

A movement is not a community; a shul is. If Jews, like all people, want grace-filled communities, we still need to ask, in what style shall I build mine?

Some young adults educated in the Conservative movement have built thriving communities that declare:

we take seriously our encounters with tradition and traditional texts and also with egalitarianism, justice, and lovingkindness. It is this combination that makes them distinctive and passionate. They define halakhic behavior (including both study and *chesed*) not as a minimum requirement, but as the ground of their Jewish life — the framework for building their particular community of grace.

This rewarding combination is what Conservative synagogues can offer American Jews that is different from what they will find in other, also grace-filled, synagogues. If that happens, and these young institutions come to see the Conservative movement as an exciting way to support their own growth and leadership development and to renew themselves by connecting with like-minded communities across the country and the world, then they, too, will choose to affiliate.

— Elisheva S. Urbas

“The claim that we are a halakhic community is a paradigm in crisis.”

— Neil Gillman, USCJ biennial speech

In the last month, my wife and I have hosted in our home 55 new members of Temple Emanuel, a Conservative shul in Newton, Massachusetts. We asked them: what brought you to the shul, and what are you looking for?

No one said, we came because we read and liked *Emet v’Emunah* or because we are attracted to the nuanced view of the Conservative movement’s theology on revelation and authority.

Theology and halakhic agonizing are *not* where it is at. That is a question for theologians and professors and rabbis and rabbinical students. It is not something that, for the most part, moves real Jews in the pews.

For them the real issue is: *are Conservative shuls places of grace?* Do our shuls embody the words of the prayer we daven every morning: *uteneinu hayom u’vechol yom l’chayn u’lechesed u’lerachamaim*, help us today and every day act with grace, love, and compassion.

The *sugya* that should drive us is *Bavli Sotah 14A*, which depicts God as the master of grace, giving unearned kindnesses to people with no expectation of receiving anything in return. That is what makes real Conservative shuls thrive. Visiting the sick, comforting the bereaved, learning Torah, celebrating Shabbat with family and friends, praying with passion, doing *tikkun olam*, teaching our children, connecting with Israel, services exploding with dance and song, will radiate grace into the shul and therefore into the world. The question that matters now is: can we take our shuls *from good to grace*, making them places where we do favors that redeem the world one person at a time.

— Wesley Gardenswartz

I met him some 35 years ago, after joining Beth El, a Conservative synagogue. All in our community knew and respected him. Called “Reverend,” he was ritual director, bar/bat mitzvah teacher, Torah reader, and leader of the daily minyan.

Saul Friedler, of blessed memory, made our synagogue

a welcoming and important part of members’ lives. Observant in his religious and personal life, he respected people who were less- or even non-observant. His mission was to get more people to enter the synagogue and benefit from its religious and communal programs. He combined a personal observance of halakhah with recognition of the communal importance of inclusiveness.

I wonder how much stronger the Conservative movement would have become had it followed Rev. Friedler’s approach to Judaism. And I wonder whether its current leaders, while remaining true to Judaism’s basic values, will find ways to invite more people to enter its synagogues and revitalize the entire movement.

— Richard Kaufman

Wesley Gardenswartz, Senior Rabbi of Temple Emanuel in Newton, Massachusetts, is married to Shira Goodman and the father of Nat, Sam, and Jordana.

Elisheva S. Urbas, a freelance book editor in New York, is president of the Solomon Schechter School of Manhattan; she is married to David M. Morris and is the mother of Avital, Ronit, and Yemima.

Richard Kaufman is Honorary President of Beth El Synagogue, New Rochelle, New York; Director of United Synagogue; Trustee of Brandeis University; and married to Rosalind Fuchsberg Kaufman.

Dr. Ray Goldstein is International President of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism and lives with his wife Jody in Rochester, Minnesota.

The congregation to which my wife and I belong in Mendota Heights, Minnesota describes itself as a Conservative community committed to three fundamental principles of Judaism as enumerated in Pirkei Avot: Torah, *avodah*, and *gemilut hasidim*. While these traditional principles drive the community’s decisions, Beth Jacob Congregation is clearly a Conservative *kehillah*. What differentiates it from communities that are not Conservative but adhere to the same principles from Pirkei Avot? Our mission — of inspiring individuals to live by and observe the halakhic patterns as defined by the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly — and our pluralistic approach require education, understanding, and tolerance.

What differentiates Conservative Jews is the way we concretize what Rabbi Gardenswartz calls “grace” — using halakhah to shape the way we “do” Jewish living: visiting the sick, comforting the bereaved, learning Torah, celebrating Shabbat. Our challenge is to make that true for all Conservative Jews. Given the opportunity to perform mitzvot, as our teenagers have learned through the informal educational programs of USY and Ramah, our adult congregants would understand this paradigm and embrace Torah, *avodah*, and *gemilut hasidim* as Conservative Jews.

— Ray Goldstein