

**Congregation
B'nai Shalom**

What's in a name?

**A MODERN
CONSERVATIVE
CONVERSATION**

**A special project by
and for CBS members**

Introduction

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

The Conservative Conundrum – Can We Talk?

The Conservative Conundrum—Can we Talk?	1
Thoughts for Conversation by Rabbi Sunshine	2
The Conversation Continues	3
What's in a Name?	4
Did you ever...	4

by Aimee Ennik

It all started with a simple task – to come up with a catchy two- or three-sentence phrase to summarize B'nai Shalom on our website and marketing materials. One obvious descriptor is that we are a Conservative synagogue, affiliated with the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. Yet even this straightforward statement of fact brought up a host of questions: Do people specifically choose B'nai Shalom because we are a Conservative community? What do people want and expect when they join a Conservative congregation? And conversely, how many potential members might we be missing either because they misinterpret the term "Conservative" (which refers to our desire to conserve Jewish traditions, not to our political or social beliefs) or because they fear such a denomination might demand more commitment than they are comfortable with religiously?

What does it *really* mean to say we are Conservative? An informal poll of B'nai Shalom members reflected the diversity of opinion on this topic, once again proving the old adage about "two Jews, three opinions." The following is a sampling of the responses we gathered:

"Being a Conservative Jew means I have a substantial respect for the word of God while recognizing that interpretation

of these words change as the world evolves. My faith teaches me why I am here, what God expects of me and how I should live my life. I understand the covenantal relationship between the Jewish people and God"

"I have often heard Reform Judaism described as "Judaism Light" so that would make Orthodoxy or Hassidism "Judaism Heavy." Conservative Judaism therefore must be Judaism in the Middle, or Judaism Just Right."

"Being Conservative means that, though our personal religious practices and observance may vary, it is important to us that our synagogue upholds the traditions associated with Judaism: Kashrut, Shabbat observance, and a strong focus on the Hebrew language. Educating ourselves and our children is a strong priority, and we are as interested in the ethical and moral traditions of Tikkun Olan and Gemilut Chasadim as we are in Torah and Talmud study."

"The thing about Conservative Judaism is that there is a spectrum of interpretation on many rituals, observances, beliefs, practices, etc. While this can be disconcerting, it is also reassuring. We can question things without feeling like we are not being

good Jews and we can take our observance, beliefs, and practices to whatever level we like and still be a part of the community."

It soon became clear that we as the Board of Directors needed to engage in some serious study and contemplation on this issue. Without a clear and unified idea of who we are and what we stand for, we could not hope to effectively address the needs of our present membership, much less develop a solid strategy for our future. For the next few months we discussed and debated the philosophies of Gillman, Kaplan, Schulweis and Roth, studied a variety of perspectives on the nature of revelation and the ability (or not) to modify the Torah's laws and ideas, and grappled with where we as a community fit into the wide spectrum of beliefs and practices that make up the "big tent" of Conservative Judaism.

Now it is time to open up the conversation to everyone. As members of B'nai Shalom, we are all equal investors in our congregation – it is our right and our responsibility to have a say in how we define ourselves and our philosophies, customs, values and vision. Over the coming months we will have a variety of opportunities to learn, discuss, and reflect on this topic so that together we continue to build a vibrant, participatory Conservative Jewish community that will take us into the future.

Special point of interest:

"The name Conservative derives from the idea that the movement would be necessary to conserve Jewish traditions."

Thoughts for Conversation...

By Rabbi Elon Sunshine

For nearly its entire history, the Conservative Movement had no official statement of beliefs to define itself. There was no document or book to read that could give a clear, concise explanation of what the movement stands for or why one should live a committed Jewish life. We can only speculate about the reason for this glaring absence of a formal statement: earlier generations of American Jews understood the positions of the Conservative Movement better than we do; the movement was defined more by what it was not – Orthodox or Reform; or perhaps there was a concern that any attempt to articulate the principles of the movement would lead to fracture, as no committee would ever be able to reach consensus. Despite this, many unofficial positions were written by scholars and rabbis over the years, until an official statement of principles was eventually adopted by the movement in 1988.

Many of the attempts at defining what the Conservative Movement stands for share a common characteristic. They suggest that the Conservative Movement encompasses a range of beliefs and practices on a spectrum, and that not all Conservative Jews embrace such beliefs and practices in the same way in their own lives. That is, there are some Conservative Jews who are more observant than others, and some who have more traditional views about God and the origins of the Torah than others. What Conservative Judaism does maintain, regardless of specific orientation, is that Jews ought to have some particular system of theology – a belief in God – and some commitment to a Jewish way of life.

On this spectrum of beliefs and practices, there are more literal perspectives on the one end, and more figurative ones on the other. For example, with regard to the giving of the Torah, a more literal view suggests that God actually delivered the Torah to Moses and the Israelite people, while a more liberal orientation maintains that the Torah evolved over time as the people attempted to capture a description of what happened when they experienced the revelation of God's presence. The implications of one's viewpoint on this question are very significant. Holding a more literal view, one likely would be compelled to subscribe to a more traditional approach to Jewish law and practice, and less open to change or innovation. After all, if the Torah was given directly by God, then it must be perfect without the need for adjustment over time. On the other hand, a more symbolic viewpoint would allow one license to modify the *halakhah*, or Jewish Law, in response to modern times and circumstances. This is because it is assumed that the law is written by human beings, and therefore it is imperfect, resulting in the responsibility of later generations to improve on the work of earlier generations in fine-tuning and correcting the *halakhah* when necessary.

Each point on this ideological spectrum comes with its own strengths and its own pitfalls. An advantage to a more liberal approach is that it allows the tradition to remain malleable and flexible over time. A

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challenge to such an approach is that it may be more difficult to ascertain when we are being true to the tradition and when we are simply changing it for our own convenience. On the other hand, a more traditional viewpoint brings with it the confidence that we are preserving the Jewish way of life as it has traveled through countless generations without losing the characteristics that make it uniquely Jewish. Nevertheless, it can be said that the only thing that is certain is change, itself, and that what Judaism has always done well is to adopt from its surroundings and to adapt to the times. If we do not open ourselves to the possibility of change, then perhaps we run the risk of letting Judaism become outdated and irrelevant to current and future generations.

Positioning ourselves on this ideological spectrum is hardly an easy task. It requires care and consideration, sensitivity to our history and traditions, and passion about what the Jewish future holds in store. It demands that we study and learn, that we reflect on who we are as Jews, and that we dedicate ourselves to the memories of our ancestors and the possibilities of our children. This coming year, we will grab hold of the opportunity to grapple with these questions in the hopes of better understanding who we are as Jews, what we want for ourselves, and what we want for our community.

I look forward to taking this journey with you.

The conversation continues..

Over the next several months, the B'nai Shalom community will have a variety of opportunities to learn, discuss, engage, and reflect on the topic of modern Conservative Judaism and what that means for CBS members. The following is a sample of what we have scheduled so far – please continue to check your Hadashot, your emails, your postcards and the CBS website, www.bshalom.org, as we have many more events in the planning stages.

Friday, July 10

Synaplex presents: A Friday Night to Educate and Excite

Join us for dinner and services as we welcome Rabbi Elon Sunshine. Rabbi Sunshine will be our speaker this evening and will reflect on "What's in a Name?" Dinner at 6:30; Services at 7:30; Speaker and Oneg follows. Please make your reservation by July 6 with the synagogue office at 934-9446. Cost is \$8/person; children 6 and under are free. Babysitting available upon request.

Saturday, July 18

Anniversary Shabbat Discussion

The theme for this month's discussion is "All the Faces of the Jewish Family." Speaker to be announced. How can a Conservative synagogue (i.e. CBS) work for couples who are interfaith or from different levels of Jewish observance? We look forward to hearing your thoughts and ideas!

Friday, July 31

Synaplex presents: Friday Night Dine and Discuss

Join us for dinner, a lively discussion on "What's in a Name?" and Shabbat services. Rabbi Sunshine will facilitate the discussion. Dinner begins at 6:00, Discussion at 6:45, Services at 7:30. Info to come.

The mission of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism is to strengthen and serve congregations and their members.

Tuesdays, October 13-27

"It's the Law: Making Jewish Decisions in Modern Times

Our popular Adult Education program through Lerhaus will kick off with a 3-session class led by Rabbi Elon Sunshine. Be sure to register. Class begins at 7:30 and ends at 9:00pm.

Friday, November 13

Synaplex presents: A Friday Night to Educate and Excite

Join us for dinner, speaker, and services when Judy Yudof will offer her perspective on Conservative Judaism. Judy is immediate past international president of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, and the first woman to hold the post in the organization's 89-year history. Information to come.

These are just some of the many activities and events we have planned, but this is by no means an exhaustive list. This is a community initiative, by and for CBS members, and your thoughts and ideas are not only welcome, but necessary for the success of this project. If you have any suggestions or input regarding discussion topics, classes, or programming you would like to see around this theme, please let us know – the more people who participate in this conversation, the better.

Can't make it to your synagogue for adult education? Too busy? It's a subject you've already studied?

Then United Synagogue's Compact might be just right for you. Compact, now entering its eighth year, is a free publication that is posted on the United Synagogue website just before rosh chodesh each month. Visit <http://www.uscj.org/compact.html> to sign up.



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**CONGREGATION B'NAI
SHALOM**

What's in a name?

We're on the web!
www.bshalom.org

What's in a name?

**A MODERN
CONSERVATIVE
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**A special project by
and for CBS members**

Congregation B'nai Shalom is the only Conservative synagogue in Contra Costa County. In an effort to meet the needs of over 350 diverse families, including singles and couples, twenty-somethings and seniors, interfaith families, and families of all sizes and types, we begin "A Modern Conservative Conversation," to discover who we are and define our future.

Did you ever wonder...

how the Conservative movement started?

what it means to be a Conservative Jew in today's world?

how many different ways today's Conservative Jews define themselves?

how does Conservative Judaism define what B'nai Shalom offers you and the greater Jewish community?

A MODERN
CONSERVATIVE
CONVERSATION



Did you ever consider...

how being Jewish influences decisions you make in your everyday life?

what lessons have you learned from your participation in Jewish life?

what in your personal history brought you to B'nai Shalom?

what connects you to B'nai Shalom, Conservative Judaism, and the Jewish community.