

### **Nothing is Ever “Settled”**

Perhaps the name of this week’s Torah portion is meant ironically. The first word is *Vayeshev* – Jacob dwelt, settled down. “And Jacob was settled in the Land in which his ancestors had been sojourners.” But can the ancestor of the Jewish people ever be settled, at rest, permanently ensconced? It seems not, for we are immediately introduced to Joseph the Dreamer and his conflicts with his brothers. And just as it happened last year, so too this year – in two more weeks Jacob will be uprooted once more, and on his way, this time, to Egypt. Thus will our ancestor set the pattern for his descendants through most of our history, swinging back and forth between the Land of Israel, Mesopotamia, and Egypt. Settled, indeed!

This week the Jewish Federation sponsored its annual Kallah for Rabbis, with eloquent scholars from the Reform, Orthodox and Conservative streams. They were asked to reflect on the strengths and weakness that they perceived in their own “denomination.” The denominational streams of Judaism are not permanent arrangements. They have emerged out of particular historical circumstances, and have always been in the process of shifting – and this is evident in the comments of the panel members. Even though the movements have developed strong institutions that have contributed a great deal to Jewish life, these institutions also change. Just this week, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, President of the Union for Reform Judaism, urged Reform and Conservative congregations that may be struggling to consider merger. This is not new, especially in smaller communities, and it shows that ideological commitments can be negotiated, given certain economic and social pressures.

I thought it might be of interest to hear a little of what these three representatives had to say. You will note that the Reconstructionist movement was not represented on the panel. Reconstructionists are understandably exasperated at being so often left off of denominational panels. They are numerically small, but have been very influential. The running joke – and it is not really a joke, but a fairly accurate sociological observation – is that the Reconstructionist movement does something first

(for example, the ordination of gay and lesbian rabbis); then the Reform movement does it a few years later and issues a press release claiming to be the “first major denomination” to do x, y, or z. Then, 15 or 20 years later, after many debates and close readings of the halachic sources, the Conservative movements decides to do x, y, or z. (In the case of rabbinic officiation at same-sex commitment ceremonies, they actually decided to do x, y, and z.)

Rabbi Saul Berman is a major Orthodox scholar, thoughtful and gentle. His analysis of Orthodoxy included the following. No era in Jewish history has seen so many engaged in serious Torah study as ours; this includes women – twelve years of day school has become normative in the Orthodox community, followed by at least a year in Israel. But is it affordable? There is great intensity in the observance of mitzvot, along with liturgical experimentation, such as Carlebach-inspired minyanim. There is a vast array of volunteer efforts to help members of the community, but not much that reaches beyond the community.

He named three “meta-challenges.” Increased materialism has led to great differences in income levels. Synagogues, he said, must inculcate “a religious sense of sufficiency.” The love of and relationship to Israel is wide and deep, but one adverse effect is increasing reliance on distant and more centralized authorities. Traditionally, the local rabbi was considered the *mara d’atra*, the halachic authority for his community. Globalization and the internet has brought about challenges to this mode. An opinion expressed over the internet by, say, a Rosh Yeshiva in Israel can circulate quickly as a challenge to the local rabbi, even though that distant authority has no sense of how a particular opinion might play out in another community. Finally, there is a growing gap between what he called “serious” Jews and what the Orthodox view as “accidental” Jews. The Orthodox community is growing more separate from the rest of the Jewish people, and this is not a good thing.

Jack Wertheimer is a professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary. He is an expert on Jewish sociology, and has written provocative and influential articles on challenges facing the Jewish community. He referred to an article (not his) from 20 years ago that called the movements “leaky boats.” Today, he said, Conservative Judaism is the leakiest. Just a few decades ago, Conservative Judaism was the largest of the Jewish denominations. It has produced a substantial body of well-educated Jews, literate enough to follow and participate easily in traditional Hebrew liturgy.

As a movement, it has always been oriented toward “Klal Yisrael.” The central national organization – the United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism - was never strong, except for its flagship institution, the Seminary. Rather, its strength lies in local and regional institutions: congregations, Solomon Schechter schools, and Ramah camps.

During the 90s, membership in Conservative congregations dropped from 950,000 to 650,000. Where did they go? Most to Reform: about 35% of current Reform Jews claim that they were raised Conservative. Perhaps 10% have become Orthodox. A current trend among younger Conservative Jews, college graduates, is to join “independent” minyanim, not affiliated with any synagogue or movement. There is, he said, still a significant constituency who prefer “Conservative-style” davenning, but can the movement retain that population?

Our speaker from the Reform movement was Prof. Mark Washofsky, an impressive scholar of rabbinic literature, especially halachic sources. Reform is currently tempted toward a triumphalist mode: it claims more members than any of the others. However, he says, the “discourse” of Reform has shifted. He referred to Oliver Wendell Holmes (not Jewish), who said in a Court opinion that the question of law is always “where to draw the line.” But Reform Jews are less and less interested in drawing lines, more and more interested in “creativity.” In addition to “creativity,” the watchwords have come to be “inclusion” and “autonomy.” Is everyone included? Does each person get to decide for her/himself? Where or what is Judaism, or Jewish identity in that?

Reform’s inclusiveness is certainly a strength (and surely accounts, in large part, for its swelling membership), but it also brings a major challenge. A substantial number of those who today identify as Reform did not grow up as Jews. They do not bring with them a set of early Jewish memories and ethnic assumptions. Reform discourse cannot assume a common set of Jewish experiences. On the other hand (as I pointed out in the follow-up discussion period), “Jews by Choice” do bring with them, often, serious theological commitment as well as willingness – even enthusiasm – for Jewish observance that is often missing from “born” (or “accidental”) Jews. Surely that adds gravitas to Reform.

Yet Prof. Washofsky’s question remains important. If we continue to see ourselves as a version of modern Judaism, as he does, then we must continue to engage in serious discussion and debate over finding the right way to draw the lines that define us as a community. And this discussion, in Prof. Washofsky’s view, should be “thick” with Jewish learning. That is, our

responses to questions that arise must include study of Jewish sources. After all, our questions are not all brand new; some of them have faced earlier generations, and it behooves us know something about how our forbears made decisions. If we only decide on the basis of what makes us feel good, or what seems right, or what includes the most people, or seems most creative – then we will arrive at a time when there is no central core to our identity, and we will simply fade into the general mass. So he warned, and I am sympathetic to this concern.

Thus we were exposed to, and entertained by, three perceptive summaries of what is strong and what is “leaky” in at least these large streams of American Judaism. American Jews and their communal institutions have achieved a great deal in our relatively short history on this continent. But we don’t have a lot of time to sit back and feel proud. Each presentation contained a clear warning against triumphalism and contentment. (One note of pride was that of the Chicago Jewish community, which seems to be one of the few places where such a conversation can take place these days among rabbinic colleagues from different streams who actually greet each other with a sense of collegiality.)

When Jacob was “settled” in the Land in which his ancestors had only sojourned, he could not know that just ahead lay uprooting, exile, slavery, wandering, conquest, defeat, dispersion. Every homecoming is temporary. Every triumph comes with a cost. Every achievement requires exertion just to be maintained. To be a Jew, it seems, is to be perpetually asking the question, “What does it mean to be a Jew?”

Poor Jacob, now Israel, the God-Wrestler, will never be settled. His children will never be finished asking our questions – including the question of which questions are the most important. For it is, finally, not our answers but our questions that will tell us who we are, and keep us on the path that leads – even if we never get there – home.