

The Future of Conservative Judaism, Part I: 2020 Parashat Lech Lecha

Rabbi Aaron Starr, October 31, 2020

Shabbat shalom. I am pleased to tell you that this sermon has nothing whatsoever to do with the election this week or the upcoming Michigan-Michigan State football game. Rather, this is an invitation to conversation and to compromise, as I would like us to enter a community dialogue about the future of Conservative Judaism.

Over the last seven months, as the virus raged and we reinvented nearly everything we did spiritually, educationally and programmatically, we, along with others around the country, began asking the question: Has a new era in the history of the Jewish People been thrust upon us? Most recently, Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove of New York's Park Avenue Synagogue has proclaimed the need for a new vision for American Judaism¹ and so we must ask: Do the events of 2020 and the changes resulting from the threat of the novel coronavirus represent the birth pangs of something revolutionarily new in the history of the Jewish People? I invite you now to join me in this conversation as we will, over the coming weeks, begin to look at Conservative Judaism in particular in order to ask whether this time in history demands revolutionary change or evolutionary change, and which aspects of our believing, belonging, and behaving require change. What is our vision for American Judaism?

Having said that, I believe that we should be mindful that there are very few Lech Lecha moments in the collective history of the Jewish people; there are very few times in which we are called upon to make a clean break from the past so as to start again anew. In this week's Torah portion, we read of the first and the clearest moment of Lecha Lecha: Avram, son of Terah, native of Ur Kasdim, is commanded by God to leave behind not only the land of his birth and his father's house, but his very way of life, to experience a rebirth as Avraham, father of nations, chosen one of God, landlord of Canaan, child of the Almighty. Abraham accepts a covenant from the Creator in which Abraham offers to God everlasting fidelity and love from generation to generation, and in return Abraham receives God's parental love, as well as the gifts of land and lineage. In so doing, the people known as Hebrews, as Israelites, as Jews accepted a destiny of service and of reward.

One might argue as well that, several centuries after Abraham, the Israelites' entrance to the Land of Israel after slavery and forty years of wilderness wandering was a Lech Lecha moment. Having departed the Promised Land as a small family, the Children of Jacob returned centuries later as a mighty nation governed by a newly delivered set of divine laws. One might also argue that the birth of rabbinic Judaism some 2,000 years ago represented another Lech Lecha moment, when, following the destruction of the Holy Temple and the exile from the land, the acts of prayer, learning, and loving-kindness in service to God transcended our worship previously bounded by geographic space. Like the original Lech Lecha of Abraham, Synagogue Judaism is a revolutionary break from the Judaism of the Jerusalem-based Holy Temple.

In the 19th and 20th centuries too, when the Jewish People returned *en masse* to the Land of Israel, we beheld another Lech Lecha moment as our relatives like the Polish David Grun or the Russian Golda Meyerson freed themselves from the chains of oppression as subjugated foreigners in Christian Europe, Arab North Africa and the Muslim Middle East to become David

¹ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/join-toi-community-as-rabbi-elliott-cosgrove-calls-for-a-new-american-judaism/>

Ben Gurion, Golda Meir, and the founders of the modern State of Israel. In many ways, too, that was a Lech Lecha moment: an opportunity to create a clean break from the past to begin again, to cast off the yoke of the ghetto and to build a contemporary nation-state as a home for Jews and for Judaism.

During the intervening centuries between Lech Lecha and now, there have been moments of evolution along with the aforementioned points of revolution. I call these evolutionary periods *Chadesh Yameinu* moments, referencing our biblically-rooted prayer that God should *chadeish yameinu k'kedem*, renew our days as in days of old (Lamentations 5:21). Unlike Lech Lecha, *chadeish yameinu* is an acknowledgment that we are taking a new path, a different road, something *chadash*, while at the same expressing a love for what came before. Nostalgia is a powerful force in Jewish life, so *chadeish yameinu* moments are not clean breaks from the past but more a time of renewal and rejuvenation. Unlike Lech Lecha, *chadeish yameinu* is a recognition that life must change, while, at the same time, seeking to carry forward the most important aspects of what was.

When our ancestors returned from the Babylonian exile and built the 2nd Temple, that was a *chadeish yameinu* moment: a new era of beliefs had begun but in many ways the ritual expression of those new beliefs resembled the previous era. The periods following the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, and the Khmel'nitsky massacres were similarly *chadeish yameinu* moments: periods of time in which renewal was called for but as a redirection of that which came before rather than a clean break from the past.

Similarly, at two points in more modern times did we experience *chadeish yameinu* opportunities. A little more than a century ago, the early Reform Jews proclaimed that the American experience had brought forth a Lech Lecha moment in time, but a subset of those reformers disagreed, wanting full well to Americanize but not to cast off the beauty of Jewish ritual. These opponents of revolutionary reform decided instead to conserve some of those aspects of Judaism of which the early Reformers sought to rid themselves. These determined individuals' act of conserving Jewish tradition alongside adopting aspects of modernity gave rise to the Conservative Movement. We are the intellectual descendants of those early Conservative Jews who sought to welcome both tradition and change.

Then, the most recent *chadeish yameinu* period came in the post-Holocaust, mid-20th century American milieu that saw Conservative Jewish synagogues become the paradigm for American Judaism. As Rabbi David Wolpe teaches, during that period we translated Americanism for a community already strongly fluent in Judaism, and our synagogues, in addition to being houses of worship and prayer, became for the Jewish people the community centers and country clubs that we were forbidden to enter in the secular world. We Conservative Jews are the inheritors of the legacy of change guided by *chadeish yameinu* rather than *Lech Lecha*.

Since that period, change has been glacially slow for Conservative synagogues though Conservative Jews have changed quite dramatically. Rather than translating Americanism for those fluent in Judaism, we are now often trying to translate Judaism for those fluent in Americanism. For our community in particular, welcoming women as full partners in ritual practice took decades. And even with men and women sitting together, our liturgy resembles the liturgy of our Orthodox brothers. That, by the way, is an observation and most definitely not a criticism. However, the change has accelerated in recent times and we as a community have sought to welcome that change with the awareness that not everyone likes changes.

Instrumentation is now fully part of our prayer. Our dress has become more relaxed. A decade ago we began adding the matriarchs, the *imahot*, to our Musaf Amidah and in the last several weeks we decided to include the *imahot* every time we daven. Additionally, Shaarey Zedek formed an inclusion committee, seeking to ensure that Jews of color, Jews with different abilities, LGBTQ+ Jews, and interfaith families feel more at home in our synagogue family.

Proud of many of these changes, I believe that we too, like the early founders of Conservative Judaism, are confronted again with a moment of *chadeish yameinu*. The global pandemic that will last years and not weeks or months has slammed open the doors of technology to every aspect of our society, including religion. Whereas prior to Covid, Jewish ritual guided our use of technology, today technology guides our use of Jewish ritual. Our three-hour Shabbat morning service has become a two-hour Shabbat morning service, requiring us to eliminate some prayers and to abbreviate others. We began recognizing the gathering of ten people virtually as a kosher *minyan*. We have gone from asking our members to turn off their cell phones during Shabbat to asking you to turn your digital devices on in order to join us. I'm still in my head wrestling over the *halakhah* of permitting the use of chat features while Zooming on Shabbat and the holidays, and at the moment I am fighting against the trend of doing away with prayer books that would require when we are back in the sanctuary everyone to look down at their cell phones, tablets or laptops to follow the text of the siddur. We are talking about placing screens in our beloved sanctuary in order to increase the connection between people praying in the sanctuary and those praying at home. Indeed, friends, like it or not: Technology's place in our Judaism has expanded exponentially.

Moreover, technology has fully erased the boundaries between work life and home life: Dolly Parton's wonderful song about working 9-5 is very much a notion of the past. Our daily *minyanim* have for a longtime been scheduled at 7:30 a.m. and 5:30 p.m. so that working men – yes, men – could stop by the synagogue to and from the office. Today, however, we are hoping to attract to daily prayer men and women, working folks and retirees, and in many ways we no longer have to worry about traffic patterns and commutes. In turn, our minyan numbers have doubled. Additionally, in the midst of a society much more prone to work from home even during the daylight hours, there is hardly a difference between the workweek and the weekend. Neckties are a terribly outdated fashion statement when people are Zooming into services while drinking coffee in their pajamas. And should we complain so long as people are coming to services?

Of course, recognizing the blessings of technology is not new to Conservative Judaism. 70 years ago, our own Rabbi Adler recognized how the technology of the automobile, with appropriate limitations, could overcome the challenges of the suburban diaspora to maintain a tight-knit Jewish community. Today, as we are “driven” into isolation by a virus about which we still know very little, computer technology similarly allows us to overcome the challenges of the Covid diaspora to maintain our tight-knit Jewish community. Additionally, for many, our use of technology on Shabbat and most recently the High Holidays, has created a far greater sense of intimacy between clergy and congregant. You can see our faces (for better and for worse) and not be distracted by the commotion of others. You can feel our *kavannah*, our intentionality of prayer, and hopefully be inspired by it. Finally, technology has allowed us to welcome service participants quite literally from all over the world as they seek to enjoy the beauty of our Shaarey Zedek prayer services. Our congregational family has become international while, at the same

time, in some ways it also feels like we are competing with synagogues in other states for our members' time.

And it is not just the virus and technology delineating this as a *chadeish yameinu* moment in history. Perhaps more powerfully and long-lasting, we are in the midst of a generational shift: the millennial generation, greater in number and louder in voice than all the generations currently living today, has begun to replace the baby boomers as the cultural drivers of our world, and their influence on American Jewish thought and practice cannot be dismissed. The worldview of the millennials is a sermon in and unto itself, including how this generation's perspectives on the tension between particularism and universalism, understanding of power dynamics, use of language, application of work life, measures of happiness, de-categorization of gender roles, identities, and more will shape our people and our religion in profound ways – some of which will be incredibly exciting to previous generations and some of which will feel incredibly threatening.

Millennials have made us aware of our sacred obligation to welcome Jews who previously were rejected by the Jewish community. Each Shabbat we offer a prayer for open doors and open hearts that Rabbi Dahlen and I wrote, and that prayer is now taking root in other congregations as well. Rabbi Dahlen and I will proudly officiate gay marriage between two Jews, on the bimah at Congregation Shaarey Zedek or wherever the wedding should take place, and consider such a marriage a fully authentic expression of Jewish life. In our efforts to strengthen Jewish Peoplehood, the generational shift is demanding that Conservative rabbis look anew at the questions of performing intermarriage and recognizing patrilineal descent. And the modern State of Israel, once a point of unity across denominations, has in some circles become the third rail of Jewish communal discourse. Certainly within the American Jewish experience and possibly in the history of the Jewish People, we are now in the midst of a powerful generational realignment that does indeed, as Rabbi Cosgrove reminds us, demand a new vision for American Judaism.

So, in this week of Parashat Lech Lecha from which springs the enterprise that is Judaism and the people who are Jews, I invite you to join with me in a conversation about the future of Conservative Judaism. How should we in the coming decades seek to balance tradition and modernity? How do we utilize technology and how might we limit technology in order to achieve our goals? How do we adapt to the needs and desires of a new generation in order to grow institutionally, while at the same time honor the reality that the predominance of active members of Shaarey Zedek come from the Baby Boom and even the World War II generations? "Conservative Judaism is rooted in the wisdom gained at the intersection of heritage and progress. This balance allows Jews to lead truly fulfilled lives; and in an ever-evolving world, provides a message of compassion, enlightenment, and holiness to communities everywhere."² In what ways, then, must our definition of who is a Jew evolve, and in what ways must our definition of authentic Jewish practice change? In what ways, too, must our definition of who is a Jew remain firm, and in what ways must our definition of authentic Jewish practice remain unyielding?

The Talmud (Sanhedrin 105b-106a) advises us to make our Judaism like a reed growing by the water: even if all the winds that are in the world come and gust against it, the rabbis teach, the reed does not move from its place and become uprooted. Rather, the reed bends: coming

² <https://usci.org/beliefs#what-is>

and going with the winds. And once the winds subside the reed remains in its place because of its flexibility. I invite you to share with me your thoughts on how we must bend, when we must bend, and when too we must remain firmly planted.

Friends, now more than at any other point in the last 75 years, we are at a *chadeish yameinu* moment in Jewish life in general and for Conservative Judaism in particular. I pray that as we journey together into these uncharted waters that God should bless us with wisdom, with humility, with compassion and with compromise. Then, please God, as we adapt to our new world, I pray that God should bless us the same way that God blessed Abraham in our Torah portion this week, when God said: "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse one that curses you; And all the families of the earth Shall bless themselves by you" (Gen 12:2-3). May we be blessed in our sacred wrestling, and in turn, may we be a blessing to others. And let us say, Amen.