

The Seminary at 100: Reflections on the Jewish Theological Seminary and the Conservative Movement, edited by Nina Beth Cardin and David Wolf Silverman. New York: The Rabbinical Assembly and the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1987, xvii + 475pp.

Ismar Schorsch has recently complained about the "paucity of basic research on the history of Conservative Judaism in America." Bemused by the "paradox that the 'Historical School'—the name by which Conservatism arrived in America—has exhibited so little sustained interest in its own history," he warns that "the price for such indifference will be the slight of posterity."

The Jewish Theological Seminary's centennial might have provided the opportunity to undertake such a definitive history. The Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, on the occasion of its centennial, issued Samuel E. Karff's *Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion at One Hundred Years* (1976), including a book-length history of the college by Michael A. Meyer and surveys of the school's scholarly contributions to five different areas of Jewish studies. Yeshiva University, which already boasts an institutional history of itself, Gilbert Klapperman's *The Story of Yeshiva University* (1969), used its centennial to focus on the history of its alumni, sponsoring Jeffrey Gurock's just published *The Men and Women of Yeshiva*, a study of the background and experiences of generations of Yeshiva students and their relationship to the secular world surrounding them. Even the Seminary's across-the-street neighbor has now published a history of itself, Robert T. Handy's *A History of Union Theological Seminary in New York*, a model

study that places Union's 150 year history within the context of American religious history as a whole. By contrast, *The Seminary at 100*, as its editors make clear in their introduction, "does not focus on the past or the present, but directs itself toward the future." Instead of examining how the Seminary and the Conservative movement have developed and changed over time, the volume offers a series of "reflections"—personal views that, while interesting in themselves, fail to provide the movement with the historical perspective that it so desperately needs.

Fifty-four different people contribute to *The Seminary at 100*, most of them faculty members, rabbis, JTS alumni, and Conservative lay leaders. Surprisingly, there are no contributions from Gerson Cohen, Louis Finkelstein, Robert Gordis, Simon Greenberg, Abraham Karp, Wolfe Kelman or Mordecai Waxman—this from a volume that bills itself as a "family portrait!" Equally surprising, a section entitled "How Others See Us," with articles by Jacob J. Staub of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and Eugene B. Borowitz of HUC-JIR in New York, offers no statement from a representative of Orthodoxy. Still, a diverse group of Conservative leaders has been assembled here—everyone from David Weiss Halivni, Ronald Price and David Novak representing the movement's most traditional wing, to Amy Eilberg, Paula Hyman, and Anne Lapidus Lerner, leaders of the struggle for women's equality. If strains are occasionally evident, there is, at the same time, a feeling that the time has come for reconciliation. Even Price expresses the hope that "tolerance will gain the upper hand . . . that we will be able to accept the differences which have

developed among us . . . and that we will work together wherever possible."

The volume is divided into three sections. Part one focuses on the Seminary and its spheres of influence: the different schools and campuses, Camp Ramah, and the Jewish Museum. Aryeh Davidson and Jack Wertheimer's statistical study of matriculants in the the Rabbinical School is of particular interest, especially the observation that one-third of Conservative rabbinical students now come from Reform or unaffiliated backgrounds, virtually none from Orthodox ranks. At the Hebrew Union College, by contrast, upwards of ninety percent of the students come from within the Reform movement, fewer than ten percent from elsewhere. Surprisingly, only fifty percent of the Conservative students surveyed consider "living as an halakhic Jew" to be an "extremely important" aspect of their rabbinic lives. This is a smaller percentage than those who consider it vital to be able to speak comfortably in public!

Other articles in this section, while not based on survey data, point to the strength and long term impact of many Seminary programs, especially those aimed at educating the laity. But Miriam Klein Shapiro voices a significant word of caution: "There is a real dichotomy," she writes, "between lay leadership [in the Conservative movement] and Seminary graduates." Although trained by the Seminary to be educated laypersons, few of her fellow Seminary College graduates "are lay leaders or even just ordinary members of a Conservative synagogue."

Part two of this volume presents a "symposium on scholarship and belief": thirteen responses from Seminary professors of various disciplines explaining how they "reconcile *Wissenschaft* and the *Kadosh Barukh Hu*." The responses, some theoretical and some pedagogic, vary in quality and defy brief summary. Yochanan Muffs's contribution, however, stands out; his conclusion is especially worth pondering:

Faith is not a passive state, a status quo, but an inner struggle. It is an order superimposed on a chaos that constantly threatens to break forth. Doubt is that which stirs inert hearts from their complacency and sets the dialectic of faith-doubt in motion. Furthermore, the greater the faith, the greater the amount of doubt the man of faith will be able to digest without losing his equilibrium. If the man of faith has the good fortune to come out of this battle without having denied either religion or science, he will have unknowingly developed a new skill: the ability to hold life like a bird—hard enough that it doesn't fly away, gently enough that it isn't choked to death.

It is striking, however, that most of the other respondents compartmentalize science and faith, unable to believe as so many once did, that *Torah* and *Mada* can be effectively synthesized. Someone—ideally Ismar Schorsch himself—should undertake to place this symposium in historical perspective, showing how the responses of JTS scholars today differ from those of their European-trained predecessors, and of their nineteenth-century counterparts in Germany. In the meantime, the symposium can be read profitably by students of Jewish thought and by those interested in the distinction between a seminary and a university department of Jewish studies.

Part three of this volume, entitled somewhat wistfully "The Self Defined," moves beyond JTS to focus on the Conservative movement as a whole. David Novak, Neil Gillman, and Ronald Price confront questions of definition head-on (with articles obviously written prior to the recent publication of the statement of Conservative Jewish principles, *Emet Ve-Emunah*); Amy Eilberg, Leonard Gordon, and Paula Hynman call upon the movement to address more forcefully the special concerns, needs and interests of Jewish women; and eleven different contributors ruminate on "the next fifty years" of Conservative Judaism both in the United States and Israel.

Repeatedly in this section the same central themes are sounded: the need for religious authenticity, unity amidst diversity, defining parameters, and realistic goals and objectives.

All of the contributors to this volume recognize, even in the absence of a reliable history, that the Conservative movement has changed dramatically in recent years, especially with the decision to grant women equal status in the synagogue and to ordain them as rabbis. The emphasis on the women's question, however, seems to me to have obscured a broader change, reflected but not mentioned in this volume, that in terms of the Seminary and the Conservative movement may prove to be no less momentous: the breakdown of the movement's traditional and (in terms of American Judaism) unique hierarchical structure, and the shift toward egalitarianism.

Historically, the Conservative movement boasted a well-defined religious hierarchy. The Seminary's chancellor stood at the head of the movement, the senior professor of Talmud and rector was at his side, the learned faculty, arranged by rank, were next in importance, and below them sat the rabbis and the laity. The fact that JTS historically preceded (and in good measure created) the Rabbinical Assembly and the United Synagogue helped legitimate this hierarchy; within the institution it was for years symbolically confirmed by the assignment of seats in the first rows of the Seminary synagogue. This hierarchic structure was quite different from what characterized American Orthodox Judaism, where the Yeshiva University was only one of several centers of authority and had no direct tie to a congregational union. It was also different from the structurally congregationalist Reform movement, dominated by the powerful Union of American Hebrew Congregations, which created the Hebrew Union College and continued to patronize it. Only JTS could honestly bill itself as "the religious center" of its movement; Yeshiva and HUC made no comparable claims.

In recent years, this hierarchy—already questioned decades ago by Mordecai Kaplan—has almost completely broken down. Rabbis and lay leaders have demanded and now exercise far more power and initiative within the Conservative movement than ever before; nobody serves as the Seminary's *mara d'atra* in the way that Professors Ginzberg and Lieberman once did; and the old system of stratification by rank and Talmudic knowledge has become greatly attenuated. Indeed, the Seminary's authority on a whole range of issues has been increasingly questioned, as the existence of the Union for Traditional Conservative Judaism effectively demonstrates.

The fact that *The Seminary at 100* publishes next to one another, as if on an equal basis, contributions from faculty members, rabbis, and lay leaders reflects this momentous change; years ago such an arrangement would have been seen as monumental *hutzpah*. Moreover, within the Conservative movement as a whole there has been a parallel shift to egalitarianism. Leadership Training Fellowship (LTF), created in 1945 to "direct the study and thinking of our *best* young people, to the end that they may be prepared for professional and lay leadership [*italics mine*]," was disbanded in 1971. Ramah, originally an elite institution "for preparing a *select* group of boys and girls for leadership [*italics mine*]," was broadened and opened to all in the 1970s. Mador, the leadership development program within Ramah, was terminated in 1981. The new emphasis, illustrated by the remarkable growth of Conservative *havurot*, has been on equality: men and women, young and old, educated and ignorant, all placed on the same footing.

This is obviously not the forum to explore the reasons for this momentous change, much less their ramifications. I raise this matter simply to illustrate the kinds of issues that deserve to be seriously explored in the context of a full-scale history of the Seminary and Conservative movement, extending the important recent

work of Abraham J. Karp, Jack Wertheimer and Robert E. Fierstein. *The Seminary at 100* does not purport to be such a history, and for what it does do it will surely be of interest to Conservative rabbis and lay people alike. But to me the volume is significant mostly as a primary source, reflecting the thoughts and concerns of Conservative Jewish leaders as the Seminary enters upon its second century. Now I look forward to a broader synthesis that will place this volume in the context of all that has come before it.

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