

difficult enough these days without our readiness to bury one another over issues of strategy and tactics, let alone on issues of ideology. I am perfectly prepared to accept Rabbi Novak's position within the Conservative movement though in many respects it is rather opposed to my own. I am indeed prepared to listen to all manner of suggestions with regard to the halachic issues that are critical both for him and for me. This must occur, however, not by calling one another names or predicting each other's imminent demise, but rather by finding the will to affirm our own individuality in the pluralistic world in which we live in which ultimately the answers must come not from us, but from the God who created us. In the meantime, I trust that our discourse with one another will be not only respectful of one another, but productive as well. ●

Conservative *halacha* is dead

Alan J. Yuter

Rabbi Leon B. Fink, complains (Sh'ma 15/290) that a Conservative medical resident was denied permission to leave the hospital to attend Sabbath morning services. Permission was denied by the chief resident because the resident was willing to work on the Sabbath *after* services, and because he was not orthodox. Rabbi Fink finds that chief resident's response, "either you are orthodox or you are not," distressing because it reveals that people do not take Conservative Judaism seriously. Given Rabbi Fink's evaluation of the physician in question as a "fine Conservative Jew, one who would be a pride and joy to Conservative rabbis, who would attend *Shabbat* services religiously and not necessarily spend the rest of the (Sabbath) time at home," it seems that Rabbi Fink does not take Conservative halachic theory seriously, either.

It may be unfortunate that hospitals do not split theological hairs with regard to the varied shades of Jewish practice. Chief residents at hospitals are not trained to calibrate religious consistency and pietistic probity; but they are intelligent people who can sense inconsistency. The chief halachic body of Conservative Judaism, the Committee of Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly, only permits riding to and from the nearest synagogue. This physician's compromised practice may be the best level commitment that Conservative Judaism has been able to muster in its laity, but it does not reflect Conservative Judaism's

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expressed standard that prohibits professional activity on *Shabbat*. The "official" religion of Conservative Judaism supports the chief resident's conclusion. Were this young physician a strict Sabbath observer according to Conservative Judaism's most liberal "official" interpretation, he would not engage in professional activity.

Fink is Liberal Not Conservative

Rabbi Fink's quandary is not appropriate to Conservative Jews who happen to be committed to *halacha*; it is appropriate to liberal Jews who wish to observe *halachic* traditions selectively. These liberals observe traditions and folkways as instruments of spirituality, not as divine commands. If the *halacha* is viewed in *any sense* as God's commanding voice, then Rabbi Fink's "pride" is misplaced. The *halachic* pronouncements of the elite religion of Conservative Judaism notwithstanding, Rabbi Fink apparently concedes that in practice, Conservative affiliates are neither conservative nor conserving, for they are liberal Jews. Conservative elite religion appeals to classical sources for legitimating support, while popular Conservative religion, as evidenced by Rabbi Fink's complaint, is no less than Reform Judaism with a traditionalist hue. If Rabbi Fink were true to the official ideals of Conservative Judaism, he would have counseled the good doctor that Jewish law prohibits professional activity on the *Shabbat*, except in a life-endangering situation. For Rabbi Fink, the truly authentic Conservative Jew of popular Conservative Jewish "religion" would "not necessarily spend the rest of the time at home." Given Rabbi Fink's assessment of his "pride and joy," Conservative *halacha* is dead in Cleveland. The astute chief resident correctly distinguished between religious sincerity and religious dilettantism.

Halacha Spurned by Laity

Rabbi Fink reveals that Conservative Judaism is a misnomer: it is a liberal movement. Halachic language provides a formal, self-legitimizing rhetoric that engages the rabbinate, but is neither applied nor taken seriously by its laity. When Rabbi Fink points with pride to a person who is violating the *Shabbat according to Conservative practice* Conservative Judaism's claim to *Halachic* legitimacy rings hollow. By pointing to an inconsistent Sabbath observer as an ideal, Rabbi Fink unwittingly supports the opinion of the "intolerant" chief resident, because a Conservative Jew would not observe the Sabbath in a consistent or credible fashion. Total commitment both for Rabbi Fink and his congregant's chief resident means "orthodox." A Conservative Jew cannot be

a true believer, according to Rabbi Fink. It's no accident that Conservative Judaism's most committed people flirt with orthodoxy, for they are searching for authenticity.

I concede that it is better to be inconsistently observant than to be consistently non-observant; but inconsistency is neither a religious ideal nor a posture that natural observers will respect.

The reason that Conservative Judaism is taken seriously as a social phenomenon but not a religious phenomenon is that it intimates that total commitment is not an ideal, its official pronouncements notwithstanding, a true believer believes with total commitment, not compromised commitment. Conservative Judaism promised a halachic alternative to orthodoxy, but a movement that fails to convince its adherents has broken its promise. ●

An observant conservative layman speaks

Douglas D. Aronin

Leon B. Fink's article "May Conservative Jews observe *Shabbat*?" (*Sh'ma* 15/290) certainly shows a failure of the Conservative movement, but in a very different way from that which he suggests. In criticizing the failure of a chief resident to accord as much respect to his congregant's request to attend *Shabbat* morning services as he accorded to "Orthodox" requests not to work on *Shabbat*, Rabbi Fink writes: "A fine Conservative Jew, one who would be a pride and joy to Conservative rabbis, would be one who would attend *Shabbat* services religiously and not necessarily spend the rest of the time at home."

As an observant Conservative layman, I am appalled at this exaltation of minimalism. The problem I frequently encounter in this regard is the automatic assumption that, because I leave work early on Fridays and won't work on Saturdays and Jewish holidays, I must therefore be "Orthodox." The Conservative movement has never held that attendance at services is the totality of proper *Shabbat* observance. Many who attend services at Conservative synagogues do not otherwise observe *Shabbat*, of course, and I would never suggest alienating them from synagogue life. To elevate their limited observance into an ideal, however, would not only depart from the fundamentals of Judaism, but would undermine the fine work of those Conservative rabbis who are striving to increase the level of observance among their congregants. The failure of the movement is not, as Rabbi Fink suggests, that "we have not been as militant in demanding time for our peo-

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ple who wish to attend services as the Orthodox are in their demand for their people having entire *Shabbat* free." The true failure is the inability to persuade more Conservative Jews that traditional *Shabbat* observance need not be an Orthodox monopoly. ●

"The homeless" are not monolithic

David S. Ribner

Margaret Holub erroneously treats the homeless as a homogeneous group (*Sh'ma*, 15/292). In fact, like any large segment of the population, this one is composed of discrete sub-groups which may share some characteristics, but which may also find in common only their need for shelter. The roads that brought these people to their current situations have been many and varied; consequently possible pathways out will be equally dissimilar. To see recently discharged psychiatric patients and recently paroled felons as indistinguishable members of "the homeless" denies each the individuality needed to help them cope with burdensome pasts and unpromising futures.

Ms. Holub's account is further flawed by its facile depiction of the homeless as good guys. Perhaps the differences between New York and Los Angeles account for our different experiences, but I doubt it. The homeless clients that I have worked with are no more noble than any other cross section of Americans and on occasion are a good sight less. Statistical studies done in New York's municipal shelter system indicate that at least 25% of the male residents have major criminal histories. The anonymity of city streets and institutions provide safe haven for an endless stream of pushers, prostitutes and con artists who comprise at least a significant fraction of the urban homeless. A day's intakes can include not only pregnant adolescents, but chronic child molesters, not only those lacking employment but those lacking conscience. Heroes and heroines do exist in the shelters, not however in greater numbers or with greater courage than most of us encounter in an average lifetime.

Cities Face Competing Demands

Those in positions of power and influence bare the brunt of Ms. Holub's wrath. They are, in her eyes, a particularly despicable bunch and she finds among them not one deserving of praise. Seeing homelessness as the direct result of actions perpetuated by corrupt officials and amoral landlords does not merely obscure the economic, social and political complexity of this problem. Such simplistic formulations perpetuate myths

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