

Exploring the Bonds of Judaism and Conservatism

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COMMENTARY

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Last Sunday, in New York City, the Jewish Leadership Conference held its “Inaugural Conference on Jews and Conservatism.” The one-day event attracted some 400 participants from around the country and from Canada, Mexico, and Israel. It featured prominent scholars, educators, policy professionals, and leaders from religion and politics, along with a rousing concluding keynote address by Israeli Ambassador Ron Dermer. The conference is part of the JLC’s ambitious effort to fortify American Judaism and American conservatism by forging an alliance between them.

It is a welcome undertaking since Judaism and conservatism share a fundamental interest in reconciling faith and liberty. It is also fraught with perplexities because both Judaism and conservatism are simultaneously riding high and suffering from an identity crisis.

Conservatism is politically ascendant in America. The Republican Party, the American conservative movement's political home, controls all three branches of the federal government, two-thirds of state legislative chambers, and close to two-thirds of governors' mansions.

At the same time, while pursuing a startlingly conservative agenda, President Trump is, to put it mildly, neither versed in conservative principles nor a personification of conservative ideals. While a victory on tax reform is likely, the fractious Republican Party has been unable under Trump to unite around a coherent and viable legislative agenda. The old enmity between social conservatives and libertarians or classical liberals, never entirely dormant, has resurfaced. And with Trump's approval ratings in the basement, a Democratic wave in next year's congressional midterm elections is anything but unthinkable.

For their part, American Jews have much for which to be grateful. A people accustomed since antiquity to life on the margins in the best of circumstances and, in ordinary times, to vicious persecution as a daily menace, Jews have prospered spectacularly in America. Emancipated from legal liabilities and social opprobrium, they have risen to the top of most every profession. The age-old scourge of anti-Semitism has been largely relegated to the fringes of American society (though the Boycott, Divestment and Sanction movement on American campuses lends credence to the supposition that anti-Zionism is the new guise of anti-Semitism).

Nevertheless, American Judaism is rent by division and discord. It has long comprised three movements — Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox — with a fourth, the ultra-Orthodox, steadily growing in size and influence. The movements disagree, and sometimes bitterly, about the legitimacy of intermarriage, the laws of conversion, and the status of women in religious ritual and public life.

Over the last few decades, moreover, a perilous rift has opened among American Jews on the question of Israel. More and more Reform Jews are estranged from the Jewish state because it continues to control approximately 3 million West Bank Palestinians. In contrast, Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Jews tend to think that the territories they call by the biblical names of Judea and Samaria rightfully belong to Israel and are crucial to the country's ability to defend itself from the jihadist threat that surrounds it.

The co-chairs of the Conference on Jews and Conservatism — Roger Hertog, president of the Hertog Foundation and chairman of the Tikvah Fund (I teach for both); Eric Cohen, Tikvah's executive director; and Aylana Meisel, Tikvah's director of strategic initiatives — are acutely aware of the challenge. They believe, however, that the ties that bind the traditions present a golden opportunity. As Cohen and Meisel argued in a 12,000-word manifesto in Commentary magazine that launched the movement, "Like Judaism itself, conservatism still honors the importance of fidelity to tradition, communal obligation, and the role of religion in sustaining a moral society."

The conference's major speeches and policy breakout sessions reflected the fledgling movement's core principles. These include the embrace of individual freedom, human equality, and civic responsibility along with dedication to the preservation of a distinctively Jewish way of life and the celebration of the achievements of Jewish civilization. In addition, the JLC seeks to protect religious liberty for all. It aims to defend parents' right to educate their children in schools that reflect their religious beliefs. It undertakes to bolster enduring marriages and strong families built around the gift and responsibilities of raising children. And it champions Israel as the sovereign nation-state of the Jewish people and as America's strategic and moral ally.

In her opening keynote address, Tikvah Distinguished Senior Fellow Ruth Wisse explored the political wisdom suffusing the works of three great 20th-century Jewish writers. She brought to life the warning in Isaac Babel's story "Argamak" against evading the responsibilities of political power. Isaac Bashevis Singer's novel "Satan in Goray," Wisse argued, dramatizes the drastic consequences of succumbing to the temptations of enlightenment and secularism by throwing off the old moral rules and customary restraints grounded in religion. And Shmuel Yosef Agnon's novel "In the Heart of the Seas" — a tale of the early-19th-century journey of a group of Eastern European Hasidic Jews to the Holy Land — teaches, according to Wisse, that recovering national sovereignty is a necessary step in renewing Jewish dignity.

Former Bush administration Deputy National Security Adviser Elliott Abrams discussed left, right, and Israel. The left's turn against the Jewish state, he asserted, is a global phenomenon. Anti-Semitism is a factor. Another is that since Ariel Sharon's 2001 election victory, Israel has had 16 consecutive years of right-wing governments. But the major cause of left-wing animus against Israel, Abrams maintained, is hostility — especially intense in the European left — against nation-states and national sovereignty. If you view nationalism as a political poison akin to racism and a root of fascism, you are bound to deplore Israel, whose citizen-soldiers fight, kill, and die to defend their nation.

In contrast, observed Abrams, the American right's strong support for Israel — a phenomenon of recent decades — stems from a common devotion to freedom and equality, a shared biblical heritage, and Israel's position on the front lines in the struggle against a terrorist enemy that is also an enemy of the United States.

Yale University professor of computer science David Gelernter delivered a provocative speech on the "Jewish invention of the West." Although his thesis is overstated — classical Greece is also a major source of Western civilization — it serves as a salutary corrective to the general neglect in university education of the Hebrew Bible and its influence. Within the West, the Bible nurtured the fundamental belief in the dignity of the individual, the idea of nation-states as opposed to tribes and empires, and surpassing achievements in art and music.

Ambassador Dermer closed the conference with trenchant remarks on the enduring bonds linking America and Israel. The cautionary statement with which he began about the error of conflating religion and politics was especially noteworthy coming from an Orthodox Jew and a political conservative.

Dermer urged conference participants to respect the difference between Judaism and conservatism. “Judaism promises a holy life that brings individuals closer to God,” he said. In contrast, “politics can be inspired by faith but politics can never replace faith.”

Amid the current political tumult, not the least advantage of the alliance between Judaism and conservatism pursued by the JLC is the prospect of restoring a better understanding of that which links, and that which distinguishes, Biblical faith and political freedom.

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