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Commentary

EDITORIAL

The right track

A year ago December, one month after becoming the state's acting governor, Richard Codey told this newspaper that he had already grown weary of being asked if he planned a run for governor in 2005.

"It's amazing: We want to focus on putting the state on the right track," he said. "I'd rather focus on governing and trying to change the way people see their government."

Codey never did make a run for governor, stepping aside for fellow Democrat Jon Corzine. But, remarkably, he did live up to the promise he made that day. Codey became the state's chief executive at a time when the reputation of New Jersey's politicians could not be any lower. But with the quiet force of his personality, Codey single-handedly raised the state's image, silencing late-night talk show hosts and setting an example for candidates

and officeholders from Cherry Hill to Washington Township.

The Jewish community is grateful for Codey's championing of issues high on the community's moral and legislative agenda. Codey signed a divestment bill to press Sudan on its treatment of refugees. He repeatedly used his bully pulpit to urge the state's lawmakers to make New Jersey an international center for the study of stem cell research. Social service providers in the state's Jewish community will recall how he championed the rights of the mentally ill, drawing on, but never exploiting, his wife Mary Jo's own struggles with postpartum depression.

Codey returns full-time to the State Senate, where we expect many more years of his principled leadership. And we hope that Gov. Corzine follows in his predecessor's footsteps, combing a devotion to ethics with a commitment to *menschlichkeit*.

What Codey accomplished

EDITOR'S COLUMN

What I learned on the way to the buffet

Three years ago, I spent a weekend at Kutsher's, the venerable Catskills resort, and came up with a plan for saving it: Close it down on a Monday, change nothing, and reopen it on Wednesday as "The Catskills Experience." Hipster Jews, drawn by the promise of Jewish kitsch, would come in droves. Older Jews and school groups would visit and find not a fading old hotel, but an exquisitely preserved monument to American-Jewish culture of the '50s to the '70s. Hey, it worked for Colonial Williamsburg, and they don't even serve cholent.

Last weekend I was back at Kutsher's, and it looked like someone had taken me up on the idea — for four days, anyway. The hotel had been taken over by LimmudNY, a festival of Jewish learning. Modeled on a British idea that has thrived for decades, the volunteer-run festival included some 300 lectures, panels, performances, and roundtable discussions (see story, page 12). The event had a distinctly pluralistic edge: Teachers and students came from all the movements, and the weekend's symbol was a multicolored zebra, representing "Jews of all stripes." As far as I could tell, the 800 participants reveled in the learning and that message — at the very least, they looked happier than the zebra.

And the hipsters came, along with the older folks, college students, and young Jewish professionals eager to network with the veteran rabbis and communal figures who formed the "faculty." The audience for performances by the folk liturgist Debbie Friedman and neo-Sephardi singer Basya Schechter included gray-haired couples from the suburbs and the hippy-ish 20-somethings who favor full beards, collarless white button-down shirts, and, on the women, peasant skirts. It was a weird combination of Elderhostel and Phish concert.

Functions like these are a case of "The Blind Man and the Elephant," and your experience is based in large part on which parts of the elephant you end up touching.

I'm not one to dwell much on spirituality, so I ended up touching more of the head and less of the heart. A few highlights:

- Sid Schwarz, the Reconstructionist rabbi who runs the Washington-based Panim, gave a lacerating late-night session on the decline of social justice activism among mainstream Jewish organizations. Schwarz suggests that Jewish life swings between two poles: the Exodus model, in which survival becomes the guiding purpose, and Sinai, which calls Jews to a sacred purpose bigger than themselves.

Schwarz said the Exodus model predominates today, and Jews are almost invisible, for example, in the interfaith coalitions that are behind the "living wage" campaign. He is admittedly nostalgic for the civil rights era. Yet while he understands the historical and social forces that made Jewish activists turn inward and more Israel-focused in recent years, that still does not absolve the large Jewish organizations, he says, from acting on the Sinaitic and prophetic impulse to ally themselves with the most vulnerable members of society.

- At a panel on the future of Conservative Judaism, Rabbi Gordon Tucker of Temple Israel Center in White Plains, N.Y. — who is on everyone's short list to be the next chancellor of the movement's Jewish Theological Seminary — said it is "inevitable" that the seminary will ordain gay rabbis. Tucker's remarks acknowledged that the subject is not only one of justice for gays but an issue that will force a historic definition of the Conservative approach to Halacha, or rabbinic law. If the panelists agreed on anything, it was that the movement has done a poor job in providing "theological clarity" and explaining how Conservative rabbis can sanction change within an approach to Halacha that "takes into account all the developing narrative and ethos of a tradition."

Tucker also dropped another bombshell:

The Conservative push for day school education at the expense of synagogue supplementary schools was a "massive rhetorical failure" that destroyed the religious school field for "decades to come."

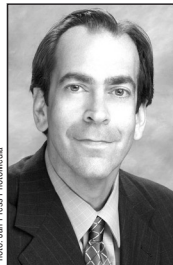
- Rabbi Elliot Dorff, of the Conservative movement's University of Judaism, galled a number of listeners when he suggested that the Jewish community should be urging its men and women to marry earlier and have more children when they do. It struck a sour note in an otherwise sensitive presentation about the values that can and should infuse intimate relationships. Was he suggesting that single Jewish women who have been frustrated in the dating market — many of whom attended Limmud — just haven't been trying hard enough? In an era of extended adolescence, are marriages among those just out of college likely to last?

- Robbie Gringras is a British-born actor and playwright who uses theater as a tool to explore issues of Jewish and Israeli identity. Gringras performed two of his solo works, but I was most taken with a discussion he led on the great "actors" of the Bible. By actors, he meant the characters, like Jacob and Joseph, who actively took on new identities, including costumes and fake names, to achieve their ends.

You'll have to catch Robbie on your own to get the full flavor, but I came away marveling at how Torah dependably gives up new secrets according to what the individual reader brings to it. An actor sees fellow actors, and I suppose carpenters or veterinarians will discover new perspectives based on their own fields and expertise.

I don't have space here to discuss half of what I learned, or to describe the breakout star of the conference, a 35-year-old Harvard-trained Israeli policy analyst whose organization is helping the government of Israel strategize. I'll devote a future column to Gidi Greenstein.

The vitality of Limmud, set against the decrepitude of Kutsher's, is almost too neat a symbol of the role communitywide learning can play in revivifying Jewish life. The Catskills have seen better days. I'm not sure I have.



Andrew Silow-Carroll