

Emet V' Emunah - Statement of Principles of Conservative Judaism

Jewish tradition continually has taught that we must live with faith even when we have no conclusive demonstrations.

Conservative Judaism affirms the critical importance of belief in God, but does not specify all the particulars of that belief. Certainly, belief in a trinitarian God, or in a capricious, amoral God can never be consistent with Jewish tradition and history. Valid differences in perspective, however, do exist.

For many of us, belief in God means faith that a supreme, supernatural being exists and has the power to command and control the world through His will. Since God is not like objects that we can readily perceive, this view relies on indirect evidence. Grounds for belief in God are many. They include: the testimony of Scripture, the fact that there is something rather than nothing, the vastness and orderliness of the universe, the sense of command that we feel in the face of moral imperatives, the experience of miraculous historical events, and the existence of phenomena which seem to go beyond physical matter, such as human consciousness and creativity. All of these perceptions are encounters that point beyond us. They reinforce one another to produce an experience of, and thus a belief in, a God who, though unperceivable, exists in the usual sense of the word. This is the conception of God that emerges from a straightforward reading of the Bible.

Some view the reality of God differently. For them, the existence of God is not a "fact" that can be checked against the evidence. Rather, God's presence is the starting point for our entire view of the world and our place in it. Where is such a God to be found and experienced? He is not a being to whom we can point. He is, instead, present when we look for meaning in the world, when we work for morality, for justice, and for future redemption. A description of God's nature is not the last line of a logical demonstration; it emerges out of our shared traditions and stories as a community. God is, in this view as well, a presence and a power that transcends us, but His nature is not completely independent of our beliefs and experiences. This is a conception of God that is closer to the God of many Jewish philosophers and mystics.

The two views broadly characterized here have deep roots in the Bible and in the rest of Jewish tradition. They are both well represented in Conservative Jewish thought, and coexist

to this day in our movement. They, in fact, have much in common. In particular, they both insist that the language and concepts traditionally used to speak of God are valid and critical parts of our way of life. Although proponents of both views use metaphors to speak of God, we all affirm the power of traditional terms (such as the kingship and fatherhood of God) to influence our lives in very positive ways. Our liturgy and our study of classical texts reflect that acknowledgment of the power of God in our lives.

That there are many questions about God which are not fully answered does not mean that our beliefs on these issues do not matter. On the contrary, they can change the world, for what an individual believes about God will both shape and reflect his or her deepest commitments about life. A belief in the unity of God, for example, creates and reinforces a belief in the unity of humanity and a commitment to standards of justice and ethics. Similarly, a people which believes in a God who "adopts orphans and defends widows" and commands us to do likewise, will construct a society vastly different from that of a community which glorifies only the autonomy of human beings.

God's elusive nature has always given us many options in deciding how we shall conceive of Him and how that will affect our lives. The human condition being what it is, some choices in these matters must inevitably be made. In our own fragile world, the tenacious belief in God that has characterized our history since Abraham and Sarah stands as instruction and inspiration, and continues to call us to pattern our lives after the God in whom we believe.

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REVELATION

Conservative Judaism affirms its belief in revelation, the uncovering of an external source of truth emanating from God. This affirmation emphasizes that although truths are transmitted by humans, they are not a human invention. That is why we call the Torah *torat emet*. The Torah's truth is both theo-

retical and practical, that is, it teaches us about God and about our role in His world. As such, we reject relativism, which denies any objective source of authoritative truth. We also reject fundamentalism and literalism, which do not admit a human component in revelation, thus excluding an independent role for human experience and reason in the process.

The nature of revelation and its meaning for the Jewish people, have been understood in various ways within the Conservative community. We believe that the classical sources of Judaism provide ample precedents for these views of revelation.

The single greatest event in the history of God's revelation took place at Sinai, but was not limited to it. God's communication continued in the teaching of the Prophets and the biblical Sages, and in the activity of the Rabbis of the Mishnah and the Talmud, embodied in Halakhah and the Aggadah (law and lore). The process of revelation did not end there; it remains alive in the Codes and Responsa to the present day.

Some of us conceive of revelation as the personal encounter between God and human beings. Among them there are those who believe that this personal encounter has propositional content, that God communicated with us in actual words. For them, revelation's content is immediately normative, as defined by rabbinic interpretation. The commandments of the Torah themselves issue directly from God. Others, however, believe that revelation consists of an ineffable human encounter with God. The experience of revelation inspires the verbal formulation by human beings of norms and ideas, thus continuing the historical influence of this revelational encounter.

Others among us conceive of revelation as the continuing discovery, through nature and history, of truths about God and the world. These truths, although always culturally conditioned, are nevertheless seen as God's ultimate purpose for creation. Proponents of this view tend to see revelation as an ongoing process rather than as a specific event.

HALAKHAH (JEWISH LAW)

The Indispensability of Halakhah

Halakhah consists of the norms taught by the Jewish tradition; how one is to live as a Jew. Most Jewish norms are embodied in the laws of the Bible and their rabbinic interpretation and expansion over the centuries, but some take the form of customs, and others are derived from the ethical ideals which inform the laws and customs and extend beyond them (*lifnim m'shurat hadin*). Since each age requires new interpretations and applications of the received norms, Halakhah is an ongoing process. It is thus both an ancient tradition, rooted in the experience and texts of our ancestors, and a contemporary way of life, giving value, shape, and direction to our lives.

For many Conservative Jews, Halakhah is indispensable first and foremost because it is what the Jewish community understands God's will to be. Moreover, it is a concrete expression of our ongoing encounter with God. This divine element of Jewish law is understood in varying ways within the Conservative community, but, however it is understood, it is for many the primary rationale for obeying Halakhah, the reason that undergirds all the rest.

Other considerations, however, complement the theological basis for Halakhah. It is a means of identifying and preserving the Jewish people and its traditions. It trains and sharpens the moral conscience of individuals and society by presenting cases for consideration and teaching Jews how to think about them morally. It establishes minimal standards of behavior and gives ideals concrete expression. In addition to shaping the content of moral standards in these ways, Halakhah helps to motivate obedience to them — not, as in generations past, through legal enforcement (except, in some measure, in Israel) — but by establishing a set of goals which has both divine and social authority. Halakhah thus establishes a struc-

ture of rules to govern human interactions.

Halakhah shapes our relationship to God. It affords us symbols by which we together can learn and express piety, and the study of sacred texts. The religious base of Halakhah makes it a far more comprehensive guide for life than any secular system of rules. Ultimately, as the prayerbook reminds us twice each day, Halakhah is God's gift to us, an expression of God's love. Similarly, our adherence to Halakhah is an act of love for God on our part. It is, in fact, the primary way in which God and the Jewish people exhibit their love for each other.

For all these reasons, Halakhah in its developing form is an indispensable element of a traditional Judaism which is vital and modern. Halakhah is not the entirety of our Jewish identity; Judaism includes the ethical and theological reflections embodied in its lore (*aggadah*), a history, a commitment to a specific land and language, art, music, literature, and more. Judaism is indeed a civilization in the fullest sense of the term. But Halakhah is fundamental to that civilization.

Tradition and Development in Halakhah

The sanctity and authority of Halakhah attaches to the body of the law, not to each law separately, for throughout Jewish history Halakhah has been subject to change. Reverence for the tradition and concern for its continuity prevented rash revision of the law, but Jewish practice was modified from time to time. Most often, new interpretation or application of existing precedents produced the needed development; but sometimes new ordinances were necessary. Sometimes, as in the education of girls and the creation of the Simhat Torah festival, the changes occurred first in the conduct of the rabbis or the people and only then were confirmed in law.

The rabbis of the Mishnah, the Talmud, and the Midrash recognized that changes had occurred and that they themselves were instituting them. They took pains to justify the legitimacy of rabbis in each generation applying the law in new ways to meet the demands of the time. They pointed out that the Torah itself requires such judicial activity, a mandate which they interpreted broadly to include, at times, even outright revisions of the law. Each individual cannot be empowered to

make changes in the law, for that would undermine its authority and coherence; only the rabbinic leaders of the community, because of their knowledge of the content, aims, and methods of Halakhah, are authorized by Jewish tradition to make the necessary changes, although they must keep the customs and needs of the community in mind as they deliberate.

We in the Conservative community are committed to carrying on the rabbinic tradition of preserving and enhancing Halakhah by making appropriate changes in it through rabbinic decision. This flows from our conviction that Halakhah is indispensable for each age. As in the past, the nature and number of adjustments of the law will vary with the degree of change in the environment in which Jews live. The rapid technological and social change of our time, as well as new ethical insights and goals, have required new interpretations and applications of Halakhah to keep it vital for our lives; more adjustments will undoubtedly be necessary in the future. These include additions to the received tradition to deal with new circumstances and, in some cases, modifications of the corpus of Halakhah.

While change is both a traditional and a necessary part of Halakhah, we, like our ancestors, are not committed to change for its own sake. Hence, the thrust of the Jewish tradition and the Conservative community is to maintain the law and practices of the past as much as possible, and the burden of proof is on the one who wants to alter them. Halakhah has responded and must continue to respond to changing conditions, sometimes through alteration of the law and sometimes by standing firm against passing fads and skewed values. Moreover, the necessity for change does not justify any particular proposal for revision. Each suggestion cannot be treated mechanically but must rather be judged in its own terms, a process which requires thorough knowledge of both Halakhah and the contemporary scene as well as carefully honed skills of judgment.

Following the example of our rabbinic predecessors over the ages, however, we consider instituting changes for a variety of reasons. Occasionally the integrity of the law must be maintained by adjusting it to conform to contemporary practice among observant Jews. Every legal system from time to time

must adjust what is on the books to be in line with actual practice if the law is to be taken seriously as a guide to conduct. New technological, social, economic, or political realities sometimes require legal action. Some changes in law are designed to improve the material conditions of the Jewish people or society at large. The goal of others is to foster better relations among Jews or between Jews and the larger community. In some cases changes are necessary to prevent or remove injustice, while in others they constitute a positive program to enhance the quality of Jewish life by elevating its moral standards or deepening its piety.

We affirm that the halakhic process has striven to embody the highest moral principles. Where changing conditions produce what seem to be immoral consequences and human anguish, varying approaches exist within our community to rectify the situation. Where it is deemed possible and desirable to solve the problem through the existing halakhic norms, we prefer to use them. If not, some within the Conservative community are prepared to amend the existing law by means of a formal procedure of legislation (*takkanah*). Some are willing to make a change only when they find it justified by sources in the halakhic literature. All of us, however, are committed to the indispensability of Halakhah for authentic Jewish living.

Our dedication to Halakhah flows from our deep awareness of the divine element and the positive values inherent in it. Every effort is made to conserve and enhance it. When changes are necessary, they are made with the express goal of insuring that Halakhah remains an effective, viable, and moral guide for our lives.

Authority for Making Decisions in Halakhah

The Conservative method for arriving at halakhic decisions reflects our interest in pluralism and also exhibits the trait characteristic of Conservative Judaism, the melding of the traditional with the modern. The rich tradition which we possess depends upon the scholarship, integrity, and piety of our leadership and laity. For religious guidance, the Conservative movement looks to the scholars of the Jewish Theological

Seminary of America and other institutions of higher learning. The United Synagogue of America, the Women's League for Conservative Judaism, and the Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs represent the human resources of laypeople of our community.

Authority for religious practice in each congregation resides in its rabbi (its *mara d'atra*). It derives from the rabbi's training in the Jewish tradition attested by his or her ordination as a rabbi, and by the fact the congregation has chosen that rabbi to be its religious guide. In making decisions, rabbis may consult the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, consisting of representatives of the Rabbinical Assembly, the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, and the United Synagogue of America. The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards issues rulings shaping the practice of the Conservative community. Parameters set by that Committee and at Rabbinical Assembly conventions govern all of the rabbis of the Rabbinical Assembly, but within those bounds there are variations of practice recognized as both legitimate and, in many cases, contributory to the richness of Jewish life. In this way the Conservative community preserves the traditional interactions between individual rabbis in their communities and the larger, central authority of the movement in making decisions in Jewish law. At the same time, Conservative Judaism responds to the needs of individual Jews and congregations. This assures us a clear sense of identity together with a vibrant, healthy pluralism.

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

The existence of evil has always provided the most serious impediment to faith. Given the enormity of the horror represented by Auschwitz and Hiroshima, this dilemma has taken on a new, terrifying reality in our generation. The question of how a just and powerful God could allow the annihilation of so many innocent lives haunts the religious conscience and staggers the imagination.

From: Conservative Judaism: Our Ancestors to our Descendants by Elliot Dorff

	SOME EXPONENTS OF THE APPROACH	1) METHOD OF STUDY	2) THE NATURE OF REVELATION	3) THE AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE'S LAWS AND IDEAS	4) MAN'S ABILITY TO CHANGE THE BIBLE'S LAWS AND IDEAS
ORTHODOX	Berkovits, Lamm	No distinction between <i>Pesbat</i> and <i>Derash</i> ; meaning of text = meaning that traditional commentators assigned to it.	<i>Verbal Revelation:</i> The Torah, including both the Written and Oral Traditions, consists of the exact words of God. He gave it all as one piece at Sinai.	God's will	None, since God revealed the answers to all future questions at Sinai and man does not know more than God. <i>Exceptions:</i> 1) Applications to new situations (which were also revealed at Sinai). 2) Choice of one position in the codes over others.
CONSERVATIVE I	Leiser, Kohut, Schechter (?), Heschel, Novak	<i>HISTORICAL METHOD:</i> Distinguish between <i>Pesbat</i> and <i>Derash</i> ; determine <i>Pesbat</i> through literary and historical analysis.	<i>Continuous Revelation:</i> God dictated His will at Sinai and other times. It was written down by human beings, however, and hence the diverse traditions in the Bible.	God's will	Same as Orthodox (but usually choose the lenient position in the codes) <i>plus:</i> 3) Places where there are clear scribal errors. 4) Clear borrowings from other cultures. That is, distinguish the divine and human elements in our texts.
CONSERVATIVE II	Bokser, Gordis Routtenberg		<i>Continuous Revelation:</i> Human beings wrote the Torah, but they were divinely inspired.	God's will	Human beings <i>can</i> change them because rabbis in each generation may be inspired to a new Midrash; they <i>must</i> because the rabbis of each generation are charged with the responsibility to keep Jewish Law viable by balancing tradition and change.
CONSERVATIVE III	Existentialists: Jacobs, Siegel Objectivists: Agus, Lieber, Dorff		<i>Continuous Revelation:</i> The Torah is the <i>human</i> record of the encounter between God and the People Israel at Sinai. Since it was written by human beings, it contains some laws and ideas which we find repugnant today.	1) God's will. 2) Covenant with God and the Jewish People of past, present and future.	We continue to have encounters with God, and the law must be changed to reflect the new understanding of God's will that results from those encounters. It is the rabbis, representing the community, and not every individual on his own, who must determine the content of Jewish law in our day.
CONSERVATIVE IV (=Reconstructionist tendency)	Kaplan, Einstein, Shulweis		<i>No Revelation:</i> Human beings wrote the Torah. No claim for divinity of the product.	1) Tradition (custom) 2) Internal Wisdom	Communal authorities in each generation can and must help individuals reconstruct Judaism with current and meaningful customs and ideas, but observance of rituals is <i>voluntary</i> ; an organized creative community of the future could establish and enforce <i>moral</i> laws.
REFORM	1937 Guiding Principles		<i>Progressive Revelation:</i> The Torah is God's will written by human beings. As time goes on, we get to understand His will better and better (= "progressive revelation").	1) Moral laws come from God. 2) Ritual laws have no authority because: a) prophets canceled them. b) Rabbinic laws were intended for specific periods only.	Every <i>individual</i> decides both what and how to obey.