

From the Rabbi's Desk @ Hillcrest Jewish Center

Rabbi Manes Kogan

Devar Torah for Kol Nidrei

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Next October 9, at 8 PM, the newly appointed chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Professor Arnold Eisen, will address the Jewish community of Queens on "The Future of Conservative Judaism in America" at the Forest Hills Jewish Center. Although Tuesday is my day off, I am planning to be there and I am encouraging all of you to attend.

Now, if there is something most rabbis affiliated with the Conservative Movement can agree on, it is that the new appointment of Chancellor Eisen as the chancellor of the JTS is seen as a pivotal event for the future of the movement.

And since this might very well be true in the end, and since you might not be familiar with chancellor Eisen's ideas, I would like to share with you some excerpts from *The Jewish Week's* interview with Chancellor Eisen a couple of weeks ago.

Eisen, the institution's seventh chancellor, said he wants to provide "clear formulations, well-articulated and cogently argued, of my understanding of this movement. I want to share my understanding, in all humility and with full respect for other voices in our community, that this is the way on which God and Torah want us to walk..."

"Whatever else Conservative Judaism is, the idea of mitzvah will always be at the core of it."

The once-dominant branch of Jewish religious life is grappling with shrinking synagogue membership, fractious disagreements over issues like gay ordination and the widespread sense that it has lost its way.

Rabbi Neil Gillman adds that "the common formula, that we're not Orthodox and we're not Reform, just won't work anymore. I find in my travels around

the country that our congregants by and large will go to a Conservative synagogue but largely for sociological or liturgical reasons. But their identity with the movement ends with the synagogue."

At a time when the Conservative movement is struggling to define its goals and message, the new chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Arnold Eisen, appears set to empower the members themselves to determine its identity.

Even "the rabbis are asking me, 'what does it mean to be a Conservative Jew?'" Eisen told The Jewish Week on the eve of his inauguration this week as the seventh chancellor of JTS, the movement's anchor institution.

"I have a sense that people want to be Conservative Jews, are enthused about it, but there is some perplexity about what Conservative Judaism is," he said. "You have a question in Conservative Judaism about message. Instead of merely writing speeches myself, I want to engage Conservative Jews in dialogue about it."

As a result, in a break with the traditional top-down approach by the movement's leaders, Eisen plans to launch the pilot effort of what he's calling "the mitzvah project," an attempt to energize the grassroots and leadership of the Conservative movement by inviting — and challenging — them to set an agenda.

Dear friends of Hillcrest Jewish Center:

Next October 9, at 8 PM, at the Forest Hills Jewish Center, we will be invited by Chancellor Eisen to energize the Conservative movement and we will be challenged to establish an agenda.

If there is something revolutionary in Chancellor Eisen's invitation, it is the invitation itself. If there is something ground-breaking in Chancellor Eisen's challenge, it is the challenge itself.

The novelty here is that after one hundred years of Conservative Judaism in America, nobody is going to give us answers anymore about what Conservative Judaism is!

What is more, Chancellor Eisen is telling you, and me, that the strengthening of the movement and its renovation are not going to come from a faceless organization or from a synod of rabbis, or from a single charismatic leader, not even from Chancellor Eisen himself!

For a change, and for what I believe is a positive change, the strengthening of the movement and its renovation are going to come, if at all, out of the strengthening and renovation of each individual congregation, or in Chancellor Eisen's words, from the grassroots.

Nobody in the Conservative movement is going to provide an articulated common vision for Hillcrest Jewish Center, Hollis Hills Jewish center, ICCJ, Forest Hills Jewish Center and the other 700 struggling Conservative synagogues in America. If something is realistic and even possible, it is the exact opposite: the strength, vision and commitment of individual congregations are going to strengthen the movement as a whole.

I could stop my D'var Torah here. Short, perhaps, but well rounded.

I told you that I agree with Chancellor Eisen that the strength of the movement and the answers to the seemingly endless crisis of the Conservative movement will be a reflection of the strength of each individual congregation.

I feel, however, that I owe you my thoughts on how each individual congregation is going to build its own strength.

Specifically, I want to consider the source of Hillcrest Jewish Center's inspiration, spiritual and material resources, and vision.

And here again, the answer should not surprise those of you who know me already: I strongly believe that Hillcrest Jewish Center is going to be as strong, as committed, as creative, as generous, as learned, as compassionate, and as welcoming as its individual members!

At the end of the day, what each of us puts into it is what we are going to get out of it.

I have been here over one year and I have news for all of you: Hillcrest Jewish Center is not a faceless entity that provides services to an anonymous group of individuals. The entirety of Hillcrest Jewish Center is here today, in one big room! Hillcrest is you, and me, and Cantor Fuchs, and Ted, and Michael, and Bernie, and Carol, and Iris, and Janet, and Susan, and Sivan, and Jill, and Joe – each of you here today!

Each of us has a face, a story, and dreams. Each of us counts and each of us is being empowered to become active, to become a leader!

I am afraid the days of the big numbers are over. The demographics are not on our side. However we can still thrive here in Queens. Instead of aiming for quantity we need to work on quality; and again, the quality of our Hillcrest Jewish home will be a reflection of the quality of each of our individual Jewish homes, of the quality of our individual Jewish practice, Jewish learning, and Jewish compassion!

It was the week before the holidays and the rabbi invited everybody in the shtetl to his home for a L'chayim.

The rebbetzin baked cakes and the rabbi used part of his meager salary to buy herring, bread, olives and dry fruits. "Just bring a bottle of white wine," the rabbi requested kindly of each guest. "I will set a big barrel in the foyer of my home and when each of the guests arrive they will pour the wine into the barrel, so it will be ready for the L'chayim."

"What do you think," Shloimeh asked his wife, "if I bring a bottle of water instead? Will the rabbi find out?"

"Nah," said his wife. "Among the hundreds of bottles of wine that everybody else brings, nobody will even notice your bottle of water."

And so they did. The day of the L'chayim, Shloime and his wife arrived at the rabbi's home and poured into the barrel at the foyer the watery content of their "bottle of wine," and then joined the rest of the crowd.

Everybody ate from the rabbi's bread and fish and enjoyed the rebbetzin's delicious cakes. Finally the time for the L'chayim arrived.

The rabbi proceeded to the barrel and started pouring the wine; and to everybody's astonishment, the barrel contained... only water...

At the end of the day, like in our story, what each of us puts into it is what we are going to get out of it.

I am an optimistic by nature. I always expect the best out of people, and I only expect the best from the members of this loving, caring, giving, compassionate, and committed congregation.

We can make this place thrive but it is up to us, up to each single individual here tonight, and up to those who couldn't make it tonight!

I like Chancellor Eisen's challenge. Only by giving my best will I get the best at the end of the day. There are no shortcuts; there is no other way!

May God bless you and your families with a year of meaningful long-lasting experiences, with spiritual and material growth, with health, joy and peace, with a good, sweet and blessed year!