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## Conservative Judaism's "Ideology" Problem

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Although palpably a sociological analysis, Marshall Sklare's *Conservative Judaism* ranges far beyond what we have come to expect of most narrowly defined, quantitative sociological studies today. Sklare brings to his subject a sharp observer's eye and a profound insight into the way the folk, elites and institutions of Conservative Judaism interact. As such he recognized the ideology problem that has plagued Conservative Judaism for much of its history. Simply stated that problem is that the largest religious denomination in American Judaism has consistently avoided formulations which would clearly set forth what it was that Conservative Judaism believed in as distinct from Orthodoxy or Reform. This study provides some of the historical context that illuminates why this ideology problem developed. We will then be prepared to make some comments on Sklare's own observations about Conservatism's ideology problem.

Given the antipathy of both Solomon Schechter and Cyrus Adler to denominationalism in American Judaism, it should hardly be surprising that Conservative Judaism never developed a well articulated ideology and program. As the first two presidents of the modern Jewish Theological Seminary (reorganized in 1902), these two men restrained the graduates of the Seminary from taking any steps that smacked of sectarianism. Schechter's vision of the Seminary was decidedly catholic. He conceived of it as a theological center "reconciling all parties and appealing to all sections of the community."<sup>1</sup> In his 1902 inaugural address Schechter expressed the hope that the Seminary would be "all things to all men."<sup>2</sup> Similarly, in the deliberations that ultimately produced the Preamble for the newly formed United Synagogue of America (USA), Cyrus Adler prevented the inclusion of any statements which might have given the impression that a new party was coming into existence, distinct from Orthodoxy and Reform.<sup>3</sup>

It should thus not be too surprising that no ideological statement emerged during the formative years of Conservative Judaism. The leadership of the Seminary, at least until 1940 (the year Adler died), did not favor a distinctive ideological program. Instead they forged

<sup>1</sup> Solomon Schechter, *Seminary Addresses and Other Papers* (New York: 1959), pp. 22-23.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Herbert Rosenblum, "The Founding of the United Synagogue of America" (Ph.D. dissertation, Brandeis University, 1970), chs. 3, 4.

what could be called the normative myth of Conservative Judaism – the belief that the approach of the Seminary was true to mainstream traditional Judaism. As such the Seminary did not need to formulate a new ideology or program; to have done so would have suggested that the Seminary approach was something other than normative. Adhering to the normative myth also prevented Seminary officials from sanctioning a label for their approach. To their minds, “Traditional Judaism” should have been sufficient. The term “Conservative Judaism” was not generally accepted at the Seminary until after Louis Finkelstein took over as President in 1940.

As more and more Seminary graduates became pulpit rabbis in the 1920's and 30's, they recognized the shortcomings of representing an approach that was unsure of its label and independence, not to mention its program. Nevertheless, by allowing itself to remain undefined, Conservative Judaism became the beneficiary of social forces that were causing a reaction to both Orthodoxy and Reform among American Jews. Being all things to all people, the Conservative synagogue came to be shaped by the particular needs of Jews who broke away from other synagogues to form it. However, to the rabbis who took matters of ideology seriously, a more positive and forthright program needed to be articulated. The existing policy of drift brought upon the movement the unflattering description of “neither Orthodoxy nor Reform.”

One rabbi who was especially sensitive to this amorphousness was Herman Rubenovitz. Rubenovitz, a Massachusetts congregational rabbi, reports an undated letter he received from a layman who was trying to write a set of by-laws for his Conservative congregation in New York. When he decided to include in those by-laws a statement of the principles of Conservative Judaism, he found, to his chagrin, that none existed. Rubenovitz wrote:

It seems to me that the rabbis have not studied our problem sufficiently; and have not analyzed the situation with such care and attention as to enable the lay leaders of our synagogue to grasp the significance of the trend in our religious life which is called Conservative Judaism. It has always been my opinion that the duty of grappling with this problem rests upon the Rabbinical authorities. I am under the impression that the United Synagogue failed to formally recognize the problem of which I write. I deem it the duty of our leadership both rabbinic and lay to take such steps as will define the nature and scope of our movement in no uncertain terms.<sup>4</sup>

From the formative years of the United Synagogue there had been calls for a platform, but that faction never mustered enough strength to carry the day. By 1931, however, enough rabbis of the

4 Herman Rubenovitz, *The Waking Heart* (Cambridge: 1967), p. 68.

Rabbinical Assembly (RA) were sufficiently convinced of the need for the organization to “define (its) attitude toward the fundamental problems of Judaism” to pass a resolution to that effect.<sup>5</sup> A committee representing a cross-section of views met through the following year but were only able to produce an apology that greater progress had not been made. Despite certainty that a common denominator existed which differentiated the RA from Orthodoxy and Reform, the committee had not succeeded in agreeing upon it.<sup>6</sup> The very inclusion within the RA of members with such disparate views condemned the organization to proceed year after year without a program.

Ironically, this failing did not immediately hinder the successful growth of Conservative Judaism. In 1939, a Chicago rabbi described Conservative Judaism's development in his area. It was not always clear, he pointed out, which synagogues were properly Orthodox and which Conservative since no one seemed sure of the meaning of the labels. There were, however, characteristic Conservative innovations that were becoming features of many synagogues, including those affiliated with other movements. Since synagogues were unsure whether adoption of these practices would make them Conservative, the rabbi concluded that a comprehensive program could only aid the growth of an already attractive movement.<sup>7</sup>

The Chicago rabbi mentioned three specific “characteristic Conservative innovations” – late Friday night services, modern educational methods, and responsible Jewish leadership. Late Friday evening worship became very popular and outdrew the Saturday morning worship. It was so attractive that many Reform temples replaced their Sunday morning service with it. The commitment to better Jewish education became a major undertaking for Conservative rabbis. From their perspective Orthodoxy was still teaching in the style of the European *heders*, and Reform had reduced Jewish education to mere lessons on charity and non-sectarian social service. Neither system had qualified teachers. Conservative rabbis undertook the task of setting up Boards of Jewish Education to train professional teachers and to develop the types of curricula that conveyed the range of the Judaic heritage and were imbued with Hebraic content.<sup>8</sup> The third item on the rabbi's list – responsible Jewish leadership – could refer to a number of things. Conservative rabbis

5 *Proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly (PRA)*, 1931, p. 119.

6 *PRA*, 1932, pp. 246-247.

7 Ben Birnbaum, “A Valuation of the Conservative Movement,” *PRA*, 1939, pp. 161-164.

8 Rubenovitz, *op. cit.*, pp. 93-98.

considered their Reform counterparts irresponsible in failing to convey the essence of Judaism in their teachings. Orthodox rabbis constantly displayed behavior that brought vindictiveness and division into the Jewish community. Also, there were many rabbis whose credentials were suspect and who, at best, could be labelled as charlatans. The Conservative rabbinate prided itself on bringing learning, sophistication and a sense of moral stewardship to the Jewish community. The challenge now faced by the Conservative rabbinate was to convey to American Jewry its uniqueness.

As early as 1927, the RA heard an address by Louis Finkelstein that attempted to identify those things on which all rabbis of Conservative Judaism could agree. The areas that met with approval were the belief in the maximal use of Hebrew in prayer and literature, support for the upbuilding of Palestine as a Jewish homeland and loyalty to the Seminary.<sup>9</sup> However, in the replies that followed, it became clear that on the conception of God, the attitude towards Torah and the extent of support for the change in ceremonies, there could only be agreement if these were defined in the most ambiguous terms.

The reticence of the Conservative movement, during the Schechter and Adler years, to identify itself by means of a specific name or platform always bothered the left wing more than the right. The right was satisfied to leave the impression that the Seminary approach was merely an Americanized version of Orthodoxy. The left, on the other hand, found itself unhappy with that identification but equally distant from the position of Reform Judaism. At various times this left wing element attempted to mobilize the USA and the RA in their ideological direction only to be repeatedly thwarted. Their subsequent efforts to create alternative forums in which they could crystalize their views underscored the failure of the mainstream Conservative movement to do the same.

Two examples are instructive. In 1919, Julius Greenstone, Israel Friedlander, Mordecai Kaplan, Jacob Kohn, Max Margolis, and Herman Rubenovitz sent a letter to all graduates of the Seminary asking them to attend a meeting for the purpose of clarifying ideological positions on Jewish practice, and the implications of Zionism for the Judaism of the Diaspora. The new organization, the letter stated, would make up for the shortcomings of the United Synagogue.<sup>10</sup> The organization that emerged was the Society of the Jewish Renaissance. Its published program sought the "advancement of Judaism in an historic, progressive and Zionist spirit." Though

9 "The Things That Unite Us," *PRA*, 1927, pp. 42-53, and discussion following, pp. 54-66.

10 Rubenovitz, *op. cit.*, pp. 57-58.

stating that certain aspects of Judaism required major reinterpretation to allow for the religion's continued growth and viability, the platform was careful to include the various watch-words of the more traditional members. Thus the Society affirmed faith in God, divine revelation (somewhat re-interpreted), acceptance of Scripture and halacha as the norm of Jewish life.<sup>11</sup>

The Society saw itself as the "third party" in Judaism that United Synagogue was not. In fact there was both excitement among the rabbis and some concern among the Seminary faculty. Ironically, the Society's lack of success can be attributed to the same fault that plagued USA. In attempting to broaden its base too much, the Society included people whose beliefs could never be reconciled for a practical program. It soon became clear that the liberals had hoped to use this forum to support their planned innovations. The more traditional members first pointed to the Society's relatively conservative platform, attempting to deny that ritual innovation was the purpose of the group. Later they pulled out completely.

A second example of the left wing's search for a more promising forum for their concept of Judaism was the Society for the Advancement of Judaism (SAJ) organized by Mordecai Kaplan in 1922. Kaplan had learned from the experience of the Society of the Jewish Renaissance that the broader the spectrum of one's constituency the more difficult it is to arrive at specific ideological formulations or ritual innovations. Having left his Orthodox pulpit, the Jewish Center, Kaplan founded the SAJ with loyal followers committed to his Reconstructionist teachings. Not only was the SAJ hospitable ground for pioneering the ritual innovations that the Conservative movement would not sanction (e.g. Bat-mitzvah), but by launching the *SAJ Review* in 1925, it provided a vehicle for the ongoing articulation of a religious ideology - an ideology that had failed to take shape at the Seminary or in the RA.

Second only to Kaplan's emerging philosophy of Jewish life known as Reconstructionism, the *SAJ Review's* favorite topic was criticism of Conservative Judaism. The liberal rabbis of the RA who contributed to the *Review* felt less like creating a new party than filling a vacuum. Aware that they might be viewed as insurgents, they hoped instead that, as a homogeneous group, they could develop the kind of program that the USA and the RA had not been able to because of the characters of their respective coalitions. The *Review* observed that while there were Conservative congregations, no Conservative movement existed.<sup>12</sup> While American Jewry waited

11 *Society of the Jewish Renaissance* (New York: 1920).

12 "Conservative Judaism in America," *SAJ Review*, 6, 30 (April 1, 1927), 2-3.

for direction on matters of halacha, the *Review* saw the USA and the RA as overly cautious and compromising, if not inconsistent. Since none of the issues agitating the Conservative rabbis had met with decisive action by the movement, there was no choice but for smaller groups within the RA to organize and propose solutions for themselves.<sup>13</sup>

Kaplan's magnum opus, *Judaism as a Civilization*, appeared in 1934 and it made a great impact upon the ideology of Conservative Judaism. Although it was the first comprehensive philosophy of Jewish life emerging from a Conservative spokesman, Kaplan presented his program in a fashion that attempted to transcend the party labels within American Judaism. Thus he outlined the crisis that Judaism faced in light of the changed political, economic, and social order; the shortcomings of Reform, Conservatism, and Neo-Orthodoxy to deal with such problems; and finally, his program for a reconstruction of Jewish life.<sup>14</sup>

Kaplan believed that Judaism existed for Jews and not the other way around. In his rejection of supernatural theology, he came to stress the expression of Jewish peoplehood through the centuries as the crucial element in Jewish development. Because he did not believe in a supernatural God, he also advocated abandoning the concept of the chosen people. His corrective to the various interpretations of the Jewish religious parties was his concept that Judaism was not only a religion but also a civilization. Thus any philosophy of Judaism had to take into account Zionism and all other forms of Jewish cultural expression. Kaplan also felt that Jewish civilization evolved naturally over time. Because the changes wrought by emancipation were relatively greater than any change that came before, Judaism had to respond in kind. Although Kaplan's advocacy of a synthesis between tradition and modernism was no different than Conservative Judaism's, the extent of halachic change that he favored was decidedly greater.

Few other leaders of Conservative Judaism during this period undertook to develop conceptions of Judaism that might aid in crystallizing the ideology of the movement that united them. Solomon Goldman in *A Rabbi Takes Stock* (1931) and Eugene Kohn's *The Future of Judaism in America* (1934) shared many of Kaplan's liberal viewpoints. They criticized Conservatism for failing to differentiate itself substantially from Orthodoxy, and both leaned

towards sociological understandings of Judaism. As a result both insisted that Conservative Judaism keep the halacha up to date with the changing times. Israel Levinthal's *Judaism: An Analysis and an Interpretation* (1935) and Julius Greenstone's *The Religion of Israel* (1929) offered more Conservative statements that reflected the dominant tendencies within the RA and JTS. Both were very vague about the nature of God and revelation and both, while asserting that change took place historically, warned against too radical a revision of halacha for the present setting.

Most interesting in the development of Conservative ideology during Cyrus Adler's presidency of the Seminary was the anthology published by the USA, *What Is Conservative Judaism?*<sup>15</sup> The work represented a concession to the left wing in recognizing (in the Introduction) the need for a clearer formulation of Conservative philosophy. The very publication of the volume indicated a self-consciousness for the movement as an independent denomination that had long been lacking. Nevertheless, the Introduction continued to perpetuate the myth that Conservatism was the only true heir to the traditional Judaism of the past. In fact, it expressed a preference for the label "Traditional Judaism" over Conservative but conceded that the acceptance of the latter in the public mind had made it a fait accompli. The volume also underscored the coalition character of the movement by including representative opinions from the various ideological factions.

One finds in the selections of the centrists, Max Arzt and Robert Gordis, a striking similarity to the positions articulated by Mordecai Kaplan in the preceding twenty years. Arzt admitted that Conservative Judaism did not accept the belief in an infallible revelation from heaven and that Judaism's growth was a function of group consciousness and the collective life of the Jewish people. With Kaplan, he further asserted that Judaism was a religious civilization encompassing the common language, folkways, national aspirations and historic memories of the Jewish people.<sup>16</sup> Gordis credited Kaplan with identifying the process of re-interpretation by which Judaism continually evolved. He felt that this process also needed to characterize the approach of Conservative Judaism in its attempt to adapt Judaism to the modern environment. Gordis coined a succinct phrase which summarized the program of Conservative Judaism - "Judaism is the evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people."<sup>17</sup> Ironically, this creed came to be identified in future years with the Reconstructionist interpretation of Judaism.

15 Theodore Friedman, ed., *What is Conservative Judaism?* (New York: 1940).

16 Max Arzt, "Conservative Judaism," *Ibid.*, pp. 63-64.

17 Robert Gordis, "Conservative Judaism," *Ibid.*, pp. 79-80.

13 "The Conservative Impasse," *SAJ Review*, 8, 23 (February 15, 1929), 2-4.

14 Mordecai Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization* (New York: 1934). For an account of Kaplan's intellectual influences see Richard Libowitz "Mordecai M. Kaplan as Redactor: The Development of Reconstructionism" (Ph.D. dissertation, Temple University, 1978).

When Louis Finkelstein assumed the presidency of JTS in 1940, Conservative Judaism had already made its mark as a distinct movement in American Judaism by virtue of the many synagogues of the second- and third-generation American Jews that had affiliated with United Synagogue. Yet not only did Finkelstein continue to resist ideological formulations for the movement, he also saw the lack of those formulations to be a source of great strength enabling the movement to retain under its aegis many different viewpoints.<sup>18</sup> Although this position caused considerable frustration for those rabbis and lay-people who needed more direction regarding the tenets of Conservative Judaism, it was the only possible position that could maintain, in one piece, the broad coalition that constituted the Conservative movement. The choice seemed to be one of clarity and division vs ambiguity and unity.

Mordecai Kaplan did not believe that avoiding a clearly stated philosophy added any strength to Conservative Judaism even though it was his position that would most likely be excluded should a moderate platform ever be written. However, for Kaplan, maintaining the Conservative coalition did not preclude the articulation of varying ideological positions. In his 1947 address "Unity in Diversity in the Conservative Movement,"<sup>19</sup> Kaplan outlined a proposal that both recognized areas of common agreement as well as legitimized the differences that existed among the three contending wings. Kaplan suggested four areas of agreement: 1) the centrality of Israel; 2) the primacy of religion in Jewish life; 3) the maximum possible amount of Jewish content in synagogue and personal contexts, including the use of Hebrew; and 4) a commitment to the principles of scientific Jewish research set forth by the *Wissenschaft* school. The areas of divergence were essentially in the conceptions of God and attitudes towards halacha. The right wing believed in the supernatural origin of Torah and were thus loathe to tamper with the halachic prescriptions as set forth in the Shulchan Aruch. The centrists had reduced the belief in divine revelation from an historical event to a theological concept and were prepared to use the leniencies and flexibilities inherent in halacha to adapt it to the times. The left wing, with which Kaplan identified, had a humanistic conception of the origin of the Jewish religion and felt that the societal changes were so great in twentieth-century America as to require legislation and abrogation beyond the scope of the traditional halacha.

18 See, for example, "Dr. Finkelstein Corresponds with the RA," June 30, 1964, Office of Public Information, JTS (Mimeo).

19 Mordecai Waxman, ed., *Tradition and Change* (New York: 1958), pp. 212-228.

Kaplan conceived of a Conservative movement that would admit new synagogues only if they subscribed to the four principles held in common agreement; subsequently, they would have the option of identifying with one of the three wings. He felt that when legitimized, each wing would be free to produce their own guide to law and ritual which would, in turn, make increasingly clear areas of agreement and disagreement with the other wings. The only alternative to such sanctioned cross-fertilization would be the forcing underground of the different viewpoints. This was, in fact, what had been happening to the Reconstructionist wing as a result of their liturgical and ritual experimentations. Kaplan was, in essence, making a plea to the Conservative movement to allow for both a healthy clarification of principles as well as a tolerance of diversity. Of course, Kaplan's somewhat rigid definitions of the three wings reflected his own highly ideological nature.

An official sanction of the wings of Conservative Judaism was never forthcoming but few disagreed with Kaplan's analysis. In fact, unity in diversity was seen as such an accurate description of the coalition character of the Conservative movement that the phrase became the justification for the failure to develop a philosophy - a position quite antithetical to Kaplan's purpose. Yet Kaplan's identification of areas of agreement won general acceptance within the movement. A decade after Kaplan's important 1947 speech, two other rabbis, Simon Greenberg and Robert Gordis, coming from very different ideological perspectives, echoed the principles seen by Kaplan as the basis for Conservative unity. Their views were published as pamphlets by the USA for the use of the Conservative laity and were meant to be summary statements on the ideology of Conservative Judaism.

Simon Greenberg was the rabbi of Har Zion Temple in Philadelphia and then became vice-chancellor at the Seminary. As developed in his pamphlet on Conservative Judaism, Greenberg's four principles were 1) scientific study of the past; 2) Judaism as a Torah-centered civilization; 3) a commitment to *klal yisrael* - the unity of the Jewish people; and 4) diversity within unity, allowing congregations to experiment with ritual without excluding themselves from the movement.<sup>20</sup>

Robert Gordis' ideological program appeared a year later, in 1956, as *Conservative Judaism: A Modern Approach*.<sup>21</sup> A congre-

20 Simon Greenberg, *The Conservative Movement in Judaism: An Introduction* (New York: 1955).

21 (New York: 1956). This was a modified version of Gordis' *Conservative Judaism: An American Philosophy* (New York: 1945).

gational rabbi in Rockaway Park, N.Y., and a member of the Seminary faculty, Gordis defined Judaism as "the evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people." He believed that Judaism always underwent change and could be best adjusted to present-day conditions through Conservative Judaism's method of re-interpreting halacha. Gordis spoke of Torah as the product of "continuous revelation," thus placing the origin in God but giving over to man the task to shape the content of that ongoing revelation into law.

Ironically, no sooner had these two statements on Conservative ideology appeared than the 1956 RA Convention featured a prolonged discussion on the lack of Conservative ideology.<sup>22</sup> As a result of this discussion, a Continuing Conference on Conservative Ideology was established under the chairmanship of Jacob Agus. The purpose of the series of conferences was stated clearly in its founding document: "Our movement suffers from the absence of deep convictions and from the shallowness of formal allegiance . . . [We are] motivated by convenience, compromise and the shoddy strategy of coasting along the shifting tides of opportunism."<sup>23</sup> The conference proceedings were to be published and disseminated throughout the movement. By rebelling against the prevailing mood of consensus, the committee hoped to clarify the basic attitudes of Conservative Judaism so that the movement could at least affirm some positions with conviction. Yet the very attitude that had prevented such formulations in the past - the myth that Conservative Judaism was not a sect but normative Judaism - was stated in the very same document: "Our purpose is not to emphasize our differences from Orthodoxy and Reform, but to articulate the essential content of our philosophy."<sup>24</sup>

That no program ever emerged from the Continuing Conference was scarcely surprising. The very same people who called for a more specific formulation of Conservative Judaism also proclaimed allegiance to the myth that made such a formulation impossible. The failure to confront this basic contradiction of purpose was the prime source of the Conservative rabbinate's frustration. If all they wanted was the expression of general attitudes towards the core of Jewish belief - God, Torah and Israel - they themselves knew that such attitudes existed. Additionally, all wings of the movement already agreed with Kaplan's exposition of the four common Conservative assumptions as evidenced by Gordis' and Greenberg's restatement of those same principles. As for the different conceptions

22 PRA, 1956, pp. 163-168.

23 "On Conservative Ideology and Program" (mimeo), 1956, RA Law Archives.

24 *Ibid.*

of God and law, individuals had offered their views in books to which all had ready access and were free to subscribe. On the other hand, if the Conservative movement wanted more specific guidelines that distinguished it from other denominations in Judaism, they had to do two things. First, they had to abjure the myth of anti-sectarianism which led to the claim that Conservative Judaism was normative. Second, they had to produce a guide to halachic observance with a theological rationale along the lines of the Reform and Reconstructionist guides to ritual. This would entail either different guides, as Kaplan suggested, each reflecting the attitude of a different wing of the movement, or a centrist guide which might require reading out of Conservative Judaism the extreme ends of the coalition. The movement was confronted with a hard choice. Making the choice would have been at the price of abandoning the normative myth. But the Conservative movement preferred to avoid such hard ideological decisions.

The above historical survey helps us understand Marshall Sklare's five observations about Conservative Judaism's ideology problem,<sup>25</sup> and also enables us to evaluate those observations in light of more recent developments in American Judaism.

Sklare's first point is that because Conservative Judaism never had an ideology, it thus served as an effective halfway house between Orthodoxy and Reform. There is no doubt that a prime attraction of the Conservative synagogue was that it offered the second generation, children of Orthodox immigrants, a synagogue option far more traditional than Reform yet significantly more American than the *shtieblach* of their parents. Given the attractiveness of this middle-of-the-road option to the Americanized children of immigrants, it is true that ideology would be the last thing that potential members would ask about. Still, as we pointed out, ideological programs were developed within the Conservative movement. It would be more accurate to say that none was ever sanctioned or officially adopted by the movement. We would suggest that the normative myth functioned as a surrogate ideology which gave Conservative Jews a sense of connectedness to the faith of their fathers.

The Conservative movement attracted the bulk of its initial followers from the vast pool of children of East European immigrants. As they acculturated, the Conservative Jewish option seemed to allow for both integration to America and rootedness to their heri-

25 Sklare, *op. cit.*, p. 229.

tage. Conservative Judaism had only to avoid specific ideological programs to capture the vast middle ground between Orthodoxy and Reform. But the end of that stage in American Jewish history has posed a serious challenge to the continued viability of the Conservative movement. Since the ethnic differences between German Jews and East European Jews no longer obtain, the elites of Conservative Judaism have become more aware of the need to articulate a specific ideology which might serve as a rationale for affiliation.

Sklare's second point is that the rabbis have always been more concerned than the laity about the lack of ideology. The point is almost too obvious; the rabbis, as professionals, are the ones who are going to be most concerned with the day-to-day problems of the movement. Any study of a religious movement will tend to pay most attention to the professionals. In the Conservative movement there was perhaps even greater dominance by the rabbis than in other denominations' lay organizations, e.g., in the United Synagogue, a supposedly lay organization but controlled by rabbis. Still, we cited one example of a Conservative layperson exasperated at not finding any ideological guidance when trying to write a set of congregational by-laws. Many questions of ideology coming from the laity were not on the level of overarching philosophies but rather questions about halachic practices. These questions would be addressed to congregational rabbis who would then forward them to the RA Committee on Jewish Law and Standards. The inability of that Committee to furnish satisfactory answers to every question was often attributable to the absence of guiding principles.<sup>26</sup> Thus, in an indirect way, the laity too was affected by the lack of ideology.

The third point Sklare makes is that the Americanization of Orthodoxy and the growing traditionalism of Reform make the need for a Conservative ideology even more immediate. The implication, of course, is that Jews who might never have considered affiliating with anything but Conservatism might now find the other two movements more palatable. But, such trends can be overstated. A large part of synagogue affiliation is determined by worship styles. We showed how such appealing innovations as decorous services, the English sermon, and late Friday night services attracted Jews to the earliest Conservative synagogues. Even though such features are now available in Orthodox and Reform synagogues, significant differences still exist in worship styles. Orthodox services are still unabbreviated, virtually all in Hebrew and retain separate seating. Reform, in contrast to Conservatism, still has much more English,

26 See Sidney H. Schwarz, "Law and Legitimacy: An Intellectual History of Conservative Judaism, 1902-1973" (Ph.D. dissertation, Temple University, 1981), chs. 7, 10.

fewer *yarmulkes* and *talitot*, infrequent morning worship without Bar or Bat Mitzvah, and shorter services. Thus, even though the gap in personal religious practices across denominational lines is narrowing, a Jew's desire for greater or lesser traditional practice in public worship will determine his or her congregational affiliation.

Given the significance of worship style over and against ideology as a criterion for denominational preferences, a more important recent development is the growing disenchantment with large, impersonal synagogues. Although this has affected both the Reform and Conservative movements, the alternative to synagogues – *havurot* – has been established mostly by Jews emerging from the ranks of Conservatism. Whether functioning within a synagogue or as independent alternatives to the synagogue, *havurot* have rejected the overly formal, rabbi-centered, decorous service. Many of the Conservative movement's finest products, youth who have come through the ranks of USY and Ramah Camps, are now gravitating towards *havurot* or younger Orthodox *shuls* that, to their minds, offer a more exciting and authentic Jewish religious option.<sup>27</sup> It is questionable whether the development of an ideology will do anything to stem this tide of disaffection with Conservatism among its younger generation. More likely, unless new patterns of congregational life and worship style emerge within the movement, more of Conservatism's youth will see their Conservative synagogues as appropriate to their parents' need for status while they pursue other options that fulfill their personal religious quest.

Sklare gives a significant amount of attention in his work to the gap between the congregations – rabbis and laity – and the Seminary (practitioners versus schoolmen). Thus his fourth point: the fear of an irreparable break between the two factions served as an obstacle to the formation of an ideology. One specific example that Sklare details is the attempt to understand Schechter's concept of Catholic Israel. Sklare properly notes that to apply that idea as intended – that Jewish law should follow the actual practice of the Jewish people – would be tantamount to sanctioning a wholesale abandonment of ritual observance.<sup>28</sup> Only Robert Gordis' reinterpretation – limiting Catholic Israel to the body of committed Jews – allowed the movement to continue to pay lip service to this principle.<sup>29</sup>

27 A more extensive treatment of this phenomenon can be found in my "Conservative Judaism in Philadelphia" in Murray Friedman, ed. *Jewish Life In Philadelphia, 1940-1980* (Philadelphia: 1985).

28 Sklare, *op. cit.*, pp. 233-235.

29 Sidney H. Schwarz, "Catholic Israel and Halachic Change," in Ronald Brauner, ed. *Jewish Civilization, Essays and Studies*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: 1981).

Still, this did not provide the answer to just how much of halacha could be changed or adapted to suit present day circumstances. The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the RA was charged with the task of interpreting halacha for the movement. But time and again members of the Seminary faculty exercised their influence to restrain the RA from sanctioning any departures from traditional halacha even though rabbis in the field needed to be able to respond to the pressing questions coming from their laity. In the end, the importance the Seminary attached to adhering to tradition far outweighed the implied commitment of Conservative Judaism to progressive halachic interpretation and change.<sup>30</sup> As Sklare suggested, for the RA to move ahead on its own without Seminary approval might well have precipitated a break.

Sklare's fifth and final point is a related one - that the Conservative rabbinate has refused to sanction any significant changes in halacha. Sklare mentions the issue of the agunah, the unmarriageable woman, and indeed, that is a prime example of all the restraints that came into play preventing the Conservative movement from initiating changes.<sup>31</sup> In fact, Sklare's sense that general dissatisfaction existed within the movement over the resistance to change of the elite structures of Conservatism led him to speculate about the possibility of the movement splitting.<sup>32</sup>

But, since Sklare suggested this possibility, significant changes have taken place. Mordecai Kaplan, who was long unhappy about the refusal of the Conservative movement to sanction changes, finally removed his edict which had prohibited his followers among the Reconstructionists from forming a new movement. Realizing that the promise of Reconstructionism was being obscured by its affiliation with Conservatism, Kaplan finally resigned from JTS and the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College was formed in 1968 by his followers (notably his son-in-law, Ira Eisenstein). As of this writing, Reconstructionism can properly be termed a movement in its own right with a Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association (80 members) and a Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Havurot (50 affiliates). Obviously, functioning on their own has allowed the Reconstructionists to move more assertively on the ritual and liturgical changes they have deemed necessary.<sup>33</sup>

30 Schwarz, "Law & Legitimacy," ch. 11.

31 A fuller treatment of the agunah issue which illustrates this phenomenon can be found in Sidney H. Schwarz, "Conservative Judaism & the Agunah," *Conservative Judaism*, 36, no. 1 (Fall, 1982) 37-44.

32 Sklare, *op. cit.*, pp. 238 ff.

33 Sidney Schwarz, "Reconstructionism & Conservative Judaism," *Judaism*, 33, no. 2 (Spring, 1984) 171-178.

Ironically, the secession of the Reconstructionists did not make Conservatism even more conservative. In fact, it can no longer be stated that Conservatism has initiated no changes in Jewish law. With Seymour Siegel serving as chairman of the Law Committee during the 1970's, the RA sanctioned the counting of women into the minyan. Even more noteworthy was the 1983 decision to admit women to the rabbinical program at JTS. This decision was the end result of an extraordinary process outside the aegis of the RA Law Committee and was finally passed by the Seminary faculty at the urging of Chancellor Gerson Cohen.

However, such changes now threaten another split, this time from the right. A number of more traditional rabbis and laypeople have formed the Union for the Preservation of Traditional Judaism and are no longer willing to submit themselves to the halachic decisions of the RA and the Seminary even though they currently remain in Conservative congregations. Only time will tell whether they will eventually join the Orthodox movement or create yet another division within American Judaism.

It is hard to say whether Conservative Judaism has solved its "ideology" problem which Marshall Sklare highlighted thirty years ago. What has happened is that the movement, by making some unequivocal decisions, can no longer play to the vast middle ground of American Jewry. As conditions change and each new generation searches for religious options suiting its own temperament and needs, it is quite likely that new religious movements will emerge even as the old ones survive by repeatedly changing their forms. Many have longed for the day when a greater unity would prevail in American Judaism, when there would be no need for three, four or more "denominations." Yet each new movement indicates a need not met and a group that stands willing to respond. In the end, this may be one of the clearest signs of vitality that we have in the American Jewish community.