

MESSAGE FROM RABBI SKIDDELL

Shalom,

You may have noticed that recently we have been replacing the labels Reform and Reconstructionist with terms like "Liberal Judaism" or "Progressive Judaism" as descriptions of our community. We began to use these descriptive terms as our Connected Congregations process was deepening the bonds between the two congregations that ultimately led to our consolidation as a new entity, Central Synagogue - Beth Emeth. Some people felt that the old labels were too limiting and noted that as the Jewish community moves toward what many scholars of American Jewry have called the post-denominational era, they are less meaningful as descriptions of synagogues than they were in the past.

However, these newer terms have engendered some confusion and even caused some consternation, as communicated to me by some of our members. So, please let me explain why we use the terms "liberal" and/or "progressive" to describe Central Synagogue-Beth Emeth.

First, I want to make it 100% clear that we believe that politics and religion should always be separate. Despite moves in Congress to overturn the "Johnson Amendment" that strengthened the separation between church and state, we remain committed to maintaining the wall of separation and would never endorse candidates or tell you how to vote. However, I also want to be crystal clear that the terms liberal, conservative, reform, progressive, etc., in a **religious** context - *especially a Jewish religious context* - do not refer to political positions, but rather to the values and ideology of those who espouse a more open approach to Judaism with greater autonomy for the individual Jew to learn and decide for herself or himself how to observe Jewish traditions, as opposed to the Orthodox approach that keeps all authority and decision making in the purview of a select group of rabbis

Specifically, terms such as "liberal Judaism" or "progressive Jews" are used as an umbrella term for all the non-Orthodox movements such as Reform, Reconstructionist, Liberal [in England], Progressive [in Europe, Israel, Australia and elsewhere] and even the Conservative Movement in the US. It may seem strange, but in this context Conservative Jews, those affiliated with the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism or identifying with its philosophy, are also "liberal" Jews.

A good example of the use of the term "liberal" in the Jewish religious context is the definition offered by the Liberal Jewish Movement in England: "*Liberal Judaism affirms the dynamic, developing character of our Jewish religious tradition. Liberal Judaism is an authentic and modern form of Judaism, rooted in a deep and meaningful engagement with Jewish texts, values, culture and history...a movement with a sense of purpose, engaged in community life, study, spirituality and social action. We believe in personal freedom and responsibility and the shared and collective bonds that unite us as Jewish people and members of humanity*". That definition certainly would fit CSBE and even echoes some of the language that we use on our website, in our brochures and PR materials.

When we use terms like "Liberal Jews" or "Conservative Jews", we are referring to the religious ideology and not to any particular *political* position. I hope that this distinction is clear and that we understand that in our context, in the synagogue and the wider Jewish community, religion, *not* politics, dominates our thought and shapes our language.

Central Synagogue - Beth Emeth remains affiliated with both the Union for Reform Judaism [www.urj.org] and the Jewish Reconstructionist Communities [www.jewishrecon.org], but we are also forging an independent path that is not dependent on or guided by a larger body. We also have seen, reflecting our own experience, how the Reform and Reconstructionist Movements have cooperated and collaborated and learned from one another as constituent organizations of the World Union for Progressive Judaism [www.wupj.org] the umbrella group

that brings together all the movements that are defined as Liberal or Progressive, i.e., Reform Judaism and Reconstructionist Judaism in North America, Liberal Judaism in England, Progressive Judaism in Israel, Europe, South America, Australia and elsewhere. For historical and institutional reasons, North America is the only continent that has two constituents in the WUPJ that both represent a liberal, progressive point of view. Everywhere else in the world – Israel, Europe, Australia, South America, etc. – there is but one. I hope that you will join me in proudly declaring our connection with Liberal and Progressive Jews throughout the world through the WUPJ and adopting the *religious* description of CSBE as a liberal, progressive congregation.

Rabbi Elliot Skiddell