Jewish Identity and Religious Commitment:

The North American Study of Conservative Synagogues and Their Members, 1995-96

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A Project of the Ratner Center for the Study of Conservative Judaism Jewish Theological Seminary of America

Produced under a grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts

This publication has been made possible through a grant from the Mandell L. Berman and Madeleine H. Berman Foundation.

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Cover photos courtesy of The Ratner Center, JTS,
illustration of Congregation B'nai Jeshurun, Madison Avenue, NYC, ca 1885.
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Foreword

Jewish Identity and Religious Commitment is the second in a series of publications emanating from the North American Study of Conservative Synagogues and Their Members. The study consisted of three freshly commissioned surveys of congregational practices and programs, the behavior and beliefs of synagogue members, and the attitudes and practices of recent bar and bat mitzvah celebrants. All three of these surveys were conducted in 1995-96. In addition, data collected through the National Jewish Population Survey of 1990 were reanalyzed in order to learn more about the entire population of Jews who identified themselves as Conservative. Finally, two ethnographers each studied two Conservative synagogues to learn more about the cultures of congregations.

The initial report about this research presented a distillation of major findings. Entitled **Conservative Synagogues and Their Members: Highlights of the North American Survey of 1995-96,** the report consisted of two sections:

1. An examination of five major themes in Conservative synagogue life, with sections entitled:

—Affirming Conservative Judaism
—The Triumph of Egalitarianism
—When Geography Makes a Difference
—The Younger Generation—Jewish Knowledge and Activities
—The Partnership Between Family and Synagogue

2. A detailed Profile of Conservative Jews and Their Synagogues.*

The highlights report offered an indispensable overview of the key findings of our wide-ranging research project. This publication, by contrast, probes specific topics in greater depth. Members of the research team have written articles shedding light on several themes: the inner Jewish lives of young people, the impact of certain types of Jewish education, the religious commitment of Conservative families, and the varying cultures of Conservative congregations. A concluding symposium offers a series of reflections about the implications of our research. Taken together, the articles in this publication aim to contribute to current discourse in the American Jewish community about matters of Jewish identity and religious commitment.

* See Jack Wertheimer, *ed.,Conservative Synagogues and Their Members: Highlights of the North American Survey of 1995-96* for a discussion of "The Study Design."

Acknowledgments

This publieation has been possible through the generosity of the Mandell L. Berman and Madeleine H. Berman Foundation. The Bermans have a long history of sponsoring research on the current condition of the American Jewish community. We are grateful for their support of our work.

Research for this project was generously funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts. We are heartened by the interest of the Trusts' president, Rebecca W. Rimel, and her staff in the Religion Division.

Chancellor Ismar Schorsch has offered unflagging support for this publication, as he has of all projects of the Ratner Center. I am deeply appreciative of his enthusiastic encouragement.

It is my pleasure, once again, to acknowledge the professionalism and hard work of the entire research team. Our on going collaboration has been a source of great personal satisfaction to me. Special thanks to Ariela Keysar for her assistance with this publication, as well as her collaboration on two articles in this volume. Johanna Ginsberg provided vital editorial assistance; her efforts greatly enhanced the clarity of each article. And Glenn L. Abel, the designer of this publication, has served as a superb partner.

Jack Wertheimer

The Jewish Theological Seminary of America is the academic and spiritual center of Conservative Judaism worldwide.

The mission of the Ratner Center for the Study of Conservative Judaism is to preserve the historical records of the Conservative movement and foster research on Conservative Judaism, past and present.

The Geography of Conservative Judaism in the United States

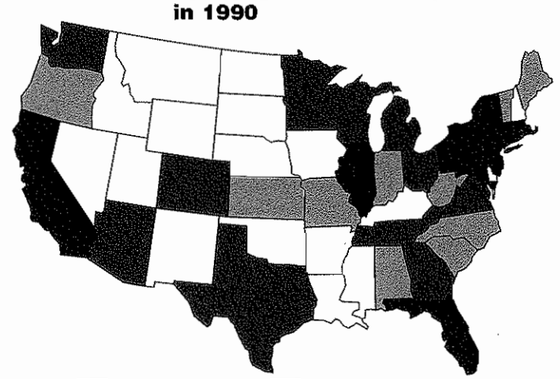
Jack Wertheimer and Ariela Keysar

The task of assessing the condition of American Jewish life is immeasurably complicated by the fact that Jews are widely scattered throughout the country. It is therefore exceedingly risky to generalize about an aspect of the American Jewish community based upon patterns in one region, let alone a single locality.

This is especially true when we consider the different branches of American Judaism. Adherents of each of the major movements—Reform, Conservative and Orthodox Judaism—form a different pattern of geographic dispersal around the country, and, therefore, what characterizes that movement in one locality may have no pertinence to another section of the country. Moreover, even within a branch of Judaism, there are significant variations from place to place when the ages of its adherents are taken into aceount: a movement may appear robust because of healthy rates of membership in its synagogues, but upon closer examination those figures may include primarily older individuals and few younger families. Such a pattern does not augur well for the future of those seemingly healthy congregations. Conversely, the decline of congregations in one section of the country may be matched by a simultaneous growth of synagogues in another region, a boom stimulated by the geographic mobility of younger families.

In the following pages, we will examine the changing map of Conservative Judaism in the United States. Using a variety of sources, including a survey of congregations that was a component of the North American Study of Conservative Synagogues and their Members, as well as a number of national and local demographic surveys conducted under the auspices of Jewish federations, we will track Conservative Jews as they have shifted their places of geographic concentration over time.

Map 1 **The Number of Conservative Synagogue Membership Units in 1990**



The Current Geographic Distribution of Conservative Synagogue Members

The National Jewish Population Survey of 1990 (hereafter referred to as NJPS) asked respondents to answer the following question: "Are you or any member of your household currently a member of a synagogue or temple?" Based on the responses, the NJPS estimated that there were some 370,000 households in the United States containing Conservative synagogue members. This amounted to 43 percent of the 860,000 households containing synagogue-affiliated Jews.

Map 1 presents the estimated number of Conservative synagogue memberships in each of the 50 states based upon the NJPS data. We divide the states into four categories: First, the large states with anywhere from 10,000 to 90,000 Conservative synagogue memberships — in total nine states, led by New York. Second, 12 states with 2,000 to less than 10,000 memberships (for example, Michigan and Texas). Third, there are twelve states with between 100 and 1,999 Conservative synagogue membership units (for example, Kansas and South Carolina). Fourth, there are 18 states for which we have insufficient data on Conservative synagogue membership in 1990 (for example, Oklahoma and New Hampshire).

When we consider the regional clustering, it is evident that states with large numbers of Conservative synagogue membership units are mainly in the East: New York (with an estimated 86,000 households), New Jersey (41,000), Massachusetts (29,000), Pennsylvania (19,000), Connecticut (15,000), and Maryland (12,000). Outside of the Northeastern seaboard, the primary locations of Conservative synagogue members are in the states of Florida (46,000) and Illinois (20,000). In the West only California with 35,000 households boasts a large body of Conservative synagogue memberships.

Historical Patterns

The distribution of Jews who belong to Conservative synagogues has evolved over the course of this century. Not surprisingly, the growth of Conservative synagogues in different sections of the country paralleled the patterns of mobility within the larger population of American Jews. The following

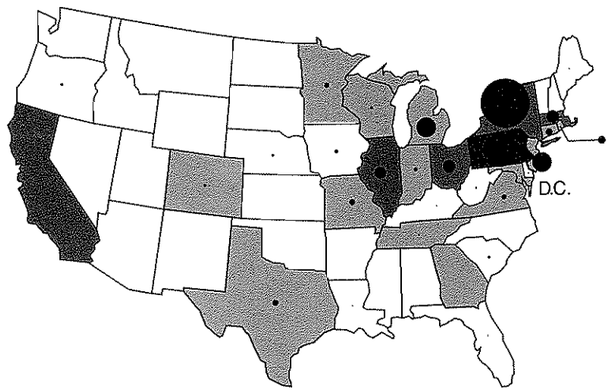
The Number of Conservative Synagogues

	1929	1964	1996
Alabama	0	4	4
Arizona	0	3	6
California	3	67	65
Colorado	2	2	6
Connecticut	8	34	35
Delaware	1	3	2
Washington, D.C.	1	6	2
Florida	1	30	57
Georgia	0	7	9
Idaho	0	1	0
Illinois	12	32	30
Indiana	3	6	4
Iowa	3	8	6
Kansas	0	0	2
Kentucky	1	1	4
Louisiana	1	2	3
Maine	1	2	2
Maryland	1	14	23
Massachusetts	13	53	44
Michigan	2	20	13
Minnesota	4	6	6
Mississippi	0	0	1
Missouri	5	4	4
Nevada	0	2	3
New Hampshire	0	4	2
New Jersey	23	110	79
New Mexico	0	1	2
New York	69	216	142
North Carolina	0	12	9
Ohio	13	26	19
Oklahoma	0	2	2
Oregon	2	3	2
Pennsylvania	38	95	61
Rhode Island	3	9	5
South Carolina	2	7	4
Tennessee	1	6	5
Texas	5	13	14
Utah	0	1	1
Vermont	0	2	2
Virginia	4	12	11
Washington	0	2	6
West Virginia	3	3	2
Wisconsin	2	7	7

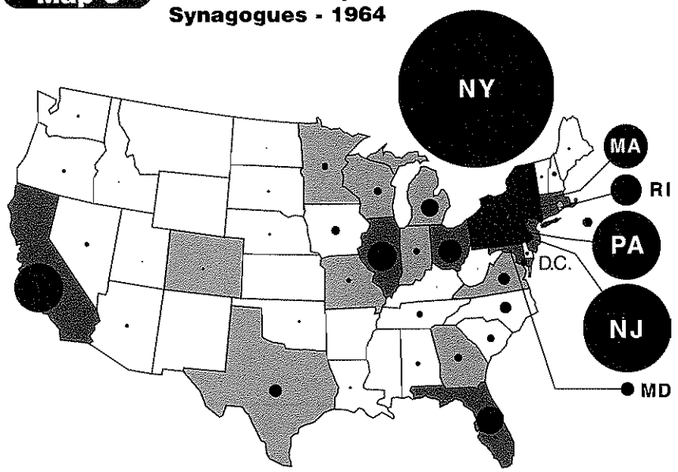
Key: 400,000 to 2,600,000; 100,000 to 399,999; 20,000 to 99,999; 0 to 19,999

Note: The size of the circle for each state represents the proportionate number of Conservative synagogues.

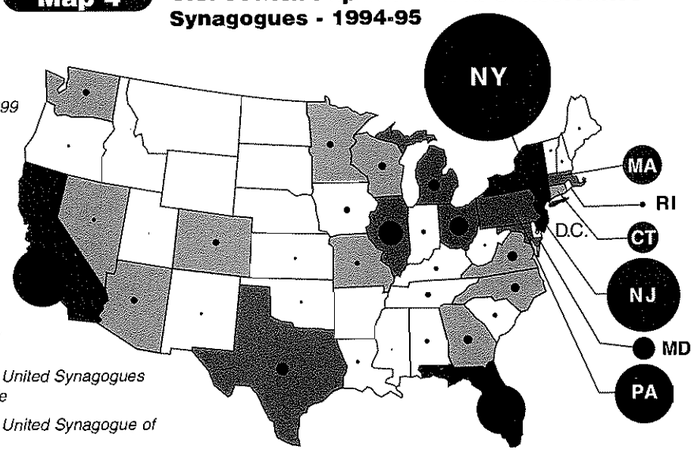
Map 2 **The U.S. Jewish Population and Conservative Synagogues - 1927-29**



Map 3 **U.S. Jewish Population and Conservative Synagogues - 1964**



Map 4 **U.S. Jewish Population and Conservative Synagogues - 1994-95**



Sources:

Map 2: Source: Harry S. Linfield, The Jews in the U.S. 1927: A Study of Their Number and Distribution (American Jewish Committee, 1929); and Report of the 17th Annual Convention of the United Synagogues of America, New York, 1929

Map 3: Sources: American Jewish Year Book, 1965 and The United Synagogues of Conservative Judaism, 1964 Directory and Resource Guide

Map 4: Sources: American Jewish Year Book, 1995 and The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, 1996 Directory and Resource Guide.

discussion examines the geographic distribution of Conservative congregations at three specific historical junctures. Maps 2-4 superimpose the number of Conservative congregations in each state upon the total numbers of Jews living in that state.

In 1927 most of the states (31) had relatively small Jewish populations, numbering fewer than 20,000 individuals. Only two states had Jewish populations larger than 400,000 individuals— Pennsylvania with an estimated 404,979 Jews and New York with 1,903,890. According to the *American Jewish Year Book,* the Jewish population in California, though the largest in the West, was estimated to number 123,284. Only four other states had Jewish populations of between 100,000 to 400,000 individuals, namely Illinois, Ohio, New Jersey and Massachusetts. Overall the Jewish population was estimated at 4.22 million. (See Map 2.)

The number of Conservative synagogues corresponded to Jewish population density. As expected, states with large Jewish populations also had more Conservative synagogues. In some states, though, there were significant disparities between the number of Conservative synagogues and the total population of Jews. For example, there were only three Conservative congregations in California, while Connecticut (with only 91,538 Jews) had 8 Conservative synagogues. Pennsylvania had 38 Conservative synagogues and New York had 69. These disparities offer perhaps the best indication of the relative rates of identification with the Conservative movement in the late 1920s. (Overall, there were 227 Conservative congregations affiliated with the United Synagogue of Ameriea, as the congregational arm of the Conservative movement was then called.)

By 1964, the Conservative movement had enjoyed two decades of explosive growth. Between the end of World War II and the mid-1960s, hundreds of new congregations were founded as veterans returned from the battlefields and the Jewish baby boom generation had to be educated. The postwar period also witnessed the growth of Jewish communities outside of the Northeastern seaboard—especially in California and southern Florida. The combination of these factors remade the map of Conservative synagogue life in the United States.

In 1964, the estimated size of the U.S. Jewish population was 5.67 million. Most states (31) still had relatively small Jewish populations, consisting of fewer than 20,000 souls. But others grew quite dramatically: California's Jewish population leaped to 629,870 (more than a five-fold increase since 1927). And Florida's Jewry grew from 13,402 in 1927 to 129,755 in 1964 (almost ten times). Pennsylvania's Jewish population remained stable, but New York Jewry experienced population growth and was estimated at 2,518,185 in 1964.

The number of Conservative synagogues also increased substantially during this period and reached 800 in 1964. The states with the largest numbers (over 50) of Conservative congregations were: Massachusetts-53; California-67; Pennsylvania-95; New Jersey-110; and New York with 216 congregations. (See Map 3.)

Three decades later, the geographic contours of the American Jewish community had changed once again. The most noteworthy shift occurred through the migration of Jews from centers of earlier concentration in the Atlantic seaboard states of the Northeast to Sunbelt states in the Southeast and West. These changes occurred against a backdrop of a virtual stagnation in the absolute number of U.S. Jews: overall the Jewish population was estimated at 5.88 million in 1994.

By 1994 the number of states with relatively small Jewish populations—less than 20,000—declined to 28. Four states had a Jewish population of 400,000 or over. But these were not the same as in 1964. Pennsylvania experienced a population decline to an estimated 331,000 Jews. Florida, by contrast, continued to grow, and its Jewish population numbered 638,000 Jews. It now ranked third after New York State, which boasted 1,645,000 Jews, and California (922,000 Jews). New Jersey, with an estimated 436,000 Jews, ranked fourth among states with large Jewish populations.

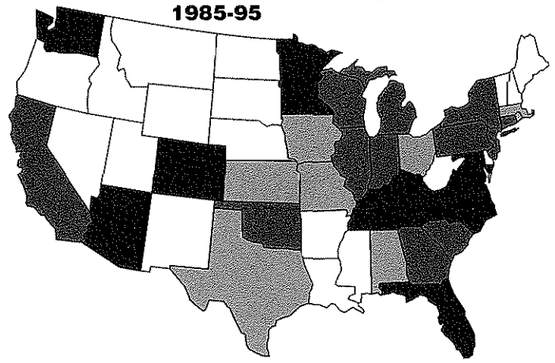
Among the Sunbelt states that experienced significant Jewish population growth, an estimated 109,000 lived in Texas and 72,000 in Arizona. (The latter represented a four-fold increase over 1964.) Other states with substantial Jewish population growth were Colorado and Nevada: Colorado's Jewish population had more than doubled since 1964 and Nevada's Jewry increased nine-fold since the mid-1960s to an estimated 21,000 Jews. On the other hand, New York State experienced a major decline in its Jewish population, losing nearly one million Jews since 1964.

The number of Conservative synagogues affiliated with the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism declined somewhat during this period to 765. This decline reflected the closing or merging of some marginal congregations, some shifts to other Jewish denominations, and the disaffiliation of some ideologically Conservative congregations from the United Synagogue. Compared to 1964, significant declines in United Synagogue membership were registered in New York (142 affiliated congregations), New Jersey (79) and Pennsylvania (61). Florida, however, almost doubled its number of Conservative congregations during this period, growing from 30 in 1964 to 57 in 1995. (See Map 4.)

Patterns of Growth and Decline

When we shift our perspective from broader national patterns to the specific experiences of congregations, some of the underlying dynamics of synagogue growth and decline come into sharper focus. The 1995-96 North American Study of

Map 5 Growth and Decline among Conservative Congregations, 1985-95



Key:
- States where over 50% of congregations claim to be larger
- 35 - 50% of congregations claim to be larger
- less than 35% of congregations claim to be larger

Source: Congregational Study, 1995-96

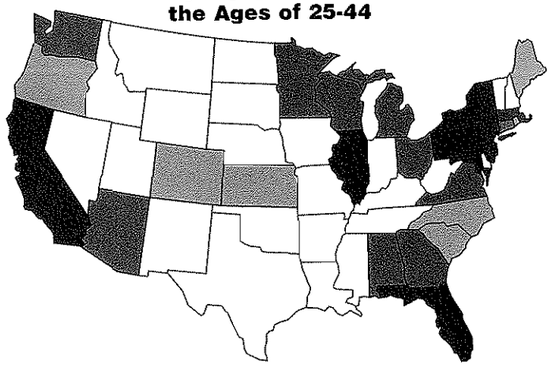
Conservative Synagogues and Their Members, for example, asked rabbis to contrast their congregational membership base in 1995-96 to that of a decade earlier. Overall, 48 percent of Conservative congregations reported growth during the previous decade, 31 percent reported a decline in membership and about 21 percent claimed a stability in membership. In the following states, the proportion of congregations which reported declining memberships was unusually large: some 58 percent of congregations in Ohio, about 48 percent of those in Massachusetts, 45 percent of the congregations in Illinois, and 43 percent of congregations in New York.

By contrast, in ten states over half the congregations experienced growth during the previous decade. These states included Virginia (67 percent of the congregations were larger in 1995), Florida (70 percent), Maryland (82 percent). In another 13 states, between a third and a half of congregations experienced growth over the previous decade: 49 percent of New Jersey congregations reported such growth, as did 36 percent of New York's congregations. (See Map 5.)

The Age Structure of Congregations

The age structure of congregations serves as a key measure of long-term vitality. Using data from the NJPS, we have examined Conservative synagogue members between the ages of 25 and 44 to learn more about the geographic distribution of younger Conservative Jews of the baby boom cohort. The NJPS estimated that some 612,000 Jews between the ages of 25 and 44 lived in households where someone was a synagogue member. Approximately 230,000 of these were in households

Map 6 The Number of Conservative Synagogue Members Between the Ages of 25-44



Key:
- 10,000 to 60,000
- 2,000 to 9,999
- 100 to 1,999
- 0 to 99

Source: NJPS, 1990

affiliated with a Conservative synagogue.

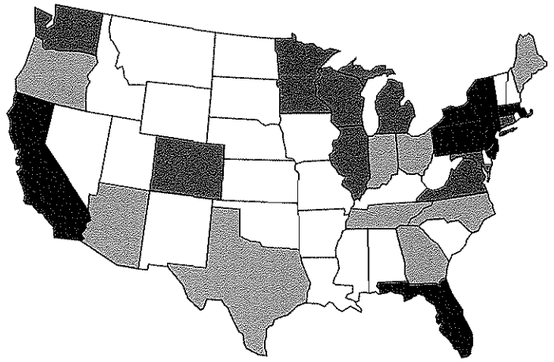
Map 6 divides these states into four categories: 1. States with between 10,000 and 60,000 young Conservative synagogue members. There are eight of these, including Florida, Illinois, Massachusetts, and Maryland. 2. Ten states with between 2,000 and 9,999 younger Conservative synagogue members—e.g. Washington and Arizona. 3. Eight states with between 100 and 1,999 young Conservative synagogue members (for example, Colorado and North Carolina). 4. Twenty-five states with insufficient data on young Conservative synagogue members in 1990.

Contrary to the popular conception, Florida attracts young Conservative synagogue members and not only senior citizens. Generally, states with growing Jewish populations attract large numbers of younger Jews who affiliate with Conservative synagogues. Despite its decline in Jewish population, Pennsylvania still had a relatively large number of young Conservative synagogue members in 1990. The states with the largest such populations were California and Florida (over 20,000), and New York (over 55,000).

We also tracked the geographic distribution of a more senior generation of synagogue members, those 65 and older. According to the NJPS, some 380,000 Jews of this age group lived in households where someone held membership in a synagogue: fifty-four percent of these were members of Conservative congregations, 26 percent were Reform, 19 percent Orthodox and 1 percent belonged to Reconstructionist Congregations.

Map 7 illustrates where Conservative Jews of this age

Map 7 The Number of Conservative Synagogue Members Over Age 65



Key:
- 10,000 to 50,000
- 3,000 to 9,999
- 100 to 2,999
- 0 to 99

Source: NJPS, 1990

cohort concentrate geographically. It is especially noteworthy that this population has clustered in Florida, where an estimated 40,000 Conservative synagogue members over age 65 reside. By contrast, 32,000 such individuals live in New York, 25,000 in California, and almost 19, 000 in New Jersey.

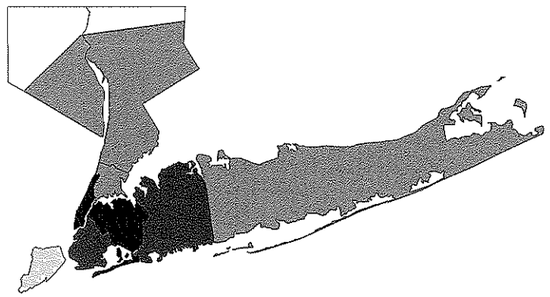
The New York Metropolitan Area: A Case Study *

Patterns of geographic concentration vary from one religious movement to another. The point is illustrated by comparing the concentration of Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox families affiliated with a synagogue in the Greater New York area. Households with a Conservative synagogue membership comprised 41 percent of 265,000 households in Greater New York which had synagogue membership in 1991; 27 percent were Reform, 24 percent Orthodox, and 8 percent other.

Map 8 presents the estimated number of households in 1991 that had a Conservative synagogue membership in the nine New York State counties of Greater New York, namely: Suffolk, Nassau, Queens, Kings (Brooklyn), Richmond (Staten Island), New York (Manhattan), the Bronx, Westchester and Rockland. Overall, there were 109,000 households in 1991 with Conservative synagogue membership, according to the New York Jewish Population Survey. The largest numbers were in Queens (25,000) and Manhattan (22,000). Nassau County and Brooklyn also were relative strongholds, with 19,000 and 18,000 Conservative households, respectively. Suffolk, the Bronx, Westchester and Rockland had less than 10,000 (but at

* We thank Dr. Bethamie Horowitz of the UJA-Federation of Greater New York for providing the data sets employed in this case study.

Map 8 The Number of Households with Conservative Synagogue Members in Greater NY, 1991



Key:
- 10,000 to 25,000
- 5,000 to 9,999
- 3,000 to 4,999
- 200 to 2,999
- 0 to 199

Source: The New York Jewish Population Survey, UJA-Federation of Greater N.Y., 1991

least 5,000) Conservative households, and Staten Island had only 2,000.

Map 9 presents the estimated number of households in the nine counties of Greater New York with Orthodox synagogue membership. Comprising an estimated total of 65,000 households in 1991, almost half of these were in Brooklyn (32,000). Queens with 10,000 Orthodox households and Manhattan with 9,000 were also Orthodox strongholds. Nassau, the Bronx, and Rockland had fewer than 5,000 but more than 3,000 Orthodox households. Two thousand lived in Westchester, 1,000 in Staten Island, and in Suffolk County there were only a few Orthodox households.

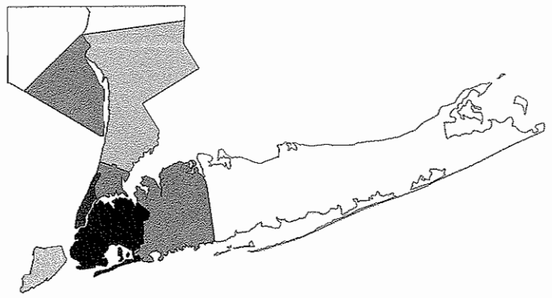
By contrast, there were were 71,000 Reform households in Greater New York with synagogue membership. The largest numbers were in Manhattan (19,000) and Nassau County (15,000). Brooklyn and Westchester each had about 9,000 Reform households in 1991; Suffolk had 6,000 and Queens had 5,000. In Rockland and the Bronx there were between 3,000-5,000 Reform households, and about 1,000 in Staten Island. (See Map 10.)

Synagogue Membership in Florida: A Case Study**

The character of larger Jewish communities in Florida is entirely different from the Greater New York area. Significantly, each large community in Florida has a distinct profile: in Palm Beach County senior citizens predominate, whereas in the smaller communities of the Orlando area there

** Professor Ira Sheskin graciously provided us with the data sets from his extensive and on-going research on Florida Jewry.

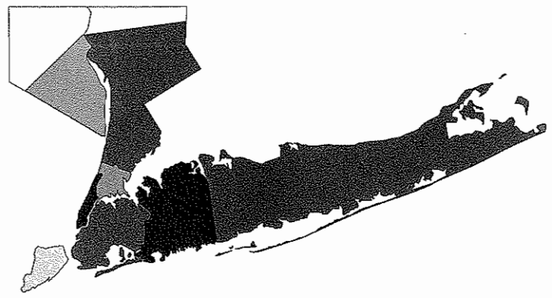
Map 9 The Number of Households with Orthodox Synagogue Membership in Greater New York, 1991



Key: 10,000 to 32,000 | 5,000 to 9,999 | 3,000 to 4,999 | 200 to 2,999 | 0 to 199

Source: The New York Jewish Population Survey, UJA-Federation of Greater N.Y., 1991

Map 10 The Number of Households with Reform Synagogue Membership in Greater New York, 1991



Key: 10,000 to 20,000 | 5,000 to 9,999 | 3,000 to 4,999 | 200 to 2,999 | 0 to 199

Source: The New York Jewish Population Survey, UJA-Federation of Greater N.Y., 1991

are mainly younger people. The Jewish communities differ also in their rootedness, from Palm Beach, where "snowbirds" report that they belong to synagogues in the North, to Orlando, St. Petersburg, and Miami, where the vast majority of synagogue members are affiliated with local congregations.

Using data from studies of several Florida communities on synagogue and denominational identification, we traced patterns of household synagogue membership. (We assumed that people join a synagogue which conforms with their denominational preference.)

Dade County, 1982 and 1994

The most southern county —Dade— contained an estimated 98,650 Jewish households in 1982 and 74,500 Jewish households in 1994. In both periods, about 37 percent of these households belonged to a synagogue. Looking at Chart 1, we find that the share and the number of Conservative households with members over 65 years old were declining between 1982 and 1994. This picture reflects changes in an aging society. (As old members die, younger families are needed to fill in to assure continuity.) Dade County has also had a substantial number of Orthodox families, both young and old. Altogether they consisted of about 16 percent of all households with a synagogue membership.

Southern Broward County, 1990 and 1997

The number of Jewish households in southern Broward County has hardly changed between 1990 and 1997. It rose from an estimated 39,000 to 40,000 households in 1997. Synagogue membership rose from 27 percent in 1990 to 29 percent in 1997. The pattern delineated in Chart 2 suggests that the Reform movement is getting younger. Both in 1990 and 1997 Conservative congregants constituted about half of the households with synagogue membership.

Palm Beach County, West (1987) and South (1995)

A historical comparison is somewhat more difficult when we compare western Palm Beach County in 1987 with southern Palm Beach County in 1995. In 1987 the western Palm Beach Jewish community consisted of an estimated 38,500 households, 41 percent of which had synagogue membership. In 1995 the southern Palm Beach Jewish community consisted of an estimated 61,300 households, 36 percent of which belonged to a synagogue.

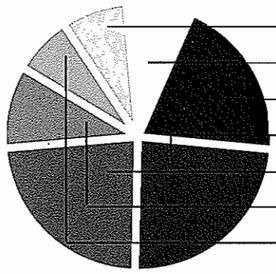
Both the western and southern sectors of Palm Beach County had a large Conservative constituency—over half of the households with synagogue membership. In both areas people over 65 made up a large majority of the Conservative Jewish membership: over 80 percent in southern Palm Beach County in 1995. In southern Palm Beach County in 1995 there were a substantial number of households with older (65 and over) Orthodox members. (See Chart 3)

Many residents in Florida spend part of the year in northern areas; and quite a number of these belong to synagogues in northern communities. This phenomenon was particularly evident in South Palm Beach (1995) where only 50 percent who said they belonged to a synagogue reported local synagogue membership; in West Palm Beach (1987) 63 percent

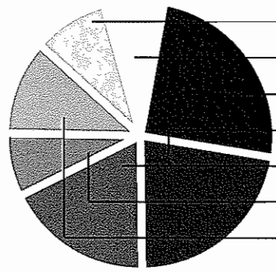
claimed local synagogue membership and in Broward County 70 percent. On the other hand, 87 percent of Miami's synagogue members belonged to a local congregation.

There is still much to be done before the geography of Conservative Judaism is fully mapped. This essay has illustrated the evolving nature of that map, which is still in flux due to accelerated patterns of mobility. Upon closer examination, it is evident that patterns of concentration differ not only from one region to the next, but even within specific communities. By paying close attention to variations from one community to the next, it is possible to discern patterns among adherents of Conservative Judaism that are invisible at the national level.

Chart 1 Households with Synagogue Membership (Dade County)

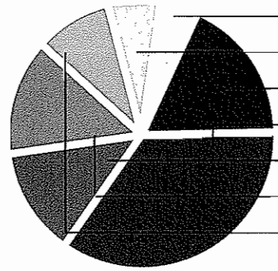


1982, Total 37,388

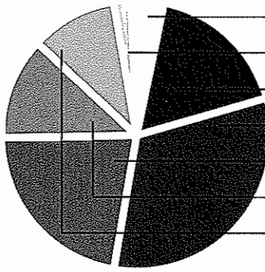


1994, Total 27,267

Chart 2 Households with Synagogue Membership (South Broward County)

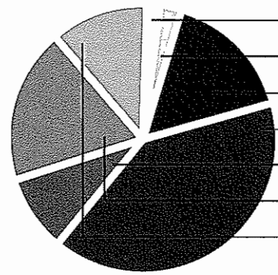


1990, Total 10,686

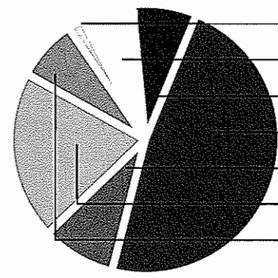


1997, Total 11,560

Chart 3 Households with Synagogue Membership (Palm Beach County)



1987, Total 15,631



1995, Total 22,313

MY HERO: INSIGHTS INTO JEWISH EDUCATION

Barry A. Kosmin

Can you name two people, alive or dead, that you consider to be Jewish heroes? The answers provided by Conservative teens to this question offer rare insight into the success of Jewish religious education. They reveal much about the knowledge students take out of the classroom and what significance they attach to it. The question actually illuminates how young people process a curriculum.

Until now, we have had little sophisticated information evaluating Jewish religious education. Though such education has two goals—to transfer knowledge and skills, and to socialize students to think and behave within a Jewish framework— recent studies have focused on socialization alone. Any appraisal of student knowledge levels has been strikingly absent. Even the socialization information has been limited at best. For example, in the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, the evaluation of different forms of Jewish education became a crude measure of the intermarriage rates of the graduates.

The survey of the b'nai and b'not mitzvah class of 5755 is the first realistic and penetrating assessment of the impact of different types of Jewish education. By asking young people about Jewish heroes, the survey evaluates both their socialization and their knowledge.

The results, analyzed below, reveal the success of Conservative religious education at every level: day school and supplementary school students share an attachment to Jewish values and a firm level of knowledge. The survey also pinpoints several areas needing attention.

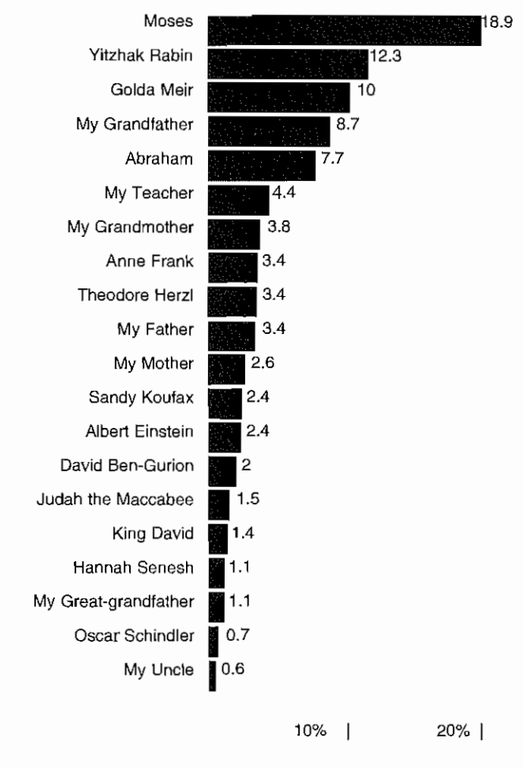
Facts and Figures

The study included 1429 young people who were asked to name their heroes about halfway through a fifteen minute telephone interview. They responded with 1,996 recognizable heroes, and the top 20 selections are featured in Table 1. Eighty-three percent, or 1,182 students, offered at least one hero. Fifty-seven percent, or 814, named two heroes. A handful of students refused to answer while 15 stated they had no Jewish heroes.

Our Heroes

Students certainly agree about who belongs on the list — the top twenty figures account for nearly 92 percent of all the choices made. With only two exceptions, they are culled from four general areas: the Bible, the State of Israel, the Shoah and respondents' families. The two exceptions are respondents' teachers and the American baseball legend Sandy Koufax, who refused to play in the World Series on Yom Kippur. (We did not count Judah the Maccabee as an exception, although strictly speaking, he is a non-biblical figure for Jews.) One hero who made the list, Oscar Schindler, is technically misplaced — he is a hero for Jews rather than a Jewish hero. (See Chart 1)

Chart 1 **Top Twenty Heroes**



Source: Bar/Bat Mitzvah Study

Measuring Success — Who's In and Who's Out

Now that we know who the heroes are, what do these answers reveal about the success of religious education generally and about Conservative Jewish religious education in particular?

For starters, all of the heroes chosen, apart from Oscar Schindler, reflect the themes of contemporary American Judaism, and particularly Conservative Judaism. Heroes are selected from the Bible, Israel, the Shoah and family. Along with reverence for teachers, they are all included in basic bar/bat mitzvah curriculum guidelines. A nearly obligatory exercise in genealogy may account for the heavy emphasis on family in this survey.

The inclusion of the teacher in the panoply of heroes reflects an important Jewish value that is taught. Our tradition and texts abound in veneration of teachers. Moses, the number one choice of these young people, is commonly referred to as "Moses our teacher." From this survey, we can begin to postulate that this principle is being deeply ingrained in the value systems of these young people.

Recognizing who is absent from the list also offers a measure of success. What can we learn from the figures who were not selected? Celebrities, entertainers and media personalities like Jerry Seinfeld are strikingly absent. While such responses might have revealed a focus on popular culture and popular values, their absence reflects that these students have developed both an attachment to and an understanding of Jewish values.

However, the pool of biblical personalities chosen is narrow, and great figures such as the Hebrew prophets, the matriarchs, King Solomon, Maimonides, Hillel and Rashi fail to appear. This reflects the lack of emphasis in the pre-bar and bat mitzvah curriculum on an intellectual appreciation of Judaism—a bias that must be redressed when these young people grow older.

Very far down the list, receiving only one or two votes are some highly visible contemporary Jewish leaders who are not Conservative, such as the late Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher rebbe, indicating the successful transmission of the philosophy of Conservative Judaism.

Different Education, Same Choices

In order to test whether the type of formal education received affected student choices, the complete list of heroes was divided into general categories and responses were compared. Ninety-one percent of the participants have received five or more years of formal Jewish education. Nine percent are currently in day school; 33 percent attended day school in the past; and 58 percent have attended only synagogue supplementary religious school.

Even a brief glance at Table 1 reveals a startling outcome. There is hardly any difference in the pattern of choices arising from the three types of schooling. Statistical tests endorse this conclusion. There is a slight tendency for day schools to produce more Zionist heroes and fewer teacher heroes, but this trend does not affect the rather unexpected overall finding that differences in types of schooling fail to produce different patterns of Jewish heroes.

Table 1 **The Heroes of Children in Different Types of Schools**

Type of Hero	day school now (199 responses)	past day school (669 responses)	syn. school only (1128 responses)
Family	31 responses 16%	136 responses 21%	258 responses 23%
Bible	61 responses 30%	224 responses 33%	366 responses 32%
Teacher	3 responses 1%	26 responses 4%	59 responses 5%
Arts & Entertainment	1 response --%	12 responses 2%	13 responses 1%
Science	7 responses 4%	8 responses 1%	31 responses 3%
Zionism	81 responses 41%	212 responses 32%	307 responses 27%
Sports	3 responses 1%	15 responses 2%	31 responses 3%
Holocaust	10 responses 5%	34 responses 5%	57 responses 5%
Jewish History	2 responses 1%	2 responses --%	6 responses --%

Where Have All the Female Heroes Gone?

A second striking pattern emerges when we divide the responses in Table 1 by the gender of the heroes chosen. (See Table 2.) More than three out of every four Jewish heroes is male. Every category except the Holocaust has a clear male bias. One reason for this trend could be that students chose their role models according to their own gender—55 percent of the class of 5755 were boys and only 45 percent were girls. This hypothesis is tested in Chart 2.

Moses is the hands-down favorite of the boys, but the girls are more divided. Among boys Moses, in first place, leads Rabin, in second place, by 88 votes. Among girls, Moses leads second-placed Golda Meir by only two votes; exactly the same gap that separates Abraham from Anne Frank. The girls may be searching for women role models comparable to Moses and Abraham, but the options fall short. Moses remains their favorite, but just barely. A perceived lack of Jewish women role models probably accounts for this pattern. Either the students are receiving the message that women in the Bible are not heroes or they are processing them as non-heroes.

The heavy emphasis on heroes from the Holocaust is also

Table 2 **Types of Heroes** (Female Hero)

	day school now (43 responses)	past day school (157 responses)	syn. school only (259 responses)
Family	12 responses 6%	46 responses 7%	89 responses 8%
Bible	1 response --%	3 responses -- %	8 responses --%
Arts/ Entertainment	-- responses --%	-- responses --%	1 response --%
Zionism	21 responses 11%	79 responses 12%	111 responses 10%
Holocaust	9 responses 5%	29 responses 4%	50 responses 5%

Table 2 **Types of Heroes** (Male Hero)

	day school now (156 responses)	past day school (512 responses)	syn. school only (869 responses)
Family	19 responses 10%	90 responses 14%	169 responses 15%
Bible	60 responses 30%	221 responses 33%	358 responses 32%
Arts & Entertainment	1 response --%	12 responses 2%	12 responses 1%
Zionism	60 responses 30%	133 responses 20%	196 responses 17%
Holocaust	1 response --%	5 responses 1%	7 responses --%
Science	7 responses 4%	8 responses 1%	31 responses 3%
Jewish History	2 responses 1%	2 responses --%	6 responses --%
Sports	3 responses 1%	15 responses 2%	31 responses 3%
Teacher	3 responses 1%	26 responses 4%	59 responses 5%

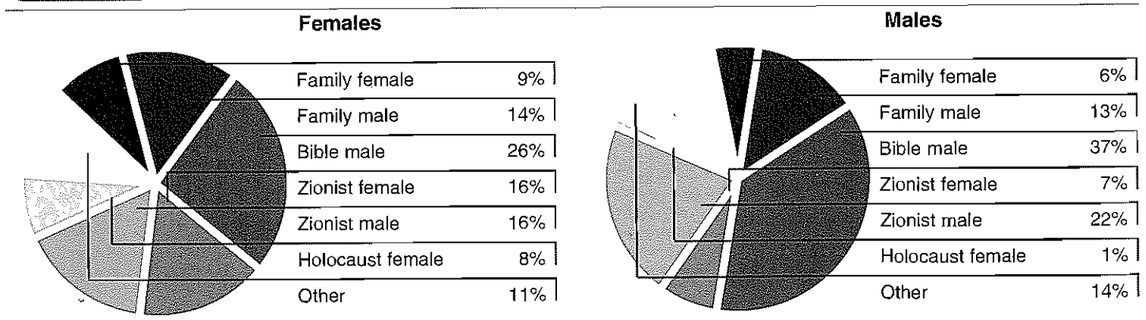
remarkable. The Holocaust as a primary Jewish experience is open to question on any number of grounds, but it is especially problematic when it reinforces the stereotype of Jewish women as victims.

This survey raises an important educational question for the contemporary Conservative movement: How can Conservative educators overcome the present restricted notion of femininity in the educational material it presents to its young people while maintaining integrity to the tradition?

Conclusion

A number of useful general conclusions can be drawn from this exercise. First, during the course of the survey, we found that b'nai mitzvah students were articulate and enthusiastic respondents who appreciated the opportunity to air their opinions and knowledge. Second, their parents also welcomed the serious interest taken in their children's education. Obviously, educators need to engage students and parents in a dialogue if they are to succeed — and we have discovered a medium that accomplishes this goal. This finding in turn suggests that a longitudinal study involving further surveys of this teenage population would be a valuable investment for Jewish educational research.

Chart 2 **Type of Heroes of B'nai and B'not Mitzvah** *Source: Bar/Bat Mitzvah Study*



Religious Beliefs of Teenagers and Their Parents: God Is In, Gender Difference Is Out

Ariela Keysar and Barry A. Kosmin

The first generation of youngsters raised in gender-neutral secular and Jewish religious environments is coming of age. As one group became b'nai and b'not mitzvah, the North Ameriean Survey of Conservative Synagogues and their members of 1995-96 examined the religious attitudes of students and their parents. There is a strong consensus between teenagers and their parents on most religious issues. They share similar attitudes toward Israel, they have close friendships with other Jews in their synagogue, and they have similar religious practices, including attending synagogue and fasting on Yom Kippur. As might be expected, gender-based differences in religious attitudes have declined. More surprisingly, teenagers are far more likely than their parents to believe in God. In fact, there is a generation gap in three basic areas: group relations, expressed through fear of anti-Semitism; religious integrity, particularly in views on intermarriage; and belief in God.

The Data

This project, the first stage in a longitudinal study, explores the attitudes and beliefs of children of similar ages, religious backgrounds and socio-economic levels from different communities in the U.S. and Canada. The information on the bar and bat mitzvah youth was gathered from the youngsters themselves, rather than through parents' reports on their behalf. The data are based on telephone interviews with teenagers and their parents in 1,412 households. Forty-five percent of the teenagers interviewed were female and fifty-five percent were male, suggesting a slight residual bias against female participation in this rite of passage in Conservative Jewish congregations. Sixty percent of the parents surveyed were female and forty percent were male. The larger number of women in the survey is accounted for by the time of calls, which were made mainly in the early evening so that the children would be available; at the time of the calls, more mothers than fathers were at home. In 83 percent of the families both parents were born Jewish, in 12 percent one parent had converted to Judaism and in 5 percent one parent was a Gentile. The original survey was not conducted with the intention of comparing the attitudes of parents and children, but rather to examine each generation separately. Therefore, the questions asked were not always identical in wording, complicating the analysis. Follow-up surveys when students are in high school and college will rectify any discrepancies.

Table 1 **Family Members Interviewed**

	father-son	father-daughter	mother-son	mother-daughter
Number Interviewed	308	237	452	396
Percentage	22%	17%	32%	28%

Source: Bar/Bat Mitzvah Study

Table 1 provides the breakdown of respondents by the gender of the children and their parents. The most common child-parent type is the mother-son grouping, indicating a surplus of boys and mothers in our sample. The least common is the father-daughter grouping, revealing a relative shortage of girls and fathers.

Anti-Semitism/Group Relations

In the younger generation, boys and girls alike are less fearful of anti-Semitism than their parents. We asked parents, "Is anti-Semitism a serious problem in the US today?" and their children, "Do you think that anti-Semitism is a major problem for Jews today in the US?" While 88 percent of the parents agreed, only 68 percent of the students did. Within particular families, the gap was reproduced, particularly among father-daughter pairs. Only 63 percent of them held similar attitudes, compared with 71 percent of the other parent-child types (father or mother and son or daughter interviewed). For this analysis of parents and children, only the U.S. data were used.

Intermarriage: Liberal Children, Traditional Parents

The younger generation is far more liberal and accepting of interfaith marriages than are their parents. When asked, "Do you think it is okay for Jews to marry people of other religions?" 65 percent of teenagers responded positively. However, when their parents were presented with the proposition, "A Jew should marry someone who is also Jewish," 88 percent agreed or strongly agreed. Allowing for one percent of other answers, only about 11 percent of parents openly accept intermarriage.

The Significance of the Parent-Child Type

The large gap between parents and children on the issue of intermarriage is consistent on the aggregate level and within a particular family, revealing that the child-parent type is not an important factor in understanding the gap. Thirty-seven percent of father-daughter pairs were in complete agreement on intermarriage issues compared with 41 percent of mother-son pairs, 43 percent of mother-daughter pairs and 44 percent of father-son pairs.

The Religious Composition of the Family

The religious composition of the family, however, is a significant factor in achieving consensus between the generations. There is consensus on the question of intermarriage in only 32 percent of families in which one parent had converted to Judaism, but there is consensus in 41 percent of families in which both parents were born Jewish and in 51 percent of families in which one parent is not Jewish. The generation gap is the largest, then, on the question of intermarriage, when one of the parents is a convert — a newcomer to the Jewish culture — and smallest when the parents themselves are intermarried. Remarkably, all of the children of intermarried parents believe that it is okay for Jews to marry people of other religions, though their parents are evenly divided. The teenagers seem to justify the choices of their parents by opting for this liberal approach to intermarriage.

Belief in God

When they were asked, "How important is believing in God to your sense of Jewishness?" an overwhelming 78 percent of the b'nai and b'not mitzvah group responded that it is very important. Another 18 percent felt that it is somewhat important. Only a tiny 4 percent claimed it is not important at all. Boys and girls responded similarly.

Their parents responded differently. When asked whether they agree or disagree with the statement, "Belief in God is not central to being a good Jew," only 17 percent strongly disagreed, 37 percent disagreed and a striking 45 percent agreed or strongly agreed.

Mother-daughter pairs disagreed on this issue far more often than any other group, with only 20 percent in agreement. Mothers and sons also disagreed frequently with only 21 percent of them in agreement. Fathers and sons agreed 27 percent of the time, as did fathers and daughters. In the sample as a whole, only 23 percent of parent-child groups completely agreed on the importance of belief in God.

The large generation gap apparent in the responses to this initial question continues through every question in this category. The least religious responses received the smallest percentage of students' answers, but the same responses achieved the greatest level of consensus between the generations.

We asked the students to identify which statement best described their own belief about the Torah: "The Torah is the actual word of God"; "The Torah is the inspired word of God but not everything should be taken literally, word for word"; or " The Torah is an ancient book of history and moral precepts recorded by man." (The three statements conform, respectively, to the theological positions of Orthodoxy, Conservative Judaism and Reform Judaism.) Twenty-eight percent of children who believe that the Torah is an ancient book of history recorded by man were in complete agreement with their parents, while only 22% who believe that the Torah is the actual word of God were in agreement with their parents.

Asked whether all, some or none of the miracles recorded in the Torah are true, almost a third of the children believe that all the miracles recorded in the Torah are true and only 3 percent believe that none is true. The children with the most traditional belief, that all the miracles are true, were far less likely to have complete consensus with their parents on belief in God. In fact only 22 percent of them were in agreement with their parents while 44 percent of those who believe that none of the miracles is true were in complete agreement with their parents on belief in God.

A majority of the children, 59 percent, believe that it is very important to participate in Jewish religious life at the synagogue — but only 21 percent of them were in complete agreement with their parents on belief in God, whereas 42 percent of children who said it is not at all important agreed with their parents.

Turning to the parents, we find that their religious upbringing is closely associated with their views on God. Contrary to what might be expected, the former Orthodox make up the most unbelieving set of parents. Fifty-six percent of parents who switched from Orthodoxy to Conservative Judaism, as compared with 42 percent of those raised in Conservative or Reform Judaism, agreed or strongly agreed that "belief in God is not central to being a good Jew." Having rebelled against their own traditional upbringing, it seems they have also distanced themselves from belief in God. "Immigrants" to the Conservative movement, they express a different religious outlook from that of the "natives" (those who were brought up Conservative), as well as from their own children, who are being socialized in Conservative synagogue settings. Only 15 percent of families with a formerly Orthodox parent had consensus on belief in God. Twenty-three percent of families with parents from the Conservative movement were in complete agreement, and twenty-four percent of families with parents from the Reform movement were in agreement.

What could create such a strong disagreement between the generations on this issue? We can only speculate that perhaps the recent bar and bat mitzvah training and involvement in religious learning has affected the youngsters' ideas about God and distanced them from their parents, or that they may be afraid to admit disbelief to an authority figure, such as the interviewer.

Gender Difference

The elimination of specific gender roles and the abandonment of legal and social constraints on female participation in all aspects of public life has begun to affect gender roles within Judaism. The Conservative Movement has evolved from a traditional model with age-old Jewish gender norms to an egalitarian model of religious participation over the past few decades. This shift has involved both clergy and laity, the ordination of women rabbis and cantors and the full participation of women in synagogue services and religious life. Today, as other parts of the 1995-96 study of Conservative Synagogues and Their Members reveal, the vast majority (80 percent) of synagogues offer boys and girls the same training for their b'nai and b'not mitzvah. We therefore expect the religious attitudes of boys and girls today to be closer than those of their mothers and fathers.

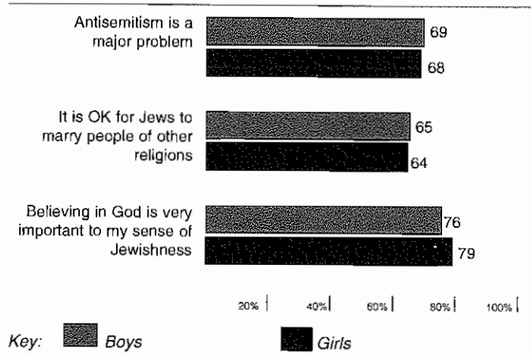
In fact, the consensus between boys and girls on the three issues focused on in this paper is prominent (see Chart 1 and 2). Among their parents, however, there is less agreement across gender, specifically with regard to belief in God. Our data show that mothers are not as likely as fathers to strongly disagree with the statement "Belief in God is not central to being a good Jew." Are mothers less believing than fathers? Or are they less judgmental regarding what it takes to be a good Jew? Further research will help our understanding of this issue. There was no significant difference between the mothers and fathers on the other two issues.

Conclusion: God Is In, Gender Difference Is Out

Clearly bar and bat mitzvah children and their parents are at different moral, intellectual and developmental stages of their lives. Children are generally more religious than adults, some of whom question the power and authority of God and may be doubtful of God's existence based on their memories of the Holocaust. These children in particular are still very close to their bar/bat mitzvah experiences. They are close enough to childhood to be enchanted by biblical stories, inspired by miracles and eager for *tikkun olam;* and too young to question the power and authority of God.

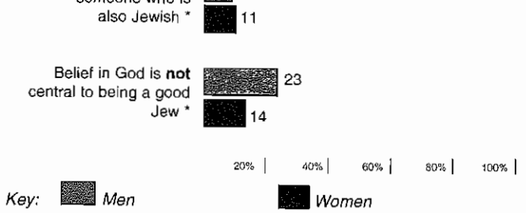
While this survey may indicate a religious revival among the younger generation, we may also find that young people's beliefs become more like their parents' as they grow up. The follow-up stages of our study will shed light on this question. If there is a religious revival, it remains to be seen how this generation's liberal views on intermarriage will affect their own relationships — will they inter-date? One thing, however, is apparent: gender is no longer an important operating principle in the views of our young people. Egalitarianism in the Conservative synagogue is triumphing.

Chart 1 **Bar/Bat Mitzvah Children's Beliefs and Attitudes**



Source: Bar/Bat Mitzvah Study, 1995

Chart 2 **Parents' Beliefs and Attitudes**



Source: Bar/Bat Mitzvah Study, 1995
** Disagree*

Day School Parents in Conservative Synagogues

Steven M. Cohen

Recent years have witnessed substantial increases in Jewish day school enrollment, and there is good reason to expect even more growth over the next decade (DellaPergola and Rebhun 1996). Several communities are planning to open additional schools, including a large number of non-Orthodox high schools. Moreover, enrollment in the lower grades of existing elementary schools is bulging. Barring a large-scale dropout rate as the current lower-grade students advance, many existing schools will continue to experience increasing enrollment.

In all likelihood, the growth in day school education will be most pronounced among families affiliated with Conservative synagogues. Orthodox day school enrollment reached its theoretical peak by the mid-1980s: something on the order of 85 percent or more of Orthodox youngsters attend a yeshiva or day school at some point in their lives. While the Reform movement has opened over a dozen day schools in the last decade, the student populations are, on average, smaller than those at the Solomon Schechter schools of the Conservative movement. In addition, concerns about ghettoization are more pronounced among Reform Jews, while commitment to traditional Jewish living is more widespread among Conservative Jews, making the day school option more appealing to Conservative Jews than to Reform Jews.

The considerable anxiety over the future of North American Jews has focused attention on day schools. Many communal leaders see them as key in strengthening Jewish identity (e.g., North American Commission). Indeed, the small amount of research on the long-range impact of day schools generally points in this direction (e.g., Bock 1976; Cohen 1974, 1988, 1995; Fishman and Goldstein 1993; Himmelfarb 1974; Rimor and Katz 1993). However, hardly any recent research has examined the parents of day school students — among the most recent studies are Kelman (1979 and 1984), and Lasker (1976-77). In light of the recent spurt in enrollment, whatever we may have thought about day school parents may no longer be applicable. An understanding of current day school parents in the Conservative movement can inform several policy objectives, especially expanded recruitment and mobilization of parents to support the day schools' Jewish identity-building agenda. Specifically, how and to what extent do Conservative day school parents differ from their Conservative non-day school counterparts?

In addressing these issues, this paper draws upon the North American Survey of Conservative Jewish Congregations and Their Members of 1995-96. It focuses on 435 parents of six-year-olds to seventeen-year-olds, 170 of whom may be regarded as day school parents, according to the definition below.

Rate of Day School Attendance: As High as 39 Percent?

Asking about the percentage of a population that attends day school is not as simple as it might appear. For youngsters of a given age, we may calculate the *current rate* — the percent who are currently enrolled in day schools. Alternatively, we may calculate the *predominant rate* — the rate for whom day school education is the dominant form of Jewish education. This figure would be higher than the current rate because it would include youngsters who attended day school for several years but are not currently enrolled in day schools. Finally, we may calculate a *cumulative rate*—the proportion of children who have ever attended a Jewish day school.

The survey of Conservative congregations questionnaire, designed with many purposes in mind, can provide information only on the cumulative rate, the highest of all three rates. Respondents were asked various questions about their oldest children, including, "Did this child ever attend a full-time Jewish school (day school)?" Presumably, affirmative answers include youngsters who attended only a pre-school or a kindergarten sponsored by a day school and those who attended day school for only a few years. From the responses of parents of children three to five years old, we know that some respondents answered in terms of Jewish pre-schools. All of these considerations suggest a maximal, if not inflated, estimate of attendance at day schools.

Indeed, of parents whose oldest children were six to seventeen years old, 39 percent claimed that their children had, at some point, attended a Jewish day school. To some observers, this figure may seem high. But keep in mind that we are referring to Conservative congregation members who, as a group, are more involved in Jewish life than any other comparable denominational segment, with the exception of Orthodox congregational members who constitute a mere six percent of American Jewry.

Support for the veracity of the 39 percent figure comes from the 1990 National Jewish Population Study, which contains information about Conservative first-graders (N=22). These youngsters were defined as those who share the following characteristics: they were between six and seven years old; their parents belonged to a synagogue; the synagogue was either Conservative or, if direct information was lacking, the parents identified themselves as Conservative.

Of these twenty-two children, eight (or 36 percent) were enrolled in Jewish day schools. Given that the two studies were fielded five to six years apart, that twenty-two is a small number of cases, and that the survey of Conservative congregations parents may have inadvertently included pre-schools in responding, the two figures (36 percent in the 1990 NJPS and 39 percent in the Conservative congregation survey) are remarkably close. Together they suggest that probably a third or more of Conservative congregants are sending their children to day schools for at least one year.

Among the parents in the Conservative congregation survey, just 11 percent ever went to a day school. So even if 39 percent is a somewhat inflated estimate of day school attendance for children today, we still can say, safely, that day school enrollment among Conservative Jews has probably tripled in a single generation.

For all that it might mean for the future of North American Jews as a whole, the growth in enrollment carries specific meaning for Conservative congregations. Day school families make up increasingly greater proportions of these congregations, attaining the numbers to form sub-communities within congregations. Moreover, as we shall see, they are often among the more active members of their congregations.

The Day School Parent: More Jewish Involvement

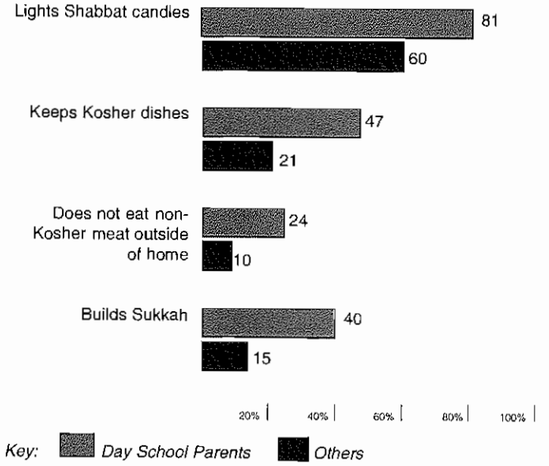
Since those with higher levels of involvement are likely to be more interested in more intensive forms of Jewish education for their children, we would expect day school parents in Conservative synagogues to be more Jewishly involved than others in their congregations. We also would expect day school enrollment to sustain or provoke Jewish involvement through raising children's interest in Judaism and providing parents with a network of more Jewishly involved friends.

But parents have a variety of reasons for enrolling their children in day schools, not all of which are directly related to assuring a quality Jewish education. Some unknown number of parents have been enrolling their children in Jewish day schools for reasons such as social status, community affiliation or interest in high-quality private school education. These parents are not likely to contribute to raising the Jewish involvement profile of the day school population. Insofar as enrollment is expanding, the expansion may be coming from the less Jewishly identified segments of the population, suggesting a parent body that is not particularly distinguished in terms of its Jewish involvement. The extent to which day school parents are more Jewishly involved than others, then, remains to be seen.*

* A methodological note: If, in fact, the survey produced too many "false positives" — respondents who said they were day school parents when in fact they were not — the comparisons below should be artificially reduced or attenuated. In fact, the significant differences between day school parents and others in these data despite the methodological difficulties point to even more dramatic differences in reality.

To be sure, the data presented do point to higher levels of involvement in all areas of practice. With respect to rituals, for example, more than twice as many day school parents as non-day school parents maintain two sets of dishes, refrain from eating meat in non-kosher restaurants, and build a sukkah. However, even though they are more ritually active than the others, day school parents are not entirely exemplars of piety in terms of the teachings of Conservative Judaism or, presumably, the teachings of the day schools their children attend. Almost a fifth of day school parents in Conservative synagogues usually fail to light Sabbath candles, most fail to maintain separate dishes for meat and dairy, and over three quarters eat non-kosher meat when they dine outside the home. (See Chart 1.)

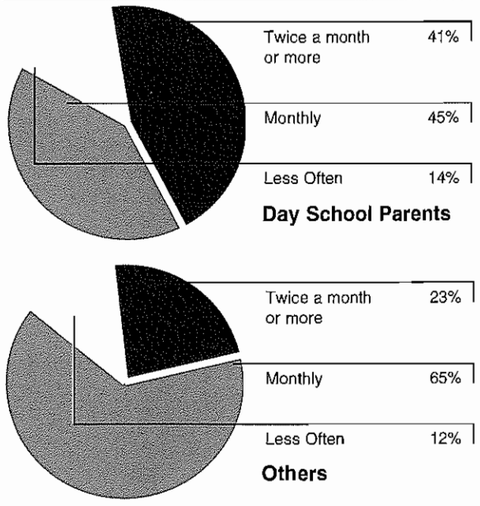
Chart 1 **Ritual Observance among Day School and Non-Day School Parents**



Source: Conservative Membership Study, 1995

In short, day school families are more observant than Hebrew school families, but even using fairly non-rigorous standards, one could not call them, as a group, ritually observant, revealing a dissonance between them and the official norms of the day schools. If through ever-expanding recruitment, day school populations become decreasingly observant, parents may exert greater pressure on schools to reduce hours of instruction in Judaica and/or to soft-pedal the advocacy of religious norms that run counter to the actual behavior patterns of the pupils' families. The pattern of greater Jewish involvement of day school parents extends to synagogue participation. Almost twice as many day school parents claim they attend services at least twice a month as do other parents.

Chart 2 Synagogue Participation of Day School and Non-Day School Parents



Source: Conservative Membership Study, 1995

Table 1 Synagogue Activity of Day School and Non-Day School Families

	Day School Parents	Non-Day School Parents
In the last year...		
Chanted *haftarah*	10	7
Read Torah	15	8
Led services	10	3
Gave *d'var Torah*	8	4
Any of the above	25	14

(See Chart 2.) In addition, we find notable differences in the extent to which day school parents assume liturgical leadership roles that demand some sophistication.

Synagogue Participation

Day school parents are about twice as likely as non-day school parents to take on each of the following roles at some point during the year: chanting the haftarah, chanting the Torah reading, leading services, and giving a d'var Torah or sermon. About a quarter of the day school parents reported having assumed at least one of these roles during the year as compared with 14 percent of non-day school parents. (See Table 1.)

These results suggest that day school parents, in addition to being more active at home, play vital roles in their congregations. In fact, answers to three questions measuring social integration into congregations support this inference. Day school parents were slightly more likely than others to agree that, "Members of my congregation are friendly to newcomers," somewhat more likely to "feel included in the life of my congregation" and substantially more likely to say that, "There's a group of people in my congregation with whom I feel very close." (See Table 2.)

Table 2 Attitudes Towards Congregations

	Day School Parents		Non-Day School Parents	
	Agree Strongly	Agree	Agree Strongly	Agree
Members of my congregation are friendly to new comers	22	57	17	54
I feel included in the life of my congregation	25	52	16	52
There's a group of people in my congregation with whom I feel very close	31	46	19	40

Table 3 Attitudes Regarding Interfaith Weddings and Patrilineal Descent

	Day School Parents		Non-Day School Parents	
	Disagree Strongly	Disagree	Disagree Strongly	Disagree
My Rabbi should be willing to perform intermarriages	36	34	19	33
Anyone who was raised Jewish — even if their mother was Gentile and their father was Jewish — I would regard personally as a Jew	14	19	8	15

Not surprisingly given the patterns above, day school parents are closer to Conservative ideology than others. Two key questions are especially illustrative. When asked whether their rabbis should perform intermarriages, 70 percent of the day school parents objected, compared with just 52 percent of the others. On the subject of patrilineal descent, just 23 percent of non-day school parents would not regard the child of a Jewish father and Gentile mother as a Jew, contrasted with 33 percent of the day school parents. (See Table 3)

Total Jewish Involvement

These attitudes are not at all a matter of happenstance. Day school parents are more deeply embedded in Jewish social networks than others. When asked about the ethnic identification of their closest friends, as many as 40 percent of the day school parents said that all or almost all were Jewish, compared with just 14 percent of the other parents (the proportions with mostly Jewish friends are 81 percent versus 57 percent). Similarly, Jewish day school parents are more likely to be born-Jews married to born-Jews, and less likely to be converts, married to converts or married to Gentiles.

These results represent only a selection of the numerous Jewish identity items found in the Conservative congregations survey. A summary measure that draws on dozens of such items from various areas (ritual, synagogue activity, social ties, leadership, etc.) more sharply reveals the distinction between day school families and others. On the basis of several items, the analysis divided the population into three strata representing high, moderate and low levels of Jewish involvement. Just 14 percent of the day school parents fell into the category of low involvement, compared with 24 percent of the others; 45 percent of the day school parents were in the high involvement strata, where we find just 25 percent of the others. (See Table 4.)

In short, two patterns emerge: 1) day school parents are more active in almost every aspect of Jewish life than others; and 2) not all day school parents are highly active in Jewish life at home or in the synagogue.

Table 4 Total Jewish Involvement

	Day School Parents	Non-Day School Parents
High	45%	25%
Moderate	41	51
Low	14	24
Total	100	100

Does Upbringing Explain the Difference?

How are we to understand the differences between day school parents and others? What is the secret to producing future day school parents? Perhaps the answers can be found in stronger Jewish socialization of parents in their early years or in the Jewish involvement of their parents.

The two groups look almost identical when we examine religious upbringing—i.e. the religion or denomination in which parents were raised—with the one exception noted earlier: fewer day school parents than others come from non-Jewish backgrounds (7 percent versus 12 percent). Of those raised as Jews, the ritual observance levels in the two groups greatly resemble each other — as youngsters, those who would eventually send their children to day schools and those who would not report almost the same sorts of Jewish educational experiences. We find nearly equivalent rates for: monthly synagogue attendance, enrollment in Sunday school and in part-time Jewish schooling, participation in USY and in other youth groups and attendance at Camp Ramah and other Jewish-sponsored camps. (See Table 5.)

The only noticeable difference occurs in the category of day school attendance. Fifteen percent of day school parents attended day school themselves, compared with only 9 percent of the other group of parents. This finding illustrates a general rule in this sort of research: those who participated in a specific sort of Jewish educational experience in their youth are more likely to encourage their children to have the same experience.

Table 5 Childhood Socialization

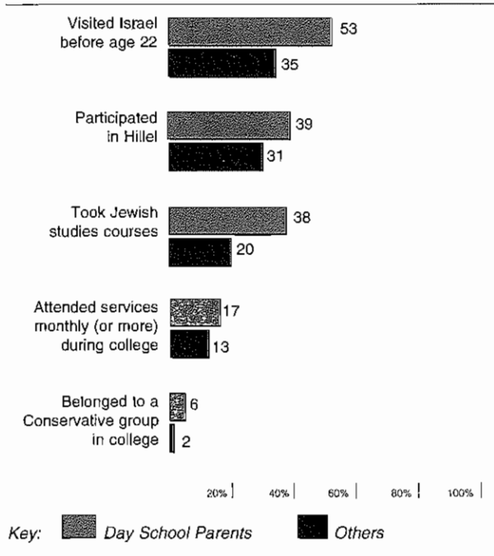
	Day School Parents	Non-Day School Parents
Denomination Raised In		
Conservative	56%	60%
Orthodox	11	12
Reform	17	12
Other Jewish	9	4
Non-Jewish	7	12
Total	100	100
Parents' Rituals		
4-5	17%	20%
3	20	18
2	32	23
0-1	31	40
Total	100	100
As 11-12-year-old, went to services monthly+	54%	52%
Main form of Jewish schooling		
Day school	11%	6%
Part-time	58	59
Sunday	11	16
None	19	19
Total	100	100
Ever Went to...		
Day school	15%	9%
Camp Ramah	8	6
Other Jewish camp	45	43
USY	27	30
Other Jewish youth group	41	39

However, the gap in day school attendance alone does not totally explain why one group of parents chose day school for their youngsters, or why they are so much more Jewishly involved. For reasons unclear from this survey, those who would be day school parents evolved into more involved Jews, in turn raising the chances that they would send their children to day school.

Adolescence and College Years

Reviewing respondents' answers to questions about their adolescent and undergraduate years, we found some differences between the experiences of day school parents-in-the-making and the others. As many as 53 percent of the day school parents had been to Israel before age twenty-two, contrasted with just 35 percent of the others. Day school parents also report slightly higher rates of involvement in Hillel, Conservative college groups and Shabbat services during their college years. The major distinction, though, is in Jewish learning in college. Thirty-eight percent of day school parents took a course in Jewish studies, far out-scoring the others, only 20 percent of whom took such a course. For whatever reason, future day school parents evinced a stronger and wider interest in Jewish learning in their undergraduate years — one that would resurface a decade or two later. (See Chart 3.)

Chart 3 **Jewish Involvements during Adolescence and College Years**



Source: Conservative Membership Study,. 1995

Elsewhere in the survey we find tentative evidence of another influence. The questionnaire asked respondents whether their Jewish involvement had increased, decreased, or stayed the same at various points in their lives. The answers of day school parents and the others were fairly similar for all periods of time except one. Day school parents were much more likely to report increased Jewish involvement when they first married than were non-day school parents. We know from other research that spouses heavily influence each other's Jewish involvement. Therefore, it may be that spousal influence partially accounts for these parents' decisions to send their children to day schools.

In sum, the day school and non-day school parent populations started their Jewish lives in very similar ways. By college they had parted company, perhaps in response to a trip to Israel or a course in Jewish studies (although both of these choices may reflect differences in their earlier Jewish involvement and socialization); they parted company again at marriage.

Although the information regarding how people have evolved into Jewish day school parents is too incomplete to arrive at firm conclusions, it does uncover an area worthy of further investigation.

The Cost Obstacle

Advocates of communal support for day school scholarships have long argued that the cost of day school tuition deters many potential families from enrolling their children. Until recently, no quantitative social science evidence was available to test this argument.

A soon-to-be-published analysis of data collected in a national survey of Jewish parents fielded in 1993 (Cohen forthcoming) uncovered a dip in levels of day school enrollment in the middle income ranges for Jews. Enrollment was 10-15 percent higher at income levels under $40,000 and over $100,000 than at the intermediate levels. This figure suggests that upper- and lower-income families are better able to afford day school tuition because of affluence at one end and scholarships at the other.

Table 6 **Household Income of Members whose Oldest Child Ever Attended Day School**

$150,000+	46%
$100,000-149,999	41%
$75,000-99,999	29%
Under $75,000	37%

The data from the Conservative congregations survey point in the same direction. Day school enrollment is higher among children in households with annual incomes under $75,000 than it is among those with incomes between $75,000 and $99,999 (37 percent versus 29 percent). Thereafter, as income rises, so does the proportion of households with children ever enrolled in day schools, peaking at 46 percent among those with incomes of $150,000 or more. (See Table 6.)

The inescapable conclusion is that tuition costs do, in fact, pose an obstacle for a significant number of potential day school families. Moreover, reducing tuition, or providing scholarships for youngsters from homes that are more affluent than now typically receive financial assistance, could expand enrollment in Conservative Jewish day schools by more than half.

Summary and Implications

Enrollment in Jewish day schools of youngsters whose parents are affiliated with Conservative congregations has dramatically increased, with at least a third spending a year or more in day schools. The numbers are expected to continue to mount in the years ahead, although high tuition has become a serious disincentive for middle income Jewish families.

In examining parents' backgrounds and upbringing for clues to the current increased day school enrollment, we found that parents' own attendance at day schools as children, their experiences during adolescence and college years, such as travel to Israel and participation in Jewish studies classes and other campus activities, and their choices of spouses seem to have a long-term impact on the selection of schools for their children.

On a more sobering note, while day school families are decidedly more active in Jewish life in both the home and the synagogue, only a minority of day school parents affiliated with Conservative congregations measure up to standards of observance and involvement typically set by rabbis and educators. That one-fifth of these households do not even light Shabbat candles is evidence that a significant minority of Conservative day school parents are remote from what most movement leaders would consider active Jewish life. And as enrollment increases, the newcomers likely will be drawn from the less observant families, further lowering the observance profile of day schools and exacerbating the tension between the educators, rabbis and more observant families on the one hand, and the less observant families on the other.

Herein lies the paradoxical implication for policy makers. Lowering tuition costs would almost certainly expand enrollment. However, doing so means opening day schools to even more non-observant parents, further challenging the culture of the day schools. Of course, contending with such paradoxes and making difficult choices, are precisely what Jewish communal policy makers are obliged to do.

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Passing on the Message: Children and Synagogue Life

Samuel C. Heilman

The concern with children, particularly their absorption of Judaism, is one of the essentials of Conservative synagogue life. People often join the synagogue upon the birth of their first child or when that child reaches the earliest age for Jewish education. That education, in turn, is often perceived and presented as a necessary prerequisite for the all-important bar or bat mitzvah rite of passage. If the danger in this approach is that people will come to consider going to the synagogue (and Judaism) as "kid stuff," its promise is that it may also maintain the Jewish engagement of the adults, at least insofar as they are parents and grandparents. Being an active Jew may be a by-product of being an active parent.

The orientation of Judaism and synagogue life around children is even greater in the suburban milieu. People who move to suburbia often claim to have done so for the sake of their children—for example, in order to enroll them in good schools or to provide them with the open spaces of backyards and private homes. In line with these child-centered concerns, synagogues increasingly are expected to assist in the enhancement of child development.

Reflecting this concern, both Kehillath Achim and the Central Synagogue, the Conservative American congregations which I studied for nearly a year and serve as the sources for my paper, spend large resources on their nursery and religious schools. The schools are key vehicles for bringing in new members. Each synagogue devotes a significant part of its physical plant to school facilities and has a large staff. Both synagogues have established "Torah for Tots" programs in which parents and often grandparents as well come—some for the first time in a long time—with their children to be introduced into synagogue life. At Central Synagogue, the rabbi meets regularly with nursery school parents, usually mothers, for a seminar on a Jewish topic. Each synagogue devotes a significant part of its physical plant to its school and its staff.

If the synagogue displays its concern for children in the allocation of resources and programs, parent-members do so not only by sending their offspring to the synagogue but also by becoming Jewishly active and committed to synagogue life.

"We wanted to be involved in our children's nursery school," one young mother explained, accounting for her own growing attachment to the synagogue. This involvement meant attending services on nursery school Shabbat, going on a synagogue family retreat and participating in various holiday events.

Yet from doing things as a parent to doing them for oneself is a short leap. "At first it was as good parents doing this because this is something you do for your child. And then it just woke up something inside of me," said one member.

Some parents resolve that their Jewish involvement will increase as their children move up through the grades: "As my children learn and do more in their Jewish lives, I am sure I shall as well," a young mother reasoned.

"I want my children to have a Jewish education, foundation and base, as does my husband. And in order to give them this involves our coming to shul and participating," said another in the same spirit. "We're both committed shul-goers," explained a third, describing herself and her husband.

"We believe on Shabbat we need to be here for ourselves, and as well because we believe that we need to set an example. And we want our children to see that we need to be here."

Another mother interpreted coming to the synagogue and bringing her children as an expression of her "hope [that] my children will feel comfortable here." A fellow member averred that for her, the synagogue "is simply a place to observe my religion and to teach my children their religion." Still another parent explained her increasing involvement in Judaism as "a constant reminder to my children that they are Jewish."

In short, for many if not all of these synagogue members, Judaism and parenting are inextricably intertwined. The triumph of each is often reflected in the other.

Each family, of course, will make its own judgments about whether or not it has succeeded Jewishly with its children. For many, the ultimate test is what kind of Jewish lives their children lead, whom they marry (if they do) and how they act as parents and adults. Many evaluate their own Jewish lives by measuring how closely their children emulate them.

One member, for example, pointed to her triumph as a Jewish parent by noting that whenever her children come home—from school or from their married lives— they return to the synagogue. Another reported with satisfaction that his children are affiliated with a synagogue where they live and are giving his grandchildren a Jewish education.

Alternatively, some members look at their children and have misgivings and doubts. One reflected on mistakes he may have made in not coming to the synagogue more when his son was young. "Maybe he wouldn't be about to marry a non-Jewish girl if we had come more."

Yet if each individual evaluates his or her own children and Jewish life separately from the community, how can a congregation measure its success? How can the synagogue discover whether or not its children have internalized Judaism and the way of life of the congregation?

Both of these synagogues have devised special public occasions when these questions can be answered, opportunities for their children to demonstrate their relationship with the synagogue, Conservative Judaism and the Jewish people. They are what social anthropologists call "cultural performances"—events enabling members of a cultural community to make "visible, audible and tangible beliefs, ideas, values, sentiments and psychological dispositions that [otherwise] cannot directly be perceived."* They are opportunities for insiders to express what they are at the same time that they reenforce this identity. As anthropologist Clifford Geertz put it, they are opportunities for people to offer not only models *of* what they believe, but also models *for* believing it. "In these plastic dramas men attain their faith as they portray it."**

In what follows I present an ethnographic sketch of two such cultural performances, at which synagogue youth demonstrate that they have gotten the Jewish message. This study represents a kind of religio-cultural report-in-progress on where the next generation is Jewishly.

Let us begin with the following postulate: a good measure of competence and engagement in synagogue life is how the synagogue school and the children prove themselves in public. When both prove themselves, the congregation has also proved itself.

A Synagogue Procession of the Youngest Children

The festival of Sukkot presents a challenge. Occurring just after Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, it may seem past the climax. Often coming on a weekday, it competes with the demands of work and weekday routines, already greatly disturbed during the High Holy Day season. Unlike Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, when almost every member of the synagogue makes an appearance at one service or another, Sukkot appeals primarily to the core congregation, the regular attenders. But Sukkot, according to Jewish tradition, "the time of our joy," is a festival that celebrates Jewish continuity. That continuity is most vividly symbolized on the last day's Simhat Torah celebrations, during which the conclusion of one Torah reading cycle is coupled with the commencement of another in the never-ending Jewish sequence. Much is made of the occasion, a joyful time when parents bring their children to the synagogue, especially in the evening.

But Sukkot is more than the celebration of Simhat Torah. It is a time for building a *sukkah,* a temporary dwelling with a thatched roof from which decorations are hung and in which edibles are consumed in symbolic display of abode. It is also a festival when the four species, the citron, palm branch, myrtle and willow are held during *hakafot* (circuits) around the synagogue — processions that symbolize the endless circle of Jewish life.

At Kehillath Achim, Sukkot has a special meaning. One of the synagogue's veteran members has made it his special duty to teach members how to construct their own *sukkot,* and over the years many have done so with their children. Indeed, for many Kehillath Achim members who would otherwise have little celebration of Sukkot, this *sukkah*-building project has proved to be an important part of synagogue life. It has helped save the festival from the void into which it might otherwise have fallen because of its unfortunate temporal location, one holiday too many in a season overloaded with Jewish celebration.

Generally, though, it is only after families have reached a fairly high level of involvement that they consider building a *sukkah.* Those with a far more tentative connection to synagogue life, often those with the youngest children, need some less demanding, yet no less compelling, activity that will bring them to the synagogue. At Kehillath Achim, that something is a children's *hoshanot* procession.

The *hoshanot* procession is that part of the service during which the four species are held in hand and carried around the sanctuary. According to tradition, only adult men are expected to participate. But at Kehillath Achim, little children lead the procession. On cue, a line of small children with *lulav* and *etrog* in hand entered the sanctuary from the side doors. With the tall palm branches waving in their hands, they looked like a moving forest of sprouts. All around, the adults burst into smiles that grew in proportion to the increasing length of the line. Some were parents and grandparents, who came just to see their offspring. Others were core members of the congregation, happy to see these new Jewish buds, the future of the congregation and the movement. The seemingly endless stream of them pouring through the doors served as a testimony to the continuing growth and vitality of the congregation.

The children were all between five and eight years old. After their dramatic entrance, excited by all the attention it had elicited, they sat down in the front rows and then, the youngest among them spilled over onto the steps of the *bimah* (the front of the sanctuary). There they were, literally at the feet of the rabbi and the congregation, in front of the ark which held the most sacred Torah scrolls. Neither the ark nor the Torah scrolls, but rather the children were now the focus of the proceedings. As the rabbi stood at his pulpit, he began to pose questions, ostensibly to the entire congregation but in such a tone and manner that they were clearly addressed to the children.

What sorts of Jews, he asked, do each of the four species contained in the *lulav* and *etrog* represent? It was a question full of assumptions: 1) that the species could and should be

* Victor Turner, The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), p.450.

** Clifford Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p.114.

understood symbolically; 2) that Jews can be categorized; 3) that some people in the congregation had heard these matters discussed some place and time before and that this would be an opportunity to repeat these lessons in a ritual-like fashion; and 4) that the questions offered some meaning, pleasure, even entertainment that would enhance the festival.

The children answered with great enthusiasm and near total accuracy. In the back, the educational director of the synagogue school, for whom this display of his students' knowledge was a demonstration of accomplishment, seemed to burst with pride. He smiled and cracked jokes with the people around him who offered their approval.

At last, when the festival quiz was over and the children had displayed their knowledge, the rabbi his ability to elicit it, and the congregation their pride and pleasure, the actual *hoshanot* procession began, led by the assistant cantor. In addition to the many children, about twenty-five adults with the four species in hand joined the procession. Clearly, more children than adults were in line. In this congregation, the children are expected to have more than their forbearers. Whether they will continue in this pattern is, of course, the essential question of continuity.

As they all marched around the sanctuary and out into the social hall, the rest of the congregation stood about and chatted. When the procession re-entered the sanctuary, everyone greeted the marchers as they passed. The congregants once again bonded as they celebrated Sukkot, secure, at least for the moment, that they had passed Kehillath Achim Judaism on to the next generation.

A Teen Shabbat

While tots and toddlers represent renewal and the opportunity for congregational continuity, a greater test comes with teens. On the verge of adulthood, they are past their all-important bar or bat mitzvah and now may be tempted to embrace identities other than Judaism. Attracting the teens to the synagogue presents a quandary for the core members. Without the incentive of bar or bat mitzvah preparation, they will have to be attracted by an acquired attachment to the community, to Judaism, or ideally, to both.

"I will say we are not as successful with continuation for our children and that's a problem," admitted one of the active members of the congregation while talking about those aspects of Kehillath Achim life that concerned her. For many in the congregation, bar and bat mitzvah ceremonies mark the end of synagogue involvement instead of its commencement. Yet at Kehillath Achim, all is not lost. On the contrary, there are teens in the congregation who do appear to display the promise of continuity and commitment to Conservative Judaism that Kehillath Achim wants. At no time is this good news more apparent than on special occasions such as Teen Shabbat.

On this Shabbat, the teens are given an opportunity to run the show in the main sanctuary—as it were, the main arena—instead of remaining out of sight, limited to a small chapel downstairs. It is also a time for the educational director and his staff to demonstrate their success in dealing with the problem of community. Teen Shabbat is therefore considered "the crown of glory," as the educational director put it. It was a crown of glory for him, for the proud parents of the participants, for the congregation and for all those who somehow felt a part of the day.

Moreover, by handing the service in the main sanctuary over to the teens, the congregation demonstrated its belief that, as the president put it, "It is the obligation of each of us to do no less [than our predecessors did] for our own children." And in their performance, the children in turn demonstrated to the congregation that Kehillath Achim has a future—that the current generation has, in fact, succeeded. It is therefore a day of no small consequence.

On this particular teen Shabbat, the main sanctuary was full and an additional section was opened to increase seating capacity. The addition of the teen participants, their parents and other relatives to the core congregation helped fill the room.

As the service proceeded, there were a few no-shows for Torah *aliyot* (among the most minor of honors for they require almost no display of Jewish competence). The rest of the show—and a show it was, a chance for the congregation to shine via its teens—went on smoothly. Among the major ritual tasks the teens were assigned were reading the Torah, leading the services and giving a sermon and a *d'var Torah.* Those who carried out these assignments were the jewels in the crown of glory. Indeed, when the service was over, I was asked by several people in attendance, "So what did you think?" They sought admiration, approbation, approval and even endorsement of what they had displayed. "Kehillath Achim is a special place," one of the women concluded, without waiting for my response.

More teens participated in this service than did normally in the weekly teen minyan. Like their elders, the teens were more likely to come to the synagogue for special occasions than on a regular basis.

In planning today's service, the organizers, especially the educational director whose products are the synagogue school teens, had tried to make it difficult to distinguish between the day school students and the synagogue supplementary school students. And to the uninformed observer, they reached their goal successfully. To the informed observer, however, who knew which honors and ritual tasks require more background and skill than others, the distinctions were pretty clear, as even the cantor admitted in a candid moment.

From early morning, even before most of the congregation had arrived, the teens led the service, offering responsive readings of Psalms and other English prayers, opening the ark, chanting the Torah, receiving aliyot and giving

talks. They replaced the adults who normally filled these roles and at the same time provided yet one more special performance of what they had learned as Jews. Since their kindergarten years, they had been giving such performances at least once a year. But during their lifetime of special Sabbaths, they had for the most part performed at an auxiliary service, or as a brief coda to the main service. Now, they arrived in the main arena, the main sanctuary, where they were crossing the bridge into Kehillath Achim adulthood. That is why this was an occasion of importance not simply for the teens but for the adults as well.

In Kehillath Achim—as indeed in many if not all synagogues like it—there are those who feel comfortable performing ritual in public and those who, either because they lack the requisite knowledge or the self-confidence, prefer assuming lesser tasks or serving as part of the responsive congregation. So too with the teens. Some of them performed more limited tasks or performed in groups—reciting prayers as part of a mini-chorus, a device used since the first grade for those who have a harder time performing alone. Others, often but not exclusively day school students, offered solo acts.

Throughout the service, the rabbi and cantor played subordinate roles. The latter had worked hard to prepare some of the participants. In a way, this service operated a lot like junior congregation. The educational director was still directing things, and parents were still the audience, rooting for their kids to perform well. But this performance was on the congregation's main stage. It encompassed the entire service.

Though errors were made in the Torah reading and prayer pronunciation, they were not corrected. Such details did not appear to matter to the congregation—paying attention to them would mar the celebratory character of the occasion. Still, some participants were quite nervous. One cried. And the girl who chanted the *maftir* portion seemed on the verge of tears. But as a whole, the teens' achievements were cause for communal pride.

Most accessible of all the performances were the speeches. Unlike the Torah reading or prayers, these talks, given in English, could be judged by everyone present. They were reports from the Jewish world of the teens, a chance for the congregation to gauge precisely what their offspring had received in terms of Jewish training and outlook. The speakers became collective representations of Kehillath Achim youth. As such, each speaker was, as Emile Durkheim put it, someone who stands for the group, "who transcends himself, both when he thinks and when he acts."*

The two major speeches were given by graduates of a local Conservative Schechter day school who were now attending a yeshiva high school that served a mixed Orthodox and non-Orthodox community. They were the religious elite of the teen population, whose parents had made a sustained commitment to intensive Jewish education beyond bar/bat mitzvah age.

These speeches were more than one-shot performances. They articulated publicly the meaning of committed Conservative Jewish identity. Because the high school is under Orthodox auspices and the teachers are Orthodox, what the students revealed in their remarks about Conservative Judaism they learned from their families, congregational life and primary school—not from high school.

The first talk came from a young woman, a high school junior embodying the quintessence of what committed and dedicated Conservative Jews should be able to produce. The experiences of which she spoke in her "Personal Prayer," as the talk was entitled, touched on her identity. Her mother would later say about her performance, "Today, I got my money's worth," meaning, I suppose, that in her daughter's presentation she saw what all her expenditure of money and effort on Jewish education and life had produced. In a sense, the congregation might have echoed these sentiments.

After the end of the *haftarah,* chanted by a different teen, the young woman stepped gingerly to the podium. Around her on the *bimah,* next to the rabbi, the honorary president and the cantor, sat several other teens. Seeing them in these places of honor served as a constant reminder that this was a Sabbath different from all others. Many of these youngsters had sat in these seats only as a bar/bat mitzvah or on teen Sabbaths in previous years.

As she stepped forward, a hush fell over the congregation. All eyes turned toward her. She had seen her father and brother take the podium on Sabbaths past; now at last it was her turn. Blond and blue-eyed, standing erect, she began in a soft but sure voice.

> Identity? A definition? To actually be someone. To maintain certain characteristics that make you a unique individual. While "identity" is not an extraordinary word in the English language, it is, I would venture to say, a word with which many adolescents my age cannot relate. The question is, Why? Why do so many youths have a problem finding their identities?
>
> High school is a time of inner struggle. Speaking from personal experience, my struggle was intensified when I was forced to begin the search for my role as a member of the Jewish society alongside the secular one. For thirteen years I had been raised in a Conservative household. I knew no other aspects of Judaism other than what I had been living. Then, in September of my freshman year, I began to attend an Orthodox yeshiva. I was faced with a new life style, one that I had never before explored. The first few months of that year were strange for me. I was taught to pray differently, dress

* Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life.*

differently and open my mind to new possibilities. And this is where my inner conflict began.

Throughout that year, I was in school from seven fifty in the morning until five o'clock in the evening. I barely had time to sit and talk with my family, let alone think about my new experiences. Yet as the months continued, I realized it was time to open my eyes. I needed to sit down and think about the dramatic changes I was going through. I remember one day I spent an entire morning in my rebbe's office, crying. I was so confused and did not know how to deal with my frustration. I felt as though I was living inconsistently. For nearly nine hours every day, I would go to school to learn and act like an Orthodox Jew. However, when I would return home at the end of the day, I had to switch gears once again and resume my usual life style. As I utilized an entire box of tissues, I told my rebbe about this conflict I was facing. And the entire time I spoke, he just sat there, listening, with a subtle smile stretched across his face. Then he began to speak, and the words that followed were ones that will remain with me for the rest of my life. "Elisheva," he said, "nothing is wrong with you. In fact this is a very good thing. You have shown me that you are thinking, something most kids your age do not know how to do."

I heard these words yet I had no response.

I spent the next couple of weeks thinking about what my rebbe said, his voice ringing in my ears. I never did come up with any definite answers to the problems I was facing. Even now, almost three years later, I often stop to think about what I am doing.

Everyone wants to have an identity. Feeling lost can be a very scary thing. And I know that while things may be hard for me now, they do not become easier next year when I leave home. Without anyone telling me how to observe Judaism, I am not sure which path I will choose to follow. Yet throughout all of my grappling, I have learned one thing. That is, for right now, I do not need to have a label. As long as I continue the search for my identity as a Jew in society, I am well on my way. As my rebbe said to me, I have begun to think, and sometimes that is what is most important.

There are several important themes expressed here. First, this is an opportunity for the teen to reveal herself publicly to her community—to share a dilemma that may ultimately put her at odds with either or both of her identities. Can she accept inconsistency? That she should choose to make the conflict public at Kehillath Achim demonstrates the communal aspect of the congregation—it is a place where the young feel comfortable baring their souls.

Second, her quandary — how to differentiate herself as a serious Conservative Jew — is shared by many members of the core congregation. She has simply articulated the essential dualism of the culture in which she was nurtured. The attentiveness of the congregation suggests that they shared her feelings, ideas and ideological issues.

And finally, while her predicament was complicated by the conflict between her daily Orthodox education and the Conservative life style of her synagogue, she found the right response. She presented herself as a serious Jew, not doing what she does by rote. Her choices, she suggests, are thoughtful Jewish choices, and these she implies are the ideal, along with the Jewish commitments that accompany this thinking.

For active Conservative Jews, thoughtfulness and seriousness along with knowledge and commitment, are the hallmark of Conservative Judaism. In this movement, the speaker seems to be telling her audience, in an ethos she has at least partially gained from the very congregation she addresses, the key is to think, not just to do. To make decisions on one's own is what she expects of her Jewish identity. And though she is a Conservative Jew (albeit one who is not yet certain "which path I will choose to follow"), her teacher's assurance that "there is nothing wrong with you" may be for her (and her audience) a kind of legitimation (even by the Orthodox) of her "usual lifestyle," the Conservative one.

Conclusion

When the service was over, the audience was genuinely touched. The children had shined. These teenagers were proof that there would be a Conservative synagogue tomorrow. For those with younger children, the teens represented something their own children could aspire to become. The performing toddlers and teens made public the culture being transmitted, revealing how successful the transmission had been. They expressed feelings, ideas and ideology in ways that the adults could not. The children were a barometer of synagogue life and a symbol of its success.

As one member said with obvious pride, "Isn't this something?"

The Conversion Illusion

Steven M. Cohen

The rise in intermarriage over the years (Kosmin, et al. 1991; Cohen 1994; Phillips 1997) has brought with it a rise in conversion to Judaism. Although a few born-Gentiles convert to Judaism on their own, the vast majority of converts become Jewish in connection with marriage to born-Jewish spouses. In this sense, out-marriage leads to more conversions.

For good reason, converts have been seen as partially offsetting some of the deleterious consequences of intermarriage. Over time, intermarriage shrinks the Jewish population; converts clearly add to the population. When ten born-Jews marry each other, they create only five Jewish families; when they marry converts, they create ten such families. From a purely demographic point of view, therefore, conversionary marriages (the union of one born-Jew with one convert) are positive.

Mixed marriage (the union of a Jew with a non-converting Gentile) is associated with lower levels of Jewish involvement of all sorts (Medding et al., 1992). For reasons having to do with both upbringing and current marital situation, Jews in mixed marriages report lower levels of engagement in almost all available measures of Jewish identity. However, conversionary marriages seem to be associated with above average levels of religious practice, even exceeding families headed by two in-married born-Jews (e.g., Winer et al., 1987: 96). To be sure, some research has pointed to lower levels of what some call the ethnic side of Judaism (Huberman 1979; Mayer and Avgar 1987; Winer et al, 1987). Notwithstanding this qualification, the research portrays converts as committed, if not more committed, to Jewish life than are born-Jews.

The considerable differences between conversionary households and those headed by an interfaith couple are so pronounced that some have called for major efforts to promote conversion. Gary Tobin, one of the clearest voices on this matter, writes:

> Rabbis need to be active promoters of conversion. With their passionate belief in Judaism, they need to encourage individuals to become part of the Jewish faith...[S]tandards and challenges should be put forward as desirable goals, not obstacles to be overcome. Individuals should not have to prove that they are interested in Judaism in order to receive encouragement from a rabbi about the possibility of being Jewish. (Forthcoming: 171).

A few pages later, Tobin's enthusiasm for conversion is even more manifest:

> There is no intermarriage problem. There is a failure to adjust to denominational switching and the dilemmas that choice imposes. Other religions have aggressive, charismatic clergy and laity attempting to bring in converts and adherents. Judaism can do no less. (Forthcoming: 177).

If, in fact, converts function Jewishly as well as born-Jews, or even nearly as well, then a policy of promoting conversion makes eminent sense. If, however, converts fail to "deliver the goods" — if conversionary marriages fail to produce nearly as much involvement in Jewish life for themselves and, eventually, for their children — then, of course, advocating conversion becomes less desirable.

Indeed, other voices have questioned the cultural and demographic value of converts to the Jewish population. Commenting on a study of Reform Jewish lay leaders (Winer et al, 1987) which reported extensively on converts and their spouses, Jonathan Sarna expresses some grave anxieties. He refers to "the tendency of converts to subordinate the ethnic aspects of their Judaism." Elaborating on this theme he says of converts:

> They are more diffident about Kelal Yisrael in general, particularly the idea that Jews should extend special help to fellow Jews in need. And their support of Israel is, statistically speaking, much lower than that of born Jews. (1990:5).

He is, it seems, even more troubled by their attitudes toward intermarriage:

> In the Reform leadership study, more than 50 percent of the converts responding — leaders, I remind you — would not even be bothered a great deal if their children *converted to Christianity!* [Sarna's italics] There is here a world of difference between converts and born Jews, and one that augurs very badly indeed for our future. (1990: 7).

The findings he cites, with their implications for high intermarriage rates among children of conversionary couples, leads Sarna to raise the specter of "one-generation Jews-Jews with non-Jewish parents and non-Jewish children." (1990: 7).

Clearly, Tobin and Sarna articulate fundamentally different views of converts, their families and their prospects for contributing demographically to American Jewry. Their differences can be encapsulated in a few pointed questions: To what extent and in what ways are converts and their spouses different from in-married born-Jews? Do these differences point to strength and resiliency in conversionary families' attachment to Judaism and the Jewish people, or do they point in the opposite direction?

The Data

Data from the North American Survey of Conservative Synagogues and Their Members of 1995-96 (Wertheimer 1996; Cohen forthcoming) are well-suited to answer these questions, at least with respect to Conservative congregation members. The data contain sufficient numbers of cases to distinguish among four groups of respondents: 1) born-Jews married to non-Jews; 2) converts (all of whom in this sample were married to born-Jews); 3) born-Jews married to converts; and 4) in-married born-Jews. (To assure comparability of all four groups, the non-married were dropped from the analysis.

The nature of this sample — married members of Conservative synagogues — means that relative to the Jewish population at large, these are among the more active and involved Jews in North America. As a general rule, the minority who are synagogue members are more active than non-members. Among synagogue members, on most measures of Jewish involvement, Conservative congregants fall between their Orthodox and Reform counterparts, seoring mostly in the top quarter of American Jewry on a variety of measures of Jewish involvement. Therefore, relative to their counterparts among American Jews, all four groups under scrutiny are more Jewishly active; however of the four, the mixed married are the closest to their counterparts in the larger American Jewish population.

Since the converts in Conservative synagogues are among the most Jewishly identified converts, any sign of relative strength in their Jewish identity ought to be greeted with caution and not immediately generalized to the entire population of converts in the U.S. and Canada. On the other hand, signs of relative weakness need to be taken seriously. For if converts who are Conservative congregants evince such signs, *a fortiori* (or, in Talmudic terms, *kal v'khomer)*, most other converts probably harbor such weaknesses.

Converting Wives, Older In-Marrieds

We begin with some basic demographic background: sex and age distribution. The mixed married and in-married are fairly evenly divided between men and women. However, almost three quarters of the converts are women, and almost exactly the same proportion of born-Jews married to converts are men. In other words, when out-marriage (union of a born- Jew with a born-Gentile) results in conversion to Judaism, almost three out of four of the conversions will be undertaken by wives. (See Table 1.)

Table 1 The Membership Population in Different Types of Marriages

	Mixed Marriages (Jews Married to Non-Jews)	Converts Married to Jews	Born Jews Married to Converts	In-Married (Born-Jews + Born-Jews)
% Male	47	28	74	48
Age				
60+	15	13	14	35
40-59	63	63	58	49
Under 40	23	24	29	17
N=	75	76	104	1,001

Intermarriage and conversionary marriage have climbed only recently in American Jewish history, growing most significantly between 1960 and 1975. It should come, therefore, as no surprise that the in-married are considerably older than the other three groups. While 35 percent of the in-married are sixty or over, no more than 14 percent of each of the other three groups are as old.

Ritual Observance: Lower Among the Mixed Married

The mixed married generally report lower levels of ritual observance (Medding et al., 1992). We might expect this pattern to exist among Conservative synagogue members as well. Alternatively, that these mixed married couples have taken the unusual step of joining a Conservative congregation means that they might approach or adopt the relatively higher levels of observance found in such congregations.

In fact, the mixed married, to varying degrees, trail the other three groups in all measures of observance. Fewer than half light Shabbat candles and only a handful observe *kashrut* or build a *sukkah.* The most striking difference is in using two sets of dishes at home for meat and dairy: 6 percent among the mixed married versus 32 percent among the in-married born Jews. (See Chart 1.)

Both sorts of spouses in conversionary families (the converts and the born-Jews) report only minor differences in ritual observance between each other and in comparison with in-married born-Jews. The differences among all these groups are small and inconsistent. However, the conversionary families are more observant of three of the five practices than the in-married born-Jews. Among the spouses in conversionary homes, the born-Jews keep kosher considerably more often and the converts build a sukkah more than the born-Jews do.

Except for the finding of lower observance levels among the mixed married, the significance of the results here is not entirely clear. Perhaps of greatest importance is that the data do not point to unusually high rates of ritual practice among converts as has been reported by other studies.

Service Participation: Converts Trail, Their Spouses Lead

With respect to involvement in synagogue services, the results are unmistakable: converts trail all other groups. On three of the four available measures, even the mixed married are more involved than the converts. Just 22 percent of the converts attend services at least twice a month, compared with 34 percent of their spouses. The other two groups fall in between. Over the prior year, just 43 percent of the converts received an aliyah, compared with 64 percent of their spouses and just over half of the mixed married and the in-marrieds.

One might think that converts fail to participate because they feel unwelcome in synagogue. Indeed, some researchers have argued that perceptions of an unwelcoming community constitute a major obstacle to the involvement of converts and mixed married Jews in communal life. In contrast with this line of thinking, the converts who have joined congregations with their spouses feel just as included and welcome as do in-married Jews. In fact, this generalization extends to the mixed married as well. On three questions measuring perceptions of feeling welcome and included, all four groups of respondents reported approximately the same high levels of satisfaction with their relationships with their congregations.

However, the data hint at why the converts trail all the others in service attendance. They are much less likely than all the others, including the mixed married, to be able to read the prayer book in Hebrew (47 percent of the converts versus 81 percent of the mixed married and 89 percent of the converts' spouses). In addition, the survey asked questions about participation over the last year in some liturgical activities demanding a degree of sophistication (e.g. chanting the Torah reading). The mixed married and the converts reported lower frequencies (11 percent and 13 percent) of having performed these activities than did the converts' spouses (25 percent) or the in-married (19 percent).

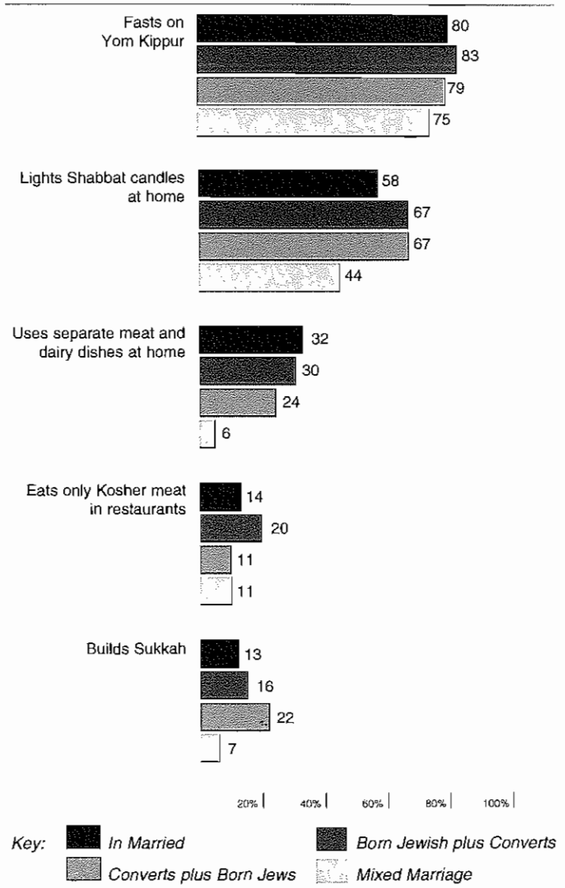
The relatively low levels of participation by converts in worship services, measured by attending synagogue, accepting honors or undertaking leadership roles, is even more striking given the high rate of activity among their spouses. Indeed, the born-Jewish spouses of converts are the most active of the four groups, out-scoring even the in-married born- Jews.

How can we explain the high rate of synagogue involvement on the part of born-Jews married to converts? One possibility is that they are striving to overcome the real or imputed stigma attached to marrying a convert. Their "surplus" synagogue activity is a way of securing acceptance in the Jewish community.

Another explanation lies in their level of involvement in Jewish activities prior to marriage. As the table below reports, born-Jews married to converts report the highest level of Jewish involvement in adolescent and undergraduate years. They exceed the in-married born-Jews on several measures: monthly synagogue attendance at age 11-12 (67 percent versus 46 percent), participation in USY (41 percent versus 20 percent), summer experience at Camp Ramah (10 percent versus 6 percent), and youth travel to Israel (35 percent versus 21 percent). (See Chart 2.)

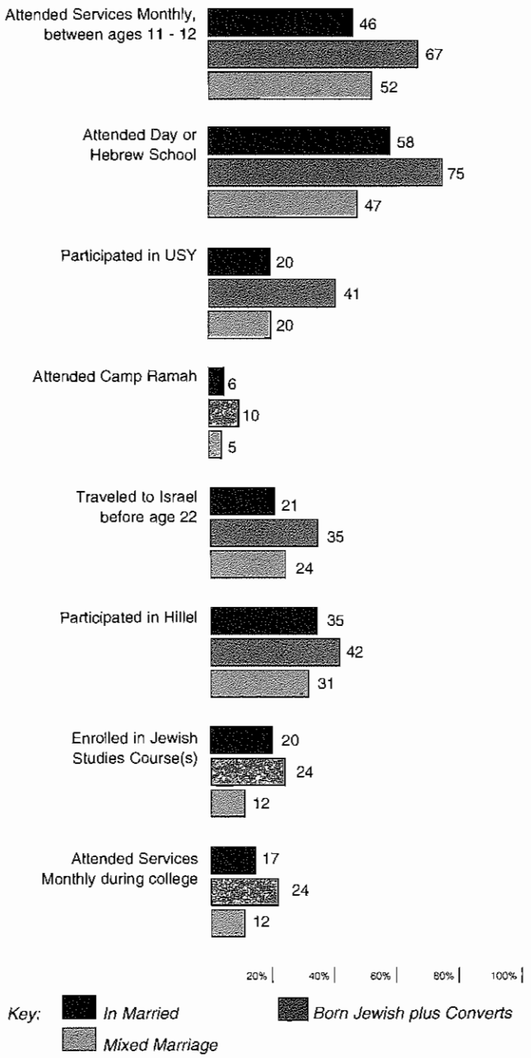
What are we to make of this phenomenon? Rabbis who have observed mixed-faith engaged couples and some social scientists have made the reasonable claim that born-Gentile partners of Jewishly involved individuals are more likely than others to convert. Involved Jews may more readily ask their partners to convert. The importance they attach to being Jewish

Chart 1 Ritual Observances in Different Types of Households



Source: Conservative Membership Study, 1995

Chart 2 **Past Jewish Involvements and Current Marital Status**



Source: Conservative Membership Study, 1995

may prompt the Gentile partner to want to do so. The parents, family and friends of more Jewishly involved partners constitute a social network that may elevate the chances of conversion. If, indeed, it is the partners of involved Jews who are the most likely to convert, then we can surmise that the higher rate of Jewish involvement of the born- Jewish spouses of converts flows from born-Jews' higher rate of involvement before marriage.

But we also begin to understand a critical methodological issue. Some previous studies of conversionary families, hampered by small case size, have been compelled to join converts together with their born-Jewish spouses for purposes of analysis (the last table in this paper, in fact, follows this procedure). But collapsing the two columns has the unfortunate effect of masking differences between the less involved converts and their more involved born-Jewish spouses. This procedure may have led to the inference that converts are more Jewishly involved than in-married born Jews, a conclusion that is unwarranted, at least with respect to those who join Conservative congregations.

Ethnic Measures: Everyone Trails In-Married Born-Jews

Our survey of synagogue members contains a limited number of questions in areas that fall under the rubric of ethnic Jewish identity: visiting Israel, close friendships with other Jews, and attitudes toward rabbinic officiation at mixed marriages. With respect to visiting Israel, the converts trail all the others, even the mixed married and their own spouses. Of all the groups, in-married born-Jews have traveled to Israel the most frequently.

As many as 80 percent of in-married born Jews report that most of their close friends are Jewish. Among conversionary families, about half make such a claim (with little difference between the spouses), while just a quarter of the mixed married report mostly Jewish close friends. With respect to the proportion of close friends in the congregation, the ordering is similar. Again, the in-married born Jews lead (30 percent) with the mixed married far behind (13 percent), and the conversionary families in between. From any perspective, then, converts and their spouses report that they are substantially less embedded in Jewish social circles.

Finally, while only a quarter of in-married Jews favor rabbinic officiation at intermarriages, as do slightly fewer born-Jews married to converts, support for officiation climbs to 37 percent among the converts themselves, many of whom fail to share their own spouses' opposition to outright mixed marriage. Not surprisingly, most of the mixed married (53 percent) support officiation. So, with respect to officiation, the converts stand roughly midway between the mixed married and the born-Jews married to converts or other born-Jews. In short, these indicators point to the relative weakness of the ethnic dimension of Judaism in conversionary families, at least in comparison with in-married born-Jews. (See Table 2.)

Converts: More Religious, Less Committed to Being Jewish

Previous research has noted that converts appear more religious than born-Jews. Anecdotal accounts report their relatively high levels of interest in spirituality and the religious dimension of

Table 2 **Ethnic Identification in Different Types of Marriages**

	Mixed Marriages (Jews Married to Non-Jews)	Converts Married to Jews	Born Jews Married to Converts	In-Married (Born-Jews + Born-Jews)
Visited Israel once more	49	42	64	67
Visited Israel twice more	24	22	31	40
Most close friends are Jewish	26	44	51	80
Most close friends in congregation	13	24	20	30
Rabbi should perform intermarriages	53	37	22	25

being Jewish. Responses to several questions in the survey pertaining to the purely religious dimension of Jewish identity conform to the previous research.

With respect to belief in God, converts out-score both their spouses and in-married born-Jews on three different questions. Professions of definite faith in God come more frequently from them than from the other groups. In this respect, they are matched only by the mixed married Jews, who profess faith in God more often than in-married Jews, even though the mixed married are far less active in home ritual observance and synagogue worship. In the sample as a whole, belief in God bears little statistical relationship to level of Jewish practice. Both "agnostic activists" (non-believers who practice) and "inactive pietists" (believers who fail to practice) abound.

Another pair of questions reveals a great deal about the nature of the commitment of the converts to Jewish identity. Respondents were asked to rate both the importance of religion and the importance of being Jewish. Among in-married born-Jews, twice as many said that being Jewish was very important to them than said that religion was very important to them (79 percent versus 39 percent). Nearly identical patterns characterized born-Jews married to converts and, to a lesser extent, mixed married Jews.

The converts, though, break the pattern. Only a small gap separates the percentage for whom religion is very important from the percentage for whom being Jewish is very important (40 percent versus 53 percent). The converts are easily the least likely to claim that being Jewish is very important. These figures are striking both because converts had no difficulty asserting the importance of religion and because they so definitively parted company with their born-Jewish spouses. (See Table 3.)

One factor that helps explain the contrast between converts' weak embrace of the ethnic dimension of Judaism and

Table 3 **Religious Attitudes of Members in Different Types of Marriages**

	Mixed Marriages (Jews Married to Non-Jews)	Converts Married to Jews	Born Jews Married to Converts	In-Married (Born-Jews + Born-Jews)
God definitely exists	59	61	56	54
God rewards good deeds	20	20	12	17
God answers my prayers	27	27	11	14
Religion very important to me	44	40	38	39
Being Jewish very important	71	53	77	79

their strong embrace of its purely religious dimension is that converts go through what they may regard as a change in religion. The cognitive compartment that their Judaism fills was formerly occupied by another religion. Conversion is a religious process — one supervised by a rabbi, usually involving immersion in a mikveh — not an ethnic one, which might be conducted by UJA leaders on the top of Masada, or on New York's Lower East Side. The religious dimension of Judaism appears easier for converts to acquire and practice than the ethnic dimension, which could demand years of living in a Jewish community with a Jewish family.

Children of Converts: Well-Educated, Highly Intermarried

The impact of conversion upon Jewish continuity can be seen most clearly among the children of conversionary marriages. The table below presents several measures relating to the children of two groups: conversionary marriages and in-marriages. The small number of cases among the mixed married precluded their inclusion in this table. We are analyzing reports

Table 4 **The Jewish Activities of Children Growing Up in Different Types of Homes**

	Born Jews + Converts	In-Married (Born Jew + Born Jew)
Oldest married child.....		
Married a non-Jew	61	29
Went to day school	25	20
Went to Camp Ramah	29	14
Participated in USY	39	50
N (minimum) =	28	329

of middle-aged and older respondents, generally in their sixties, regarding their married children, generally in their thirties.

A huge gap separates the results of the children of conversionary marriages from those of in-marriages. Among the married children of in-married born Jews, 29 percent were in mixed marriages. This figure is, of course, lower than that obtained for recent marriages in the population generally, which is about 45 percent (Phillips, 1997). Parents who have remained Conservative synagogue members for decades can be expected to have raised children with below-average intermarriage rates.

Among conversionary families, the proportion of children marrying non-Jews reaches 61 percent, more than double the rate among children of two born-Jews. (See Table 4.) (This figure too must be seen as below average for conversionary marriages in the Jewish population as a whole because of the selectivity of the sample.)

The small number of cases (twenty-eight) casts some doubt upon the estimated proportion of mixed marriage among the converts' children. Nevertheless, even small samples can provide useful estimates of the population from which they are drawn, provided we properly understand the extent to which they are subject to sampling error, and the extent to which they are supported by other theoretical or substantive considerations. Statistically, a 95 percent confidence interval of two standard errors extends 18 percentage points in either direction, that is, above and below the reported frequency of 61 percent. In other words, assuming that sampling error alone were operating to distort our results, we can be 95 percent sure that the real proportion who intermarry among all children of conversionary couples who remain Conservative synagogue members past middle age ranges from 43 percent to 79 percent. Adding and subtracting one standard error establishes a 68 percent confidence interval with a standard error of 9 percent; we can be two-thirds confident that the true figure for converts' children in mixed marriages lies between 52 percent and 70 percent. In any event, we can be reasonably certain that the chances of mixed marriage among the offspring of conversionary marriages is much higher (probably double) than among children of marriages between two born-Jews.

We examined what kind of Jewish education the different types of couples provided for their children and found no consistent differences that might explain the gap. The children of conversionary and in-married parents were about as likely to have attended day school. The converts' children were more likely to have gone to Camp Ramah, but less likely to have participated in USY. No clear conclusions can be drawn with respect to the relative commitments to Jewish education among parents in conversionary marriages and in- marriages.

We have already seen other signs of weakness in Jewish involvement among converts, and even among their born-Jewish spouses. Particularly relevant are their relatively low figures for close friendships with other Jews. These suggest that conversionary families live in more socially integrated environments than in-married families, even if the comparison is restricted to Conservative congregants from the same congregations. One must assume that the differences are as wide, if not wider, in the Jewish population as a whole.

In sum, notwithstanding many individual cases of unusual Jewish involvement on the part of converts, and without denying the unusually high levels of Jewish socialization and education on the part of converts' born Jewish spouses or ignoring the areas in which converts match or surpass in-married born Jews in part, the bottom line is that converts and their spouses may well be raising children with very high chances of marrying non-Jews. Their below average identification with the ethnic side of Judaism reinforces this inference.

Implications: More Intensive Education and Socialization for Converts

Several policy suggestions emerge from this analysis. The one that is supported most strongly is the need to emphasize the ethnic dimension and group-survival issues of Judaism in educating, nurturing, and socializing converts and their spouses. God, prayer, Shabbat, synagogue skills, holidays and other aspects of the religious dimension are certainly critical for leading a Jewish life, but these are the areas in which converts are already adept. They may need to hear more about Jewish family, community, intermarriage, assimilation, Israel, Holocaust, anti-Semitism and the like. The matter of how, specifically, to revise curricula and change the experiences of prospective and recent converts is left to rabbis and educators. But the urgent need for change ought to be obvious to all.

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Secularity Among Conservative Jews

Paul Ritterband

Jews in the United States and Canada show the highest level of secularity of any ethnic or religio-ethnic group of European origin. Jews are the least likely to attend religious services, to express belief in God and miracles, to believe in divine revelation. A few years ago, the Gallup poll asked a sample of North Americans, *"How important would you say that religion is in your life?"* Fifty-six percent of Roman Catholics, 37 percent of Episcopalians, 55 percent of Presbyterians, 72 percent of Southern Baptists and 25 percent of Jews replied that religion was very important to them.* The same question was posed to members of Conservative synagogues and 41 percent of that sample said that religion was very important to them As one would expect, a much larger proportion of members of Conservative congregations expressed the view that religion was very important to them than was true of Jews generally. Yet it is surprising that the majority of the members of a religious organization report that religion is not very important to them. Would the majority of the subscribers to the local Philharmonic orchestra report that music was not very important to them?

While Jews as a group are not strongly committed to religious norms, they do show an incredibly high level of communal solidarity. Jews, far more than Protestants and Catholics, are likely to befriend co-religionists; Jews are very likely to live with fellow Jews forming Jewish neighborhoods. On a larger canvas, Jews feel responsible for one another. The struggle for the emancipation of Soviet Jews galvanized tens of thousands of North American Jews to protest, attend rallies, contribute funds.

Many Jews consider themselves and are considered by their fellow Jews to be good and loyal Jews without being religious. Indeed, over the past one hundred fifty years, there have been many important Jewish movements which were not religious. So too there were many Jewish leaders and heroes who were not religious.

To get at what we might call the "tribal" element in the Jewish experience we asked: *How important would you say that being Jewish is in your life?* We found that 78 percent of the members of Conservative synagogues felt that being Jewish was very important to them. This fraction is far greater than it is for the Jewish population as whole where only 55 percent say that being Jewish is very important to them. Jewish peoplehood is important to a higher proportion of affiliated Conservative Jews than is Jewish religion. By cross tabulating responses to questions about the importance of religion and being Jewish, we find some interesting patterns: 40 percent of the sample reports that both religion and Jewishness are very important; 37 percent report that being Jewish is very important while religion is not very important; 21 percent report that neither being Jewish nor religion is very important; 1 percent tell us that being Jewish is not very important while religion is very important. We shall call the group that is committed to both religion and to Jewishness, "religionists"; the group that is committed to Jewishness and not religion, we shall term "secular," and the group that is committed neither to Jewishness nor to religion we shall term the "peripherals."

A cross tabulation tells us that in order to give priority to Jewish religion (Judaism) in one's life, one must give priority to being Jewish (Jewishness). That is, only a tiny minority of the sample of Conservative synagogue members (1 percent) tells us that religion is very important but that being Jewish is not. Though logically possible, it is extremely unusual for a person to express strong attachment to religion without strong attachment to the Jewish people. For Conservative Jews, religion is not embraced in the abstract but in the particularity of Jewish experience. Judaism without particularity floats in the air much like figures in a Chagall painting.

Jewishness is threatened by assimilation and Jewish religion by secularization. Both processes have been going on for the past one hundred fifty to two hundred and fifty years and they have wreaked havoc on Jews and Judaism. Secularization worked much more rapidly and pervasively among modern Jews than did assimilation. Jews remained Jews long after they stopped believing and practicing as Jews. While some Jews sought to disappear as Jews through conversion, the vast majority remained identified as Jews, though frequently with few of the markers of traditional Jews, whether the markers were religious or secular.**

* In a national opinion survey of American Jews, 97 percent of those who identified as Orthodox, agreed that being Jewish is very important in their own lives, as compared with 73 percent of those who identified as Conservative and 53 percent of those who identified as Reform.

** There are many dimensions of Jewishness/Judaism. Referring back to the national opinion survey cited above, we find that when asked for the most important element in the constellation of modes of Jewishness, Conservative Jews were the most likely to say that being part of the Jewish people is the most important while Orthodox Jews are more likely to say, "religious observance." The emphasis on peoplehood has characterized the Conservative movement since its beginning. However the movement also stressed religious observance. Clearly one message resonated with the rank and file far more than did the other.

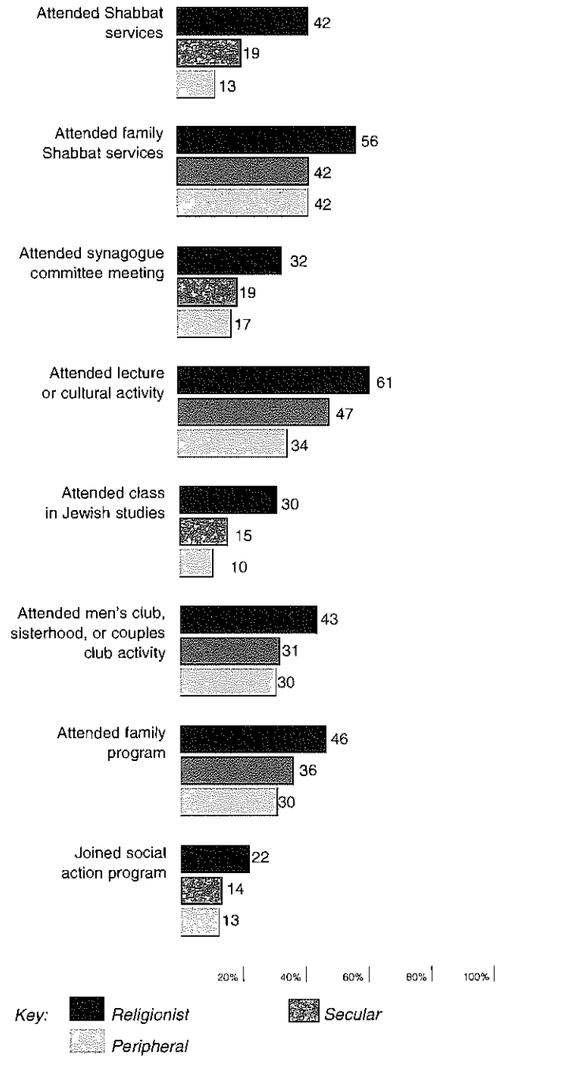
How did it come to pass that people with little interest in religion became affiliated with the synagogue? The answer lies in the fact that the synagogue became the major address of the Jews in the diaspora. By the time that North American Jews moved in large numbers to the suburbs, where the Conservative congregation flourished, religion had almost entirely displaced ethnicity or nationality as a focus of *communal* organization, while for the *individual* member of the congregation, the Jewish people was the anchor of his Jewish life. The generations of the immigrants and their children could lead rich Jewish lives through their commitment to Yiddishism, socialism, and a host of other Jewish secular "isms." This is no longer possible. For the most part, Jews, whether we classify them as religious or secular, are now homeless except for the synagogue. To meet the needs of secular Jews, the synagogue has taken on a wide variety of "worldly" functions such as sports, social gatherings, and the like.

As one would expect, the volume and pattern of participation of the "religionists," "secularists" and "peripherals" differ significantly, one from the other. Taking Sabbath service attendance as our first concern we find that there is a vast difference between the "religionist" members on the one hand, and the "secularists" and "peripherals" on the other, while the differences between "secularists" and "peripherals" is small. (See Chart 1.) This finding is almost embarrassingly obvious but its implications are not. In the absence of religious commitment, congregations have substituted "special occasions" as pretexts for conducting services. While this may work for any given Shabbat, it will not create a Shabbat community around which a larger Jewish community can be built.

Sabbath services aside, we have a list of nine congregational activities and the fraction of each of the three groups ("religionists," "secularists" and "peripherals") that participate frequently in each of the activities. In every instance, the "religionists" are more involved in the life of the congregation than either the "secularists" or the "peripherals." This pattern holds true for each individual item on the list. It is clear that differences among the three groups are not restricted to religious activities but are reflected strongly in intellectual activities such as classes and lectures as well. The probability of participating in Jewish learning is enhanced by commitment to the Jewish people and to Jewish religion. Even committee and board meetings, which are heavily involved in administration and finance, are also the beneficiaries of ethnic and religious commitments.

Given the importance of this powerful and highly generalized measure of Jewish commitment, it would be highly desirable to know its source. That is, why do some Jews affiliated with a Conservative synagogue assert that being Jewish is important to them but religion is not? Why do some claim that both religion and being Jewish are important or that neither is important? We begin with some important *non-*

Chart 1 **Percentage Participating Regularly in Congregational Life Among Sectors of Conservative Congregational Membership**



Source: Conservative Membership Study, 1995

findings, that is, some instances where we might expect to find a source for this central measure but did not.

Generational membership in North America makes no difference. Our collective imagery is of pious ancestors and fallen children. The former were pious, learned, loyal Jews while the latter are clearly lesser Jews. While this is undoubtedly true for some of us individually, it is not true collectively. In the main, age makes no difference—with the following qualification: the youngest group, those under 35 years old, is significantly more likely to assert the importance of both Jewishness and religion; once we consider those above 35, age makes no difference. Perhaps, the more powerful commitment of the under 35 group presages a new day for the Conservative movement or simply reflects the fact that most people joining Conservative congregations hold off affiliating until they have children of school age. Those who do affiliate when they are young are not a random sample of their age cohort. At any rate, our image of the pious "old folks" needs updating.

So too our image of the "corrosive" effect of education. "Religionists" in the synagogue are no less intellectually sophisticated than are "secularists," nor are "peripherals" less committed to Judaism and Jewishness because they "know better."

If the variation in the sort of Jewish commitment we are discussing does not come from broad social and demographic forces, what is its source? No one source explains everything neatly—there is no magic solution. But the explanations that do work are connected with the influence of significant others. That is, parents and spouses are the most effective agents of Jewish socialization. If a parent wants his/her child to be a concerned Jew then the parent must include the child in his or her world of Jewish concern. If a parent wants his/her child to be a believing Jew, then the parent dare not depend upon the Jewish school to do the job alone. Schools transmit knowledge and skills; loved ones shape life commitments.

We have seen some of the consequences of the marginalization of Jewish religion even within the precincts of the synagogue. Those who do not express a religious commitment participate less in the life of the synagogue. They also demand less from the leadership of the congregation. It is less important to the "secularists" and the "peripherals" that their rabbi be a model of Jewish piety and scholarship. From a cynical perspective, they are ideal members. They demand little and pay their dues. However, Jewish consciousness, Jewish collective memory and Jewish community, are embedded in Jewish religion. Without Jewish religion, Jews quickly become amnesiacs and ultimately cease functioning as Jews.

Until modern times, Jewishness and Judaism were linked together such that is was impossible to affirm one without affirming the other. The religion of the Jewish people is a response to the history of the Jewish people. In the traditional Jewish imagination, the Jew exists on two levels, which coexisted easily with one another. Jews gave their children the names of heros and heroines from Jewish history. Thus, there was *Avraham Avinu,* our Father Abraham, and Avremele, little Abraham, who lived down the street. They were equally real. Somewhere along the way to westernization and modernization, a large fraction of the Jewish people lost touch with its ancestors and the ancient family saga, though they maintained contact and concern for and with the Jews of their own time. In the foreshortening of their time horizon and their turn away from the past, many Jews became "secularists" and some became "peripherals."

Late Twentieth Century Conservative Synagogues: An Ethnographic View

Riv- Ellen Prell

Thirty years ago, the new suburban synagogue was the source of important insight into the postwar American Jewish community. Burgeoning membership, sparse synagogue attendance, women in leadership roles and a focus on children's education revealed the eagerness of Jews to join mainstream American culture but not to abandon their Jewish identity. Community and the importance of transmitting Jewish identity to the next generation were at the core of a Jewish life for young families that distinguished them from their suburban neighbors.

My study of two suburban Minnesota synagogues suggests that synagogue life has something different to tell us about the American-Jewish world of the late twentieth century. While children are still the crucial factor in a family's decision to join a synagogue, and attendance continues to decline, community is no longer the synagogue's primary draw. The adults who join and count themselves among the active members seem far more interested in learning than in other activities. Jews have greater access to social clubs and mainstream activities today than just after World War II when anti-Semitism was still widespread. The synagogue now plays a narrower but more religious role in its members' lives, although what constitutes a religious life is negotiated by individuals and families.

Family Life

Families today are fundamentally different from those in that earlier era. They are far more likely to be headed by two working parents, both facing heavier demands on their time than when mothers were expected to meet all family needs. There are more divorced parents and reconstituted families; intermarriage has increased. Conservative synagogues of the late 1990s respond to members, whatever their level of observance, who must integrate Judaism into the same limited non-work hours that are reserved for children, family responsibilities, leisure and volunteer activities. Synagogues therefore must transmit Jewish practice within the social realities of their own time.

The Synagogues

I have compared two synagogues that are remarkably alike in certain ways. Beth El Synagogue and Beth Jacob Synagogue are both centrist Conservative congregations, committed to the full equality of men and women in every aspect of Jewish life. Their rabbis are traditional Jews with young families whose own lives model scrupulous observance of Jewish law. Beth Jacob's congregants are more observant than Beth El's, but congregants in both synagogues are more observant than the national average for Conservative Jews. Their Shabbat morning services are virtually identical liturgically. They have active youth programs, their Shabbat skills training and preparation for b'nai mitzvah are highly regarded and impressive numbers of their teenagers go on to become Torah readers and teachers in the programs that produced them. Although the synagogues do not provide Jewish education, all their youth are required either to attend a community supplementary school or a day school.

Beth El and Beth Jacob are, nevertheless, dramatically different congregations. Even more than their difference in size — Beth El has about thirteen hundred households and Beth Jacob has about three hundred fifty — and the fact that Beth El has a cantor whose leadership is critical, are the synagogues' ages. Beth El was not quite seventy-five years old at the time of this study, while Beth Jacob was celebrating its tenth anniversary. Both congregations have had rabbis with remarkably stable tenures. Beth El has had three distinguished senior rabbis for more than seventy years, although during 1995-96, the position of senior rabbi was being held on an interim basis by the congregation's junior rabbi while the community conducted its search. Beth Jacob's rabbi has served the congregation for nine years and the community anticipates that he will remain with the congregation until his retirement.

Community and Religious Life

In creating Jewish community and religious life, the congregations share some but not all of the same goals. They envision different types of communities, and to some extent, they serve different types of Jews. The contrasts between them are evident in examining what happened when, in 1995, during their Yom Kippur sermons, the rabbis of both synagogues initiated a year of programming dedicated to mitzvot. The idea was to increase congregants' personal observance within the home and private life.

Shabbat Observance at Beth El

At Beth El, Rabbi Kahn, Cantor Newman, the staff and a lay committee developed "Celebrate Shabbat" to encourage congregants to increase their religious observance of Shabbat at home on Friday night in conjunction with the synagogues's

decision to limit "late" Friday night services because of dwindling attendance. A series of in-synagogue Friday night dinners and services marked the move from weekly to monthly Friday night services. Virtually all of the special events had an explicitly educational function. The dinners taught Shabbat observance in the home. The lay committee created recipe boxes of materials — blessings, songs, recipes — to help families create Friday night in the home. And the initiative was explained to the congregation in the following announcement: "We'll discover how to bring Shabbat into your home if you've never done so before, or how to enhance the rituals you are already practicing today. We'll provide suggestions for helping families learn how to fit Shabbat into their hectic life styles. We'll experience how celebrating Shabbat can make the family more cohesive and provide the welcome respite from the busy work week."

In a much commented upon Yom Kippur sermon, Rabbi Kahn discussed the importance of Shabbat observance in the lives of harried, exhausted families and the need to give up the large and complex meals associated with Shabbat so that no one would feel "oppressed." He said, "When we celebrate our Minneapolis or suburban Shabbat, we must catapult ourselves into a whole new world, different from the world we experience during the week. Our Shabbat must emphasize relaxation, self-reflection. It must emphasize family; it must serve as a break from busy-ness, technology, consumerism, and modernity."

Then Rabbi Kahn delivered what many congregants consider the most memorable part of his sermon. "I have found that one of the biggest harriers to celebrating Shabbat is what I call the '*bubbe* syndrome.' Everyone feels that the Shabbat they make must be just like *bubbe's* was, with homemade *challah,* chopped liver, chicken soup, kugel, everything. But this image of the traditional meal, while wonderful, represents further enslavement for the person who literally has to slave away to prepare it. So I say, 'Buy frozen or make pasta.'

"Let me share with you how our family has celebrated an occasional Shabbat. Every once in a while, maybe once or twice a year, we have a week where we are just swamped, but by the end of the week, we are in desperate need of Shabbat. Yet neither of us has the energy to make it. On those occasions we have gone and picked up a pizza, and made Shabbat over wine and pizza. Why not? We didn't need the chicken or the kugel. We needed Shabbat."

Rabbi Kahn's choice of vocabulary was deliberate. He specifically used the word "celebrate" rather than "observe." He had learned over the years that his congregants were not likely to observe all of the laws of Shabbat. He wanted to encourage them to participate more actively in home observance, even if they could not or would not be observant Jews. He explained, "I want people to feel more identified and I want people to be more observant, but I'm not willing to look upon people negatively who aren't willing to. I also think that there are a lot of people who just need to be made aware of the beautiful things of Judaism because they don't really know that they are available."

Programming was at the heart of the "Celebrate Shabbat" campaign. The staff carefully tailored the monthly Friday night dinners to Beth El's various constituencies. Late Friday night services were linked to the presence of the choir. Some Shabbat dinners and services were directed at particular groups such as singles and families with children of different ages. "Informal Shabbat" encouraged people to dress casually and stay after services for dinner and Israeli dancing. "Artsy Shabbat" included a week-night crafts program enabling people to create their own "heirloom" Shabbat objects.

The core programs of the initiative were three Shabbat workshop/congregational dinners following early services in December, February and April. These educational dinners were far more widely attended than anyone had anticipated — the second two sold out right after the first dinner was held. All three attracted a remarkable cross-section of the congregation.

Some congregants were reinvigorated in their observance by "Celebrate Shabbat," and some began to create a Shabbat experience for their family — the purpose of the rabbi's initiative. The vocabulary of "celebrate," "casual," and "liberation from the kitchen," signaled, according to congregants, a Judaism that understood the complexities and needs of their lives. As a parent of a young family commented, "I loved what he said about Shabbat. It was the first time I ever heard a rabbi say that you don't have to do it like your grandmother. You don't have to do it right; just do it. I never had that permission from a rabbi before. Always, it's never enough."

Rabbi Kahn estimated that about twenty families with young children did observe Shabbat in their homes for the first time. But the unanticipated and more widespread effect was to bring congregants together in the synagogue to create a communal, inter-generational experience. The staff learned that hundreds of Beth El members hungered for Jewish community within the synagogue. Paradoxically, what was most effective in increasing Friday night observance among families was to bring them together for Shabbat in the synagogue.

As one congregant in his late twenties said, "The thing that's been most inviting to me lately at Beth El has been these programs about Shabbat, I think because you go and you meet people and you learn something about Shabbat." A very active member who had inconsistently observed Shabbat his entire life also found these programs "reinvigorating because it had been quite some time since we had done that. It was like 'Oh yeah, I know about that. I haven't done that in a while.' But in the last year we've had friends over who are *Shomer Shabbat* and live in the neighborhood. Since going to this it's giving us a greater confidence to share Shabbat with them."

The ironic shift from the goal of increasing Friday night observance at home to the wildly successful communal Shabbat observance in the synagogue may be better understood in the context of Beth El's history, which continues to serve as powerful draw for the community.

Beth El is made up of a number of multi-generational families whose own ancestors founded the synagogue. Beth El's members talk often about the synagogue's previous location on the north side of Minneapolis, where it stayed well beyond the mass exodus to the suburbs out of the community's deference to the remaining shopkeepers and elderly members. That neighborhood remains their model for synagogue life, with its overlapping ties between families and neighbors, social life and religious life. Beth El is currently described by some of its members as a replacement for that neighborhood. While the experience of living in a Jewish neighborhood was one of the strongest expressions of American Jewish culture for them, Minneapolis Jews no longer share a single neighborhood. They are scattered in a variety of suburbs, some without a strong Jewish presence. They sometimes refer to the synagogue as their "home."

The practice of Judaism by new members, just as by those who grew up at Beth El, is rooted in the hope and promise that their children will feel comfortable as Jews, often coded as feeling "at home" at Beth El. They too are attracted to understanding Judaism as multi-generational and focus on the importance of its transmission to their children. Perhaps it is no accident that congregants' often express their great pleasure in Rabbi Kahn's leadership with the Yiddish word for home, calling him *"haimish."*

"Celebrate Shabbat" at Beth El might be understood as a synagogue and its members coming to terms with Judaism in a community where home, food and memory are the critical foundations of Jewish life.

Kashrut and the Ladder of Observance at Beth Jacob

On Yom Kippur at Beth Jacob, each person found a pink pledge card with nine fold- down tabs and a place for a signature on his or her seat. The card included an advertisement for the new Jerusalem McDonald's with the symbol "O" superimposed over it in black. The tabs corresponded to the ladder of *kashrut,* beginning with "no pork" and leading to other prohibited foods, the separation of milk and meat, a kosher home and finally "only hechshered products outside of the home." Rabbi Allen devoted his Kol Nidre sermon to the topic of *kashrut.*

"The process of a holistic approach to Jewish life which defines us as an *am kadosh* (holy people) is quickly disappearing," said Rabbi Allen. "Without a sense of distinctiveness about who we are and what we are all about, all the buildings and all the programs and all the love and wonder and awe we generate here in the *shul* will one day simply disappear. The act of eating can become a means for holiness, for sanctifying the world in which we live." Referring to the pledge card, the rabbi asked his congregants to make the "*kashrut* pledge."

He continued, "Each of us, that means me, too, can move one step further up the rung of holiness by increasing our level of *kashrut.* That is all we need to do tonight — start the process in motion. Okay, before you tune me out and say, 'No way — I'm willing to hear about great causes, to give to make the *shul* vibrant, but I'm not willing to give up my pepperoni pizza,' hear me out. While all the world's problems will not be solved by your increased observance of *kashrut,* you at least can become increasingly sensitized to what it means to be a feeling person, a passionate Jew and a member of a covenantal people extending back through history."

The sermon initiated a year of programming around kashrut. Rabbi Allen convened two discussions to allow members to talk about keeping kosher. Every household at Beth Jacob received a *kashrut* package that included "A Guide to the Jewish Dietary Laws," a booklet describing the philosophy and methods of *kashrut* and a refrigerator magnet proclaiming "Chew By Choice."

Rabbi Allen sees the synagogue as a place that can do some, but not all, things. He explained that Beth Jacob never set out to provide "a whole range of things that I'm not sure that *shuls* need to be providing," such as a Sisterhood or a Men's Club. He argues vigorously that faced with diminishing resources and people's busy lives, American synagogues will have to define the central core of synagogue life as the opportunity to grow as Jews. And, he said, "*Kashrut* is one of those things that, given the highly individualistic world that we live in, is effective. A lot of people don't study and don't come to *shul.* Everyone eats. I think for many people it is the crucial element of how they define themselves. *Kashrut* clearly demands some sort of observance of boundaries and creating separation from the world. By elevating the decision-making process around food, we invite people to see themselves as engaged in Judaism. I really believe that if someone gives up pork products, they have entered into the discussion. Then suddenly, they feel connected to something that certainly is a defining element of Judaism classically. We need to demonstrate that Judaism is part of your everyday consciousness, and I think the easiest way to do it is *kashrut.*"

"Chew By Choice" was not a collective effort. No one appointed a committee to oversee its projects. Like much of the religious life of the synagogue, it was rabbi-driven. However, it did affect many congregants. About fifty members returned the pledge cards, though it was unclear if congregants were intended to literally mail in the card. Most of those moved up from one to another level of commitment, for example, from keeping a kosher home to observing *kashrut* outside of the home. In addition, two families took up the synagogue's offer to help defray the cost of creating a kosher home.

Many congregants spoke about the sermon and the matter

of *kashrut* to me throughout the year. One woman, raised as a committed Reform Jew, worried, "Am I going to feel that I'm not meeting the expectation of a good congregant and a good Jew if I don't keep kosher?" On the other hand, others welcomed the sermon. A member in his late thirties told me, "I found myself thinking, 'I'm exactly one of these people who is very comfortable with what I eat, what I do in my home and outside my home, but I haven't looked at it for a long time.' There was a challenge there." Another congregant, also in his thirties, an Orthodox Jew before joining Beth Jacob, said, "One of the things I like also about the Conservative approach is the notion of the ladder of *mitzvot.* You can start at a certain level and gradually work your way up. You can strive for an ideal, but you're not going to get there overnight. You take one step for now and think about the next step later." His wife echoed those sentiments by asserting that the presence of too many rules creates a desire to rebel. "Tell me all the rules and I'll say, 'No.' If I feel that I have room to do what I want, I'll go further."

Another member, a man in his early fifties and a Shabbat morning regular, does not yet keep kosher, but sees himself in a process, on a lower rung of the ladder. "Although we haven't yet really completed the commitment to *kashrut* and we're only talking about it, it has begun to affect my eating patterns. There are certain things that I just don't eat anymore. It's not because I willfully cut them out, but because the incongruity makes them uncomfortable." He was particularly impressed by the book the rabbi sent to the households. Its authors viewed *kashrut* as a means to holiness, in contrast with his parents' approach. "I very clearly understood *kashrut,* as I was growing up, in the context of identity. But never — in all those years that I lived in my parents Orthodox home and kept kosher — never did I understand kashrut as it is presented in this booklet: the concept of hallowing God and hallowing one's relationship to God through sanctifying even my most mundane activities. Why is that a new concept for me? What did that generation think it was accomplishing? That *kashrut* would continue to be passed on, when the single richest justification was completely omitted from our educations, formally and informally? It stunned me to read this thing. I wonder how I would have felt giving up *kashrut* as a young adult had I seen it in this light."

This congregant came to understand a lifetime of choices as simply not having had a powerful enough rationale for observing the dietary laws — one that is now available to him.

Beth Jacob congregants are unusually committed to the practice of the Jewish dietary laws in comparison to Conservative Jews nationwide. Our membership survey found that 43 percent of Beth Jacob's congregants separate milk and meat dishes and 27 percent refrain from eating meat in non-kosher restaurants. However, these numbers do not indicate how gradual this process has been. No one that I interviewed, including the rabbi, as he explained in his sermon, has continuously observed *kashrut* throughout his or her life. Nor do Beth Jacob's congregants consider their observance of *kashrut* as a single, unchanging package of decisions, activities and attitudes. Few people actually described "ladders," but many seem to be in the process of scaling them. People used words like "experiment" or "try" as they described their relationships with *kashrut.*

Eight months after the sermon, Rabbi Allen told me that he never judges his effectiveness over a single year because he considers that far too short a period to gauge change. Rather, he is committed to continue to link *kashrut,* Shabbat observance and study, so that they will reinforce one another.

Rabbi Allen recalled attending a celebration recently for a congregant's promotion. The congregant received a gift certificate to a restaurant whose symbol is a lobster. Obviously embarrassed, that individual told Rabbi Allen during the party, "A year ago I would never have imagined feeling embarrassed about this gift." Another congregant had lunch with the Rabbi and told him as he ordered a turkey sandwich, "I don't have it with cheese any longer." Rabbi Allen noted, "That was true, by the way. He used to always order cheese on his meat sandwiches when we had lunch together." Rabbi Allen mused that while some might see these examples as a complete trivialization of *kashrut* and others might see them as a victory, he felt they were important first steps in the decision to enter the conversation.

The focus on conversation explains why Rabbi Allen did not pose the issue of *kashrut* to his congregation of overwhelmingly young families as something to do for the sake of their children, or, for that matter, for the sake of the memories of their families. He sidestepped hygiene and the sociological explanations that provided the crucial rationale for observance in the 1950s. Instead, Rabbi Allen asked his congregants to learn to make ordinary life holy and set apart, to reject the homogeneity of late twentieth century American life and assert difference. In that very formulation he acknowledged that Beth Jacob is a congregation with unusual expectations for the practice of Judaism, and that its members practice in different ways and are at different rungs on the ladder of observance.

The vision of the founders of Beth Jacob is entirely consistent with that of the rabbi. The community was shaped by a powerful 1980s focus on the importance of participation and equality. Lacking memory and neighborhood, Beth Jacob was founded on the principle of creating a unique community. As one founder explained, "Members are not here because of their parents or grandparents. I meet people at *shul* who searched for several years before finding a synagogue. They made a judgment and joined. They are here by choice, and not by default."

In contrast to the memories and focus on transmission that dominate Beth El, Beth Jacob emphasizes active and self-conscious commitment to Judaism and to the synagogue. While members chose to create an egalitarian synagogue, "choice" on the ladder of *mitzvot* has a rather different meaning. Congregants describe choosing to be commanded, and Rabbi Allen places the sense of obligation at the center of his vision, acknowledging that people come to that obligation in different ways and at different paces.

Synagogue Cultures

Although congregants do not self-consciously use the term, I have come to understand Beth Jacob as a community of choice, and Beth El as a community built on memory. Neither foundation reflects nostalgia or backward glances. But they do not proceed with the same vision of Jewish life. The ethos of Beth El continues to ignite a strong relationship among memory, neighborhood and community. Continuity and family are at the core of how most members describe their Jewishness and the synagogue. Beth El's members are far more likely to describe their synagogue as a home than a community, the most common term used by Beth Jacob's members.

Beth Jacob's focus on choice describes a group committed to an approach, rather than to a single set of practices or assumptions about how to practice. The power of participation and egalitarianism reflects not only a synagogue still quite young, but one built less on ties of extended family and shared memories than on commitment to a vision of Jewish practice.

As examples of late twentieth century synagogues, Beth El and Beth Jacob reveal that religious idioms of practice and *mitzvot* take center stage in synagogue life, though each synagogue creates a unique culture that shapes that practice within a community grounded in history and a vision of Jewish life for late twentieth century families.

Symposium—What We Have Learned

In this section, members of the research team reflect in a more personal fashion on the larger significance of their findings. They were specifically invited to address the following themes:

- The commitment and loyalty of synagogue members to Conservative Judaism
- The commitment and loyalty of synagogue members to the larger Jewish community
- How the synagogue intersects with family life.
- The impact of egalitarianism
- The differences between the core and the periphery
- The impact of intermarriage on the Conservative synagogue
- The role of informal Jewish education in the Conservative synagogue
- The sources of vitality in the Conservative synagogue

1. Sidney and Alice Goldstein

Conservative Jewry in the 1990s has been shaped by the evolution of the denomination in the preceding fifty years. Developed initially to serve the needs of East European immigrants in their efforts to integrate into American life, Conservative Judaism prospered, especially in the years following World War II. Responsive to the increasing suburbanization of American Jews and their transformation from working class immigrants to second generation professionals and business owners/managers, the Conservative synagogues built in the 1950s and 1960s served not only as places of worship, but also as educational institutions, social centers, and locations for volunteer activities parallel to those in the larger community. They were thereby attractive to Jews from traditional backgrounds who were rapidly assimilating to American life but who were not yet fully accepted into the American mainstream. In the process, Conservative Jewry became the largest of the three major denominations in the United States.

A major part of the appeal of Conservative Judaism to American Jews was its retention of the familiar context of Judaism without the insistence of stringent observance that characterized Orthodoxy. The autonomy of individual congregations, the laxity of observance among many Conservative Jews, and the lack of a centralized, coherent ideological position created major contradictions within the movement. At the same time, they allowed great flexibility in how Conservative Jews defined themselves in relation to their practices and beliefs and allowed a broad spectrum of Jews to comfortably identify as Conservative.

Changes in American society in the decades after the 1960s profoundly affected American Jews. The decline of overt anti-Semitism and the recognition of Judaism as one of the major religions in the United States made integration into the larger society easy and desirable. In fact, much of the ethnic distinctiveness of East European Jewry was adopted by Americans: Yiddish words and phrases entered the vocabulary, and "Jewish foods" became standard in the American diet. Increasing secularization, stress on individualism, and the rise of a feminist perspective all contributed to changing the way many Jews considered the role of Judaism in their lives.

These transformations were reflected as well in the comparative sizes of the major denominations. By the end of the century, Conservatism was no longer the largest denomination; the one-third of American Jews who identified as Conservative was just slightly less than the number who indicated they were Reform. Only a small proportion considered themselves Orthodox. Given such fluidity in denominational identification, even while most American Jews do identify with one or another denomination, it becomes imperative for each movement to understand its constituency if that movement is to retain its vitality in the next century. This may be especially important for the Conservative movement because of its position between Orthodoxy at the more traditional end of the religious spectrum and Reform at the more liberal end, and because of the lack of a clear delineation of the movement's practices and beliefs.

In the past, most studies of Conservative Jews have relied on information gathered from persons belonging to a synagogue. This approach is often very useful in generating insights into congregational dynamics, but it cannot provide a comprehensive picture of the entire population who consider themselves Conservative. In the United States, where synagogue/temple affiliation overall is at a low 41 percent, understanding the characteristics of both those who are affiliated and those who are not is essential for long-range planning. This is especially true at a time when attrition from Judaism in general is high and when debates about outreach vs. inreach assume a central role in determining strategies for continued growth and vitality in the movement.

In 1990, the National Jewish Population Survey generated a national data base that covered the entire spectrum of American Jewry, from those who were fully involved with the Jewish community to those with only tenuous connections by virtue of having a Jewish parent. The survey provided information on what respondents considered to be their denominational identity and the denomination in which they had been raised, as well as on a wide array of personal characteristics, practices, and beliefs. It is therefore a valuable source for assessing the nature of those individuals who identify themselves as Conservative Jews, both synagogue members and nonmembers.

We distinguish between the core (members) and the periphery (unaffiliated) among Conservative Jews. In doing so, we recognize the centrality of the synagogue in the Conservative movement, even though many persons may be members without being highly involved in synagogue activities.* By being members, however, individuals/households have made an active commitment (even if only a financial one) to the movement, and are thereby clearly different from individuals who say they are Conservative but do not indicate this in a formal way. About half of all those who identify as Conservative are affiliated with a synagogue. The Conservative affiliation rate is thus above both the national average and that for Reform Jews; it is below the rate for the Orthodox. That half of all persons who identify as Conservative Jews do not belong to a synagogue emphasizes the need to understand who the unaffiliated are and how they differ from the affiliated. We examine the two groups separately, turning first to the members.

The Jewish Identity of Core Jews

The religious school has been a central element of synagogue life, and its impact is apparent in the levels of Jewish education in the Conservative core. Almost half have had six or more years of Jewish schooling and only one in four has had less than three years. Since Jewish education is a key to a strong Jewish identification, it is not surprising that persons with high levels of such education are also likely to be synagogue members. Not only are they members, they also attend services with some regularity (half attend once a month or more), suggesting considerable involvement in the life of the synagogue.

Membership, Jewish education, and attendance are clearly intertwined, with each factor acting as both cause and effect. Households and individuals become members of synagogues because they have been educated to recognize the importance of supporting Jewish institutions and because attendance at religious services has been an integral part of their childhood routine. They may also join because they wish to provide their own children with a religious education, especially in connection with bar/bat mitzvah preparation, and this is often possible only through membership in a synagogue. Even synagogue attendance may be related to children's education since such attendance is often a mandatory part of the school curriculum in the year(s) before bar/bat mitzvah. If families join a Conservative synagogue because of their children, the challenge for the movement becomes making such membership attractive, not only during the elementary school years, but most importantly during the children's teen years, as well as beyond the time when children live in the household.

Although synagogue membership is obviously an important aspect of being a committed Conservative Jew, the movement also places high premium on a set of observances that are considered central to Judaism, including the observance of Shabbat and maintaining *kashrut.*** Another series of time-related rituals (Seder attendance, lighting Chanukah candles, fasting on Yom Kippur) also can be used as measures of commitment to the tenets of Conservative Judaism.

Core (affiliated) Conservative Jews have a very high level of adherence to those rituals that are relatively rare occurrences. The great majority annually attend a seder, light Chanukah candles, and fast on Yom Kippur. They are much less likely to practice rituals that involve daily or weekly activity. Despite the official stance of the Conservative movement about the halachic importance of Shabbat observance and kashrut, a minority of members observe either of these practices. The proportion maintaining kashrut is especially low — only one-quarter.

Apparently, judged by the indicators used, even most of those Conservative Jews who are members of synagogues do not regard the lighting of Shabbat candles or maintaining kashrut at home as defining elements in their Judaism. They may, however, observe Shabbat and/or kashrut in some form not captured by the information available to us or specified by halacha. Households may celebrate Shabbat with a special meal or family activity; they may refrain from eating pork products or shellfish, without buying kosher meat or having separate dishes.

* Because synagogue membership was determined on the basis of the household, 17 percent of individual respondents who identified themselves as Conservative lived in households with synagogue membership in another denomination.

** For our purpose, within the limitations imposed by the NJPS data, we define Shabbat observance in terms of lighting *Shabbat* candles, and *kashrut* in terms of maintaining separate dishes in the home and always buying kosher meat.

These modified behaviors may thereby serve as a useful entry point to fuller observance, if the movement can capitalize on existing practices and transform them into behavior that is more congruent with the movement's halachic position. That the less demanding practices associated with holiday celebrations are so widely observed suggests an underlying strong connection to Jewish ritual and tradition among the core group.

Using these less stringent observances as stepping stones to fuller observance, Conservative Jews may be gradually induced to more widespread observance. For example, observance of kashrut may be introduced in stages that make each step a natural and easy progression to the next level of observance. Programs may be instituted that will teach congregants the blessings over Shabbat candles, provide *challot* to households, hold workshops that teach Shabbat or other rituals rituals, and how to make appropriate ritual objects like *challah* covers or *kiddush* cups. One or more mentoring programs can provide less threatening learning milieus and more flexible schedules than more formal classes. Hebrew schools, including junior congregations, should be coordinated with imaginative programs aimed at adults to enhance adult involvement.

The identity of the core Jews as expressed through synagogue membership extends to the larger Jewish community, although not always at a very high level. A large majority contribute to Jewish causes (80 percent), but many fewer (about six in ten) belong to Jewish organizations. Even fewer engage in Jewish voluntarism. Apparently, connections to the larger Jewish community are relatively passive, with little direct, personal involvement. Nonetheless, among this group the commitments in terms of funds and organizational membership are relatively strong. Their less active involvement may be due to constraints on time or physical ability.

These commitments to the Jewish community are mirrored by the core group's involvement in the non-Jewish community. Levels of giving, organization membership, and voluntarism for non-Jewish activities are at levels just slightly below those for Jewish involvement. The largest difference appears in contributions to Jewish and non-Jewish causes, but even here the difference is not great. These somewhat superficial measures of Jewish vs. non-Jewish involvement indicate little favoritism to the Jewish community among the core group of Conservative Jews. They suggest instead that these Jews are relatively integrated into the larger American society. To retain their support and loyalty, then, the Jewish community will need to at least equal the kinds of opportunities and satisfactions provided more generally. In this respect, the role of the synagogue may be especially important since the core Jews are already synagogue members and contribute funds to it. This affiliation should be used more forcefully to enhance other forms of involvement in the community. Closer cooperation and joint programming between local federations, community centers, and synagogues are needed to foster such involvement.

Beyond connections to the local and national community, the core group also shows an above average commitment to Israel, as defined in terms of visits. Almost half have traveled to Israel at least once, far above the national average for Jewish Americans. Again, the Israel experience should be used as a point of entry to get affiliated Conservative Jews more engaged with both their synagogue and the Jewish community in periods following visits to Israel. It suggests, too, that synagogue members who have not yet visited Israel represent a promising pool of potential visitors who need to be encouraged to do so.

Conservative Jews who are affiliated with a synagogue clearly are relatively committed to active involvement in Jewish activities at both the communal and personal levels. Nonetheless, they remain a heterogeneous group whose depth of commitment varies considerably and who obviously have a variety of motives for being members of synagogues. Even among this group, then, efforts must be made to enhance participation in Jewish activities and observance of those practices that are central to Conservative Judaism. Because of their demonstrated commitment to Conservative Judaism through synagogue affiliation, members constitute a logical focus for efforts to enhance Judaic practices and commitment to the larger Jewish community.

Jews on the Periphery — The Unaffiliated

Half of all Jews who in 1990 identified themselves as Conservative were not members of a congregation. The basis for their self-identification as Conservative is not clear; it may be related to their identities and experiences in the families in which they grew up or it may simply be a way of indicating they consider themselves not as observant as the Orthodox but more observant than the Reform. Lack of a clear understanding of why so many Jews who call themselves Conservative do not have stronger ties to Conservative institutions or ideology needs in-depth research. They constitute a potential source of members in the future.

The unaffiliated form a strong contrast to the core group. On almost every dimension of identity as Jews, their levels are below those of the core group. They are much less Jewishly educated, with almost one-third having had no formal Jewish education. Not surprisingly, two-thirds seldom or never attend synagogue services.

Their degree of observing Jewish practices is also much more marginal. Very few light Shabbat candles or keep kosher. Like core Conservative Jews, they are more likely to participate in those rituals that occur only annually, but even here, participation rates are lower: Only about one in six attend a seder, light Hanukkah candles, or fast on Yom Kippur, compared to nine in ten of the core. Similar differentials between the periphery and core characterize participation in Jewish communal activities. A smaller percentage of the nonmembers belong to a Jewish organization, are involved in Jewish voluntarism, or donate to Jewish causes. These individuals are also somewhat less involved in the general community, where participation rates are also lower, although the differences between the core and periphery are much smaller.

In the aggregate, therefore, this peripheral group of Conservative Jews is generally less involved and less committed to both their Jewish identity and to involvement in the Jewish and general communities. Many are not, however, separated completely, still maintaining tangible connections to their Jewishness. In fact, one-third had been synagogue members in the past. Although they clearly deviate from Conservative ideology, their commitments may take different forms that are not measured by the available data. The very fact that they identify as Conservative suggests that being a Jew and having a denominational identification are meaningful to them at some level, even though most would not be considered Conservative Jews by standards recognized by the movement itself.

A major challenge for the movement, then is how to capitalize on these connections to transform unaffiliated Jews into more intense participants. The issues become particularly acute at a time when the Conservative movement, like American Jewry in general, is faced with stable numbers at best, and considerable turnover in composition. Small pilot projects are needed that aim first at determining what being a Jew means to these peripheral persons, why they are unaffiliated, and—of the once affiliated—why they left. These projects could then be followed by experimental programs designed to integrate some of the marginal Conservative Jews into the more active core.

The Fluidity of Membership

Long-term trends among Jewish Americans have seen a decline in the attractiveness of more traditional ideologies and practices toward less demanding forms of practice. As a result, large shifts have occurred out of Orthodox into Conservative and from Conservative to Reform identification, or away from any denominational identity altogether. Such shifting has been a major mechanism in the growth or decline of specific denominations. It has also been a key factor in shaping the specific profile of Conservative Jews in the 1990s. Comparisons of the denomination raised with the current denomination of respondents in the NJPS, provide important insights into these patterns.

Consistent with general historical trends, the Conservative movement gained heavily from the Orthodox over the course of the lifetime of the NJPS respondents. Some 492,000 adults who identified themselves as Conservative in 1990 had been raised as Orthodox. Together with the 917,000 individuals who were raised as Conservative and remained so, they formed the large majority of Conservative Jewry in 1990. Many fewer persons joined the Conservative movement after a Reform or secular upbringing or were converted from a non-Jewish religion.

Those who joined from an Orthodox background brought with them many of the traditional practices and behaviors associated with Orthodoxy. They are, in fact, somewhat more observant and involved than those who have been Conservative all their lives. The in-switchers thereby have raised the overall Jewish profile of Conservative Jewry and have formed a significant segment of the Conservative group, adding an important element of Jewishness. Because most who switched from Orthodoxy did so a number of years ago, they constitute a relatively older segment of Conservative Jewry that will phase out as mortality takes it toll.

At the same time, historical trends also operated to draw persons away from Conservative Jewry. Almost as many who were raised as Conservative Jews left the movement for Reform (429,000) as joined Conservatism from the Orthodox. In addition, Conservative Jewry also lost adherents to Reconstructionism; others preferred to be "just Jewish;" and some 93,000 became non-Jews altogether. On balance, the Conservative movement experienced a net loss of 77,000 among the population represented by the respondents to the NJPS.

Just as the movement in from Orthodoxy enhanced the Jewish identification of Conservative Jewry, switching out of the movement also enhanced its Jewish character, because in the aggregate those who left tended to be the most loosely attached, with lower levels of religious practice and more tenuous attachments to the organized Jewish community. As a result, those who remain are among the more strongly identified. For example, while about four in ten of those who have been Conservative Jews all their lives are members of a synagogue/temple, this rate is even higher among those who switched in (half), but it is only one-quarter among the out-switchers. Similarly, six in ten of the lifetime Conservatives have medium-high levels of ritual observance, as do three-quarters of the in-switchers; but only about four in ten of those who left the Conservative movement are this observant. Not surprisingly, compared to lifetime Conservative Jews, a relatively large percentage of persons joining the Conservative movement were converts to Judaism; while among those leaving, the proportion of intermarried Jews was exceptionally high.

Many factors may contribute to the shifting constituency of Conservative Judaism. Persons may shift for ideological reasons or personal preferences. They may see denominational change as congruent with a more American lifestyle or as more appropriate to changing social status. Other reasons for change include marriage between persons raised in different

denominations, migration to areas where institutions with the preferred denomination are not available, and social pressure by peers, colleagues, and neighbors. Sometimes the appeal of a charismatic leader or an attractive institution may occasion change.

Whatever the reasons for movement into or out of a Conservative Jewish identity, the trend over the past decades is clear. The stable size of Conservative Jewry in the United States largely has been the result of the heavy in-movement of the formerly Orthodox counterbalanced by the departure of even more persons to the less traditional forms of Judaism. By the 1990s, the pool of Orthodox Jews in the United States had become quite small, but also quite cohesive. Compared to earlier decades, persons are much less likely to leave Orthodoxy in any appreciable numbers over the next several years. In fact, it is quite possible that in increasing numbers the most committed among Conservative Jews will become disaffected by a perceived lack of standards in the Conservative synagogue and join the ranks of the Orthodox. At the same time, Reform Judaism continues to be attractive and the Reconstructionist movement is growing. Both of these denominations constitute alternatives for Conservative Jews who are not strongly committed to Conservative ideology and/or halachic standards. Any growth in the Reconstructionist movement may be especially serious for Conservative Jewry, because those who have switched to the Reconstructionists in the past have relatively high levels of Judaic practices and behavior. The high rates of intermarriage among newly-marrying cohorts also suggest that there may be some attrition from Conservative to Reform, no denominational identification, or movement away from Judaism altogether. For those who intermarry and convert under Conservative auspices, it becomes especially important that pre- and post-conversion educational experienees stress observance and involvement.

The Challenges for the Future

The configuration of Conservative Jewry at the end of the twentieth century points to several areas that will pose major challenges to the movement in the coming decades. These challenges must be seen within the broad framework of American society and changes in attitudes toward and acceptance of religious diversity. Developments in the past several decades have already profoundly affected how individuals relate to religious institutions and how they deal with private expressions of religiosity. Further transformations are inevitable.

Conservative Jewry can be seen as a series of concentric circles. The innermost circle consists of persons who are members of a synagogue and who are fully involved in the Jewish community and subscribe to a set of Conservative beliefs and practices. At the next level are those other synagogue members who are only slightly involved in synagogue life but who are less observant and less involved in the larger Jewish community. They are likely to be the most receptive, if properly educated, to increase their participation and practices. The next circle, still consisting of members, is constituted of individuals who appear in the synagogue only for the High Holy Days and an occasional life-cycle event; some may still have children in Hebrew school. They are committed to the existence of the synagogue, but do not lend more than financial support. They are themselves not involved in synagogue life or, often, in the life of the general Jewish community. Nonetheless, their attachment is meaningful to them and crucial to the viability first of the synagogues of which their households are members, and then of the Conservative movement more generally. A better understanding of why they are members and regard themselves as Conservative Jews could lead to programming that would induce them to increase their levels of participation. Finally, in the outermost circle are nonmembers—including the third who were former members—who still consider themselves Conservative Jews. That they constitute more than half of all Conservative Jews suggests the size and potential importance of the periphery for the movement, if their Judaic practices and involvement can be strengthened. The reasons for their lack of institutional membership may be conditioned by factors beyond their control—economic constraints or lack of a Conservative or any other synagogue where they live—or by purely personal preferences. A recognition of the dynamics involved in membership is essential for an understanding of why so many persons who say they are Conservative do not express their identity through membership, and also to develp programs to attract them to affiliate or reaffiliate if they were former members. If Conservative Jewry is to sustain its current numbers, the outer periphery is an essential component. That individuals in this category differ in significant ways from the affiliated suggests that relying only on information about synagogue members provides incomplete and probably biased information about Conservative Jewry as a whole.

Only if the movement is willing to define itself solely in terms of current synagogue members can this large peripheral group be ignored. While numbers alone are not necessarily crucial at the national level, they have great significance for the viability of synagogues and other institutions in the community. A certain density is essential for the maintenance of schools, programs, and staff; indeed, the existence of individual synagogues may be in jeopardy if numbers drop below a given critical mass.

While many factors contribute to the growth or decline of individual congregations, some policies may be instituted that would encourage affiliation and thereby help synagogues with declining memberships. Among these, the barrier of high membership costs may be especially crucial. The economic issue may become central for congregants who move from one location to another and want to join a new congregation. Too often this involves increased costs because of additional fees and dues. Some transference of membership and credit for earlier investments would be helpful in such cases. Younger members with school-age children may find it difficult to pay both membership and tuition; accommodations for such situations are important. Subsidies, either from national, regional, or more local organizations, including federations, would help to ease such finaneial burdens and encourage membership.

The Content of Conservative Judaism

With such varying levels of involvement/affiliation, it is not surprising that Conservative Jews vary widely in their religious practices. This "pick and choose" approach to religion resembles that of the American population in general but also reflects the nature of the Conservative movement. Although the movement has an overall halachic position, this stance is not always articulated clearly or forcefully; and individual congregations have considerable flexibility in setting their own practices and formats within the general Conservative ideology. Conservative congregations therefore can offer many entry points for individuals seeking affiliation. The challenge should be seen as both raising affiliation levels and concurrently raising the levels of observance of current and new members.

The flexibility that has characterized the Conservative movement has its advantages and drawbacks. Individuals from a wide variety of backgrounds can feel comfortable within the Conservative movement. Thus persons raised Orthodox find themselves at home with the halachic positions and traditional services of the Conservative synagogue even while it provides a setting that is seen as more congruent with modern life styles. The extensive switching into the movement of those raised Orthodox is clearly a reflection of this perception. At the same time, those who are inclined to observe few if any practices feel little pressure to become more observant. The danger here is that these individuals will eventually drift away from Conservative affiliation either into Reform or away from any denomination at all.

The challenge, then, is to find a strong identity, position, and structure for Conservative Judaism that at the same time allows individuals a variety of entry points at various stages of the life cycle and provides a way to progress toward greater involvement and observance at their own pace. Strengthening the Jewish education, formal and informal, of persons brought up in the movement is a central starting point. In this respect, Schechter schools and Ramah camps are important ways to enhance Judaic skills and create a leadership that has been reared in the movement. But unless the younger segments of Conservative Jewry, which have chosen to be more observant as a result of their exposure to Schechter schools, USY activities, and Ramah camping experiences, feel comfortable in the Conservative synagogue, they may shift to Orthodoxy. Creating a set of practices to which Conservative congregations across America can generally subscribe is another way to create a unified movement with a visible, cohesive image. The use of the same Siddur and *niggunim* for prayers is a case in point. At the same time, the movement needs to articulate its stance on a wide variety of halachic issues and convince individual congregations of the value of these positions and of the need for a certain level of conformity.

This approach suggests a strengthening of the practices and beliefs to which Conservative Judaism subscribes. It may thereby help to retain persons who are among the most observant and committed. If articulated well, it may also attract unaffiliated persons and those outside Conservative Judaism who are seeking a more meaningful structure in their religious lives. On the other hand, it may alienate some members who are indifferent to halachic concerns and seek a much looser milieu in which to express their religiosity. If so, then the number of persons who consider themselves Conservative may well decline over the next decade or two. Some decline might, in fact, be acceptable if it were to result in a more cohesive and active membership. Too much decline, however, would have a serious impact on the ability of individual synagogues and the national organizations to maintain levels of service, especially in a population that is characterized by high migration rates. The data from NJPS clearly show that Conservative Jews cover a wide spectrum, from the almost-Orthodox to the almost-secular. To find the balance between inreach to the more strongly identified and outreach to the marginal Conservative Jews is a major challenge.

A variety of approaches are obviously needed to reach Jews in the different circles of the amorphous entity that is Conservative Jewry. Creating a clear image of Conservative Judaism is only one step in this direction. To be effective, programs must be developed to counteract trends in the larger society toward greater secularism and individualism. Some indicators suggest that individuals are, in fact, now seeking a greater sense of community and are searching for values and structure. Conservative Judaism can be a powerful vehicle for meeting those needs. A first step is to know the character of the constituency. Programs can then be designed to speak to individual Jews and their families; to retain those who are already actively involved, to enhance the participation of those with qualified interest, to draw in those affiliated persons very marginally involved, and to attract into membership persons who identify as Conservative Jews but who have no formal affiliation. Only in this way can the Conservative movement be assured of a strong and viable future in the next century.

2. Samuel C. Heilman

It is, of course, difficult to compress into a few pages the understanding I have gained about Conservative Jewry from my field work in two synagogues. What I have learned about Conservative Judaism is naturally skewed by the fact that the source of my knowledge was *synagogue members*. While some of these members were more actively involved in synagogue life than others, all were formally affiliated with the synagogues I studied. Hence, what there is to learn about Conservative Judaism from those who are currently not members of a Conservative synagogue, but call themselves Conservative Jews is excluded from these conclusions. Finally, my information is not random nor necessarily comprehensive. Rather, it comes from those informants who opened their lives to my eyes and my inquiries during the time I spent as a participant observer in their synagogues.

The Commitment and Loyalty of Synagogue Members to Conservative Judaism

Overall, the synagogue members I observed and interviewed may be divided into two essential categories: 1) those who are actively involved in their synagogue and the Jewish life associated with it, and 2) those whose synagogue and Jewish attachments are dormant or at best quiescent. In general, most members interviewed did not perceive a contradiction or tension among their commitments and loyalties to Judaism, their synagogue, and Conservative Judaism as an ideology. Nevertheless, they did tend to define both the demands of Judaism and expectations of their Conservative affiliation largely through the prism of their experiences in their particular synagogue. Often they felt a greater loyalty to their particular synagogue, rabbi, and fellow members than to the movement as a whole. Indeed, in quite a number of cases, their association with Conservative Judaism as a movement followed their joining the synagogue, and that decision was made for a variety of personal reasons, including location, changes in their family situation (commonly marriage and/or becoming parents), or social needs. For such people, as they became engaged in synagogue life, they often gradually "discovered" that they were indeed able to identify as Conservative Jews. To be sure, others came to such a realization beforehand and selected their synagogue affiliation as a reflection of that ideological commitment.

Whether their involvement in synagogue life was active or quiescent, they were largely convinced that Conservative Judaism, while holding fast to certain standards of tradition, allowed them a great deal of freedom to interpret the nature of their religious attachments and commitments. Their Conservative Jewish identity was thus subject to a sort of improvised and personalized reinterpretation. Moreover, it expanded or contracted throughout the life cycle.

Frequently, the people I observed understood their decision to be part of the Conservative movement as a rejection both of Reform Judaism, which they found too indefinite and vague in its demands, and Orthodoxy, which they saw as rigidly narrow and hostile to women. In contrast to these extremes, they believed that Conservative Judaism provided a place in the middle, a niche that granted freedom and flexibility along with some level of commitment and tradition. Yet, as noted, they also believed that Conservative Judaism treated them as adults who, although offered these concrete commitments, could nevertheless make choices about which commitments to embrace and how to do so. As one man put it: "Every Jew has to find out where they [sic] are and who they are not."

They expected to feel "comfortable" about the way they practiced (or did not practice) being Jewish, even if that did not quite square with the formal ideological or behavioral demands of the movement, or even if it was at odds with the rabbi's interpretations. Episodic engagement was all right. Put differently, they expected Conservative Judaism and the synagogue in which they practiced it to hold on to them, as one man put it, "firmly but with an open hand."

In practice, they believed this meant that Conservative Judaism allowed them—if they wanted it—to be inconsistent in their Jewish lives. They believed it also offered them an opportunity for Jewish growth—even if that happened in irregular spurts. It enabled them to feel good about their level of commitments—even when these were minimal — and gave them no guilt feelings about those things they did not do while encouraging them in whatever they did choose to do. In short, the Conservative Judaism they embraced was personally satisfying, tolerant, and moderate. In the Conservative synagogue, as one member put it, "No one ever said to me, 'You can't join if you won't do this or you won't do that.'"

How the Synagogue Intersects with Family Life

Embedded in many of those synagogue members I interviewed was a conviction that, as one woman articulated it, "You have to belong to a synagogue." This was because, she explained, one had to "show some level of commitment," and that sort of commitment could not be fulfilled completely at home: "Belonging to a synagogue is an integral part of being Jewish." This conviction, however, was often dormant and frequently required some life cycle change to awaken it.

The common pattern was that a child became affiliated with a synagogue through one or both parents. That affiliation was maintained at least until bar or bat mitzvah age and perhaps at a less intensive level after adolescence. Although among the active core of a congregation, some young people remain intensively engaged in synagogue life throughout the high school and college years, sometimes on campus, the adolescent and post-adolescent period is commonly one of dormancy for Jewish affiliation and involvement. Following marriage, the dormant affiliation may become reawakened. Commonly, the newly married couple that maintains some synagogue involvement does so at first through their parents, often returning to the parents' synagogue for Jewish holidays that often serve simultaneously as family reunions. The evidence demonstrates that being in a family situation has always been a key stimulus for synagogue affiliation and involvement. Thus, couples tend to join a synagogue independently after the birth of their first child or when that child reaches school age. This change is often accompanied by a move to a new and larger home, frequently in a new neighborhood.

As children grow, the nature of parents' synagogue involvement may change. For example, some who joined because of a child's birth discover that the presence of a toddler in the synagogue restricts their own capacity to become deeply engaged in the prayer service even though, paradoxically, it is the presence of that child that moved them to attend the service in the first place. As the child matures, some parents may find themselves personally drawn to increased synagogue involvement. Sometimes this takes the form of concern with the synagogue's educational activity on behalf of their children. At other times, it involves becoming engaged in the institutional and organizational life of the synagogue, paralleling their growing authority and power in other domains of life, primarily their careers. Finally, because they are less consumed with the details of controlling their children's behavior during services, some young parents find themselves more absorbed by the worship.

On the other hand, some parents find that as their children grow and particularly when they leave for college, their own synagogue involvement diminishes. These are people for whom synagogue involvement was essentially part of their parenting responsibilities.

The death of a parent may once again move some of these same individuals to return to the synagogue in order to recite memorial prayers. Ironically, some parents may be able to bring their adult children to synagogue and into Jewish life with their deaths far more easily than they could during their lifetimes.

The synagogue and its associated school and community of worshippers often provides a social, cultural, and spiritual anchor for the Jewish family and its members. It is often the place where they choose to mark life's important passages: birth, coming of age, graduation, marriage, and death. Some synagogues have added the receipt of a first prayer book or Bible, leading services, reading Torah, and other specifically Jewish accomplishments to the list. All of these roles are probably what one member meant when he suggested that he believed that "the synagogue should be like a family." And as in a family, "You flow in and flow out," as he concluded.

As one member put it, "a synagogue provides a whole complex of programs to meet the needs of every age level of the family — spiritual, educational, cultural, social and recreational." As each of these needs becomes felt, the synagogue is able to fill it.

The Commitment and Loyalty to the Larger Jewish Community

For many of its members, the synagogue serves as a nexus with the larger Jewish community. For some, it is the only plaee in their lives where they congregate only with other Jews and in an institution guided by Jewish principles and traditions. It is here, for example, they might assemble to mark some occasion that affects Jewry in general. Here is where they come to proclaim their solidarity with the Jewish people. When world Jewry mourned the murder of Israeli Prime Minister Rabin, an event that took place during the period of this study, members expressed their solidarity with the mourners in a variety of venues, but primarily through gatherings in their synagogues. Obviously, the universal Jewish calendar of holy days is often apprehended, experienced, and marked in the context and framework of synagogue life.

Often people conceive of their attachment to their particular synagogue as tantamount to an association with Jewry in general. Moreover, in their quest to enlarge the membership, a kind of abiding desire of all those who make up the leadership and active core of synagogue life, the surrounding Jewish community is perceived as a target population. Correspondingly, the creation of good Jews, a resource for Jewry in general, is one of the tacit educational goals of the synagogues. When the synagogue seeks to have its members "do more," it is seeking simultaneously to have them do more as Jews in general. Thus often the local and specific goals of the synagogue coincide with the more extensive and universal aims of the Jewish commuuity in which that synagogue and its members locate themselves.

Finally, as synagogue members experience a Jewish religious or cultural awakening—something that often occurs in the course of their synagogue life—they feel a commitment and loyalty not only to their congregation, but to the Congregation of Israel, the Jewish people. As active members of a synagogue in particular, they also see themselves as part of the affiliated community, the Jewish mainstream.

The Differences between the Core and Periphery

In the synagogues examined here, the membership may be divided into an active core and a relatively inactive periphery. The core members constitute the synagogue's most familiar faces and are, in a sense, a small congregation, the beating heart, that lives inside the body of the larger synagogue. For this group, the synagogue feels like a far smaller place, a place

that provides a family-like community. For this group it is not the many who come a few times a year (and whose dues and financial donations help sustain the large building, staff and institution) but rather the familiar faces of people they see and worship with regularly, who serve on the synagogue's many committees, that make up the synagogue as they commonly experience it. Indeed, those who are part of the core often refer to the synagogue as their "shul," a term commonly associated with smaller, more intimate synagogues. The wide use of this "Jewish" term probably also serves to signal the enhanced sense of parochial Jewishness that many in this core group feel.

The people of the "shul" are often the ones who also make up the leadership corps of the larger organization, who shape the character of its social life, and who in a very concrete way determine its Jewish orientation in concert with the religious and edncational staff.

Yet these core people also recognize that they are part of an institution that includes large numbers of others who constitute the periphery. Almost all those "others" will show up on the three days of the year that constitute the High Holy Days. Some of them will also come on special occasions like the anniversary of a kaddish recitation or else a bar or bat mitzvah or some other rite of passage. They may also appear on occasions like Homecoming Sabbath, when college youngsters who are home for the Thanksgiving holiday are invited back to play a prominent role in the service, or on Teen Sabbath, when a similar thing happens for high school youngsters. In a sense, many of these "special occasion Sabbaths" have as a latent function the attraction of those from the periphery who normally do not come to the synagogue regularly.

The peripheral membership is essential to the "largeness" of the institution. The core group does not expect to encounter most of the periphery in the synagogue very often (even though in principle the core wishes to engage them more and interest them in synagogue life). From out of the periphery and into the core come those people whose synagogue involvement and consciousness may have been dormant for some time but because of some change in their life circumstances, may become active. And into the periphery may go those who for parallel reasons find their synagogue involvement playing a smaller role in their lives. The ebb and flow of members' synagogue involvement tends to be accepted, if not condoned. A person who has stopped coming or not yet begun is not to be made to feel like a pariah or a renegade.

This is because in spite of the relatively high level of their synagogue involvement and the salient role it plays in their personal and Jewish lives, core members understand that other members, like themselves, will become more or less active at different points in their lives. In fact, many of the current core members may themselves have had long periods when they were not very involved and understand that, thongh they are currently much engaged in synagogue life, there might come a time when they will again find other interests and concerns. As one member put it: "there is a life-cycle character to involvement." That is why members of the core—who generally feel a great attachment to other members of the core—are also prepared (although not always equally) to embrace members of the returning periphery like prodigal kin.

The line between the core and periphery is relatively easy to find at any given point in time, but the population in each of these groups may exchange places in the course of a synagogue's life.

The Impact of Egalitarianism

Egalitarianism may be defined most simply as a willingness to afford equal rites and Jewish obligations to men and women in the synagogue. For many people in the synagogues studied, an acceptance of an enhanced role for women in synagogue life is perhaps the single most important symbol of a congregation's openness to egalitarianism. Conversely, those congregations and movements that do not accept the principle and practicc of egalitarianism are, in words heard repeatedly, considered "hostile to women."

When individuals and congregations embrace egalitarianism, they are not taking a step onto the slippery slope of diminishing Jewish involvement and commitment, as some who have opposed this move away from Jewish tradition assume. On the contrary, egalitarianism's supporters seek rather to expand the Jewish duties and responsibilities incumbent on the Jewish woman at the same time that they endow her with some of the public honors that accompany their fulfillment. Thus, the women who are most supportive of egalitarianism tend to be among those synagogue members who seek to increase rather than diminish their involvement in matters Jewish, as symbolized by their desire for a more active ritual and religious life. In fact, within the congregations observed, many of those who were committed to the highest levels of Jewish observance were also in favor of egalitarianism. For them, the empowerment of women would simply increase the number of members who could express their strong attachment to Judaism.

Those who claim that women's full participation in Judaism is religiously threatening do not understand that these women were, as one man who supported egalitarianism explained, "still doing mitzvot," still accepting the obligations of Judaism. Indeed, he concluded, women who embrace the egalitarian ideal "have not said to us, 'it's okay if you do two hundred and thirty-two out of six hundred and thirteen *mitzvot*.' In other words, they have not diluted those obligations." So, he reasoned, why not let women do as much as they are willing to do, which was a great deal more than they had been doing in the past? "So long as the movement is saying there is more that is allowable," he concluded, "let's get there. Why deprive a woman from learning more or caring more about her Judaism? What have we accomplished by limiting women?"

Often, the women who support the egalitarian approach to synagogue life do so in part because they seek to make use of skills they have acquired in the course of their Jewish education, including the ability to lead prayer, read Torah, and chant the *haftarah*. In other cases, these are women who have embraced egalitarianism as a social ideal and become moved to improve their religious and ritual skills to exercise their new enfranchisement. The enhanced Jewish engagement that egalitarianism brings about among women may, furthermore, stimulate others in the family to intensify their religious, ritual and synagogue involvement. Thus, for example, the wife and mother who chants the *haftarah* also brings her husband and children to the synagogue to hear her performance and may by her example or urging encourage them to do what she has done.

Egalitarianism also allows women to display their empowerment and competence in a most public way. They then can draw praise from their fellow congregants in equal measure as their husbands, fathers, and sons—something that makes them feel far more bonded to the synagogue community than they did when they were only passive participants. It also allows them to play a public role in ensuring Jewish continuity.

The fact that the Conservative movement has a formal commitment to egalitarianism has also made women, and those who care about them, feel a more powerful affinity toward this movement, which they believe now welcomes them as full-fledged members. It makes "Conservative" seem synonymous with "progressive."

Finally, the issue of egalitarianism is connected to the question of who will be able to participate fully in synagogue community life, who will be in the core and who in the periphery. Whereas in congregations that reject egalitarianism women may seem to be second-class citizens, peripheral to the proceedings, in the egalitarian Conservative synagogue they can be part of the active core.

The Impact of Intermarriage on the Conservative Synagogue

Intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews is a fact of American life. There appears to be hardly a Jewish family that is not touched by it. Yet whereas in generations past, an intermarriage was assumed to lead inevitably to a complete or near-complete breach with the Jewish community and way of life, if not the Jewish family—especially where the non- Jewish partner did not convert—that is no longer inevitably the case. Today, the intermarried may continue some sort of affiliation with the synagogue and Jewish community, leading to the presence of both converts and non-Jewish spouses within the congregation.

To understand this dynamic, one must first realize that religion—like marriage—is perceived today less as a matter of fate and more as a matter of personal choice. Non-Jews who marry Jews are often estranged from their own religious backgrounds. At the same time, their willingness to date and then marry a Jew often reflects an openness to Judaism and Jewish people. When and if they convert, they may become more engaged by Judaism than their born-Jewish spouses. In part this phenomenon is explained by the fact that the Jewish spouse is often someone who has become estranged from or indifferent to Judaism and detached from the Jewish people.

Sometimes the Jewish involvement of the convert acts as a stimulus for the born- Jewish spouse to become more involved. Other times the desire to explain Judaism and Jewish life to a non-Jewish spouse serves as a stimulus for greater Jewish involvement. All of these options become possible because of the Jewish community's growing tolerance of non-Jews and converts within its midst.

While by no means always the case, intermarriage may in some families become an occasion for a Jewish renaissance. This is more likely to occur when the non-Jewish partner converts. To be sure, conversion requires enormous amounts of outreach and education. The obstacles are particularly daunting within the Conservative synagogue. The prospective convert has to learn sufficient Hebrew to use the prayer book, still the norm within the Conservative synagogue. For some this also includes gaining competence in the laws of *kashrut* (particularly daunting when the convert is the wife and mother), and sometimes even becoming commited to intensive Jewish education for their children and opposed to *their* possible intermarriage. For this renaissance to occur, moreover, the congregational community and its religious and lay leaders must be more than tolerant; they must be welcoming toward newcomers and strangers.

While the Conservative movement and the synagogues may demand conversion as the price of tolerance and welcome, the rank and file membership will often settle for a mild interest in matters Jewish or even the absence of estrangement. Non-Jewish family members who have not converted often make their way into the congregation's social network and appear at services (most commonly on the High Holy Days or Passover). On the occasion of their children's bar or bat mitzvah or even on some other synagogue performance, these non-Jewish parents are routinely expected to join in the celebration (although the synagogue roles they might play are not always clear). Thus, while formal boundaries remain between the non-Jewish members of Jewish families and the Jewish community, these are become increasingly tenuous in practice.

The Role of Informal Jewish Education in the Conservative Synagogue

Today's Conservative Jews recognize Jewish education as an

important element of their synagogue life. They come not only to worship, but also to be intellectually stimulated and informed. A successful rabbi will be more than a spiritual leader or minister; he or she will also be an educator. So much has this become the case that even the sermon—for generations the single most important speech event in a rabbi's role—is now frequently transformed into an occasion for teaching, often in the form of a discussion or a joint review of a written text.

While the rabbi remains the primary educator, this role is increasingly shared with lay members who regard their Jewish commitments and involvements as including a capacity to study and teach some Jewish sources. Many rabbis thus regard it as their role to empower their congregants as educators. Pulpits are opened to the laity. Occasions when in the past the rabbi might have been the teacher—at a *seuda shlishit,* the commemoration of a *yahrzeit,* a child's coming of age—are now frequently opportunities for laity to fill that role.

This is a result of the increasingly high level of Jewish knowledge that large numbers of people of the **boomer** generation and below have acquired. Often products of day school education or Camp Ramah, these people have the competence to handle Jewish sources. Coupled with their high levels of secular education—the proportion of college graduates in the synagogues approaches 80 percent—they have internalized an attitude that not only values learning but also assumes that one should be able to study on one's own.

While large sectors of Conservative congregations remain under-educated Jewishly, there is a growing consensus—at least among those who are in the congregations' active cores — that Jewish knowledge is essential to being active in synagogue life. The lay leader who is satisfied with activity limited to social or financial affairs—a common figure in Conservative synagogues of generations past—has largely disappeared. Today, even those focused primarily on such matters also recognize and embrace some forms of Jewish education. Thus, for example, in one of the synagogues observed, all meetings always began with a brief but intensive *d'var Torah.*

The "Shabbat retreat," an intensive weekend away shared by a small circle of members, is an increasingly common feature of congregational life and is often an occasion for informal, hands-on Jewish study. So-called "havurah" services as well as "learners" services likewise provide opportunities for informal Jewish education, an alternative to the passive experience of large, formal prayer services. For growing numbers of members, these are more important reasons for synagogue attendance than coming to worship.

Special Sabbaths on which children in the synagogue perform or lead the services are often presented as opportunities not only to display what they have been taught but also to teach and inspire parents to improve their own Jewish skills. The Sabbaths even feature bar and bat mitzvah ceremonies no longer limited to adolescents. Adults who either missed their own such celebrations or have acquired new Jewish skills like chanting the *haftarah* or reading Torah may display their accomplishment during an "adult bar or bat mitzvah" ceremony.

In sum, the synagogue is expected to extend Jewish knowledge and empower its members educationally. If it does not succeed in this task, the membership will see it as having failed as an institution.

The Sources of Vitality in the Conservative Synagogue

When it works best, the synagogue gives its members a sense of *empowerment, competence, community and continuity.* The degree to which these feelings are enhanced is a direct consequence of being part of the active core of congregational life. Moreover, each of these is linked to the other. Thus a sense of empowerment grows out of a feeling of competence; people who know their way around the synagogue, who are proficient in ritual behavior, who know "how things work in this place" not only feel Jewishly empowered, they also feel communally empowered, as if they are part of a living and breathing community. And when that community is a synagogue-based one, they also feel as if they are contributing both to the continuity of the Jewish people, and to the community's continuity. Moreover, because the synagogue generally plays an important part in their family life, for such people positive feelings toward the larger Jewish world reverberate in their feelings toward their own family. Maybe this is what was meant by the 1950s slogan, "The family that prays together, stays together."

3. Barry A. Kosmin

As the largest body of affiliated Jews in North America, Conservative synagogue members stand at the center of organized Jewish life. Theory and practice predict that as a "broad church" lying between the particularism and parochialism of contemporary Orthodoxy and the universalism of Reform Jewry, Conservative Jews would be most aware of *Klal Yisrael* and most committed to the concept. Previous research I have done confirms this prediction.

When the North American Jewish Data Bank was asked to provide a composite profile of the most likely donor to the UJA-Federation campaigns by drawing upon local and national demographic surveys, the finding was that he or she would most likely be a Conservative synagogue member. The profile reflected the typical synagogue board member—an individual fifty-five to sixty-four years old with a substantial income and high degree of ritual observance, who attends synagogue monthly and has a purely Jewish social network. My national survey of Hadassah also yielded the conclusion that support for Zionism among American women is heavily dependent on Conservative synagogue members.

Our survey of the b'nai mitzvah class of 5755 provided the opportunity to ask whether this concern for the wider Jewish community has been transmitted to younger Conservative Jews. The answer is a resounding yes. Today's Conservative synagogues are raising a new generation of community-minded Jews. The occasion of the bar or bat mitzvah was used by 58 percent of these youngsters to give a donation to charity, and 80 percent said they intended to give tzedakah from their pocket money. A willingness to volunteer in the Jewish community was evinced by 87 percent of this sample of nearly fifteen hundred teens. This willingness to volunteer was a direct result of their Jewish education, according to 60 percent. In fact, for 29 percent of the b'nai mitzvah class, community service was part of their synagogue's educational program.

These survey findings suggest that a new generation of Conservative Jews has been taught to view the synagogue and the movement as part of a larger unit, the Jewish people, and tradition of involvement and service to the wider community. "Being involved in activities in the Jewish community" was regarded as very important to their sense of Jewishness by 49 percent of these teenagers and somewhat important by 47 percent. Today Conservative youth are probably alone in expressing the sentiment that "a feeling of closeness to other Jews" is very important (49 percent) or somewhat important (47 percent) to their own sense of Jewishness.

How the Synagogue Intersects with Family Life

No life cycle event is more closely connected to the synagogue in contemporary North American Jewish society than the bar or bat mitzvah. Certainly the involvement in this rite of passage far exceeds rites associated with birth, death or marriage. The local synagogue is the site of the ceremony and most of its preparations, which according to 51 percent of parents dominated their family lives for the preceding year. It is a one-day event that engages the entire family—the student, siblings and parents all prepare for it. The family expects the support and solidarity of their fellow congregants and the professional staff as they receive neglected and distant relatives into the sacred space of their synagogue. Though they no longer, perhaps, express the term, family *yichus* is involved as the parents present their child and themselves to their respective families, friends and associates. We should also not underestimate the impact of this public act of religious engagement upon Gentile friends and associates.

The appeal of the bar or bat mitzvah is perhaps that it marks the last gasp of the *mishpokha* (the extended family). It appeals to the older generation because it symbolizes the link between the generations, assuring the elderly that the chain of transmission has not been broken and that they have done their duty.

It is important for the synagogue as an institution to realize the huge amounts of emotion, time and money invested in this event by most Jewish families. Ironically, the synagogue activists and regulars who are *shomrei mitzvot* are least likely to invest heavily in such episodic and life cycle-oriented events. Yet the satisfaction most families feel after the day—fully 97 percent of parents and 99 percent of children felt it was worth the time and trouble—redounds to the congregation and rabbi.

This amazing level of inter-generational unanimity provides an important insight into the true value of the bar and bat mitzvah ritual for contemporary Jewish families. A part of the transition from childhood to adolescence, this rite symbolizes the transformation in the relationship between parent and child. It helps the child and parent define new levels of control, responsibility and autonomy. It provides the young person with a chance to earn self-esteem and gain a sense of belonging. Contemporary parents and children recognize and appreciate this opportunity to work together towards a clear goal. The high level of congruence in attitudes between parents and children that this survey has reported offers evidence of great success on the family level. Like the gender gap, the generation gap is closing and that is a success.

The Impact of Egalitarianism

The impact of egalitarianism on the Conservative synagogue is shown by the statistic that of the b'nai mitzvah class of 5755, 45 percent were girls and 55 percent were boys. This balanced gender situation can be contrasted with the generation of parents in their forties. Among this population, 87 percent of the fathers had bar mitzvah ceremonies but only 31 percent of the mothers had bat mitzvah ceremonies.

The number of young people participating in b'nai mitzvah ceremonies has almost doubled in a generation, putting pressure on Shabbat services. Finding dates for ceremonies has become more difficult in congregations with large numbers of younger families, and regular congregants often find themselves weekly spectators at an "event" rather than at a prayer service.

Egalitarianism has won acceptance across the Conservative movement. Seventy- eight percent of congregations reported that they treat bar and bat mitzvah students exactly alike in training and ritual requirements. And almost none of the twenty-two percent of congregations that don't treat them alike reported refusing to make any concessions to girls. Moreover, the overall trend was towards greater egalitarianism and no cases of retrogression were found. This finding suggests that the complete emancipation of women in Conservative Judaism is just a matter of time and when it happens there will be a well- educated female laity ready to participate fully.

The equal treatment of young men and women has had the sociologically expected outcome of reducing differences between the sexes. The survey shows that today's teenagers exhibit no gender differences in their observance of rituals, intention to attend synagogue, nor, perhaps more significantly, in their theological views, such as the importance of God.

Among their parents, the gender gap has also narrowed because of the increased opportunities for women. Mothers are slightly more likely to attend religious services than fathers, but there are few gender differences in attitudes towards Judaism. Fathers and mothers exhibit almost exactly the same patterns of holding office in the synagogue (24 percent) and having friends in the congregation. This lack of difference even extends to parental attitudes and reactions towards the theoretical possibility that their children might intermarry.

The synagogues these young people attend are egalitarian in terms of leadership positions, both lay and professional, with the exception of the clergy. Female presidents are quite common. Fifty-three percent of youth directors are women, as are 65 percent of the educational directors of the supplementary schools. However, only four percent of the rabbis are female. Nevertheless our research shows that egalitarianism is no longer being debated in most Conservative synagogues. Certainly for b'nai mitzvah students and their families, who represent the younger element in most congregations, this issue is no longer even relevant. The battle for egalitarianism has been won.

Differences between the Core and the Periphery

The concept of core and periphery echoes R. Saadia Gaon's assertion that Jewry exists "only by virtue of its Torah." The data assembled here differentiate synagogue members from the unaffiliated, but the stark contrast is artificial. While synagogue members may have a greater acceptance of halakha, enhancing their level of Jewishness and commitment to Jewish continuity, I am not convinced that there are two distinct populations. Rather, I believe a more accurate analysis would reflect a continuum. At one end are the *shomrei mitzvot,* a synagogue elite with a sense of transcendent obligation. At the other end are the largely deracinated, nominal Conservative Jews who have not attended a synagogue for regular worship since their youth and identify solely through social inertia. In between lie most Conservative Jews.

Distinguishing between a core and a periphery is arbitrary, an exercise in stereotyping. The artificiality of the operational definitions used in this project is obvious when we recall that surveys are merely still photographs within the "movie" of affiliation with Jewish life. Of course, some Conservative Jews will never be unaffiliated while others will never join a congregation. Probably a majority will have episodic involvements in synagogue life.

To some extent this core/periphery contrast applies to the day of the b'nai mitzvah ceremony since it is an event of maximum inclusiveness, a faint echo of the highly affiliated community of the 1950s. It is a Shabbat when the less educated, the "three times a year," even the solely nominal Jews appear on the synagogue scene. Attendance on this day is an essential element of their episodic, infrequent and *unobtrusive* attachment to Judaism. Moreover, given the evident decline of observance of death-related rituals such as *yizkor* and *yahrzeit,* the bar and bat mitzvah are the last remaining occasions for the "unchurched" to appear in large numbers. The participation of the "periphery" undoubtedly reinforces the feelings of solidarity among the "core" of regular worshipers in most congregations.

The bar and bat mitzvah students and their parents form an essential part of the core population during their years of preparation. Of course, the synagogue monopoly on the ritual creates problems. Successful recruitment leads to a battle to maintain religious and educational standards. This challenge largely explains the ambivalence of rabbis and synagogue leaders towards the ceremony and the majority of b'nai mitzvah families.

In fact, there is evidence that contemporary attitudes of exclusion by synagogue elites is leading to the creation of a periphery. The data from the various surveys make clear that the desire for standards has strengthened exclusionary practices in most synagogues. "Problem" populations—interfaith families, one-parent families, blended families and poor families—are under-represented among b'nai mitzvah families in Conservative synagogues. There is also very little evidence of outreach towards these peripheral populations.

Tightening up the standards of entry for students, increasing the time commitment to Jewish education, and raising the Hebrew language requirements result in a narrowing of the range of backgrounds from which the current cohort of students in Conservative synagogues is drawn. Quantity is sacrificed for quality. Requiring parents to make early choices for their children's Jewish schooling disadvantages migrants as well as late blooming religious enthusiasts. In other words, the periphery finds it increasingly difficult to access the b'nai mitzvah system and the Jewish education system.

Furthermore, the data show that rabbis exhibit no missionizing zeal and recognize no obligation to recruit Jewish children other than those of paid members. Very few synagogues even offer the possibility of a second tier bar or bat mitzvah ceremony; for example, in the chapel on Mondays and Thursdays for the problem cases.

So the division between core and periphery is not yet a fact but the current climate of opinion and synagogue policies in the area of bar and bat mitzvah are widening the gulf. The likely result is that some peripheral Conservative Jews will fall into the orbit of Orthodox or Reform congregations which are more committed to outreach. Probably many more will be lost to Judaism altogether.

Intermarriage and the Conservative Synagogue

The rise in intermarriage rates recorded by the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey has been confirmed for Conservative Jews by this project. However, we have to recognize that all types of intermarriages are rising in the US. In fact, only one in four non-Hispanic white marriages unites partners of identical ancestry. Though religious intermarriage is less common than ethnic intermarriage, it is more common than inter- racial marriage. As differences between groups in language, education, residence, occupation and life style erode, the natural barriers to intermarriage fall.

American Jews are obviously part of a societal trend. Unlike their European forebears, they do not intermarry out of a rational desire to gain access to the perquisites of the majority population; nor do they intermarry out of a desire to leave the Jewish people or their families. It is rather that, for many, being Jewish is just an aceident of birth without much transcendent or spiritual meaning.

Yet somewhat paradoxically, one of the major findings of this project is that interfaith couples are very rarely members of contemporary Conservative synagogues. Among the parents of the bar and bat mitzvah students in our sample, a population that married mainly during a period when nearly one-half of Jews chose a Gentile life partner, we found that 91 percent were Jews by birth. Nearly 8 percent were Jews-by-choice and just over one percent of parents were currently not Jewish. Of course, since parents come in pairs, 18 percent of these teenagers have grandparents who are not Jewish.

So if the intermarried are so rarely present, why do they loom so large in the thinking of synagogue leaders? The answer is that among the older generation of congregants, most have an intermarried child. This child is the one that does not join a Conservative synagogue. And even those members whose own children are not intermarried have nephews and nieces, cousins and friends and neighbors who are intermarried. We have survey evidence that even while, in theory, these Conservative congregants endorse halakhah, they also believe in patrilineal descent for their own grandchildren, for how could members of their own families not be Jewish?

The parents of the bar and bat mitzvah students exhibit the same ambivalent attitudes. Though 98 percent are currently not intermarried, they have family and friends who are. Theoretically, 88 percent agree that "a Jew should marry somebody Jewish." Yet 66 percent agree that "rabbis should be more helpful in welcoming non-Jewish partners into the community." Their teenage children have embraced American societal norms, which stress integration, and they have taken their cues from their parents' and grandparents' generations. Thus 65 percent of teenagers now think "it is okay for Jews to marry people of other religions."

The attitudes held by the majority of congregants in all three generations towards intermarriage mean that it is just a matter of time before intermarriage becomes a major issue in synagogue life, especially if Conservative synagogues wish to maintain their current levels of membership.

4. Riv-Ellen Prell

How the Synagogue Intersects with Family Life

The two Conservative synagogues in Minnesota that I studied share a long-standing pattern of American religion. Families join synagogues when they have children and remain most active during their children's lives at home. The synagogue is particularly compelling to people who want to transmit what they believe are Jewish values, a Jewish outlook and an identity.

Congregants in their early thirties who have not had children yet described the synagogue as far more welcoming toward and directed at young families. One woman, a pharmacist, said "My candlesticks just sit on the counter begging to be lit." She expressed the greatest confidence that she would use those candlesticks regularly once she had children, but it never seemed to make sense to do it simply with her husband. She and others expressed similar sentiments about regular Shabbat morning attendance.

The relationship between synagogues and families is, then, one of the key issues of Conservative Jewish life. One of the new dimensions of that relationship is the integration of families into Shabbat prayer. A long time member of a synagogue described Friday night as the time in the 1960s when she hired a baby sitter so that she and her husband could attend services, hear an interesting lecture, and then socialize both at the Oneg Shabbat and later in the evening in neighborhood homes. The synagogue and its services were synonymous with adulthood. Children, because they were noisy, were not allowed into the sanctuary and had their own programs instead.

Shabbat morning services in both synagogues, even though child care is available, are full of children of a variety of ages, beginning with infants. Parents remove their children when they are crying, but keep them in strollers or in their arms when they are not distracting. Some young children go to educational programs but always end the service on the bimah singing along with the congregation, literally at center stage. Shabbat services are family events, and families seem drawn to them in order to bring their children, to extend their children's sense of attachment to a congregants and peers. Older members often describe the presence of children as chaotic and distracting, however rabbis and younger families seem

committed to keeping children integrated and attached to a synagogue where they feel comfortable.

The synagogues' rabbis provide a vision for Jewish families by linking life in the synagogue to the creation and maintenance of a Jewish home. Both rabbis created materials, tapes, and other forms of support to assist families in that effort. As one of the synagogue educators said, "Some synagogues, like public schools, are becoming the sole educators, taking over what families do. Rabbi Allen is focusing on not taking that away." The synagogue, then, serves as a source of integration for families, home, public worship and community.

With the substantial shift of Conservative Jews toward day school education, the synagogue has become only one of several sources of identity and socialization for families. Increasingly, then, the synagogue today serves as a religious community, in contrast to the 1950s when congregations mainly offered families a social center.

The Impact of Egalitarianism

The Conservative movement's decision to allow women to function as religious equals with men affected both of the Minnesota synagogues. Over half the members of each synagogue surveyed in our study agreed that egalitarian policies attracted them to the synagogue.

Many women congregants expressed greater self-consciousness about their participation in religious life than men. The women reflected on the choice involved in wearing a *talit* and learning to read Torah and acquire other synagogue skills. Several women congregants suggested that they chose to learn skills and take on more responsibilities because they were inspired by the expertise of other women who performed these roles.

In both congregations, the community discussed and debated the inclusion of women. Their decision to extend equality to women considerably increased the pool of Torah readers, *hazzanim,* and other congregation leaders. The participation of women has revitalized both congregations.

One of the synagogues is situated in an Orthodox Jewish neighborhood and some children of congregants attend an Orthodox day school. One such yeshiva student requested that she be allowed to celebrate her bat mitzvah in an all women's Shabbat service outside of the main sanctuary. She apparently felt that by forgoing her bat mitzvah in the main sanctuary, she would make it possible for her Orthodox school mates to attend. The rabbi ruled that no such minyan could be held. "I would not allow an all men's minyan," he said; "so I could not allow a women's only minyan." Egalitarianism continues to pose a variety of challenges.

The Sources of Vitality in the Conservative Synagogue

Congregants interviewed about their synagogues, both those who were quite active and those who were less so, viewed synagogue life largely in terms of those activities in which they personally participated. Depending on the synagogue and the age of the person, congregants focused primarily on the choir, prayer, community, nursery school, and somewhat less often the board of directors.

During the year of my study, the rabbis of both synagogues used the idiom of *mitzvot* and observance to define a salient characteristic of membership. One congregation launched a "campaign" to raise the level of *kashrut* observance, while the other focused on the "celebration," rather than observance, of Shabbat. Congregants were invited to understand their lives within Jewish rhythms and in dialogue with Jewish law.

Those very idioms were frequently used by congregants who often employed the vocabulary of their rabbis to describe their own Jewish lives. The synagogues' vitality was measured by events and diseussions devoted to observance, rather than other forms of participation. The rabbis exercised their leadership by emphasizing an idiom of *mitzvot* as the foundation for participation.

In both synagogues, congregants were encouraged to take on Jewish observances incrementally, rather than making a complete commitment at once, (a position congregants associated with Orthodoxy) they were invited to obligate themselves to new *mitzvot* gradually. The license to move step by step appeared to be quite effective in creating a committed, observant, and expanding core of members who, in turn, offered the synagogue a variety of skills, competence and commitment that were central to their self-definitions as observant Jews.

The Differences between the Core and the Periphery

Synagogues are like all voluntary organizations in that their membership is rarely equally committed within their own individual lives or within the life of the community. The committed core is always smaller than the total membership. Nevertheless, the membrane between the core and the periphery is permeable. Several factors determine a congregant's place relative to the core. True, the more observant are usually the most committed. What is perhaps less obvious is that members apparently on the periphery often do not view themselves in that way. In one congregation, parents who are active in their children's daily nursery school felt centrally involved in the synagogue. Families who were once very active when their children were younger and frequently attended Shabbat morning services held onto the sense of themselves as strongly committed. Those who attended Shabbat services infrequently because they had young children saw themselves as simply

waiting in the wings; they planned to become more active as soon as their children were considerably older.

The avenue to membership in the synagogue's core was not by way of children alone. A great number of congregants described being asked by a ritual director, cantor, rabbi or other congregant to learn a skill or to receive an *aliya.* The effect was transforming. As they felt recognized and more central to the synagogue, they began to attend more regularly, sometimes to feel more competent, and hence to identify strongly with the synagogue.

Nevertheless, though congregants of all ages attended Shabbat morning services, the ages of core members were fairly consistently between about thirty-five and sixty-five, with the greater number of core participants being in their late thirties through fifties. In addition to demonstrating the numerical strength of the Baby Boom generation, the core further reflects the real link between active synagogue membership and the life cycle.

The Role of Informal Jewish Education in the Conservative Synagogue

Synagogue membership creates innumerable moments for learning about Jewish life and observance. Peripheral members are often defined as "three-days-a-year" Jews, which implies that people pay substantial dues solely to have a synagogue to attend on the High Holidays. In fact, the life cycle seems to have a far more binding effect on members. More like an insurance policy than a three day pass, synagogue membership assures a setting for the celebration of a bar or bat mitzvah, wedding, and funeral, as well as a source of support during times of illness.

Rabbi Allen described these moments as important opportunities for people to learn that "Judaism can speak to them." His congregants express just that view. They are surprised not only by the depth of his concern, but by his ability to bring profound meaning to those events.

Children sometimes have greater Jewish competence than their parents. The bar or bat mitzvah of a child often provides the occasion for mothers, in particular, to seek out the cantor, rabbi, or other functionary to teach them synagogue skills, such as chanting the Torah. They are drawn into Jewish adulthood sometimes at their children's request and sometimes by their own desire to learn.

In both congregations, the rabbis serve preeminently as teachers, a role highly valued by congregants who are eager to learn in the context of worship. The rabbis I studied took the initiative to teach in a variety of ways. They encouraged learning through adult bar and bat mitzvah classes and a variety of literacy programs. They taught formal courses in Talmud, Bible, and ethics, the latter dealing with issues such as assisted suicide and abortion. Their teaching especially revolved around mitzvot.

5. Paul Ritterband

The Synagogue and Family Life

There is no question that the family is the key institution in Jewish life, as it is in life generally. The family produces Jews. Its primary function is biological but close behind is its social function: turning squalling, needy, helpless infants into responsible, decent, loving and productive human beings. The human family produces human beings much like other animals produce copies of themselves, responding to instincts embedded in their bodies through God knows how many generations.

Socio-biologists have coined a very useful phrase, "the selfish gene." In order to explain behavior that appears anomalous and often counter-productive, they assume that above and beyond everything else, the genes in the chromosomes of all living creatures want to live. They live by having copies of themselves passed on to the next generation, defeating the death of the individual. The spawning run of salmon, which almost inevitably ends in the death of the individual fish, succeeds when the next generation of fish comes swimming down the stream. Biological immortality is achieved pretty much the same way, with minor variations, by all living creatures.

Social immortality is more complex and requires considerably more effort on the part of parents. Parents have to train their children over a number of years in order for the children to become social copies of themselves. Think about the old-fashioned response of parents to their children marrying out; they would mourn the children as if the children were dead, sitting shiva. Why? Because the child had reduced the chance of the parents to achieve social immortality. How else can we explain this harsh, even brutal response of traditional yet loving Jewish parents?

In my analysis of the survey of Conservative congregation members, I was amazed by the power of the family. To a remarkable degree, the adult members of a Conservative congregation order their lives in accordance with the values and behavior they learned in their parents' homes. The frequency of attendance at synagogue services, the probability of being a member of Hillel in college, the probability of a non-Jewish spouse converting to Judaism and the likelihood of many more adult Jewish choices and behaviors are highly influenced by the Jewishness of the parents' homes.

Schools and other educational institutions impart skills and knowledge, but homes construct the identity that carries into maturity. We need good Jewish schools because we need literate Jews. But no Jewish school, no matter how good, can give children a sense of who they are as Jews or the motivation to continue to be Jews. It will not do for Jewish parents to send their children to Jewish schools so that they can learn *about* Judaism and Jewishness. To do so simply runs counter to the

evidence of the social researcher and the folk wisdom of the Jews.

Core and Periphery

Core and periphery are easy notions to understand in the abstract but more problematic when we move to the practical arena. If core is "at the center" and periphery is "way out there, somewhere," how do we know where exactly the center is and how do we measure distance from there to the periphery? And who exactly is in the center? Is the center comprised of those who are close to the rabbi? Members of the board of trustees? People who are particularly observant? No matter which indicator we use, the results are similar, conforming to the general rule, "the more, the more."

Those who attend services more frequently than others are also likely to give a higher percentage of their incomes to Jewish charities, make more visits to Israel, attend more lectures on Jewish themes, even have more Jewish children than other members. It is not necessarily that one of these activities leads to another. More likely, they are inter-connected parts of a single mind-set.

One bit of folklore has it that there is a division of labor in congregations: some people pray, others pay the bills, while others still clean up after children. Another version of the same bit of folklore is that officers and members of the board are good at finances and housekeeping matters but are unlikely to attend services or participate in adult education. We now know that both versions of this story are false. The general rule of thumb is "the more the more."

A second bit of folklore suggests that a tiny cabal controls the congregation and neither new people nor those without money are welcome into the core. This is also false. Usually terribly short-handed, most congregations are welcoming both to newcomers and to those without substantial capital.

Other measures of core and periphery yield comparable results. For example, those with a more traditional Jewish ideology are more likely to participate in activities and report that their closest friends are members of the congregation. The opposite is true of religious liberals, revealing that religious liberalism is a predictor for the periphery.

Are there demographic markers for those in the core or on the periphery? Here we have a very interesting turn of events. When we look for membership in the core or periphery of the Jewish population as a whole, demographic characteristics make a major difference. For example, age makes a big difference in predicting levels of Jewish commitment in the population as a whole. However, when it comes to the membership of Conservative congregations, such factors become trivial. The act of affiliating with a Conservative congregation filters out the marginal Jews. And increasingly, core Conservative Jews are believing Jews. They are Conservative Jews by choice not by default.

Sources of Vitality

Conservative Judaism can be defined both by its professional leadership and by the opinions, values and behavior patterns of its lay constituency. For now, I attempt to understand the movement as it is actually lived by the members of its congregations. As such, it has long been recognized as full of paradoxes and internal contradictions. Often seen as the movement's weakness, particularly when evaluated against a standard of internal consistency and rigor, I see these as its strength. It is a strength when we evaluate human communities in terms of their humanity, their willingness to live with ambiguity and to recognize that life itself is filled with internal contradiction. Hillel the Elder asserted, "If I am not for myself, who shall be for me? When I am for myself, what am I?" Contradictory? Without question, yes! Make sense? Without question, yes!

Take one example from our questionnaire responses. Three-fourths of the members of Conservative congregations assert that Conservative Judaism lets its members choose those parts of Judaism that they find most meaningful; more than three-fifths assert that Conservative Jews are obligated to obey Jewish law; about half believe in both propositions. Orthodox and Reform Jews know better than to affirm both ideals simultaneously. Reform Jews deny the obligation to obey halakha while Orthodox Jews deny the right to choose. The most frequent response of Conservative Jews is to accept both propositions despite their contradictory nature.

The major strength of the Conservative movement, when taken seriously rather than as a default option, is that it demands the critical loyalty of its adherents. While God may have given the commandments, the decision to obey is up to each Jew. That decision cannot be made responsibly in ignorance. Thus, it is the obligation of the Conservative Jew to know and to understand both the tradition and the world in which he or she finds himself or herself. The Conservative Jew negotiates with the tradition, balancing the demands of past, present and future just as Hillel taught that the Jew must balance the demands of self and others.

At its best, negotiation with the tradition takes place in a communal context. Individuals negotiate not only with their own judgments of past and present but with their neighbors' judgments as well. Participating in communal negotiations transforms the synagogue. Rather than functioning as a supermarket of social and religious services supplied to passive consumers, the synagogue becomes an active agent in conserving the usable Jewish past to forge a liveable Jewish future.

Intermarriage

Some issues lend themselves to cool, rational discourse while others arouse a great deal of emotion. Intermarriage tends toward the latter. It does little good to tell parents who are facing a child's intermarriage that they ought to be rational about the matter. Yet, the community has to find ways of being rational without compromising its basic commitments. Some knowledge and guidelines for thinking about the issue would help.

Every westernized or secularized Jewish community has had a non-trivial ineidence of intermarriage. Once the social, cultural and psychological barriers between Jews and Gentiles came down, intermarriage followed. Some North Americans plaeed their bets on "American exceptionalism." Since the United States and Canada were born as democracies and their Jewish communities never had to go through the process of emancipation, their children would not feel the temptation to marry "the other" the Gentile, the stranger.

Well, as we all know now, that is not how history works. Intermarriage is now a common feature of Jewish life, and North America is not exceptional. But what can we do about intermarriage? First, we must acknowledge that the issue exists. From our survey of Conservative congregation members we know that a significant fraction of children of members of Conservative synagogues are married to people who are not Jewish. In addition, many husbands or wives in households affiliated with Conservative congregations were not raised as Jews but are now Jews. Finally, a good number of current Conservative congregation members were not raised as Jews and are still not Jewish. Intermarriage is a reality in the Conservative movement. Wishing will not make it disappear, and neither hand-wringing nor incrimination will substitute for communal policy.

There is pressure brought upon rabbis to perform intermarriages. In our survey, one-fourth of Conservative Jews agreed that their rabbi should officiate at intermarriages. To do so would solve the immediate problem, but would complicate life for the Jewish community. Every sort of community has boundaries and rules of participation. There is nothing particularly parochial or narrow-minded about the Conservative congregation living by its rules.

Intermarriage, conversion and affiliation can be understood by analogy to the absorption of immigrants. When the receiving society is strong and when the desire of the immigrants to become part of their new society is strong, then absorption of immigrants is accomplished effectively and cfficiently. When these conditions are not met, the new immigrants do not learn the ways of the receiving society, and their original culture overwhelms that of the receiving society.

As a community, the Conservative congregation can deal with intermarriage without bending its standards for affiliation and participation in the life of the community by welcoming Jews-by-choice. While this point of view does not preclude outreach, it does suggest the establishment of an order of priorities: take care of your responsibilities at home first. Then focus your efforts on those who stand at the edge of your community and finally on those who were once part of your community.

Once you have succeeded in dealing with the population of current members and their children, then you can afford to go beyond to the larger public. But by all means do not think that the struggle for Jewish continuity can be won "on the cheap." If we denature Judaism and Jewishness in order to gain numbers, ultimately we will lose both quantitatively and qualitatively.

6. Jack Wertheimer

While our research on Conservative Synagogues and Their Members was primarily intended to spark healthy discussion about the future of Conservative Judaism, it would be unfortunate if the broader Jewish community were to regard this study as a parochial matter of relevance only to the Conservative movement.

From a quantitative perspective alone, the population examined by this study is central to the future of American Jewry. Conservative Jews constitute almost half of all synagogue members in the United States and their Jewish commitments are an important barometer of the vitality of the larger Jewish community. They play a role disproportionate to their numbers in the maintenance and support of the institutions that serve the Jewish community as federation and UJA donors, as lay supporters of the major volunteer organizations, and as members of JCCs. *Even more important, findings from this study can serve as guideposts for the larger Jewish community on the road to continuity.*

Jewish Education Makes a Powerful Difference

A striking and consistent pattern emerged when we asked members of Conservative synagogues about their exposure to Jewish educational programs. With each younger age group, the rates of exposure to these programs rose. Such educational experiences are necessary factors (among others) for continuing participation in Jewish communal institutions.

Intensity of Jewish education also makes a profound difference. For example, members of Conservative synagogues who only attended Sunday school participated in synagogue life at lower rates than those who attended supplementary school programs or day schools.

These findings argue powerfully against the claim that a minimal Jewish education is sufficient. Those who wish to reduce the number of contact hours in supplementary schools or who promote one-day-a-week education should be regarded as

modern-day snake oil salesmen: they are promoting a product that may harm more than it helps.

The Bar and Bat Mitzvah Experience Is a High Point

Contrary to the widespread perception that the bar/bat mitzvah celebration is a vacuous experience for young people, our study suggests that it is a profound and formative Jewish event. After interviewing nearly fifteen hundred recent bar and bat mitzvah celebrants in communities throughout North America, it is evident that the process of studying and then performing in public raises the self-esteem of young people. Recent celebrants overwhelmingly described the religious ceremony as the most important part of the event.

Even more important, recent b'nai and b'not mitzvah express high levels of positive identification with being Jewish, believing in God, visiting Israel, learning Hebrew and continuing their Jewish education. Unfortunately, it still appears likely that these young people will detach themselves from Jewish life as tbey make their way through their teens and twenties. With the exception of relatively small populations, significant numbers of young people drop out of Jewish life right after experiencing a high point in their Jewish lives.

All of this suggests that a culture of Jewish disaffiliation exists for young Jews in their teens and early twenties. Even more tragically, the Jewish community has acquiesced to this culture: "They're just rebelling; they'll come back." How often do we hear this soothing, yet false claim? Though some young Jews do return to active Jewish life after a hiatus of ten or fifteen years, many never return.

By failing to involve our young people, the Jewish community is taking a dangerous risk. It must invest heavily in programs that capitalize on the bar/bat mitzvah "high," rather than allow those positive feelings to dissipate.

People Rise to Expectations

In addition to speaking with young people who recently celebrated a bar or bat mitzvah, we also interviewed one parent of each child. In the period prior to their child's celebration, parents participated far more actively in synagogue life. A great many of these parents became more involved because synagogues required attendance and participation. Some synagogues enact formal guidelines; in other cases, the rabbi, cantor or education director seeks to persuade parents that their presence is critical.

In an age when Jewish institutions have become ever more hesitant to convey any expectations, it is still possible to ask people to do more and they will respond positively.

Jewish Continuity Begins at Home

The most important finding of the study links parental behavior to the subsequent Jewish involvement of their children. This finding undoubtedly will not come as a surprise to many. After all, we all know the pitfalls of asking children to do as we say, not as we do. And yet many, if not most, American Jews continue to act otherwise.

Synagogue members whose parents took them to religious services are the most likely to attend services regularly as adults and the most likely to believe that religion is very important. *The model of parents who themselves take synagogue services seriously is the most powerful factor affecting future service attendance by their children.*

There are important lessons here for those concerned with "Jewish continuity." We must invest in intensive Jewish education for all our young people and embrace tbem in a range of Jewish programs during the decades after bar and bat mitzvah; we must enlist parents and families as role models for Jewish living; and we must talk to adults about our communal expectations. As a community we must realize that ensuring Jewish continuity really is not such a mystery.

Maps, Charts and Tables