

In Search of a Voice
by Al Simon, Beth El Ner Tamid Synagogue, Mequon, WI, March, 2004

There is an element that exists but is not to be found on the Periodic Table of Elements. This element is neither organic nor inorganic, and yet it lives. No telescope can detect its existence, and not even the most powerful electron microscope can reveal its presence. This element, although completely invisible in its natural state, is one of the world's most powerful forces. It goes by the name of fear. Fear is a child and its birth takes place in the presence of two conditions: the unwillingness to experience change and the extreme need to avoid that which is unknown. The nature of this element will not respond to reason, logic, or common sense. In its purest form, fear will suffer the death of its host, rather than to risk change and to subject itself to the experience of the unknown.

Today, the Conservative Movement is in a struggle to find a voice that speaks to the Jews of its community. All Conservative Synagogues require a voice that can be heard and which can find favor with not only the unaffiliated Jews of its community, but also with Jewish individuals who have chosen to embrace non-Jews in marriage as well as the children of these marriages. The question becomes, "What is required of Conservative Judaism in order to accomplish such a daunting task?" The answer is change.

If we glance backwards at the history of civilizations, we find an amazing consistency: in the absence of change, societies that have failed to remain relevant and meaningful to each succeeding generation have ultimately dissolved into antiquity. The problem is not simply the desire on the part of a particular society to cling to the ways and methods of their forefathers. The real problem is finding a voice that transmits those ancient values and ideals in a manner that positively relates to its current generation. Each and every one of us who live in this present moment, are witnesses to the effect of societies who have lived in the fear of change and the fear of the unknown. However great or small were

these cultures, they are all relegated to the print in our history books.

As Jews, do we not only have the right, but even more so, do we have an obligation to examine the very relevance of change itself? We are the people of the Book. For all we value and hold dear, we turn to our ancient writings and legacies for guidance and direction. When we examine Genesis, we find the existence of two great forces—each force being essential to creation but in total opposition to each other. They are the forces of permanence and change.

In the initial stages of creation, we see that God creates a foundation for the world that is both permanent and immutable. The underpinnings of creation are literally the forces of that which can be called everlasting. But the grandeur of creation was not to be a cosmic mural suspended in the heavens like a lifeless painting. To the foundation of permanence are added the elements of change, chance, and even uncertainty.

It is here, in the ever-shifting cycles, in the ever-present moments of birth and re-birth that we are witness to the living fingerprint of God. In all things, the universe of which we are a part, speaks to ever-present change. Indeed, it is within the absence of change that decay and death take place. Every breath we take, every new heartbeat casts us into the next moment of life.

As Jews, we have a responsibility not only to recognize that change is the pathway to the future, but we also have the obligation to embrace it, despite its uncertainties and inherent unknowns. And so, we return to the original question. "What must we, as Conservative Jews do, in order to find this new voice?"

I recently wrote Rabbi Elliot Dorff a letter of thanks and appreciation for coming to our synagogue to serve as our Scholar-in Residence for the weekend of February 20th, 21st, and 22nd. His Friday night presentation encompassed the

vital importance of embracing Keruv. He is truly one of the greatest Jewish Scholars in America. However insightful and penetrating his words and thoughts may be, the nature of Keruv has the potential to unlock some of the greatest fears among members of the Conservative movement. I received direct feedback from some congregants regarding these fears. While these fears are many, two of them will illustrate the passion some will demonstrate in order to resist having the non-Jew among us. The fear that these non-Jews will somehow dilute our ritual programs, and that their non-Jewish children will form loving relationships with our Jewish children, resulting in interfaith marriages. The realities of these fears are often unfounded. For example, with regard to the non-Jewish spouse, when properly welcomed, encouraged, and motivated, those who are relatives of the Children of Israel, can very easily become a Child of Israel also.

In the letter to Rabbi Dorff, I shared these expressions of fear with him. I said in this letter, "As you know Elliot, these fears are extremely large issues and often lie at the foundation for great resistance to any introduction for welcoming a non-Jewish spouse into our synagogue. In the face of such concern, I truly wonder how much effect our Men's Club Keruv project can have. Ultimately, the general membership of the synagogue must embrace the concept of Keruv in order for it foster properly. No matter how successfully Men's Club may foster Keruv, its true success lies within the walls of the Sanctuary and the beating hearts of the men and women who pray within."

In no way am I implying that the efforts we are about to generate are not worthy of our time, talent, and financial resources. It is easily foreseeable that our efforts can and will be the mechanism that breakdown some of the fears and stereotyping that lie at the foundation for change. Fears that are passed down generationally are often the most resistant to change. Often, the fears are not even acknowledged until they are challenged, and then they are defended with a vengeance.

Conservative Judaism must remember that its initial success as a movement was predicated on its willingness to adapt and change, to find a voice that spoke to the Jews of its generation, some of whom were Orthodox, but were willing to listen to a new and contemporary voice.

Because of the ever-shifting patterns in our social structure, we again must find the voice that speaks to our community. It is my deepest prayer, that thoughtful men and women of our movement will set aside the element of fear, and recreate the spirit of the mitzvah- "And you shall welcome the stranger among you."