

The Status of Jewish Men in the Conservative/Masorti Movement

By Rabbi Charles Simon
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Introduction

Volunteerism and male volunteerism in particular is an issue of crucial importance to the future of Conservative/Masorti Judaism. It is one upon which our synagogues, camping system, educational, youth initiatives and major training institutions rely; and yet it is has not found its place on our Movement's agenda. Indeed the perception of the place of volunteer cultivation, like that of leadership training, has traditionally been misplaced in the non-profit world. Rather than view it as an ongoing process, synagogues and volunteer organizations implement it as an occasional project created in response to what is perceived as a temporary need. Responses of this sort are inadequate and fail to address what should be viewed as a long-term ongoing concern.

This paper focuses on the status of men in the Conservative/Masorti Movement for a number of reasons: First, it reflects nearly thirty years of my working with and studying and thinking about men. Second, even though a systematic study of the current involvement of Jewish men in the Conservative/Masorti Movement has not yet been performed, sufficient information gleaned from surveys performed in other venues can, when combined with one another, suggest what is happening to men in our Movement. Finally, the faculty of the Cohen Center at Brandeis University has lead me to believe that only **thirty percent** of all synagogue volunteers in our Movement are men, i.e. seventy percent are women.

While the marketplace and the Jewish world is increasingly becoming egalitarian, the process by which volunteers, both men and women, are targeted and cultivated needs to be shifted from current strategies which group men and women together to one that reflects current scholarship relating to gender engagement. Just as the maximization of a clergy person's effectiveness with an intermarried couple calls for an understanding of both person's religious backgrounds as well as recognition of

specific gender needs, so too, should this way of thinking apply to the cultivation of volunteers.

The purpose of this paper is to paint a picture for educators as well as for fathers and mothers, and for all Jewish professionals that explains what is happening to Jewish men in the volunteer world. The goal of this paper is to place the cultivation of volunteers and the re-engagement of Jewish men in Jewish life in the Conservative/Masorti Movement on our collective agendas.

Our training institutions are doing excellent work preparing the professional (both men and women) leadership for the future of our movement. And while they are wonderfully cooperative in working with and supporting the lay community, what is missing in the curriculum is the opportunity to study the specific needs of and the strategy for nourishing the LAY volunteer leadership of the future. This is further aggravated by the failure on the part of synagogues and Movement organizations to cooperate on and commit to a needed integrated long-term strategy to build volunteerism and support; and foster potential leadership on a Movement level.

Why are Men Less Involved?

Parallel to our Movement's initiating the process of engaging and empowering women thirty years ago, a weak series of protests claiming that the process of engaging women would deter and discourage male involvement in synagogue life began to be heard.

If the market place can create an environment where men and women work together on an equal basis or at least one which is evolving into an equal playing field, why would it be different in the synagogue? On the other hand, if one believes the synagogue represents the last bastion of a boys club, then why aren't men fighting back or at least why aren't we seeing an increase in male activities? If men are becoming less visible and fewer men are volunteering, it must be for other reasons.

In her book, The Male Brain, Dr. LuAnn Brizendine, formerly at Harvard University and currently of the faculty of UCSF Medical Center at the Langley Porter Psychiatric Institute, explains the physiological and biological changes that men undergo as they age. These changes address aggression, affection, maturation, parenting and grandparenting from a hormonal perspective. Her analysis never suggests that men would flee or choose not to engage with women in the marketplace or any other situation. While the argument that men, like women, need opportunities to work with and relate to one another is a serious one, it is foolish to assume that men are making fewer Jewish choices including synagogue involvement, and volunteering because they don't wish to participate in another egalitarian venue.

In the spring of 2010, I was contacted by a well-respected member of the Jewish press asking if it were true if the number of men graduating as rabbis from the Jewish Theological Seminary was in decline. "More women graduated this year than men," he said. "How many I asked?" Eleven out of twenty he replied." "Oh, (I responded slowly) you're speaking of five percent. What was it last year and what are the projections for next year?" He sheepishly terminated the conversation.

While it cannot be proved I believe it is unfair to assume that fewer men are entering the rabbinate and assuming leadership roles in Jewish institutional life because they do not wish to compete with women. It doesn't seem reasonable. The specter of this argument continues to surface every time a journalist addresses the subject. For the record twenty-seven of the thirty-six students graduating from JTS and AJU in May 2011 are men.

The lessening of Jewish Male involvement in synagogue and in Jewish life is a direct result of what men have been taught for the last thirty plus years. During that time the Jewish community focused significant resources towards rectifying the gender imbalance and creating egalitarian communities. This process unwittingly assumed that men's needs would remain the same. It sounds like a bad joke (that men always want the same thing) but as the world changed, so did the needs and expectations of men. Thirty plus years later, men

have learned it is acceptable to leave their children in the synagogue parking lots on Sunday mornings and are seeking and finding other venues to fulfill their intellectual, spiritual and social needs. Thirty plus years later significant numbers of men find what happens in the sanctuary irrelevant and the attempts to engage them (family services, meditation services) resonate to a small minority and continue to attract significantly larger numbers of women than men. Thirty plus years of neglect has produced a specific and unintended result. Men are increasingly less visible in Jewish life because their needs have not been addressed.

For thirty plus years synagogues created engaging serious adult b'nai mitzvah programs however, they never considered the implications of dual-career parenting and its possible impact on male involvement. Important initiatives to address women's health concerns were created but similar think tanks or lobbies to consider whether or not similar activities should be created for men failed to emerge. If male involvement in synagogue life has diminished it is not because men don't wish to compete with women; it's because their needs and the means to address those needs have been ignored or forgotten. A strategy to address gender imbalance is urgently needed.

Learning how to address gender imbalance

In order to develop an understanding and to construct a strategy to engage Jewish Men one must begin by asking the following questions:

1. What are the current assumptions relating to engagement and do they apply to men?
2. Are there any specific qualities that generally distinguish Jewish men from the men of other cultures, and if so, how should the strategy be modified?
3. What are the ingredients necessary for engagement?
4. What needs to occur in order to make worship and mitzvot speak to men?

What is the current assumption relating to engagement and does it apply to men? The prevailing attitude that has emerged in the post Katrina world for engaging young adults is that one of the threads which connect young adults to Jewish life is social action. This is an important term and

requires further explication. Social action activities, whether they be directed at young or mature men, require specific definition. Some activities like visiting the sick (bikkur holim) more often than not will fail to attract men. Men will acknowledge visiting the sick is an important activity but will also say it isn't one to which they gravitate. Social action for men needs to be cause or mission related.

Men will build a house, ride a bike, climb a mountain, and track through jungles in order to build latrines, or teach remedial reading because these activities provide them with a sense of accomplishment on a number of levels. Male volunteer engagement is linear. It requires a cause that projects reasonable results. *Mission accomplished what's next?*

Are there any specific qualities that generally distinguish Jewish men from the men of other cultures and if so how should they be addressed?

I recently learned of a survey performed by an FJMC brotherhood leader which was sent to the wives of the club's members asking them to indicate in which activities they would desire their spouses to participate. To say it another way, "What would you like your husband to do?" This is different from asking women what their husbands will do for them.

There are those of us who are more technologically inclined than others and there are those of us who take pleasure in "hands on" work. On the other hand, "calling the plumber" doesn't have to be the Jewish males' demonstrated response when minor handyman skills are required. The women who filled out the questionnaires generally wanted their husbands to learn how to fix a toilet, clean gutters and make general repairs i.e., demonstrate skills beyond that of changing a light bulb. Is anyone surprised how many Jewish men lack these basic abilities?

The flip side of this equation is, would having these skills make a man more or less attractive to his partner? Could this be an indicator of what the Jewish man in the 21st Century needs to be? Should it become part of our rhetoric?

This is an interesting question and reveals part of our current dilemma. One the one hand, many of scholars of Jewish contemporary life readily admit

that the level of Jewish competency is often what deters people from becoming involved. At the same time, they acknowledge that our culture promotes and admires the scholar and the thinker. Decades ago, Rabbi Harold Schulweis commented that we have the most highly educated, most sophisticated population that has ever existed in the Jewish world and most of them feel incompetent and inadequate when they enter a synagogue. Is it any wonder that they choose not to become active participants?

Consider all of the jokes describing men driving and completely lost but refusing to ask for directions? Men need to demonstrate competence and are less willing than women to ask for help. Have you ever considered how many marital quarrels were avoided because some smart guy invented the GPS?

In response to the questionnaire, the brotherhood is sponsoring a series of small "how to" workshops. Men, especially Jewish men, need to feel competent. The desire to feel competent is one of the reasons that men choose not to attend synagogue religious services. Competency whether it is in the garden, the house, or the sanctuary is a concern that needs to be addressed.

Competency appears to be unifying factor that crosses cultural lines, however, Jewish cultural norms place more credibility on assertiveness, social and intellectual engagement than physical prowess.

What are the necessary ingredients for engagement?

In an article titled, *Policy Implications of the Gender Imbalance among America's Jews*, Jewish Political Studies Review Fall 2008, Sylvia Barak Fishman stated that men's feelings of religious incompetence are one of the leading factors that inhibits synagogue engagement. Assuming this to be correct would it be possible to reformulate how a synagogue projects itself so that it could incorporate the following five items:

- 1) Men will **become** engaged if they feel satisfied something has been gained or something has been learned.
- 2) Men will **become** engaged if they feel their "volunteer time" is appreciated and not wasted.
- 3) Men will **become** engaged if challenged to rise to an occasion.

- 4) Men will **remain** engaged if camaraderie is present.
- 5) Men will **remain** engaged if positioned in an environment that balances seriousness of purpose with fun.

For example, imagine a hunter's state of mind when he begins his quest. *I have my tools. I am ready to hunt. I have anticipated the challenges that need to be met. I am confident. I will succeed. It will be fun. Hunters need to hunt. Hunters need to know the challenges of the moment have been met. Hunters relish an atmosphere that balances seriousness of purpose with enjoyment. Hunters appreciate their tools.*

Now imagine this scenario: Perry enters the sanctuary. He doesn't know where to find the tools, he doesn't know his way, and his mind yells at him, "It's a jungle!" He looks around and shakes his head. "This is definitely not fun."

Volunteers, both men and women, appreciate being asked and being thanked. I suspect that engaging male volunteers even if they wish to be engaged is more complicated. The issues surrounding gender involvement are many, including the understanding of social rules and the differences between sub-groups of Masorti Jews. Like women, men appreciate being asked and being thanked; however, many of them have a tendency to initially reject positions of responsibility for a variety of reasons.

There is an art to asking. If one wishes to engage men and ask them to accept a time-demanding position, the chances of obtaining success would be dramatically increased if it were presented in a context that includes a recognition of their existing time commitments, an awareness of the atmosphere that will be encountered, the seriousness of purpose of the task (hunt), and the enjoyment that will be gained. *Men and women often require a different language of engagement.*

While some men, seek positions of leadership, a great majority, will only take that first step on the ladder towards leadership and responsibility if the above five ingredients have been included. If the representatives of an institution ask a person to volunteer without an understanding that volunteers

and leaders needs to be cultivated over a multi-year period, they have committed a fatal flaw and have fallen victim to the quick fix virus, a virus that will inhibit the building of a volunteer community.

Basic Engagement

A number of years ago the FJMC in partnership with the Cantors Assembly, established a series of pilot programs in an initiative called, "passionate davening." The goals were to create a series of successful models that would attract and involve people in either daily minyanim, the Friday evening, or Shabbat morning service. After two years of effort, a number of important lessons were learned. One of these lessons relates specifically to men.

This effort required that both clergy and lay leaders agreed to make phone calls to members of the congregation, specifically those who rarely attended services with the intent of engaging them more effectively in congregational life. Each phone call began with a request and an invitation for the person being called to attend a "think tank" where a select committee would brainstorm about a designated service.

It was anticipated that a majority of the people called would respond that they never or rarely attended services and in all probability didn't like synagogue worship services in general. The callers were asked to counter this response with a statement indicating that was the reason for their being called. "We would like to learn why you chose not to attend and we would like to convene a meeting of you and other people with similar feelings in order to learn what we could do to make the designated worship service more meaningful."

Surprisingly, or perhaps not surprisingly, a significant majority of the men called chose to attend the meetings and many of them, over a brief period of time and as a result of the process we created to engage them, became active proponents of that "service". They began attending the specific service regularly, made friends, and became regular attendees. Within two months one began to hear them say things like, "Why don't you come with me to my service. I guarantee you will like it." *Men like to be asked. Asking for an opinion is a key to engagement.*

The challenge of raising the Issue

The engagement of men and their sons needs to be placed on the agenda of the Conservative/Masorti Movement. In order for this to occur a framework and methodology for male engagement needs to be created. This framework needs to be constructed and presented to community leaders in an organized coordinated fashion that allows it to be heard. Unfortunately, the most obvious choices for delivering this message will most likely fail.

I remember a number of years ago, I was one of two men on a conference call with an additional half a dozen Jewish Outreach workers. The call had been convened to discuss male involvement. I listened for forty-five minutes to six women speaking amongst themselves. They decided the way to engage a man in Jewish life was to offer "Daddy and Me" classes. After the call's conclusion the other man, a prominent Reform rabbi, and I contacted the convener and explained that as men, we knew the suggested approach would fail.

At that time, I wasn't aware what could be learned from the people who were studying hormonal drives and how they could serve as jumping off points for programming; but I instinctively understood that teaching young men how to become more effective nurturers would not attract twenty-thirty year olds. Mission driven or competitive activities or opportunities to receive mentoring would have been more effective.

The current and most obvious venue for delivering the message is the synagogue and if the rabbi is the decision maker then most probably he/she will select the pulpit as the place for raising the community's consciousness. Unfortunately, the rabbi who delivers a sermon referencing the second gender to a congregation composed of more than fifty percent women will most assuredly not succeed in engaging men. If the address is concerned with the quality or failure of male friendships, it might gain the support of the women present, but it also won't necessarily translate into increased male involvement.

A plan of engagement requires a special place and a specific strategy. It needs to incorporate our understanding of hormonal/biological drives and couple them with the need to find stakeholders. If

men have been biologically wired to be problem solvers and "fixers" then; for some of us, the necessary tools or components needed for re-engagement needs to be included in the plan. A plan of engagement requires a tool kit. If I am presented with a situation that needs to be addressed a problem which needs to be tackled, provide me the information so that I can fully understand the problem/concern.

If we/they are fixers; how can we/they possibly attempt to rectify a situation and become involved if the needed components/tools have not be provided?

Desire is one of the needed components that belong in the toolbox.

Information is another of the needed components.

Fortunately, relevant information/data is available and can be extracted from studies in four ancillary areas. They are:

- 1) Studies comparing Jewish involvement of high school boys to high school girls
- 2) Studies in the non-Jewish world comparing the religious involvement of college men to college women
- 3) The data relating to intermarriage
- 4) What we have learned about Jewish engagement

The Tools: Providing the Data

What do we know about boys, men and Jewish involvement? In the early part of this century a Philadelphia based non-profit group, "Moving Traditions" began to study the Jewish involvement of high school boys and compare it with the involvement of high school girls. The result of their work indicated that teenage boys were significantly less Jewishly engaged than teenage girls of the same age. In 2009 the Pew Charitable Trust completed a study of male involvement in church and Christian religious activity on more than one dozen campus in the United States. The study was created in response to the Christian community's concern that college age men were less involved in church and religious activities than their feminine counterparts.

While the common denominator at first appeared to be religious involvement, further questioning revealed it was actually gender engagement. It was not a surprise to learn that Jewish men on campus

are significantly less than involved in Jewish living than women of the same age. By combining the studies relating to high school boys and university men and coupling it to the information relating to intermarriage gleaned from the National Jewish Population Survey of 2000 (NJPS), a portrait of the future choices that Jewish men of marriageable age will most likely make begins to emerge.

The NJPS provided our communities with crucial information about intermarriage. Since that time, subsequent studies have successfully added to our understanding about intermarrieds and Jewish identification. The studies indicate that our children, when they seek to identify Jewishly, initially desire to replicate their childhood religious and family experience and will seek out Conservative synagogues even if they are intermarried.

The studies also indicate that a significant percentage of non-Jewish men and women who have intermarried choose to become Jewish after a decade of marriage. This number can actually be larger if the couple is involved in synagogue life. In addition, we know that the more socially engaged young adults are in Jewish life and the more engaged they are with Jewish peers, the stronger their opportunity for in-marriage or creating Jewish homes will be.

Finally, the data gathered from 250,000 young adults who attended Taglit Birthright Israel program over a ten year period informs us that the amount of in-marriage that occurred following Birthright experience is twice the United States norm as is the number of people choosing to marry and become Jewish. These statistics appear encouraging, but shouldn't be misconstrued to lead us to believe these young adults will join shuls. It simply indicates that these young adults have a desire to identify with the Jewish people. How and if they become engaged is another matter.

Fathers have been taught to plan for their children's future and if and when possible save enough to afford tuition for camps and post high school education. When possible, they also plan and save to provide their children with gifts in the event they choose to marry. For the first time it is now possible to provide fathers with the tools which will influence their children's future Jewish choices.

Synagogue leaderships' challenge is to present this information to fathers of toddlers, pre-teens, teens and young men of marriageable age in a manner that allows them to develop their own problem solving strategies, i.e. make decisions that could work for their families.

Roger is an active under forty-year-old member of one of our men's clubs. He is the father of two children and is a regular Sabbath attendee. He has successfully recruited a cadre of his peers. Most of them were raised in Conservative synagogues and most of them were never regular synagogue attendees. As a result of his leadership, nearly one dozen men attend daily minyan the same day of the week. Following that, they breakfast together. One morning I met Roger for coffee and asked him why he became an active member of the synagogue. His response was simple and direct. "I married a Jewish woman who was a Jew by birth but lacked any connection to Jewish life. As soon as I became a father I realized that if I wanted Jewish grandchildren it would be my responsibility."

Roger instinctively understood his situation / dilemma / challenge and developed a plan to address it. While all of us might not be as intuitive, sufficient information is available to allow us to do something that has never been done before.

We can overturn past assumptions of current generations, which assumed that sending one's children to religious school and possibly supplementing it with youth programs or summer camps were sufficient to ensure Jewish continuity and substitute a picture outlining the possibility of young adults' future choices supported by data.

Data/information can encourage parents/fathers to make more educated decisions.

Involving Jewish Men more effectively in Jewish life

One of the ways to involve Jewish men in Jewish life is to convene a series of focus groups asking all present what Jewish choices they would like their children to make? Given this is a self-selecting population most of them will indicate a desire for their children to marry Jewish or be part of a Jewishly connected family. These responses provide

a segue for presenting men with a picture of what is occurring in the North American Jewish community and the choices that young adults (their children) are likely to make in the future. Serious discussion, camaraderie, challenge, and opportunity to learn are the tools and provide each individual with the necessary components to begin to seriously consider the nature of the Jewish choices they are making and the impact they will have on their children.

Men in the Sanctuary: What will it take to make it work?

Today the dwindling number of men who choose to actively participate in synagogue worship either come from traditional homes, day schools and/or Camps Ramah, or are seekers who appreciate the natural community that is offered in either a daily or Shabbat service. They are a minority.

Most of the men who belong to our communities rarely attend a given service on a regular basis, and if they do, it is for social or community reasons. Their level of Jewish knowledge in most instances could be described as minimal. They and their friends constitute our target market.

When the FJMC piloted the “Passionate Davening” initiative one of the first questions each rabbi was asked was, “How do you want your congregants to feel at the service’s conclusion?” For those who are in the marketing world this is an obvious question. If a goal is not established at the outset how can it possibly be attained? For many rabbis it was a question with which they had never been confronted and as a consequence many of them were unable to respond and for some it challenged the very nature of how they understood community worship.

What do you mean, how should they feel? It’s a service, we sing, I teach, we pray together. It’s what we do?

The “passionate davening” model didn’t radically alter the nature of the service. The structure and prayers remained the same. It did, however, modify the way the service was positioned. By learning to be more sensitive to timing, choreography, physical gestures, music, teaching and intellectual engagement the successful congregational team,

learned how to build a more vibrant active participatory constituency.

If we are interested in developing ways to re-involve Jewish men in community prayer, then we must re-imagine what happens in a given service in light of the five previous points and allow the service to be guided in a way that it addresses their motivational needs.

This won’t necessarily change the structure of the service or the prayers that need to be recited, but it can succeed in altering the atmosphere in the synagogue from one which re-enforces alienation to one where men feel their needs are being met. This can be accomplished without disturbing those who have find comfort and meaning in the status quo. Creating the atmosphere is the first step towards implementing a strategic plan to raise the level of men’s involvement and knowledge.

This process reminds me of a statement attributed to Rabbi Akiba who allegedly said that study is the highest form of worship because study leads to practice. The word “volunteerism” can be substituted for “practice” because the results of engagement can be if properly addressed, increased volunteerism.

Conclusion

If one takes a moment to look at gender involvement in non-Orthodox Jewish and most Christian religious streams, one quickly becomes aware of the existence of the tremendous gender imbalance that exists. This imbalance is less pronounced in the Conservative Movement than it is in other non-Orthodox streams but will most likely continue to increase unless we, our Movement leadership, decides to address it.

This process begins with local synagogues and Movement institutions and organizations asking basic questions. “Why are fewer men volunteering and what is it about the way we run our institutions that is causing fewer men to desire leadership positions?”

This question needs to be considered in tandem with the assumption that the goal of each organization or institution should be to motivate Jewish men to become more active in Jewish life as opposed to perpetuating current thinking which posits that the

goal of each institution is to assure its own continuity. The current manner of thinking limits opportunities for engagement and creates a view of the synagogue and organization as being imperiled and threatened.

Men need to be challenged and synagogues boards, which are often perceived as challenging as co-op boards, fail to motivate and attract people with vision and desire to make a difference. To say it more succinctly, too often the manner in which synagogue and organizational leaders seek to engage men are contrary to their motivations and result in negative charisma that discourages men from becoming involved. Current assumptions that men

are too busy are a weak explanation of our failure to motivate men properly. However, if synagogue involvement and participation is placed in the larger context of Movement importance and the opportunity is provided for individuals and families to obtain personal meaning, then it is possible that an increased number of men would rise to the occasion. Specific strategies for engagement that incorporate our current understanding of gender motivation can be created and employed. If we modify the manner in which we perceive the situation, it is possible for plans to be implemented that will correct the gender imbalance in our communities.

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