On Campus

Conserving the Center

During his 20 years as chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Ismar Schorsch headed an institution — and a denomination — that took strength from its position in the middle. As Schorsch steps down, he laments that the center has drifted too far.

By
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A week before presiding over his final commencement as chancellor of Conservative Judaism's flagship institution, the Jewish Theological Seminary, Ismar Schorsch '69GSAS previewed his upcoming valedictory address. He would reflect not on his career, but on his school and his denomination, for generations the dominant, centrist branch of American Judaism. His conclusion would be that the movement and the school had not lived up to their promise.

"Living at the center is a real challenge," he mused. "It means balancing polarities. It's a more complicated position than being on the right or the left."

Wrestling on 122nd Street

The Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) has been affiliated with Columbia University since 1954 through a program that grants students at both schools dual degrees and allows cross-registration. JTS is composed of five schools, including an undergraduate college. "The seminary is also the religious center of the movement," says Schorsch, "so there is a great deal of wrestling here with the nature of Conservative Judaism and training the leadership for that movement."

Conservative Judaism maintains an allegiance to traditional Jewish law, while at the same time it adjusts that law to the realities of contemporary life. The movement follows a middle path between Orthodox and Reform. Locating that middle ground has led to recurring tension within the movement as it struggles to uphold traditional aspects while keeping up with modernity. Famously, JTS was thrust into one such debate in 1986, the year Schorsch was appointed chancellor. The first female Conservative rabbi had been ordained one year earlier at another institution, and JTS had decided to admit women into its rabbinical school, dividing the faculty. In one of his first decisions as chancellor, Schorsch swiftly opened the cantorial school as well to female candidates — and then set out to rebuild his staff after a number had left in protest. “The place of women in the cantorial and rabbinical schools has been an ongoing process, and one of which I am quite proud,” he says.

Arnold Eisen, the Stanford University professor who will succeed Schorsch as chancellor, likewise will inherit an institution in the throes of an identity crisis. In recent decades, the Conservative movement’s numbers have declined, and as it has fallen from being the preeminent Jewish denomination, it has been marked by a bitter debate over whether to perform gay marriages and ordain gay rabbis.

“A First-rate Historian”

Ismar Schorsch was born in Germany in 1935 “as the curtain came down on German Jewry,” in his words. His family escaped to the United States when he was a child, and his father, a prominent Conservative rabbi, served congregations in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Schorsch was educated in public schools and at Ursinus College in Pennsylvania, earned master’s degrees in Jewish history from Columbia and JTS, and was ordained at JTS in 1962. He worked for two years as a military chaplain in Korea, and in 1969 earned his PhD in history, writing a dissertation on German-Jewish history during the Second Reich.

Schorsch taught at Columbia for one year but left to follow his longtime friend and mentor Gerson Cohen ’58GSAS to JTS, where Cohen had been named president (and would soon become chancellor). “It is from Cohen that I came to be imprinted with a love for Jewish history, an appreciation of its inner dialectic, a veneration of the ideal of a Jewish humanist fascinated by all expressions of Jewish creativity,” Schorsch said in a 2003 speech. At the Seminary, the two men developed from

scratch a doctoral program and Schorsch established the William David-son Graduate School of Jewish Education. In each of his subsequent posts at JTS, Schorsch says he continued to push an agenda of serious Jewish education and to strengthen JTS academically.

Outside his role as institution builder, Schorsch is a scholar — the author of more than 50 works on German Jewry and Jewish history. Michael Stanislawski, professor of history at Columbia and the associate director of the Institute for Israel and Jewish Studies, calls Schorsch a “stellar” academic. “He has been the most important historian of this scholarly movement, of the creation of the Jewish historical profession, the professionalizing of the study of Jewish history,” Stanislawski says.

Eisen, the incoming JTS chancellor, credits Schorsch with fashioning JTS into a top academic center in the Jewish world. “I think that’s a function of his personal commitment to scholarship,” he says. “He’s a first-rate historian, he wanted JTS to be a place of first-rate scholarship, and he made it so. I don’t think I would be interested if it were not.”

Drawing a Line

It snowed hard a few months ago in New York, and when the storm was over a white blanket covered the city. Looking down from his fifth-floor office, Schorsch watched students in the JTS quadrangle turning the white stuff into a message board. First, someone etched in German the term for Jewish scholarship: Wissenschaft des Judentums. A short time later, someone wrote the word “folk.” A third added “rap,” and by that time, Schorsch had a theory, which formed the center of his provocative commencement address in May.

“The students come from a culture addicted to the quick fix, and scholarship requires delayed gratification,” summarizing his speech to a visitor. “Rap [music] is a much quicker way to get that fix. . . . That’s the tension I see going on in the Conservative movement,” Schorsch says. “We’re less committed to scholarship, to deepening our understanding of Judaism or the Jewish experience.”

Within the context of Conservative Judaism’s current malaise, the observation reflects Schorsch’s commitment to tradition, a perspective that is declining within the movement. In fact, some rabbis and certainly a significant portion of

Conservative congregants say Schorsch hews too closely to old standards and is out of touch with a movement that is markedly different from its heyday in the 1960s. Certainly, many took offense at his May 18 valediction.

“I think there is a real crisis of morale within the movement, and I have to say that Chancellor Schorsch was not able to overcome that crisis, although he is a great scholar and an individual whom I greatly respect,” says Jonathan Sarna, a professor of Jewish history at Brandeis University, and the author of American Judaism: A History.

Although Schorsch may not be personally responsible for a decline in Conservative Judaism, he appears to have alienated a large segment of the movement through some key positions. In 2003, for example, he suggested that a 1950 rabbinical decision that sanctioned driving on the Sabbath was a mistake, a result of which was that the Conservative movement “gave up on the desirability of living close to the synagogue,” he told journalists at the time. To critics, the comment undermined the very resolution that decades earlier had distinguished Conservative Judaism.

“That decision in 1950 helped to draw the line between Conservative Judaism and Orthodoxy,” says Sarna. “It made possible Conservative Judaism’s astounding growth in suburbia, and unquestionably set the stage for the growing chasm between Orthodoxy and the Conservative movement, which basically had argued in 1950 that there were times that called not only for liberal interpretations in law, but a change in Jewish law brought forward by changing technological and geographical conditions in the United States.”

A Critic from the Right

Over the past three years, the movement’s discussion of human sexuality similarly has driven a wedge between Schorsch and many rabbis and congregants. The movement’s Rabbinical Assembly, a 1600-member union of Conservative clergy, has charged its Committee on Jewish Law and Standards to take up the issue, and the group is expected to render a decision in December on performing gay marriages and ordaining gay rabbis. Schorsch’s view on the issue is clear. “I politically advocate equality for gays in American society,” he says. “I draw a distinction between what is possible politically and what is possible religiously. And here my

views have been that religious leadership, given the Jewish tradition, cannot be exercised by gays."

In sharp contrast, Eisen says he hopes the movement finds a way to ordain gays as rabbis and cantors. "I want it to happen," he says, "but I want it to happen right." Sarna says Eisen's position reflects his success at finding the pulse of the movement, whereas Schorsch's reflects concern that the movement is losing touch with Jewish law. "But you can't simultaneously preside over a movement and be a critic from the right," Sarna says. "I think he is probably going to be more comfortable as a critic from the right than as the leader of the movement."

By December's vote, Schorsch will no longer be chancellor. Speaking about the impending decision, he cautions, "The gay issue tests the fidelity of the Conservative movement."

Schorsch is silent for a moment, as he frequently is during conversation, weighing carefully each word. "I was an academic before. In this position I became a rabbi; I developed a religious voice. . . . This is not an easy institution to run. My position may have been the top of the heap, but that heap's a volcano."

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