

Torah Table Talk

Miketz/Shabbat Chanukah



*Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt
in memory of their grandson, Oren Jacob Brandt-Rauf.
"He was the perfect child."*

I am parting from my regular format to share an important message with all of you this Shabbat!! Marilyn and I have just returned from International USY convention where Mordy completed his term as president of United Synagogue Youth. Needless to say we are proud parents of all his accomplishments. Here is the speech that Mordy gave at the convention – it has plenty of food for thought for table discussion!

Rabbi Mark Greenspan

International Presidents Address USY INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION 2005 By Mordy Greenspan

Good Evening. Thank all of you for joining me here today. I would like to begin by reading you an online post that can be found at the website Jewlicious.com.

“I grew up between my local Reform and Conservative shuls. I went to Sunday school at the Conservative one. No one in my class returned to that place after our bar or bat Mitzvahs if we were given the choice.

They failed to instill in us any sense of passion or joy about being Jewish. They failed to instill a sense of community between the members, or relevance to the real world in the stuff we were learning. In fact, I barely remember what they taught us. If Conservative Judaism worked, I really might not have had such a problem with it. But I know my experience isn't unique, and the Conservative movement keeps losing numbers for a reason.”

Over the last two decades the Conservative Movement has been losing members in droves. We went from claiming 40% of American Jewish households in 1990 to 33% in 2000. The same survey also found that nearly half of all adult Jews who were raised Conservative no longer consider themselves to be Conservative.

It would seem that Conservative Judaism is in trouble, that its future uncertain. With the success of Chabad across college campuses, the Conservative Movements presence is continuing to falter. Talking with my friends, the majority of who are active in Jewish life at their respective colleges, there is no active Conservative option.

While many colleges have Koach, the college age Conservative group, Koach is no match for Hillel and Chabad. If anything it is overshadowed by them because its funding is nowhere near what they spend every year.

And yet with all of this going on USY has continued to be a stronghold in the movement. Over 20,000 teens participate in our program across North America. Over 900 of them participated in USY Summer Programs this past summer and the over 1200 of you have journeyed to Philadelphia for a week of learning, friendship, and fun.

To give you a good perspective on the rest of Conservative youth in North America, over 50,000 Jewish teens are enrolled in Conservative Jewish High Schools, a number which has risen in recent years. Over 8,000 Conservative teens attend Camp Ramah every year as well. And the year long Nativ program in Israel, which a large number of this International board has chosen to participate in, has reached record numbers!

So... if USY, Camp Ramah and Conservative Jewish High Schools are doing so well why do we seem to be in so much trouble? Why is the Conservative movement losing rather than gaining members? What lies in store for the hundreds of thousands of youth who are active in the Conservative movement? What lies in store for us?

The years of being teenagers in the Conservative movement are filled with lots of opportunities: USY, Ramah, Solomon Schechter Day Schools -- but what comes in the post-high school years?

Judy Yudof the immediate past president of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism has said, "We do such a good job of inculcating the values of the Conservative movement in our young people through our organizational youth groups, that frequently they return to homes and synagogue communities that don't support the values they have come to embrace."

As the active members and youth leaders of Conservative synagogues back home we need to reinvigorate Conservative daily life. We need to join our home communities and strengthen them. We need to let rabbis and educators and lay leaders know what we need to remain active members in our movement!! USY programs need to reach out not only to teens within Conservative congregations but also to the community as a whole. Let us make USY the glue that begins to set our communities off in the right direction.

Recently when a high level professional for the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism was asked what the Conservative movement was doing, to better reach out to college and post-college Adults in the 18-30 age range his response was "Well, we've formed a committee."

We don't need another committee!! What does it mean for us, that when we go off to college we will have difficulty finding a Conservative community? What does it mean for us that Conservative Judaism is continuing to shrink? When we are adults will we still be able to find vibrant and active Conservative communities to join? Will there still be a USY for us to send our kids too?

Over the next five years the heads of the three major arms of the Conservative movement: The Jewish Theological Seminary, The Rabbinical Assembly, and the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism will all be retiring. We have coming a time of major change and a time of major opportunity. The opportunity to reach out to the adult leadership and show them that we are important, that we are the future of this movement. It is time for us to show our love and our care for Judaism to the members of our individual congregations.

We need to remain active and we need to remain enthusiastic. One year ago at International Convention I said, "USY may only last four years but its experiences need to last a lifetime." Let us make those

experiences last a lifetime through devotion, through dedication, and through commitment.

Recently I've been thinking about what made me want to be so active within this movement. And there are always two things that immediately come to mind: one is my family and the other is USY. Had it not been for them I do not think I would be living a committed Jewish life.

My family began and inspired my love for Judaism. They taught me how to live a Jewish life -- while USY showed me that there are other people out there like me: friends that cared about Judaism just as I did.

My USY friends and I formed our own unique community. Those friendships and communities that are formed need to be preserved and cherished. We need to take the communities that we build here and bring them out to the next level – out into the real world. You each have your own communities of friends and committed Jews. It is our responsibility to make sure that those communities continue to grow and strengthen as part of the Conservative Movement.

USY'ers: the future of the Conservative movement is in your hands. We need to return home and tell our Rabbi and synagogue boards the same. We need to tell them that we want to change the path that the Conservative movement has been going down. It is up to each of us to save this movement. What are you going to do to make a difference?

Thank You

A Special Passover Request

Believe it or not but I am already working on this year's Haggadah Commentary. As many of you know over the last several years I have translated a traditional commentary on the Haggadah in time for the Seder. In memory of my dear father in law, Bernie Parl, I am doing something different this year. My daughter Naomi and I are creating a unique commentary on the Haggadah which weaves together a contemporary explanation as well as some of the wonderful humor associated with Passover. If you have a favorite Passover joke or a personal Passover story that is humorous that you are willing to share, please send it to me for consideration for the Ha – Ha – Haggadah (yea – that's what we are calling it!). Submissions should be under seventy five words... should be sent to Naomi at - negreens@gmail.com

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*“All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind
and a desire to grow a Jewish soul.”*