in the aggregate. This raises two important and immediate questions:

1. Is it important to promote Conservative Judaism? Why?
2. If it is, how is it to be done?

The first question, of course, should be addressed first. And in other circumstances I would do so. But I believe passionately in the importance of Conservative Judaism as the embodiment of living Judaism quite distinguishable from the alternatives on the left and on the right and while all the reasons for that passion may not be crystal clear I leave that discussion for another day and ask you to stipulate, as they say in the courtroom dramas, this point and allow me to move on to the second question.

It is in framing the second question that I actually learned something while at the Chancellor's Cabinet meeting. The dire predictions regarding Conservative Judaism and the legitimate reasons for concern were not new to me. But in the course of the discussion Rabbi Jim Rosen of Connecticut framed the problem in a way that I found particularly helpful. In his analysis regarding what is missing from Conservative Judaism he said that although we have a distinctive *Halacha*, that is an approach to Jewish law and practice, we do not have a distinctive and certainly not a compelling *Aggadah*, that is an accompanying narrative as to why one should observe Jewish law in the main and follow our approach to Jewish law specifically. I felt Rabbi Rosen's formulation to be particularly insightful but undeveloped. In fact, it is not that Conservative Judaism doesn't have an *aggadah*, it has an antiquated *aggadah*. In fact, it has had a series of *aggadot* over its history and in their time each did suffice to explain to its adherents the reason d'etre of their practice. Whether or not individual Conservative Jews practiced *halacha* they knew what they would be affirming if they did. And in fact, a much larger percentage of the movement did practice within certain parameters *kashrut*, *Shabbat* and even daily *tefilla* in earlier snapshots of the movement's life.

For an earlier generation of Conservative Jews, drawn mostly from traditional Jewish households, the *aggadic* statement "Tradition and Change" served to explain to themselves the rationale of being Conservative Jews. History, the driving intellectual force of the movement's leadership, could be shared by the movement's laity. Everyone agreed that the times they were a'changing long before Bob Dylan coined the phrase and, more importantly, Conservative Jews believed that the times had always been a'changing and that so-called normative Judaism had always acclimated itself to the changing times.

Like all *aggadic* statements this one was both accurate and inaccurate. It was purposely vague and almost misleading while at the same time being generally accurate. But its scholarly integrity or lack thereof was of much less importance than that it supplied a community with the narrative it needed to remain faithfully Jewish in a new way.

But the *aggadah* of “Tradition and Change” broke down, probably about 40 or so years ago, when change became too rapid and the hold of tradition too weak to be assuaged by the mandate to make change. How many changes could you make that would in fact keep pace with the pace of change in American culture and still have any tradition left? Thus began our shrinkage. However, while smaller and now more committed to Tradition than to change, the Conservative Movement that emerged in the 1970’s found a new *aggadah*. This was the *aggada* of pluralism. With the Movement fragmenting in the wake of the breakdown of the rubric of Tradition and Change into segments committed unilaterally to one or the other, just learning to live together within a wider and wider community of practice became the narrative justifying a commitment to Conservative Judaism. Where else, this *aggadah* went, could Jews who disagreed fundamentally on issues of Jewish practice remain not only cordial but filial? Where else could Jews who would not agree in practice with other Jews nevertheless count those Jews in their minyan, validate the legitimacy of their Jewish acts etc., only in the now pluralistic Conservative community. This, we told ourselves and others, was the model of Jewish life from the beginning. *These and those are the words of the living God*, quoted from the Talmud; the minority and majority decisions of Rabbinic literature; the power of local custom and ethnic difference like Sephardic and Ashkenizic. By propagating this model we once again had a rationale for claiming the so-called normative stream in Jewish history. Again, the facts of these claims were much less important than their *aggadic* power. And armed with this *aggadah* we prospered for another 20 years.

By the 1990’s this *aggadah* also began to break down. The rise of the Reconstructionist Movement and Jewish renewal, the growing observance levels in Reform Judaism, the frumification of Orthodoxy, the growing importance of spirituality as the focus of most American’s religious drive all contributed to make pluralism obsolete. It wasn’t so much that it was bad, it was just irrelevant. But for the decade of the ‘90’s an offshoot of the pluralist *aggada* managed to mask the immediate danger.

That was traditionalist egalitarianism. As the movement back to traditional observance came to characterize large swaths of the Jewish world across denominations, the ability to do so seriously while maintaining the new American value of egalitarianism and, in fact, adopting this value as a distinctly Jewish value became the next *aggadah* of the Conservative Movement. It has sufficed until very recently and is only now beginning to unravel leaving us precisely where Rabbi Rosen suggested. Why egalitarianism is on the cusp of not working is another storyline that I will not be able to follow, but the obvious concern in what was known as Modern Orthodoxy to regain its own *aggadah* on the basis of some sort of serious accommodation with the role of women is the primary example that I will cite and which will have to suffice.

Rather, I want to begin at the end. There is a truth that resonates from Rabbi Rosen's statement: we are a movement without *aggadah*. So what I want to do is suggest one. It is an *aggadic* impulse that has been at the core of my own commitment to Conservative Judaism all these years even as the other *aggadot* of the movement were coming and going; even as I agreed with those and then felt their inadequacies. Perhaps, now the time has come for this particular *aggadah* to move front and center and perhaps it can prove powerful enough to energize, even galvanize the Conservative community, or that part of the observant Jewish world that intuitively understands that one *aggadah* cannot replace another but in fact can only re-energize the preceding *aggadah*. Of course, the *aggadah* that I want to suggest is *Musar*. I do not have the time left to me this morning to go into the particulars of how *Musar* can serve as the central and unifying *aggadah* of the Conservative Movement, but I want to begin that process today and continue it at subsequent opportunities. Let me re-emphasize before I do that, in part, the adoption of a new *aggadah* does not replace or repudiate the old ones, but re-enlivens them. That has always been the process. So for us that means that "Tradition and Change;" "Pluralism;" and "Egalitarianism" remain important value statements about what makes Conservative Judaism unique. But viewed from the *aggadic* perspective of *Musar* these become more powerful, regain their relevance.

So for the sake of time let me today simply outline what this perspective is and commit myself to in fact naming it, bringing it more centrally to bear in the course of my speaking to you from Shabbat to Shabbat so as to make it explicit as the *aggadah* of who I

am as a Conservative Rabbi and therefore what Conservative Judaism comes to be in our context. As I understand and interpret *Musar* it will consist of three basic mandates:

1. That human personality is shaped by the tension between the *Yetzer Ha-ra* and the *Yetzer Ha-tov*, that is the necessity at every moment to choose between our Good and Evil inclination.
2. That this choice is made possible by a commitment to *halacha*. That is, that our *faith* is that we have a law which reflects the Divinity implicit in making this choice.
3. That the Divinity of this choice is measured by the impact of our choice on the good of another, our neighbor, the other human being; those closest first, those furthest away in the course of time until time itself is transformed into Messianic time. this measuring standard, in turn, helps us to refine number 2 (our faith in the law) by number 1 (our choosing the good over the evil) and this is the ongoing project of Jewish life.

I will end here, but with God's help I will continue to draw out the consequences of this program with you in the coming weeks in detail because I believe that Conservative Judaism is the perfectly poised expression of Judaism in our time to incorporate this mandate which I believe has been the defining characteristic of Judaism from its miraculous inception.