



No, Rabbi Lau, Conservative Jews Have Not Strayed; Quite the Contrary

Apologies, Rabbi, for the tardiness of my response; I have simply been too busy bringing people closer to Judaism to promptly reply to your misguided allegation.

Rabbi Dan Dorsch | Dec 16, 2015 5:31 PM

Dear Chief Rabbi David Lau,

Last week, I was made aware of your remarks regarding Diaspora Affairs Minister Nafatali Bennett's visit to a Solomon Schechter School. You said that it was impermissible to recognize "an audience that is distancing itself from 'Klal Yisrael,' (the Jewish people)" and that Jews of our "kind" should be told that we are headed "down the wrong path," because we will "lose" our children to assimilation.

At the time, I thought of many ways to respond to your rather misguided assessment of a wonderful Jewish school, let alone an entire movement, in which I am deeply involved (not to mention that I am an alumnus of another Solomon Schechter school). I could have explained how my Solomon Schechter education helped to provide a strong foundation for my own personal love of Judaism. Or, perhaps, in my initial anger, I could have resorted to ad hominem attacks on your institution, the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, as it grows increasingly insular and anachronistic to the lives of the vast majority of Israelis, let alone to the vast majority of American Jews.

However, it was then that I realized – and I hope that you'll understand by the lateness of my response that this is the case – that I simply haven't had the time to respond to you because I am too busy creating pathways to bring people closer to Judaism.

Quoting Maimonides in his letter to ibn Tibbon, "The Lord God Himself knows how I am able to write you this letter." Serving as a rabbi in a Conservative kehila (community), like many of my colleagues, I spend most of my time forging relationships with members of my community that I hope will encourage them to deepen their connection to Jewish tradition. This makes most of my days very long, but very fulfilling.

On Mondays, for example, the first day of my work week, I begin my day by attending morning minyan, usually with my two-and-a-half-year-old son. Afterward, I take my son downstairs to our Jewish preschool where last week he began his formal study of Hebrew language by learning the letters of the dreidel for Hanukkah. During drop-off hours for school, I spend time interacting with the parents and answering questions. Many of them at first admittedly seemed "distanced from the path of the Jewish people" as you suggested, but I have found through the openness of our interactions that our conversations are precisely where they begin to explore forging a deeper connection to Jewish life.

All of that, in case you were curious, happens before nine o'clock; 9 A.M. is when I begin Torah study. Torah study grounds me as I prepare lessons for my kindergarteners, who I teach that afternoon. It also prepares me for the various appointments I have throughout the day. On Mondays, I meet with three women who are eager to learn to read Hebrew. They were all raised in Orthodox households where they were denied a formal Jewish education by their parents because they were women. I also meet to continue studying with a recent convert to Judaism who, after attending and enjoying Shabbat services regularly, decided to bring her Jewish in-laws along. Next week, as a Conservative convert, she will "distance herself" from the Jewish people when she travels to Israel on Birthright.

Last week was Hanukkah, which, as I am sure you know, made things extra busy. After my kindergarten class concluded in the afternoon, I quickly rushed out the door and drove to JESPY House, a residential facility for primarily Jewish adults living with learning and developmental disabilities. Twenty Jewish teenagers from my synagogue led the residents in the singing of brachot (blessings), Hanukkah songs, and the lighting of the menorah. As they played dreidel, ate traditional foods, and spent time getting to know the residents, there was little doubt that here too, both of these groups were actively pushing themselves further away from the Jewish people.

I think by now, Rabbi Lau, you've gotten my point. Having just finished Hanukkah, I am mindful of our mission as Jews to combat ignorance and baseless hatred in our world by bringing people me'afeyla le'orah, from the darkness and into the light.

We, Conservative Jews, unquestionably disagree with you on matters of halakha (Jewish law). Yet, I respect your office enough to appreciate the major contributions that you are making to the Jewish people as the chief rabbi of the State of Israel.

Now that I hope you know a little bit more about what I, and many of my wonderful colleagues, do, perhaps you might consider the ways in which our path brings Jews closer to Klal Yisrael and Jewish living, and put an end to the offensive remarks that you and your Chief Rabbinate ilk make, which only serve to alienate us from the State of Israel.

Yours,

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