

## Covenantal Judaism

**Rabbi Danny Nevins, JTS**

The foundation of the Jewish covenant is our faith that all of existence was called into being by the will of the Creator, and that the Creator has invested humanity with the divine image. God's ultimate essence is beyond human comprehension, as are the mysteries of creation, revelation, and providence. Yet we share the conviction that our lives may be filled with purpose and holiness through *the study of Torah, the practice of mitzvot, the creation of sacred community and the pursuit of justice.*

These four facets of Jewish life are our attempt to understand the will of God and to cling to God with all of our mind, spirit and strength. Conservative rabbis, cantors, educators and lay leaders are dedicated to strengthening this covenant, and our congregations, schools, camps and other organizations are each designed to model these values and practices. Many other Jews share some or all of these values, and it is ultimately our practices and beliefs that will define the character of our religious identity. No person's practice of mitzvot is perfect; our faith in God's compassion includes the great power of forgiveness. Likewise we seek to foster forgiving communities that welcome all seekers of the divine presence and offer mutual encouragement in the pursuit of holiness. This brief description is meant to clarify our purpose and to welcome others to join us in strengthening the Jewish covenant with God.

**Study of Torah.** Torah is a broad term that encompasses the Jewish people's deepest understanding of the origins, purpose and contents of its covenant with God. Torah is an ever-renewing stream that includes three millennia of biblical and rabbinic literature as well as contemporary works of interpretation. The study of Torah is a lifelong obligation for every Jew; our rabbis, congregations, schools and camps exist in large measure to share this knowledge with Jews of all ages, to integrate traditional wisdom with the insights of modern scholarship, and to apply Torah values to the challenges of contemporary life. The first function of a rabbi is to engage the Jewish people in the study of Torah.

**Practice of Mitzvot.** The Jewish covenant teaches individual and collective obligations towards God and other people. While people may choose to fulfill or ignore these obligations, we believe that life is enriched immeasurably by the intentional practice of mitzvot. Mitzvot govern ethical conduct such as respect for the life, property and dignity of other people, as well as rituals that mark our devotion to God. Such rituals include, among many others, daily prayer, kosher diet, and the sanctification of time through observance of Shabbat and the festivals. The details of these ethical and ritual obligations as described in halakhic literature make such practices both challenging and rewarding. Conservative rabbis have for over a century examined diverse topics of Jewish practice (halakhah) and taught how best to integrate traditional values and practices within the setting of contemporary life. Constantly evolving scientific insights and social norms are viewed not as a threat but as an opportunity to reexamine the path to holiness. Examples of such

teachings may be found on the [web site](#) of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards.

**Creating Sacred Community.** From its origins, the Jewish covenant has been expressed through the family, the local congregation and the collective people of Israel. The individual is reminded not to separate from the community, for it is in community that the divine presence becomes apparent. The Torah emphasizes the importance of inclusive communities in which strangers are warmly welcomed. Our communities are dedicated to this ethic of inclusion, where men and women as well as people of diverse religious, economic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds and sexual orientations are all welcomed to participate fully in congregational life. Our communities are devoted to supporting one another, both locally and around the world. The State of Israel is our sacred homeland, and our communities promote support for a secure and peaceful state. In addition, our congregations and their clergy are devoted to being active citizens of their local communities, joining together in the construction of a civil society and expressing appreciation and friendship for people of diverse backgrounds and affiliations.

Our communities also include individuals who belong to a Jewish family but who themselves ascribe to a different faith, or who have not yet chosen formally to associate themselves with the Jewish people through conversion. They enrich our communities by their presence. Moreover, we welcome individuals from non-Jewish, including non-Jewish maternal, backgrounds to become full partners of the covenant through the practice of mitzvot and the traditional rituals of conversion. Our rabbis are trained to supervise this process and our congregations are committed to being welcoming places and communities to all. Jewish life cycle rituals such as baby namings, b'nai mitzvah and weddings are reserved for people who identify with and have been recognized as Jews; our clergy may not, for example, perform weddings for a couple unless both partners are Jewish and unmarried. Nevertheless all people are welcome to attend our rituals, worship and study, confident that they are entitled to love and respect from our Jewish communities.

**Pursuit of Justice.** The Jewish covenant with God is designed to be a force for redemption of the entire world, spreading faith in God's unity, in human dignity, and in compassion for all of God's creatures. Where some people see the covenant as an assertion of superiority, we understand it to teach Israel how to be a light unto the world and a force for universal justice. When human freedom and dignity are violated, the image of God is diminished. Our congregations are meant to be havens from the often crass and materialistic popular culture. At their best, they are model communities of justice and righteousness which advocate for these values in society. Rabbis and congregations in partnership can realize the prophetic ideals of our tradition and make the Torah a source of light and hope for all people.

**Discussion Guide.** *This document is designed to be used by communities to clarify their values and to realize their application in practice. Care should be taken in how to design such a conversation and who to invite to run it. The use of an external facilitator is recommended. The conversation should not be framed in terms of judgment. No individual or community is ever a perfect practitioner of every value at every time. Rather, the activity should be designed to help an organization paint a portrait of itself--highlighting its guiding values and engaging in an essential conversation of how to grow as a religious community.*

1. Try a values audit of your organization. Which of these four facets of the Jewish covenant are most prominently supported in your community? Can you provide examples of ways that your organization lives by these? Are any of them entirely absent? In what ways are your community's values different than the culture that surrounds you?
2. In what ways are you experiencing challenges and complications in your community around these issues?
3. In recognition that leadership is essential in maintaining and deepening our appreciation for the beliefs and values we hold dear, what types of leadership--lay and professional--would be most effective? What type of leadership do you need in order to help you navigate the challenges and complications you have identified?

In order to fulfill our religious mission more completely, what should be our priorities? How should we reallocate our resources to reach our goals? What should be our short term goals, and what should we establish for longer-term aspirations? How can we position ourselves now to achieve both?