

JEWISH VIRTUAL LIBRARY

A Division of the American Jewish Conservative Enterprise

Conservative Judaism

The name derives from the idea that the movement would be necessary to conserve Jewish traditions in the U.S., a culture in which Reform and Orthodoxy were not believed to be viable. Conservative Judaism attempts to combine a positive attitude toward modern culture, acceptance of critical secular scholarship regarding Judaism's sacred texts and commitment to Jewish observance. Conservative Judaism believes that scholarly study of Jewish texts indicates that Judaism has constantly been evolving to meet the needs of the Jewish people in varying circumstances, and that a central halachic authority can continue the halachic evolution today.

Attitude Toward Halacha

Conservative Judaism affirms that the halachic process reflects the Divine will. It makes use of Solomon Schechter's concept of *Klal Yisrael* (the whole of the [observant] Jewish community), in that decisions on Jewish Law are largely determined by the practices of *Klal Yisrael*.

In Conservative Judaism, the central halachic authority of the movement, the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards (CJLS), will often set out more than one acceptable position. In such a case, the rabbi of the congregation (*mara d'atra*) is free to choose from the range of acceptable positions (or none of them), and his congregation is expected to abide by his choice. The CJLS speaks for the Conservative movement and offers parameters to guide local rabbis who turn to it for assistance. Local rabbis will make use of traditional sources and, when available, *teshuvot* written for the CJLS. Although rabbis mostly adhere to the CJLS, they have the ability to make their own *halchic* decisions when appropriate.

An exception is made in the case of "standards." A "standard" requires an 80 percent (not unanimous) vote of the membership of the CJLS (not just those in attendance) and a majority vote by the plenum of the Rabbinical Assembly. At present, there are four standards:

1. Rabbis and cantors are prohibited to officiate at intermarriages in any way.
2. The performance of remarriages without an acceptable *get* (divorce according to Jewish law) or other halchic termination of the previous marriage whether by death or *haf'kaat kidushin* (annulment) is prohibited..
3. The recognition of Jewish lineage through matrilineal descent only.

4. Conversions to Judaism requires both circumcision and mikveh immersion for males and only the latter for females.

Willful violations have led to resignations or expulsions from Rabbinical Assembly membership.

Conservative Theology

Conservative Judaism holds that the laws of the Torah and Talmud are of divine origin, and thus mandates the following of halacha (Jewish law). At the same time, the Conservative movement recognizes the human element in the Torah and Talmud, and accepts modern scholarship that shows that Jewish writings also show the influence of other cultures, and in general can be treated as historical documents.

The movement believes that God is real and that God's will is made known to humanity through revelation. The revelation at Sinai was the clearest and most public of such divine revelations, but revelation also took place with other people — called prophets — and in a more subtle form, and can happen even today.

Many people misinterpret Conservative Judaism as being like Reform Judaism except with more Hebrew in its services; they believe that if one simply goes to a Conservative synagogue, then one is a Conservative Jew. This, of course, is not true, and the movement's leadership is strongly concerned with whether or not the next generation of Conservative Jews will have the commitment to lead an authentic Jewish lifestyle.

Source: Shamash: <http://shamash.org/trb/judaism.html> and Masorti World

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