

WHAT'S MISSING FROM JEWISH CONSERVATISM?

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The key to Jewish continuity lies in observance of Jewish law, a fact Jewish conservatives would do well to remember.

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Eric Cohen's eloquent and inspiring essay in *Mosaic* outlines a series of ideas that are both truly Jewish and truly conservative. I agree with them: the sanctity of the traditional family structure; a Jewish nationalism that joins morality, Jewish identity, and self-preservation; and a measured embrace of free markets. For Cohen, these ideas form part of a call to arms, a call that is directed not only to like-minded conservatives but that might ultimately fire and perhaps rescue Jews on the brink of assimilation, weakness, and self-destruction.

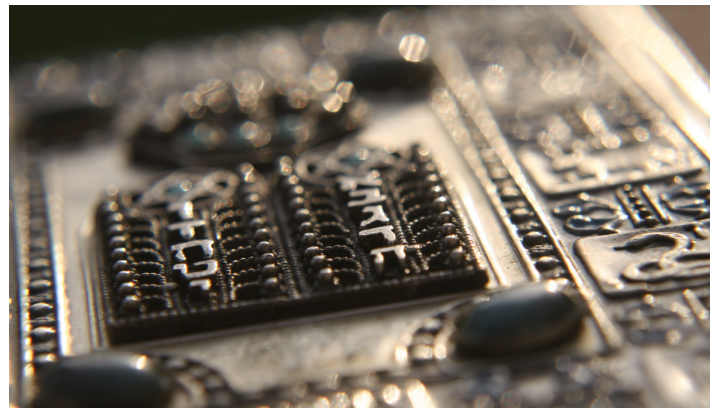


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And yet there is something missing. Midway through this sweeping essay, Cohen enlists the biblical book of Joshua to illustrate certain hard truths about the requirements of Jewish survival and continuity. Among those requirements is the one taught by the figure of Joshua himself, the conqueror of Canaan—namely, having the power, when necessary, to wage and to win war.

That is certainly so. But the very first chapter in the book of Joshua stresses a different, prior requirement, one that for traditional Jews embodies the central lesson not only of that book but of Judaism in general:

Only be strong and very courageous, and observe to do according to all the Torah, which Moses My servant commanded thee. Turn not from it to the right hand nor to the left, that thou mayest prosper wherever thou goest. This book of the Torah shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success.

The lesson of this opening passage in Joshua is clear: Jewish continuity cannot be achieved without a return to tradition itself. It is the giving of the Torah at Sinai that formed ancient Israel as a nation before it ever entered the land; it is obedience to the Torah that will insure Israel's moral and spiritual flourishing when it settles the land; and, ultimately, should Israel be expelled from the land, it is the Torah that will preserve the Jews and Jewish continuity.

Why is Jewish continuity linked so centrally to the Torah and to observance of Jewish law? Let's look first at Cohen's treatment of the family, upon whose strength and character, he writes, "the fate of the Jews as a people will rest first and foremost."

In his groundbreaking 1957 study of Judaism in America, the sociologist Nathan Glazer explained that Judaism is not, and has never been, a faith founded only on creed; it has always been an all-encompassing way of life, its beliefs bound up with its "acts, rituals, habits." For that very reason, Glazer wrote presciently, "Judaism is even more vulnerable to the unsettling influences of modernity than is Christianity." Once a Jew finds it more convenient to abandon specific observances of his ancestors, he is left with "no body of doctrine to fall back on . . . [U]nder these circumstances, an entire way of life disintegrate[s]." Writing many years later, Elliott Abrams built on Glazer's point by colorfully describing his immigrant grandparents: in America "there was pressure to grab a non-kosher sandwich, to work on the Sabbath, to skip a prayer here and there. And as the ritual pillars began to collapse, they brought down with them the whole structure of faith for many American Jews."

Sociologically speaking, there is little to argue with in this analysis. But there is a deeper reason why continuity has always been joined together with and dependent on faith and its actualization in practice. Commitment to the obligations of faith is what makes people realize they are part of something larger than themselves: something that they must perpetuate through their children not merely physically but spiritually. "In perpetuation," writes Leon Kass, "we send forth not just the seed of our bodies, but also the bearer of our hopes, our truths, and those of our tradition." By contrast, parents with no traditions or with no belief in the truth of their traditions have little or no incentive to ensure that their own way of life will be perpetuated by their children.

Cohen is correct: in the abstract, even a secular Jew can appreciate that father and mother embody, as Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik put it in *Family Redeemed*, "the greatness of man *in toto*." But Rabbi Soloveitchik goes on to note that Abraham becomes the founder of Judaism not through his desire for a biological heir but through his larger determination to transmit his

calling to those heirs: “I have chosen him because he will command his children and household after him, that they may preserve the ways of the Lord” (Genesis 18:19). With reverence for religious truth comes, often, a reverence for tradition and a readiness to sacrifice for its transmission.

“It is . . . both necessary and obvious to assert,” Cohen writes in the sentence that I quoted from earlier, “that the fate of the Jews as a people will rest first and foremost on the strength and character of the Jewish family.” In the end, this is only half-true. The fate of the Jews as a people—and Cohen himself hints as much at the very end of his essay—lies in the belief that we as Jews are different: that we are called, chosen, to obey a revelation truer than any other.

If Jews believe this with all their hearts and minds and souls, then the strength and character of their families are ensured. If they do not, then no matter how much they may admire the Jewish theology of the family, their resoluteness in the face of either hatred’s fury or assimilation’s embrace will not last more than a generation or two. To think otherwise is to commit what conservatives caution against: privileging the power of ideas over the lessons of experience.

A related issue is raised by the section of Cohen’s essay on the meaning of Jewish nationalism—the section in which David Ben-Gurion, an admirer of the biblical Joshua, is cast by Cohen as a modern-day incarnation of that great ancient leader and prophet. For if there is anyone who chose to ignore the message that I cited above from the first chapter of the book of Joshua, it is David Ben-Gurion. It was he who added to Israel’s declaration of independence the opening words, “The land of Israel is the birthplace of the Jewish people”—in full awareness that, for traditional Jews as for the book of Joshua itself, it was Sinai, not the land, that first made us into a nation. A genuinely *Jewish* nationalism, even as it cherishes that land, must also remember that Sinai is what preserved the Jews as a people for 2,000 years of exile, and continues to do so today.

Does this mean that the salvation of Jewish nationalism will come from the Orthodox? Not necessarily; after all, as Cohen notes, while the patriotic idealism of the religious-Zionist community in Israel is very strong, a number of religious Jews in Israel are neither philosophically Zionist nor prepared to bear arms in Israel’s defense. Whether it comes from within Israel’s Orthodox community or from without, a true model of Jewish nationalism must combine an unfaltering commitment to Jewish national well-being with a deep appreciation for the past that forms an inextricable component of that well-being.

Among Israeli leaders, the one who fits the bill better than David Ben-Gurion is Menachem Begin: the only Israeli leader to embrace, in Cohen’s fine words, both “the challenge of *protecting* the Jewish nation-state against its enemies and the challenge of *remaining* a Jewish state in character and culture.” Dedicated to Jewish self-preservation, Begin both ordered the destruction of Iraq’s Osirak reactor in defiance of so-called “international law” and, immediately upon becoming prime minister, declared that Israel’s national airlines would no longer fly on the Sabbath. The latter decision met with howls of protest from Ben-Gurion’s political and ideological heirs, who accused Begin of a foolish attachment to outmoded Diaspora custom at

the expense of national self-respect and financial common sense. Begin, no scrupulous observer of Jewish law, passionately rose to the defense of Jewish tradition:

[I]t is not necessary to be an observant Jew to appreciate the full historic and sacred aura that enshrines this “perfect gift” called Shabbat. Its prohibitions are not arbitrary. They provide insulation against corrosive everydayness, they build fences against invasions by the profane, and they enrich the soul by creating a space for sacred time. . . . [O]ne need not be pious to accept the cherished principle of Shabbat. One merely needs to be a proud Jew.

This was not a speech that Ben-Gurion, or any Labor prime minister, could have given, and I am not sure that any of Begin’s successors in the Likud party could have given it, either. Begin may have had his flaws as a leader, and there is no denying that David Ben-Gurion was an indispensable figure of Israeli independence. But a man who had no love or even admiration for 2,000 years of Jewish tradition cannot be regarded as a hero of Jewish conservatism.

In America, by contrast, the future defense of Israel rests largely not with Jews but with Christians. Jews, of course, must continue to do their part; but if America has been a friend to Israel, it is because, from the beginning, its Christianity was largely Hebraic in orientation, and at its best positively philo-Semitic. American support for Israel, as George W. Bush put it to Israel’s Knesset, stems first and foremost from Americans who see in the Jewish state the “redemption of an ancient promise given to Abraham, Moses, and David; a homeland for the chosen people in Eretz Yisrael.”

Which Americans care deeply about Israel? Who, to use a common phrase, pass the “kishke test”—that is, feel for Israel’s well-being in very recesses of their souls? Here, too, religion, matters. When the Pew survey asked respondents whether they believed that the land of Israel had been given by God to Abraham, over 80 percent of evangelical Christians said yes; only 40 percent of American Jews did. We may have reached a point in Jewish history where, for the first time, many Gentiles care more about the future well-being of the Jewish commonwealth than do many Jews.

And this brings us to the future of Jewish conservatism, at least in America. To my mind, that future lies less in trying to change American Jewry than in trying, as Jews, to preserve and protect what is best in America itself. And here is where Judaism in general, and perhaps American modern Orthodoxy in particular, may have found a unique calling.

These are terrible times for the conservatism that Eric Cohen defends and wants to propagate. The U.S. Supreme Court may be on the brink of declaring that the idea of the family central to Judaism and Christianity for millennia is irrational, bigoted, and constitutionally unfounded. Cohen rightly notes that religious liberty is woven into the very DNA of this country, yet only two decades after the unanimous passage by Congress of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, governors in Indiana and Arkansas have been compelled to apologize for endorsing similarly

worded enactments in their states. In the face of such developments, there will be a strong temptation for many people of faith to withdraw from American life completely, as the philosopher Alisdair Macintyre advises in *After Virtue*: “What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us.”

But this, perhaps, is too pessimistic. In the teachings of Judaism, a faith and a people that have endured, even at times prospered, in cultures pagan, Christian, and Muslim, there is an alternative model. People of faith, Rabbi Soloveitchik argued, must be prepared to embody Abraham’s identification of himself as a *ger vetoshav*, a stranger *and* a neighbor, aware of what makes them different while engaging the world and, like Abraham in Canaan, speaking candidly and eloquently about why they are different. Traditional Jews can show other faith communities how to succeed in a joint project to safeguard an America that will allow all of us to be “strangers and neighbors”—to fight for our religious freedom and distinctiveness, to make it ever easier to create religious schools, while also articulating a conservative vision of the American idea, what it meant to the founders, and how it serves as the basis of a political worldview. We can work, in other words, for conditions in which our children can be raised to become adults who are at once apart from and part of society. If we do all that, then we can be confident that religious communities will continue to procreate and grow and transmit their traditions—which, after all, is what religious communities do.

Centuries from now, historians studying the American Jewish community will surely be struck by how much, in terms of wealth, power, and civic comfort, this community achieved under conditions of unprecedented freedom. They will surely also be struck by how many chose to utilize that freedom to discard the heritage that their ancestors had sacrificed to conserve, even as others held fast to all that was right and true in it. But they will also ask: what did Jews do *for America*? When so many American Christians devoted themselves wholeheartedly to the well-being of the Jewish state, did Jews return the favor by supporting and fortifying the struggle to withstand a secular culture that had become hostile to so much that traditional theists believe in? America has been a blessed haven to the Jewish people; did Jews work to preserve, and sustain, the vision of its founders? If the answer to these questions is yes, one will know that the mission of Jewish conservatism has succeeded.