

## Bar Mitzvah Importance of Conservative Judaism

LAY AND RABBINICAL LEADERS MEET IN TWO-DAY CONFERENCE TO DISCUSS WAYS AND MEANS OF IMPROVING RELIGIOSITY IN SYNAGOGUE AND HOME

(by Henry W. Levy)

TARRYTOWN, NEW YORK--Such questions as raising the Bar-Bas Mitzvah age from thirteen to sixteen or seventeen, whether present Sabbath morning services are generally geared to meet the needs of the congregations, whether rabbis' sermons are too long, the role of women in the synagogue service, and an analysis of whether the prayers in services are too repetitious, were among the problems discussed by some thirty-five leaders of Conservative Jewry at a two-day conference on "Rite and Ritual -- Customs and Ceremonies," conducted by the Institute of Jewish Living of the United Synagogue of America.

It was a serious conference, attended by knowing laymen and rabbis, that attempted to meet on an honest, informal level, in an effort to devise ideas and techniques to improve the quality of Jewish observance in the synagogue and the home. It was, as Arthur J. Levine, its chairman, said, an effort to "discuss the substance of Conservative Judaism. We are trying by frank and critical discussion to develop a feeling tone from which we can develop a more meaningful Jewish life -- a Conservative Judaism that is neither a pallid mirror of Orthodoxy nor a compromise with the changes of Reform."

This was the fourth such conference held by leaders of the United Synagogue, of which Jacob Stein is president. The previous ones were on the kindred subjects of intermarriage, the role and status of women in Conservative Judaism, and the Jewish collegian.

Sitting in on the conference with laymen and leaders from all over the country, one couldn't help but be impressed with the concern of the participants, their desire to define what was wrong with present practices, and their aim at moving towards solutions that would improve Jewish life in the U.S. and Canada. The conference, and its predecessors, were preludes to the sixtieth anniversary convention of the United Synagogue's 833 affiliated congregations that will meet for its biennial convention at the Concord Hotel, Kiamesha lake, New York, November 11 through November 15 later this year. A consensus of the views expressed at the "Rite and Ritual" conference will be presented to the full biennial of the 3000 delegates, with a view towards guiding them in their deliberations and actions.

There were no set speeches; excerpts were not prepared in advance for the press. The nearest thing to a formal presentation was made by Rabbi Jules Harlow, Director of Publications of the Rabbinical Assembly. The editor of the new edition of the Rabbinical Assembly's High Holiday Prayerbook, he discussed modern prayer in Conservative Judaism and laid the basis for the informed discussion that followed. The conference, as he said, was to help do away with "a hardening of our liturgical arteries in a time which hardly can be called an era of prayer."

The presumption was accepted that only five to ten per cent of Conservative Jewry really fully participate and understand their professed religion. It was thus, said Rabbi Harlow, that it was time to revise and revitalize rituals, define techniques, and test the efficiency of the classical Conservative service, so that its impact could be improved.

Premise number one that was accepted by the participants was that the average Jewish layman attending services, and practicing his Judaism, was too often merely a part of the audience rather than a participant. "Greater involvement" in Jewish religious life in the home and the synagogue was the goal to which to aspire.

Take the discussion of the Bar Mitzvah, as an example. No other single subject evoked such heated discussion. Dr. Morton Siegel, executive of director of the United Synagogue, backed by Jacob Stein, the president, agreed that radical surgery was needed. It was generally accepted that the Bar-Bas Mitzvah (we include the two in all succeeding references) had assumed too important a role in the Jew-



JEWISH CHAPLAIN SHOWS SON OF A JEWISH OFFICER IN THE ARMED FORCES HOW TO BLOW THE SHOFAR AT A PRE-HIGH HOLY DAY SESSION WHILE CHILDREN OF ANOTHER JEWISH OFFICER WATCH.

ish educational process; that, in some cases, it had been vulgarized, that it was no longer just an aspect of the Jewish educational process, but that it had too often become more an end of Jewish education than the beginning that it should be.

It was generally accepted that the Bar Mitzvah had been "overplayed" in the synagogue; that steps must be taken to "underplay" it. It was agreed that too often it had become the only or principal focus of the Shabbat service, and those congregants who were not a part of the Bar Mitzvah party suffered through its over-emphasis.

Dr. Siegel's most startling suggestion was that the Bar Mitzvah age be raised from thirteen to sixteen or seventeen; that the traditional service at thirteen (the achievement of the age of puberty for the child) be noted by a call to the Torah for a reading.

But the acceptance of the concept that Bar Mitzvah was an important achievement in the Jewish educational process, and should be recognized as such, was held to be faulty. It was agreed that a statement of suggestions of the conference on Bar Mitzvah be prepared for submission for action to the United Synagogue biennial convention. Included in the consensus of thinking was that the ritual for the thirteen-year-old be accepted as a chronological event after five years of attending religious school; that Bar Mitzvah be granted three or four years later after completion of Hebrew religious high school; that Bar Mitzvah be only a minimal part of the Shabbat service, not its major aspect; and that any parties to be held should be dignified and in conformance with all the accepted traditions of Jewish observance.

Rabbis Hershel Matt, of the Jewish Center of Princeton; Bernard Segal, executive vice president of the United Synagogue; and Mordecai Waxman, vice president of the Rabbinical Assembly and rabbi of Temple Israel, Great Neck, led the discussion of the Sabbath service. Rabbi Matt expressed the belief that human beings have a basic need for prayer, and that it must not be slighted in any new practices evolved; but he urged innovative techniques, the use of more English and its chanting, as is done with the Hebrew. Rabbi Bernard Segal urged greater emphasis on the study aspect of the synagogue service. Rabbi Waxman agreed, but emphasized that each congregation, and each rabbi, according to their needs and beliefs, must evolve their own particular types of services. Mr. Stein pointed out that emotional appeal must not be forgotten in the process of intellectualization. William Abrams, of Montreal, suggested that the prayers of petition, so much a part of the present ritual, can no longer be the fundamental reason for inclusion in the service.

There was wide agreement that the service ritual must be more understandable to more people; that this may be accomplished by more English in the service; by greater explanation by the rabbi; by study and dialogues during the service; and by acceptance of the fact that what

was right sixty years ago, when Conservative Judaism first evolved, may not be necessary today. There was much sentiment for a new prayer book, couched in more modern terms, very likely with less formal prayer.

Richard Moline, president of the United Synagogue Youth, said that the specific interests of the youthful Jews must not be ignored. Mrs. Selma Rapaport, president of the Women's League for Conservative Judaism, emphasized the need for greater parent education and the rabbi using the synagogue service as a teacher as well as preacher. Rabbi Harlow suggested that the Friday night service has declined in acceptance and its whole impact should be reviewed. He also advocated more use of the lay reader as a participant in the service.

Mrs. Edya Arzt, speaking on decorum and dress for those attending services, recognized that there are changes in dress that are accepted today, but that we must continue to recognize that going to synagogue basically requires dress other than work-a-day. Speaking for youth, Mr. Moline said that many young people felt that there was nothing wrong about praying in blue jeans.

There were many other thoughts expressed-- too many to be covered in a brief article. Rabbi Waxman felt that there should be shorter readings from the Torah, and that readings used should have something to say to moderns. Mr. Stein observed that a new Torah commentary in English might be a real need. Several speakers suggested that Jewish standards -- kashrut and Jewish living -- should be a requisite for synagogue leadership. Mrs. Evelyn Henkind said that more use should be made of the published materials of the Women's League.

Mr. Levine concluded that the subject of

Mr. Levine concluded that the subject of rites and ritual was a most "amorphous" subject, which did not always respond to definitive answers. He said that the lesson of the Conference was that there must be more and continued discussion with other arms of the Conservative movement -- the Rabbinical Assembly; the Women's League; the Men's Clubs; and all others. "The dialogue," he suggested, "has just been started."

An observer might add that the attendance at the Conference proved that there is still a real and serious interest among Jews in religion as religion, that Judaism is still more a faith than an ethnic movement.

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