

Project Report

Toward the Documentation of Conservative Judaism

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Abstract: The Ratner Center for the Study of Conservative Judaism at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America has embarked on a program to collect and accession the historical records of the Conservative movement, the largest religious movement of synagogue attenders in the United States. With funding from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, the center has completed a first phase of accessioning the records of synagogues, rabbis, and the central educational institution of the movement. It has also developed a documentation strategy that will shape its programs into the next century.

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CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM CONSTITUTES the largest denomination of American Jews affiliated with a synagogue. The history of this movement is conventionally dated to the founding of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in 1886 as the central educational institution for the training of rabbis, cantors, educators, and communal workers for Conservative synagogues. In conjunction with the centennial celebration of the seminary in 1986, plans were laid to gather for the first time in a systematic fashion the historical records of the Conservative movement—its major institutional arms, its congregations, and its rabbinic and lay leaders. First known as the Archives of Conservative Judaism, this project was renamed the Ratner Center for the Study of Conservative Judaism in 1989. Its mandate has been to document the history and contemporary development of the Conservative movement over the course of more than a century.

History of the Conservative Movement

In response to the radical religious orientation taken by the Reform movement's Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, then the only rabbinical seminary in the United States, rabbis with a more traditional orientation banded together in 1886 to establish the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) in New York as a counterrabbinical seminary. The manner in which JTS was founded was to shape the internal dynamics of the Conservative movement for the next century. First came the seminary, which in time created other movement arms—an alumni association in 1901, which was to become the organization of the Conservative rabbinate, the Rabbinical Assembly (RA); an organization of congregations, the United Synagogue of America, founded in 1913; and then a series of other auxiliary arms, all founded at the initiative of JTS. Due to its central role as an organ-

izing force, JTS is regarded as the fountainhead of Conservative Judaism.

The history of Conservative Judaism as a movement begins in earnest in the first two decades of the twentieth century. During this period, the small number of congregations that had founded JTS, mainly synagogues of Sephardic (Iberian Jews and their descendants) and Central European transplantation, were augmented by congregations with a Jewish constituency from Eastern Europe. The latter population constituted the vast majority of American Jewry after the turn of the century, and as these Jews from Eastern Europe Americanized—and especially as their children came of age—Conservative Judaism drew on a vast population of upwardly mobile Jews. The growth in member congregations of the United Synagogue tells much of the story: in 1913, twenty-two congregations founded the United Synagogue; a decade later, United Synagogue affiliates numbered 150 congregations; and by 1929, there were 229 affiliates. The greatest growth came after the Second World War when affiliation rose from approximately 350 congregations in 1945 to more than 800 two decades later. In the two-year period from 1955 to 1957, 131 new congregations joined the United Synagogue. During the middle decades of the twentieth century, the children and grandchildren of East European immigrants transformed the Conservative movement into the largest religious denomination in American Judaism.

The Conservative movement added several major arms to serve the multiple needs of this vast population of Jews. JTS itself expanded geographically by establishing its West Coast affiliate, the University of Judaism, in Los Angeles in 1948 and a school in Jerusalem a decade later. It also broadened its own educational activities in the postwar era. Its collection of Judaica objects and art was moved and became the nucleus of the Jewish Museum on "mu-

seum mile" on the East Side of upper Manhattan. It founded a network of seven Ramah camps to offer intensive Jewish living during the summers. And it established a day-school network now encompassing some 75 affiliated schools known as the Solomon Schechter Day Schools. Within the Seminary, a Melton Center for Jewish Education was formed to provide curricular materials to Conservative schools.

Other movement arms expanded their activities as well. The United Synagogue developed young adult and youth departments in the early decades of the twentieth century. In time, the United Synagogue expanded its educational department so it would directly supervise and offer guidance to supplementary school programs available in virtually every Conservative synagogue. The Women's League for Conservative Judaism, the United Synagogue's women's auxiliary, became a separate body that assumed prime responsibility for fund raising on behalf of Jewish education. The league also works to educate its own members, even as it devotes its primary attention to fund raising for JTS. In the 1940s, a Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs was created both to offer fellowship to male members of congregations and to promote Jewish education. And still other agencies were established by cantors, Jewish educators, and synagogue administrators to serve the needs of professionals working in Conservative synagogues.

The Conservative movement has also expanded beyond the United States. In Canada, congregations have long been members of the United Synagogue, as rabbis have been of the Rabbinical Assembly. To increase the geographic scope of its activities, the Conservative movement founded the World Council of Synagogues in 1957. Simultaneously, JTS built a campus in Jerusalem, which eventually would become the nucleus for the Masorti movement in Israel. A rabbinical alumnus of

JTS founded the Seminario Rabbinico Latinoamericano in Buenos Aires to train Conservative rabbis for Latin American congregations. New programs in the former Soviet Union and in Europe round out present-day efforts of the Conservative movement to enhance its role as an international Jewish movement.

Remarkably, the history and development of this major Jewish religious movement, the largest movement in American Judaism, remains largely unwritten. Even the history of JTS has not been examined by scholars despite the longevity of the institution and the impact it has had on American and, indeed, world Jewry. Among the few book-length works on the subject are *The Emergence of Conservative Judaism*,¹ a history of the Conservative movement in the nineteenth century by Moshe Davis, and Marshall Sklare's *Conservative Judaism: An American Religious Movement*,² a sociological study of Conservative Judaism just as it was poised for its greatest growth in the 1950s. Several important essays address aspects of the theme. Abraham J. Karp has written two essays on the Conservative movement and the Conservative rabbinate.³ For a historical overview of the Conservative synagogue, there is an essay by Jack Wertheimer in *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed*,⁴ a volume he edited. And there are some essays on Camp

¹Moshe Davis, *The Emergence of Conservative Judaism* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1964).

²Marshall Sklare, *Conservative Judaism: An American Religious Movement* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1953).

³Abraham J. Karp, "A Century of Conservative Judaism in the United States," *American Jewish Yearbook* 86 (1986): 3-61; and "The Conservative Rabbi—'Dissatisfied but not Unhappy,'" *American Jewish Archives* 35 (November 1983): 188-262.

⁴Jack Wertheimer, "The Conservative Synagogue," in *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed*, edited by Jack Wertheimer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 111-49.

Ramah in *The Ramah Experience*,⁵ edited by G. Rosenfeld and Sylvia Ettenberg.

The Status of Documentation on the Conservative Movement

The Ratner Center for the Study of Conservative Judaism was established in 1985 for the dual purposes of collecting the historical records of the Conservative movement and encouraging scholars to use those records to write the history of the Conservative movement. To date, the center has acquired some seventy-five rabbinic collections and twenty-five congregational collections, and it has organized the historical records of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America through a grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC).

This grant has enabled the Ratner Center to organize its work systematically and plan for future programs. First, it made it possible to hire a full-time project archivist, whose salary was eventually assumed by the Ratner Center. Second, the grant enabled the Ratner Center to begin entering records into RLIN, bringing our descriptions into conformity with accepted archival standards. Third, the grant enabled us to process the bulk of the historical records of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America from the early years until the end of the administration of President Louis Finkelstein in 1972. Fourth, the grant covered costs for instituting a records management program at JTS, which will facilitate future preservation efforts. And fifth, the grant helped us plan a documentation strategy for future acquisitions. We were able to bring together a team of archivists with Helen Samuels, our consultant on docu-

mentation strategy, to think through the complexities of documentation.

To foster further research, the Ratner Center seeks to document the full range of Conservative activities, both by acquiring unprocessed, previously inaccessible collections in private and institutional hands, and by serving as a clearinghouse of information on the location of material on the Conservative movement preserved in other archives. As a first step, the center has surveyed existing archival repositories for any holdings that document the history of Conservative Judaism.

The paucity of historical writing reflects, in part, the inaccessibility of archival materials documenting the movement's past. With NHPRC funding, the Ratner Center's project has addressed this problem by

- processing historical records, including major portions of the Jewish Theological Seminary's records.
- processing the records of rabbis and congregations already acquired by the Ratner Center.
- gathering information about records of the Conservative Movement in other repositories.

The project took the following steps to gather information and assess the adequacy of documentation on the Conservative movement:

1. Project staff collected information about the scope and content of the records of six of the "arms" of the movement: the United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism, the Women's League for Conservative Judaism, the National Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs, Camp Ramah, the Federation of Synagogues Administrators, and the Masorti movement in Israel. Staff members described well over 400 cubic feet of records through on-site inventories.

⁵Sylvia C. Ettenberg and Geraldine Rosenfeld, eds., *The Ramah Experience: Community and Commitment* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1989).

2. Project archivist Julie Miller conducted a mail and telephone survey of repositories likely to contain collections bearing on the history of the Conservative movement. We now have intellectual control over pertinent material in twenty-eight archival repositories throughout the country.
3. The Ratner Center sent a questionnaire to more than 1,200 Conservative rabbis, soliciting information about their own papers, congregational records, and papers of synagogue functionaries, such as cantors and individuals active in organizational activities of the Conservative movement. Approximately 150 completed questionnaires were returned, and they have served as important leads to material in private hands.

The surveys conducted by Ratner Center staff have yielded vital and previously inaccessible information on the status and whereabouts of collections pertaining to the Conservative movement. Through our research, we have uncovered privately held papers that are in danger of disappearance, and we now have far more systematic information on repositories and their holdings. This enables the Ratner Center to assist researchers more concretely. It has also become evident through our survey work that existing collections are not consistently accessioned, processed, or included in bibliographic databases to facilitate access and research use. Furthermore, as we learned from our consultations with Helen W. Samuels, large areas of movement history and function remain underdocumented. Among the major topics underrepresented in collections documenting the Conservative movement are the following:

- Religious life and social activities in Jewish communities of different sizes.
- The role of the Conservative rabbi beyond the synagogue, as, for example, in interfaith work, the civil rights struggle, chaplaincy in the military, civic work, and education.
- The shifting focus of synagogue life, such as efforts to create synagogue-based havurot (fellowships).
- Information on controversial issues that divided Jews, such as liturgical reforms, changes in seating patterns, and the social agenda of congregations.
- Jewish education in America. This is a woefully neglected topic. As JTS embarks on an effort to build a professional school of education, a cadre of graduate students will be able to write such a history if we collect the records of synagogue schools, community day schools, summer camps, and adult education and other similar programs. We are thus seeking the papers of teachers and the records of camps, even as we encourage congregations to give us their school's papers.
- The changing role of women in religious life, including material documenting the introduction of the bat mitzvah ceremony for girls coming of age, discussions of women's participation in board and religious matters within the congregation, and other such issues.
- Program materials created by synagogues to integrate young people, singles, divorced people, converts, and intermarried couples. We need to document what synagogues have done and how these programs have been conceived.
- Materials on the role of art and music in synagogue life, including tapes, films, photographs, and other such records. The purpose is to get at popular religion by looking at formal and in-

formal activities fostering artistic creativity.

- Documents on the role of the synagogue in American public life. This includes program materials on the participation of the congregation in activities that transcend the congregation, both for Jewish causes such as support for Israel and lobbying for Soviet Jewry and for general communal causes such as food and shelter for the homeless, educational activities about religion geared to non-Jews, and civil rights concerns.
- Data that would permit follow-up studies on the efficacy of educational programs.

Recommendations to Strengthen Documentation

Borrowing from the experiences of the Evangelical Archives Conference, Archives of Religious Institutions, and other projects, a documentation strategy to preserve the historical records of the Conservative movement must include the following actions:

1. *Complete surveys of the records of the remaining institutional "arms" of the movement.* These would include the Rabbinical Assembly, Jewish Educators Assembly, World Council of Synagogues, Movement to Reaffirm Conservative Zionism (MERCAZ), Association of Solomon Schechter Schools, United Synagogue Youth, and Cantors Assembly.
2. *Train archivists/records managers in each of the affiliated institutions.* They could then be responsible for the care and maintenance of their records and could either establish internal archives or oversee the timely

transfer of historically significant material to the Ratner Center or another appropriate repository.

3. *Prepare archival and records management guidelines for congregations and conduct training workshops on a regional basis.* Part of this step would be to encourage synagogues to place historical records in local repositories, with the Ratner Center serving as a clearinghouse of information leading to appropriate repositories.
4. *Follow up repository-level surveys with a survey at the collection level.* This might be accomplished as a mail survey tied into basic archival description workshops. For those repositories not already reporting to RLIN, OCLC, or NUCMC, standardize reporting in the MARC-AMC format so information can be entered in the JTS's on-line catalog (known as ALEPH). A printed guide to Conservative movement sources could then be generated from MARC entries.
5. *On a periodic basis, assemble the documentation group to reassess the status of documentation, hone the contours of "desired" documentation, and plan cooperative efforts to fill gaps, whether by creating oral histories or other kinds of records.* Such cooperation is vital because it has become abundantly clear during the process of preparing this documentation strategy that the entire network of Jewish archives in the United States needs better coordination. The work of the Ratner Center in documenting Conservative Judaism would benefit from such national coordination.