

Vision for CBI

‘Make the old new, and the new, holy’

In the 1920’s, before the establishment of the state of Israel, Rav a.i. Kook, was the first chief rabbi of what we then called Palestine, and an icon of the Jewish world. Rav Kook was a caring and committed Jew, and equally important, a pragmatist. In 1948, tensions arose between two groups of Jews living in Palestine — those who wanted the land to be traditionally Jewish or orthodox, and those who wanted secular Zionism to express the fulfillment of millennia of Jewish striving.

Seeking to respond to the concerns of both groups, Rav kook held that Jews could ‘make the old new’, and at the same time, ‘the new, holy.’ that meant integrating the beauty and uniqueness of Jewish tradition with modern spiritual, social, and scientific sensibilities.

The following example illustrates Rav Kook’s teachings for us today.

Since I hold ordination from the Jewish theological seminary, I am most familiar with the conservative movement’s strand of Judaism. In the early 1990’s, the law committee of the conservative movement voted overwhelmingly to bar gays and lesbians from attending rabbinical school; but, less than two decades later in 2008, mirroring changes in public attitudes along with new scientific knowledge and information available, the law committee -- increasingly comprised of younger members and more women -- voted to overturn its earlier decision and to open the doors of the rabbinical schools to gay and lesbian students.

I share this particular example because the committee’s 2008 vote confirms what the Jewish sacred texts, dating all the way back to the Talmud, have been emphasizing—that it is the responsibility of each generation of Jews to discern god’s will for that particular generation. In other words:

Divine revelation did not just happen one time at Mt. Sinai;

It is an ongoing process.

The Jewish tradition has many timeless, universal, and salutary teachings to offer to us, as it serves as testament that there is a power greater than ourselves, a power that we Jews call Adonai or god, to whom we owe deep gratitude and appreciation. The ethical teachings found in the Torah and powerfully preached by our prophets call upon us to emulate the ways of god by being god’s partner in feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and bringing comfort, justice, and healing to the disadvantaged and those in need. And we are taught time and time again in the Torah to “love our neighbors as ourselves”, with the word “neighbor” generally defined inclusively -- not only the Jew, but also the stranger and the non-Jew.

For CBI, here are a few examples of what I believe Rav Kook meant by 'making the old new and the new holy:'

The Talmud teaches, "**Judaism rests on 3 pillars**" or foundations

- (1) Torah -- becoming a knowledgeable and educated Jewish community;
- (2) Avodah - "service" to god and to community, either through participation in prayer services or through service in other ways in the synagogue community;
- (3) gemillut hasadim -- performing "acts of lovingkindness".

When I first arrived, CBI we did not have regular Friday night services and attendance at Shabbat morning services was hit or miss. I also found that some of the practices did not reflect important changes being made in conservative synagogues across the country.

In the spirit of 'making the old new and the new holy,' I reached out to musicians in our community to gauge their interest in a twice a month musical Friday night service. At first, several congregants were concerned about having instruments on Shabbat -- a traditional prohibition. And so, we studied ... music, clapping, singing, and instrumentation were prominent in the two holy temples in Jerusalem, as is reflected in the psalms, but were then prohibited, as a sign of mourning, after the destruction of the second temple in 70 C.E. we, however, are not bound by a 1900 year old practice, which no longer resonates with most contemporary Jews; besides, the conservative movement's law committee set aside this ban and approved the use of musical instruments on Shabbat over 50 years ago.

Now with our own **musical group, *bashert***, our prayers are even more joyful and meaningful. Coupled with the efforts of those preparing delicious shabbat dinners, we have spiritually uplifting and well-attended friday night services. We've made 'the old new and the new holy.'

Another example: more than 50% of Jewish people are married to non-Jewish partners. Several years ago, at CBI, the non-Jewish spouse was limited in what he or she could do either on Shabbat morning or at a life cycle event. This alienated a few families when the non-Jewish spouse was not permitted to participate at their children's B'nai Mitzah and they've since left our community.

While I was still a civil rights lawyer, in my synagogue in Alabama, a non-Jewish husband and father was not permitted on the Bimah; but rather, he had to address his daughter who was becoming at Bat Mitvah, from the first row. This non-Jewish man happened to be the governor of the state of Alabama, at the time. Having supported his wife and his daughter's Jewish education and commitments, of course, he was deeply hurt.

At CBI we now emphasize inclusivity and invite the non-Jewish spouse to accompany the Jewish spouse to the Bimah and to receive other honors, as well.

One more example. Over the last ten years at CBI, gathering a traditional minyan of 10 for Shabbat morning services had become a “hit or miss” proposition, which meant we could not always read from the Torah or say Kaddish with mourners or for those with yahrzeits; nor could we say a number of other prayers requiring a traditional minyan. When Jews lived in distinct communities, it was quite easy to find a 9th or 10th man in the neighborhood; but this is no longer our reality. And so, for the time being, we adjusted our definition of minyan to mean 7 people – including both men and women. This allows us to pray and study in community.

May we continue to first discern and then follow the will of god here at CBI by making the ‘old new and the new holy.’