



Conservative Judaism

By Steve Cohen

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Conservative Judaism

A Diversity of Belief Systems

One cannot understand Jewish people today by studying only the Old Testament. Jewish people identify with different religious groups, writings, teaching and theology from a multitude of sources. The Jewish religious calendar and festivals, attitudes toward Jesus, traditions, concepts of family, and varying concerns comprise a multi-faceted Jewish milieu.

What Jewish people believe can cover an encyclopedia's worth of information. We will present a basic overview of the highlights to help Christians better understand Jewish beliefs.

The divisions, or denominations, that Jewish people tend to be found in today are:

- Orthodox
- Reform
- Conservative
- Reconstructionist

Some minor offshoots are the Hassidic movement (the ultra-orthodox) and the Zionistic movement (a political movement). Some Jewish people are atheistic or agnostic. And of course there are the Jewish Christians, also known as "Messianic Jews."

Current North American Jewish Demographics

Surveys taken to determine how Jewish people identify themselves have yielded different results. More than six million Jewish people live in North America today. Nearly a third identify themselves as members of the Reform movement, about one quarter identify themselves with the Conservative movement, and less than a fifth describe themselves as Orthodox.

Orthodoxy today seems to be on the upswing, as many modern Jewish people are searching for meaning and purpose in their lives through Judaism. Many Jewish people do not have religious affiliations, other than to attend services such as the High Holy Days of Rosh Hashannah and Yom Kippur. Some even claim to be atheistic in their background, others agnostic, while still others claim to be Zionistic.

Zionism is sometimes mistaken to be a religious movement. But basically, Zionism is a political movement. It concerns itself with the return and restoration of the land of Israel to the Jews, rather than the maintenance of a religious theology.

Jewish people identify with different branches of Judaism, because there is no unifying theology of Judaism today. Different rabbis hold differing opinions; in fact, Judaism could probably best be typified as "unity with diversity." Jewish people feel a unity of purpose, but they hold a diversity of opinions as to how they should be leading their lives.



The Conservative Movement

Conservative Judaism is a modern movement, having its roots in the end of the 19th century and in the first two decades of this century. Eastern European immigrants who came from a very Orthodox background found themselves in a western setting where Jewish people were given economic and social opportunities and training quite unlike the persecution they had suffered in Eastern Europe. The first generation of Jewish people who came to North America sought to maintain strict adherence to Orthodox principles and teachings. But the second generation moved away from them, yet maintained some of their teachings and principles.

Conservative Judaism, a mixture of the orthodox and modern society, emerged as a result of Reformed Judaism moving too far away from the traditional Jewish beliefs. This new movement holds to as much of the doctrine, beliefs and traditional practices of Judaism as possible, while in practice adapting as much as possible to an American lifestyle. The mixture has modernized many traditions while upholding many beliefs.

Jacob H. Schiff and Louis Marshall, who were Reform, were instrumental in reorganizing the central institution of Conservative Judaism, the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. They wanted to provide an English-speaking, Westernized clergy for these immigrants to replace their foreign immigrant rabbis.

Cyrus Adler was the chief actor in this reorganization, though his primary concern was to continue traditional Judaism in America. Adler had grown up in the circle which had resisted Reform in the previous generation.

The reorganized Seminary opened in 1902 with a small but distinguished young faculty which had been assembled by Schechter, including such figures as Louis Ginzberg in Talmud.

Despite the attitude of the chief financial backers of the Seminary, who were anti-Zionists, Schechter and his younger faculty colleagues all identified with the Zionist movement from a sense of religious and cultural unity. From its beginning, the Zionist movement impacted Jewish life both in America and Palestine.

An alumni association of the Seminary existed by 1901, even before the reorganization of the institution. This body had been renamed The Rabbinical Assembly of America before 1920, the name under which it was incorporated in 1929. Rabbis who graduated from other institutions but joined the Conservative group were admitted to this body along with graduates of the Seminary.

In 1962 this organization was renamed the Rabbinical Assembly, the International Association of Conservative Rabbis. By then, rabbis on all continents shared this Conservative outlook. By 1970, more than 40 served Israel in various capacities, several at the head of congregations of their own. Solomon Schechter invested a decade of effort into organizing an association of synagogues sympathetic to the religious stance of his Seminary.

Cyrus Adler and others internally opposed this move, expressing fear that such an organization would permanently close the door to a unity of all the traditionalist forces, but Schechter prevailed. At the



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founding assembly of the United Synagogue of America in 1913, members adopted a constitution that announced as the organization's religious purpose as "the maintenance of Jewish tradition in its historical continuity" and summarized the main outlines of traditional Jewish practice. The last sentence read, "While not endorsing the innovations introduced by any of its constituent bodies" would "embrace all elements essentially loyal to traditional Judaism." (The Encyclopedia Judaica)



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