

# Congregation B'nai Jacob

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September 3, 2017

Dear Members of B'nai Jacob,

We are writing to let you know that your Board of Trustees has unanimously chosen to recommend to our members that we affiliate with the Conservative movement and join a network of other like-minded congregations in the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism (USCJ).

After having several conversations about joining the Conservative movement, we and your Board of Trustees recently met with a representative from the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism (USCJ). What we found is that everything about our congregation, including our services and practices, falls well within the framework of the Conservative movement.

What led us to this point? Over the past fifteen – twenty years, while our congregation has maintained a belief and practice of upholding tradition while embracing the modern world, and while we have much to be proud of as a congregation, we have seen dramatic changes in our demographics and membership. We have remained a strongly connected congregation and for that we should feel very proud. As our congregation has changed we have continued to try to meet its changing needs. At times, this has been difficult because we haven't had the benefit of being able to look outside ourselves to see what other congregations like ours have done to meet similar challenges.

Congregation B'nai Jacob was originally founded on the tenants of Orthodoxy. When we moved into our current building in 1949, to meet the then changing needs of our congregation, we departed from some Orthodox practices such as having separate seating for men and women in our services. Over time, because we had evolved away from the practices of an Orthodox synagogue, we were not able to be a member of the Orthodox Union when we tried to join in the 1980s. Even though we had, and continue to have, an Orthodox-trained Rabbi, we are not an Orthodox congregation. Rabbi Urecki has maintained his affiliation with the Rabbinical Council of America (RCA), the leading organization of Orthodox rabbis in North America, during all this time, but even though Rabbi Urecki is a member of the RCA, B'nai Jacob Congregation has not been affiliated with any denominational organizations; we have not been able to benefit from the services and resources they offer.

Now more than ever we need a stronger ability to meet our increasingly diverse needs, and while we have tried, among ourselves, to meet those needs, it has become increasingly clear to us that the answers on how best to move forward are not as simple

today as they used to be. The balance of tradition and modernity, old and new, requires much more robust conversation and well-grounded professional insights. We are going to need resources and opportunities to develop a long-range plan for B'nai Jacob so we can continue to move forward together.

If we join the Conservative movement, we can stay exactly the same as we are today. There are congregations exactly like ours that are members of the Conservative movement. Joining USCJ will give Rabbi Urecki and Congregation B'nai Jacob the ability to make changes together that we would not otherwise be able to make to meet the evolving needs of our congregation. Being connected to a larger organization will give us the framework within which we can work to identify the kinds of changes we need to make in order to best meet the needs of our diverse congregation.

In exploring what it would mean to be a member of USCJ and the Conservative movement, we learned that becoming a member of USCJ would not require us to change one thing at our shul. Our rabbi can keep his membership in the RCA, our prayer books can stay the same, our practices can stay the same, our services can stay the same. We would simply be joining a network of other Conservative synagogues. Our rabbi would have access to the Conservative movement's Rabbinical Assembly (RA), an organization comprised of Conservative rabbis, where he would be able to learn from the experiences of other similarly situated rabbis and how they have met their own unique challenges within their respective congregations.

In addition, we also learned that USCJ offers a wealth of support in the following areas:

- They have many useful resource materials on an enormous range of topics, from membership recruitment to holiday observance to social action projects.
- They have professional staff that can assist us through consultations on anything from programming to succession planning, or any of the other problems we may face on a daily basis.
- They offer successful youth programs, such as USY and Kadima.
- They offer programs through their education department to help support our Hebrew schools and teachers
- They offer a number of different kinds of leadership training for emerging leaders, Board members and others.

Our goal is to strengthen this congregation and position it for the future. Being connected to other voices that understand our unique challenge of creating an authentic traditional yet dynamic Judaism for the next generation will serve us well.

We believe that the USCJ will help us have the meaningful conversations we need with the goal of defining our congregation moving forward. Being part of a larger family of Conservative congregations will help us develop good practices and strategies

both on a board level and as a religious community. The support we will get drawing from Conservative colleagues and shuls like ours will benefit B'nai Jacob's own rediscovering and ability to move forward.

Your Board of Trustees and Rabbi fully support affiliation with USCJ for our congregation, and believe that such affiliation will continue our mission of "Traditional Judaism for a Modern World." The cost of joining USCJ is based on several factors including the number of members we have and our dues income. The cost for the first year will be somewhere in the \$2800 - \$3000 range. We feel the benefits we can realize will far outweigh the cost of membership.

After the High Holidays, we will have an informational meeting for our members about joining the Conservative movement. We want to hear from you. We will answer your questions and respond to your thoughts, concerns, and ideas. We think this is an important and significant step forward for our congregation, and your Board of Trustees feels that our members should have the opportunity to help decide our future. Therefore, members of B'nai Jacob will have the opportunity to vote on whether we should join USCJ. More information on that will be forthcoming after the Holidays. In the meantime, please feel free to reach out to either of us if you have questions, or just want to talk.

We look forward to talking with you about this in the days and weeks to come.

B'Shalom,

Janet Victorson, President

Rabbi Victor Urecki