

Conservatives defend ideology against attack

Alana Rosenbaum

AN attack labelling the Conservative movement "a failure and a lie" has prompted a vehement response from the Conservative communities in Sydney and Melbourne

Temple Emanuel Rabbi Jeffrey Kamins said the attack, by director of America's Agudath Israel Rabbi Avi Shafran, was "a typical Orthodox analysis of non-Orthodox Judaism".

Writing in the *American Moment* magazine in an article titled *The Conservative Lie*, Rabbi Shafran said the Conservative movement was inconsistent. Conservative rabbis who officiate at same-sex weddings do not jeopardise their standing in the Conservative Rabbinical Assembly, even though homosexuality is forbidden in *Halacha*, he charged.

Rabbi Shafran's article also cites the 1996 Wertheimer report, which indicates that only 29 per cent of Conservative Jews buy kosher meat and 15 per cent observe Shabbat.

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Rabbi Kamins said the article was a reflection of the author's prejudice. "He's writing from the perspective of wanting to champion an Orthodox perspective," he said. "We are doing what rabbis have been doing for thousands of years — basing contemporary decisions in *Halacha*."

He acknowledged that while Conservative Judaism takes a lenient approach to some issues, it is stricter on others. For example, it has come out against smoking because of its ill-effect on health. Likewise, because of the suffering caused to the animal, veal should not be kosher, despite the fact that technically, because it chews the cud and has cloven hoofs, it is considered kosher.

A visiting rabbi at Melbourne's Conservative congregation, Kehilat Nitzan Rabbi Sylvan Kamens, also came out against the attack, labelling it "scurrilous". He said the article was part of a history of controversy between Orthodox and Conservative Judaism in America, and rejected the



Rabbi Jeffrey Kamins

suggestion that the Conservative rabbinate has turned its back on *Halacha*.

He said the Conservative Rabbinical Assembly does not condone same-sex unions, but noted that homosexuality is no more of a sin than adultery. "What about presidents of Orthodox congregations who are adulterers — are they any less culpable in terms of *averot* (sins) than a homosexual?"

Rabbi Kamens further argued that Shabbat observance is not an appropriate yardstick to measure the success of the Conservative movement, suggesting that Orthodox rabbis should apply similar standards to their own congregations.

He accused Rabbi Shafran of using selective information, particularly with regard to the Wertheimer report. Rabbi Shafran, he said, had neglected to mention that Jewish dayschools in the Conservative movement are growing in "leaps and bounds", and that 5000 children attend Conservative summer camps, often returning home to revitalise their families and congregations.

The Conservative movement has found a *Halachic* solution to the problem of *agunot* (chained spouses), which Orthodox rabbis rejected, Rabbi Kamens said. "It is a prenuptial phrase within the *ketubah*, which says that should this union ever be dissolved by civil action, both parties agree to abide by the decision of the Beth Din of the Rabbinical Assembly. It is an example of trying to interpret and see *Halacha* develop to be responsive to needs. *Halacha* shouldn't be the goal; it should enable people to live according to Torah."