

Judaism

Conservative Judaism

FOUNDED: 1886 CE
RELIGION AS A PERCENTAGE OF WORLD POPULATION:
0.026 percent

OVERVIEW Conservative Judaism, developed in the United States, was a reaction to Reform Judaism's rejection of traditional Jewish law and practice. In 1883 a group of traditional rabbis broke with what they considered to be the radical agenda of Reform Judaism and its seminary. They were particularly concerned with the abandonment of the kosher dietary laws, the Hebrew liturgy, and the doctrine of Israelite election. Three years later these rabbis, working with lay leaders in Philadelphia and New York, established their own rabbinical school, named after Zacharias Frankel's seminary in Breslau, Germany, as the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS).

Although the faculty, students, and alumni of JTS would eventually organize what became the Conservative movement, in its early decades the seminary did not claim to represent any denomination. Indeed, it aspired to offer authentic leadership for the entire Jewish population of the United States and as such included rabbis who variously identified as Reform, Orthodox, and then Conservative in its ranks. Eventually, as the Reform and Orthodox seminaries grew more established, JTS identified its brand of Judaism as a denomination. From World War II through the 1970s Conservative Judaism was the largest American Jewish denomination. With the dawn of the 21st century, however, the number

of Conservative adherents had declined and the population in Conservative synagogues had begun to age. Yet its distinctive blend of ritual traditionalism and moral progressivism influenced the practice of a centrist swath of American Jewry well beyond its denominational boundaries.

In 2013 there were 1.8 million people who identified as Conservative Jews around the world. In addition to the Conservative movement in the United States, branches exist in Canada, Israel, Latin America, and western and eastern Europe under the name Masorti, the Hebrew word for "traditional." There is a Conservative Zionist movement called Mercaz, as well as a growing number of Masorti synagogues, youth groups, summer camps, and elementary and high schools in the State of Israel. In addition to the rabbinical and cantorial schools at JTS in New York City, there are affiliated seminaries in Los Angeles, Buenos Aires, and Jerusalem.

HISTORY Although begun in the United States, the Conservative movement was influenced by developments in Europe, especially the teachings of Zacharias Frankel (1801–1875), a German rabbi. Frankel, who promoted historical scholarship of Judaism, viewed Jewish law and custom not as static elements but as evolving from historical circumstances. His school, Das Jüdisch-Theologische Seminary, was founded in 1854.

Until 1880 there was little traditional Judaism in the United States; of the 200 synagogues, 188 were Reform. In 1883 a group of traditional rabbis walked out of their graduation banquet at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati because the menu was not kosher.

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Two years later, in 1885, the Reform movement published its radical Pittsburgh Platform, which further alienated traditional rabbis and motivated them to start a new rabbinical seminary. The coalition that launched the Conservative movement included German Reform and Sephardic Jews, as well as some of the first of several million Jews who emigrated from eastern Europe to the United States between 1880 and 1920, bringing with them more traditional Jewish norms and beliefs than many of the earlier immigrants maintained. In 1886 the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTS) was established to train English-speaking, Americanized, but traditional rabbis to serve the new immigrants. The school combined the scientific study of Jewish texts with traditional practice. Graduates founded congregations where the language of prayer was Hebrew and the liturgy was traditional, but the sermon was delivered in English and often included events of the day alongside traditional explications of the text. The tenets of the movement were complex, and for decades most Conservative Jews saw themselves simply as Jews in the middle between Reform and Orthodox adherents.

By the middle of the 20th century Conservative Judaism had taken hold in the United States among the second and third generations of eastern European Jewish immigrants, especially in suburbs of big cities. The movement continues to have a worldwide membership but is still overwhelmingly American in numbers and character. According to a 2013 Pew Research Center study, 18 percent of American Jews identified with Conservative Judaism, well behind the 35 percent who identified with Reform and the 30 percent who claimed no denomination, but ahead of the 10 percent who identified as Orthodox. However, the Conservative share of formally affiliated Jews was substantially higher. High birthrates and increased retention in the ultra-Orthodox communities of America and Israel make it the fastest-growing sector of the Jewish world in the early 21st century.

CENTRAL DOCTRINES Fundamental to Conservative Judaism is a fidelity to the rabbinic interpretation of halakhah (Jewish law and practice), which is assumed to have developed over time. Because halakhah has always been influenced by the cultures in which Jews lived, Conservative Jews believe that Jewish law and practice should continue to develop. However, this development must be guided by scholars who believe in the sanctity of tradition, adhere to its precepts, and are learned in Jewish law. Moreover, Conservative Judaism has been influenced by Solomon Schechter's doctrine of "Catholic

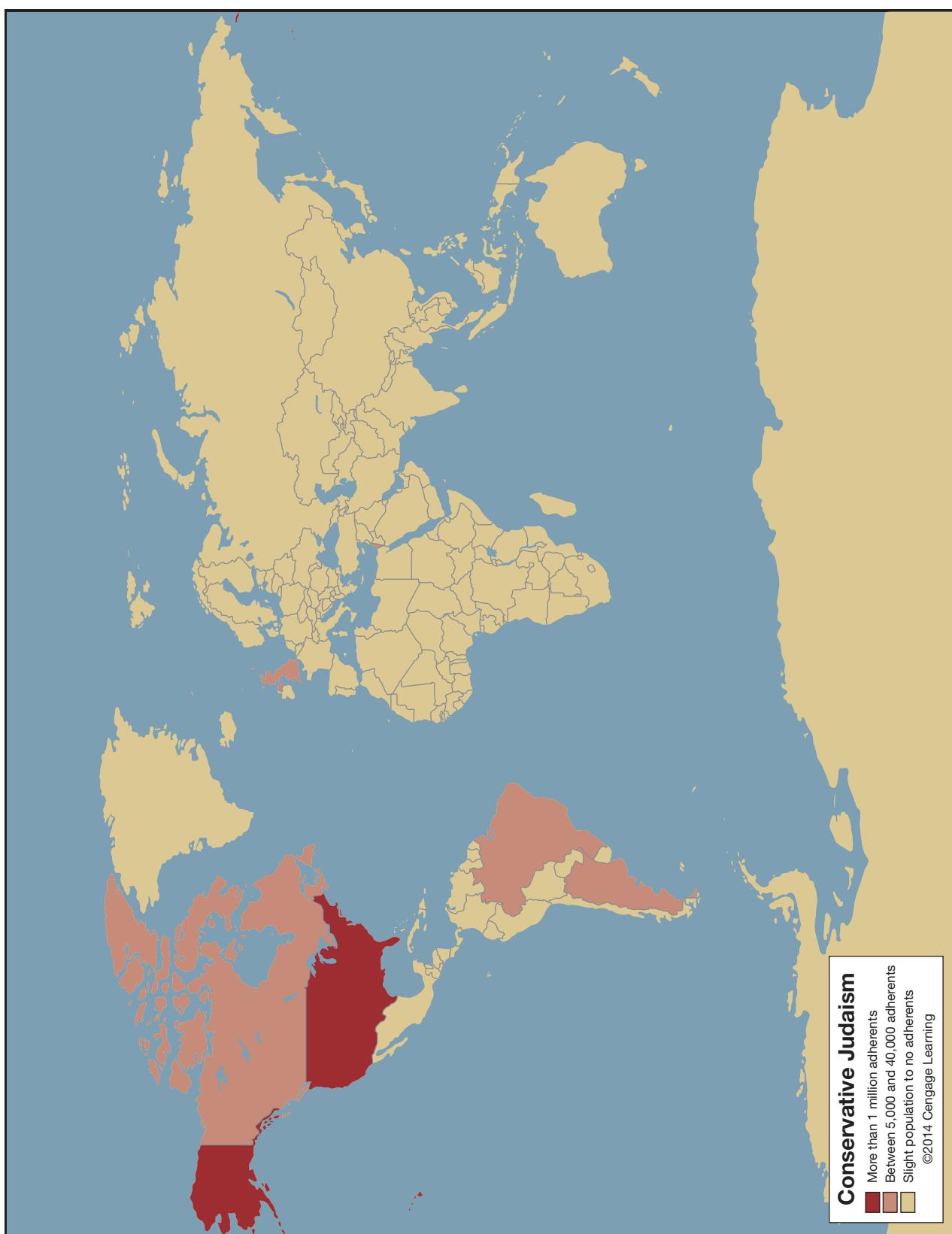
Israel," whereby a consensus of the committed Jewish community served as a check on radical transformation of the law.

Conservative Jews accept the doctrine of revelation (without outlining a specific version that must be accepted) and affirm the existence of a covenant between God and the Jewish people that binds them to the 613 mitzvoth, or commandments, listed in the Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible). Along with ethical precepts, the mitzvoth include such ritual practices as kashruth—rules and regulations for food and its preparation, often known by the Yiddish word *kosher*. Conservative Judaism has also emphasized the unity of the Jewish people and a commitment to rebuilding a Jewish state in the land of Israel.

The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards—which includes 25 rabbis appointed by the Rabbinical Assembly (the organization of Conservative rabbis), JTS, and the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, as well as one cantor and five lay observers—rules on new questions of Jewish law addressed to the committee by rabbis and affiliated organizations. Only rabbis may vote on these questions. Because Conservative Judaism values pluralism, it considers any position supported by even six votes to be a valid practice within the movement. Moreover, Conservative halakhah generally recognizes the local authority of its rabbis to determine the best ritual practice for their own communities. If the law committee has permitted a range of practices in a given area, the rabbi of the individual congregation may choose any of the approved practices for his synagogue. However, in several boundary-marking issues, the committee has moved that its positions be adopted as Standards of Rabbinic Practice by the plenary of the Rabbinical Assembly. These are all connected to family law. They insist on the traditional definition of Jewish identity—birth to a Jewish mother or halakhic conversion, the requirement of a Jewish divorce document (*get*) before a previously married man or woman can remarry, and a ban on Conservative rabbis from performing inter-faith marriages. A Conservative rabbi who violates these Standards of Rabbinic Practice may be expelled from the Rabbinical Assembly.

MORAL CODE OF CONDUCT Conservative Judaism's moral code of conduct is based on traditional Jewish texts and communal norms. The creation of humanity in the divine image leads to a moral imperative to protect the life and dignity of all people. Conservative Judaism

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teaches its adherents to view loyalty to the ancient covenant between God and Israel as a means of bringing redemption to all of humanity. Its leaders have endorsed public policies deemed beneficial for public welfare in areas such as health care, immigration policy, gun violence, and environmental stewardship. The Rabbinical Assembly and Cantors Assembly have each articulated ethical standards for their members, and each maintains an ethics committee (*Va'ad HaKavod*) that investigates complaints about the ethical conduct of Conservative rabbis and cantors.

SACRED BOOKS Conservative Jews have the same sacred books as all other Jews: the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible), which includes the Torah (the five books of Moses) and the Talmud (the main repository of Jewish law and lore), as well as medieval and modern books of commentary, legal codes, liturgy, and mysticism. However, Conservative Judaism has taught its students to use the tools of the modern academy to understand the history and development of the sacred canon in order to deepen comprehension, even at the expense of veneration for the mythic origins of the Torah.

Prayer books are the most significant vehicle for the popular expression of Conservative theology. Morris Adler's *Sabbath and Festival Prayer Book* (1944) subtly altered references to Temple sacrifices from a plea for restoration to a remembrance of things past. Ancient blessings in which Jewish men thanked God for not making them a woman or a Gentile were transformed into affirmations of being made in the divine image and Jewish. In 1985 Jules Harlowe (1931–) edited *Siddur Sim Shalom*, a prayer book that includes the cycle of prayers for weekdays, Sabbaths, and festivals, as well as for home life. In alternative English versions of the main prayer (the Amidah), written by Andre Ungar (1928–), the matriarchs of Judaism are mentioned for the first time. Fifteen years later a two-volume revised *Siddur Sim Shalom*, edited by Avram Reisner, gave the option of including the matriarchs in the Hebrew Amidah. This model was also followed in the Israeli *Siddur V'Ani Tefilati* (2009), edited by Simchah Roth, which celebrates the sovereign presence of Jews in the homeland and offers rituals for army induction, while also softening the messianic fervor of some prayers. In the early 21st century the Rabbinical Assembly published a new *Mahzor Lev Shalem*, edited by Ed Feld, which features extensive commentaries and modern compositions to accompany the traditional liturgy.

SACRED SYMBOLS Like all traditional Jews, Conservative Jews revere as sacred symbols the Torah scrolls and other holy books, such as prayer books and the Talmud. Other symbols include the menorah, a candelabrum with seven lights used in Jewish worship; the mezuzah, a parchment scroll containing sections from the Torah that is affixed to the doorpost of one's home as a sign of faith; the tallit, a prayer shawl; and tefillin, phylacteries, or leather boxes containing scriptural passages that are worn on the head and left arm. During festivals such as Rosh Hashanah, Hannukah, Purim, and Passover, additional ritual objects and symbols are used to recall key experiences and beliefs of the Jewish people.

EARLY AND MODERN LEADERS Two distinguished rabbis, Sabato Morais (1823–1897) and Henry Pereira Mendes (1852–1937), along with a group of prominent lay leaders from Sephardic congregations in Philadelphia



A menorah with nine candles, called a hanukiah, is used on Hanukkah. Eight candles represent the eight days of Hanukkah, with a ninth candle used to light the others.
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and New York, founded the JTS in 1886. Its mission was to preserve the knowledge and practice of historical Judaism. In 1887 the JTS held its first class of 10 students in the vestry of the Spanish-Portuguese Synagogue, New York City's oldest congregation.

The most prominent early leaders of JTS were Solomon Schechter (1847–1915), Louis Ginzberg (1873–1953), Cyrus Adler (1863–1940), and Mordecai Kaplan (1881–1983). Schechter came from a teaching post at Cambridge University in 1902 to serve as the first president of the JTS. In 1913 he founded the United Synagogue of America (later renamed the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism), representing affiliated synagogues in North America. Ginzberg was the leading scholar of rabbinical literature at JTS from 1903 until his death. Adler was president of the JTS from 1915 until 1940.

Kaplan founded the Teachers Institute at JTS in 1910 and taught there for more than 50 years, influencing generations of students. He also founded the Jewish Reconstructionist movement, which seceded from the Conservative movement after his retirement from the JTS. Kaplan was a strong supporter of the “synagogue center,” an institutional trend encouraging the use of synagogues for community events, study, and social activities in addition to prayer. In 1924 he created the bat mitzvah—with synagogue rituals similar to those of the bar mitzvah, the traditional boy’s coming-of-age ceremony—for his eldest daughter.

Other major leaders of the 20th century included JTS Chancellors Louis Finkelstein (1895–1991), Gershon Cohen, and Ismar Schorsch (1935–). JTS opened branches in Los Angeles and Jerusalem and supported the creation of a seminary in Buenos Aires. All of these branches eventually became independent rabbinical schools of the Conservative movement. In 2006 JTS named Arnold E. Eisen, a prominent scholar of modern Jewish thought at Stanford University and an outspoken Conservative Jew (but not a rabbi), as its seventh chancellor.

MAJOR THEOLOGIANS AND AUTHORS Theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–1972) wrote important works on the relationship of human beings to God, the significance of the Sabbath, and the meaning of revelation. He served as a living model of ethical behavior for his students at the JTS during the civil rights movement of the 1960s and during the anti–Vietnam War protests. In the next generation, Neil Gillman (1933–) and Elliot

Susan Grossman

Susan Grossman has been the rabbi of Beth Shalom Congregation in Columbia, Maryland, since 1997 and is a prominent scholar of Jewish law for the Conservative movement. One of the first women to be ordained as a Conservative rabbi by JTS, she also earned a doctorate in ancient Judaism from the seminary. Rabbi Grossman has led congregations in Westchester County, New York, and in Howard County, Maryland. She coauthored with Rivka Haut the book *Daughters of the King: Women and the Synagogue*, which was published by the Jewish Publication Society. Together with Elliot Dorff, she edited the halakhic commentary to *the humash* (printed Torah) *Etz Hayim*, and she serves on the prestigious Committee on Jewish Law and Standards (CJLS). The CJLS has approved her responsa on the permissibility of women to serve as witnesses on Jewish ritual documents, the contemporary use of the mikveh (ritual bath), and the status of partial-birth abortion.

Rabbi Grossman was honored by *Jewish Woman* magazine as a “Woman of the Year” in 2000. She is a mentor to younger rabbis and is a role model for women as they establish themselves as leaders of the Conservative movement.

Dorff (1943–) have authored numerous reviews of Conservative Jewish belief and practice and have trained new generations of Conservative rabbis in New York and Los Angeles. In 2001 the Conservative movement published its first Pentateuch. Titled *Etz Hayim* (“Tree of Life”), it includes essays and commentaries by leading rabbis of the movement and models the value of pluralism in its triple set of commentaries featuring the historical, ethical, and legal meanings of the Torah.

Isaac Klein (1905–1979) chaired the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards at JTS and authored *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice*, a legal handbook of the Conservative movement. Joel Roth, a Talmud professor at JTS, succeeded Klein as chair of the CJLS and influenced generations of Conservative movement leaders in the study of Jewish Law. In 2012 a successor volume, *The Observant Life: The Wisdom of Conservative Judaism for Contemporary Jews*, expanded the scope of topics to include

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matters of civil society, economics, and family life beyond purely ritual matters.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE The Conservative movement has three primary organizational structures in North America: the JTS, the Rabbinical Assembly (RA), and the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism (USCJ). The University of Judaism in Los Angeles became independent as the American Jewish University, and its Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies became a second Conservative-affiliated seminary in North America. The RA, the organization of Conservative rabbis, began as an alumni association of JTS but now has many members who were trained elsewhere. The USCJ, which represents more than 750 North American synagogues, is a layperson's organization, though its executive director has always been a rabbi. The umbrella organization for Conservative groups in other parts of the world is the World Council of Conservative Synagogues.

The individual synagogues form the grassroots core of the Conservative movement and contribute members to the Women's League of Conservative Judaism, the International Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs, and the United Synagogue Youth. A network of Solomon Schechter schools and Ramah summer camps spans the United States, Canada, and other countries, giving Conservative Judaism significant resources for the training of an educated and committed youth.

HOUSES OF WORSHIP AND HOLY PLACES In Judaism, as in all biblically based religions, the notion of specific holy places is ambiguous. If the God of Israel is also the universal God of creation, then, as the prophet Isaiah declared, "The whole earth is filled with his glory!" (Isaiah 6:3). In the third-century midrashic collection *Bereshit Rabbah* (a rabbinic commentary on Genesis), Rabbi Ami is quoted as saying, "The world is not the place of God; God is the place of the world" (Genesis 68:9). Nevertheless, there is a sense of hierarchy in holiness, with the Temple Mount in Jerusalem considered to be the place where God's presence (Shekhinah) has been centered on earth. This location is also said to be the site of the "foundation stone" upon which the world was based. It is associated with the biblical story of Mount Moriah, where Abraham bound Isaac (Genesis 22:14) and upon which, according to Jewish tradition, Solomon's Temple was built. Nevertheless, it is significant that King Solomon, in his prayer at the dedication of the temple, raised this very question: "For will God

indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, the heaven and the heaven of the heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house that I have built!" (I Kings 8:27).

Nonetheless, after the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem by the Roman emperor Titus in 70 CE, the remaining parts of its Western Wall, popularly known as the Kotel or the Wailing Wall, became a site of collective mourning and of the expression of messianic longing for its restoration. After June 1967, when the Israel Defense Forces captured the Old City of Jerusalem during the Six-Day War (also known as the Arab-Israeli War) and the Kotel plaza was cleared and turned into an Orthodox synagogue, Conservative Jews and others sought the opportunity to pray in this sacred site with egalitarian prayers that mixed men and women and allowed all to lead public prayer. This contentious issue led to the designation of another section of the Western Wall under Robinson's Arch (one of the arches over the valley to the Temple Mount, located on the southern end of the Wall) as the recognized location for non-Orthodox Jewish prayer services. Monthly protests by the Women of the Wall—a group of Jewish women who pray and read from the Torah out loud at the Kotel—gather women from across the religious spectrum to demand equal access to Judaism's most sacred location.

Prior to the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, the *synagogue*, from the Greek meaning "assembly," had begun to serve as a local site of Jewish worship. (The Hebrew term is *bet ha-keneset*, or "house of assembly.") In the Talmudic period there arose a parallel institution called *bet ha-Midrash*, or "house of study," designating a place where Jews went to study the Torah. The two institutions eventually were joined, and in Yiddish, the vernacular of eastern European Jewry, the synagogue is simply called a *schul*, or "school."

WHAT IS SACRED The Hebrew term for "holiness" is *kedushah*, meaning the act of "setting apart," or dedication to God, who as the holy one and the creator of the universe is the source of all holiness. The act of dedicating oneself and one's actions to God constitutes the sacred in Judaism. Hence, Rabbi Heschel claimed in his work *The Sabbath* that Jews' relationship to God is pre-eminently through time and not space. The Sabbath, he said, is a "cathedral in time." It may, therefore, seem paradoxical that one of the most frequent names for God in the Talmud is *Makom*, Hebrew for "space." The contradiction is explained by a midrash ascribed to

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Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus (first-second centuries CE) in Psalm 90:1—"Lord, Thou has been our dwelling place in all generations"—suggesting that, wherever there are righteous and pious people, "God is with them." When the temple was destroyed, the divine presence was said by the rabbis to go into exile with her people.

The most common liturgical formula that attends the performance of religious commands (mitzvoth) begins, "Praised are You, Lord, our God and Sovereign of the universe, who sanctifies our lives through His commandments." Theologically, these actions bind the person to God, infusing divine holiness into daily life. The rabbis, however, have held that it is life itself that is most sacred, and in order to preserve a life the precepts of the Torah may be suspended. Accordingly, they interpreted Leviticus 19:16 to mean that "neither shalt thou stand aside when mischief befalls thy neighbor." For example, if someone is assaulted, it is incumbent upon all who are in a position to help to do so, even if this entails suspending the ritual commandments of the Torah.

Once objects have been designated for ritual use, such as a cup for the Sabbath kiddush prayer, they are not to be returned to common use, and in this sense they are regarded as sacred. Religious books written in Hebrew, "the sacred tongue," starting with the Bible, are also considered sacred. When these books become worn and no longer fit for use, they are reverentially buried in a cemetery, often in the grave of a great scholar or particularly pious person. In some communities it is customary to store Hebrew texts, including correspondence dealing with religious matters, that are no longer in use in a special vault, or *genizah* (hiding place), usually in a synagogue.

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the shift to digital media raised the question of whether the divine name could be erased from digital memory or displays. The Conservative movement declared that, because such displays are intended for temporary use, they may be erased without violating the ancient ban on destroying a paper copy of the divine name.

HOLIDAYS AND FESTIVALS For Conservative Jews the 25-hour Shabbat (Sabbath), from sundown each Friday until an hour after sunset on Saturday, is the most sacred day besides Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement). The Conservative movement follows the traditional Jewish calendar in celebrating the biblical high holidays of Rosh Hashanah (new year) and Yom

Kippur; the three pilgrimage festivals of Pesach (Passover), Shavuot (Feast of Weeks), and Sukkoth (Tabernacles); and the minor festivals of Hanukkah and Purim. Contemporary innovations in the Jewish calendar include the celebration of Yom Ha'atzmaut (Israeli Independence Day) and the commemoration of Yom Hashoah (Holocaust Memorial Day).

MODE OF DRESS Conservative Jews do not have a distinctive dress. For daily prayer men, boys over the age of 13, and some women wear tefillin; for daily, Shabbat, and festival prayer, men and some women wear *talitot* (prayer shawls). Men and many women cover their heads for prayer, and some Conservative Jews wear head coverings at all times as a traditional sign of piety, indicating the presence of God above them. In the vast majority of Conservative synagogues, the rabbis and cantors wear the same ritual garb as the congregants, except on the high holidays, when the clergy wear white robes. Tensions between the values of gender equality and distinctiveness continue to play out as Conservative Jews (like other people) negotiate the role of gender in contemporary religious life.

DIETARY PRACTICES Ideally Conservative Jews adhere to the laws of kashruth, which require that only biblically acceptable meats and fish be eaten, that meat be slaughtered according to rabbinic law, and that meat and dairy foods not be eaten together at the same meal. On the festival of Passover, stricter rules apply, since even trace amounts of leavened food (chametz) are forbidden. While Conservative-affiliated congregations and other organizations maintain kosher food service, many Conservative Jews do not follow kashruth stringently. Indeed, the commercial supervision of kosher foods and restaurants is largely dominated by the Orthodox rabbinate.

RITUALS Conservative synagogues hold prayer services three times a day, with a fourth prayer service added on Shabbat and festival days. While decorum was important in early congregations—and was one of Solomon Schechter's priorities in differentiating modern worship from the chaotic style of traditional services—many contemporary services emphasize informality, lay participation, and singing. Modern cantors are urged to emphasize congregational singing rather than ornate performances, and many rabbis use the sermon slot as an interactive lesson rather than as a formal speech. The basic liturgy, spoken in Hebrew, is the same in all congregations, but some large synagogues run "parallel services" with different

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A Jewish boy follows along as his father reads from a prayer book during a bar mitzvah in Jerusalem, Israel. In addition to prayer shawls, the pair are using tefillin—phylacteries, or leather boxes, containing scriptural passages that are worn on the head and left arm. © DAN PORGES/PHOTOLIBRARY/GETTY IMAGES.

styles of worship that may include study, music, or increased family participation. A number of congregations have adopted popular Israeli- and Hasidic-inflected melodies, and some have introduced the use of musical instruments even on Shabbat, when they have traditionally been banned lest they be tuned or transported in violation of Sabbath law.

RITES OF PASSAGE Conservative Jewish rites of passage include *brit milah* (circumcision) for boys and a special baby-naming ceremony, often called *simhat bat* (the joy of a daughter) or *brit bat* (covenant for a daughter), for girls. Created in the early 1970s in response to feminist demands, such ceremonies became widely observed in the late 1980s. When boys and girls turn 13, they celebrate their bar mitzvahs and bat mitzvahs, respectively, officially assuming religious duty and responsibility. The central moment of this ceremony is when the young person is called up to chant from the Torah scroll before the congregation and to lead them in prayer.

Traditional but personalized wedding ceremonies include a chuppah (canopy), a *ketubah* (the Aramaic wedding document), and the traditional seven benedictions (blessings read by a rabbi under the chuppah). After the death of a close relative (a parent, spouse, child, or sibling), Conservative Jews “sit shiva,” or stay home, for

seven days, which is followed by 30 days of intense mourning or a year of mourning when each parent dies. As part of the mourning process, the *kaddish* prayer is recited in the synagogue three times a day.

MEMBERSHIP Any Jew can join and pay dues to a Conservative synagogue, but non-Jews and non-Jewish spouses of Jews may not be members or participate in traditional rituals. Children must have a Jewish mother or be converted to be accepted as Jews. After the Reform and Reconstructionist movements accepted patrilineal descent as a marker of Jewish identity in the 1980s, the Conservative movement’s law committee unanimously reaffirmed the necessity of matrilineal descent. Nevertheless, many efforts have been taken to welcome non-Jewish families and to include them in Jewish worship.

As the percentage of Jews with one or more non-Jewish parents has risen, so too has the Conservative movement’s efforts at outreach. Conversion remains the preferred path for interfaith families so that all may share in Judaism’s core beliefs and practices in home and in public. Conservative rabbis perform a high percentage of conversions to Judaism, especially in the diaspora. The Conservative movement does not evangelize. It does, however, sponsor conversion classes for those interested

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The Masorti Movement in Israel

Because the two chief rabbis of Israel are Orthodox, and only Orthodox rabbis are legally empowered and indeed employed by the state, the Masorti (Conservative) movement has suffered more limitations in Israel than in any other country. Conservative and other non-Orthodox rabbis in Israel may not officiate at marriages or Jewish divorce proceedings. As a result many Israelis travel out of the country to marry, forcing the state to recognize their marriage under international law. Non-Orthodox movements within Judaism are frequently excluded from government aid. The thorniest issue has been conversion to Judaism. Tens of thousands of immigrants to Israel from the former Soviet Union have wanted to convert to Judaism but have not wanted to become Orthodox, and the state recognizes only Orthodox conversion. Despite these obstacles, and particularly since the mid-1980s, the Masorti movement has created and maintained institutions in Israel, trained native-born rabbis and teachers, nurtured more than 50 synagogues and a youth movement, and begun to support candidates for local political office.

in studying Judaism and encourages non-Jewish fiancés and spouses to take these classes along with their Jewish partners.

RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE One of the hallmarks of Conservative Judaism is its open-mindedness. Adherents are tolerant of Jews who differ in their interpretation of Judaism, of members of other religious groups, and of secular humanists. This open stance made Conservative Judaism a popular denomination for Jewish seekers of the 20th century but has arguably weakened it in the early 21st century, as Orthodox outreach organizations such as Chabad vigorously recruit even the most secular Jews to their fervent communities. JTS Chancellor Arnold Eisen (1951–), a sociologist and scholar of Jewish Thought, advocated speaking to “the Jew within” even while continuing to respect practices that had defined Jewish communities for millennia. His “Mitzvah Initiative” engaged Jews to define their own relationship to

the mitzvoth, whether as divine commands, family traditions, communal norms, or personal forms of piety.

SOCIAL JUSTICE Conservative Judaism highlights prophetic and rabbinic writings that urge adherents to “repair the world” to reflect divine justice (Tikkun Olam). Most congregations have social action programs and encourage members to give money to charity, to participate actively in making the world a better place, and to lobby state and federal governments to achieve social goals. Many of the central debates within Conservative Judaism have centered on issues of equal treatment of all members of the community, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, and physical ability. Conservative synagogues in North America and in Israel have emphasized accessibility of their buildings, rituals, and programs to differently abled individuals.

SOCIAL LIFE The central institutions of Conservative Judaism are the synagogue and the family. Sabbath worship often highlights developments in family life such as marriage, the birth of children, bar and bat mitzvah (a coming-of-age ritual), the celebration of special anniversaries, and memorials for deceased relatives. The movement is egalitarian and stresses the importance of parenting by both men and women. Divorce is permitted, but a Conservative rabbi will officiate at a second marriage only if the divorced person has obtained a Jewish divorce document in addition to a civil divorce. Since the mid-20th century great efforts have been made by Conservative rabbis to reverse traditional forms of discrimination against women, and then gay and lesbian Jews within Jewish religious life.

Many Conservative Jews, although lax in their personal ritual practice, conform to religious standards for important life-cycle transitions surrounding birth, marriage, and death. Because the State of Israel has granted the Orthodox rabbinate a monopoly over the rituals surrounding such events, Conservative Judaism (as well as Reform and other non-Orthodox streams) suffers from religious discrimination in the Jewish State.

CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES In the middle of the 20th century, as masses of American Jews moved to the suburbs, controversy erupted in the Conservative movement over permission to ride in a car to the synagogue on the Sabbath and festivals. Today the vast majority of Conservative synagogues have parking lots, and most Conservative Jews drive to services. A small group of clergy and lay leaders has maintained the more traditional

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practice of walking to synagogue, especially in urban environments, and has sought to cultivate a community that spends the Sabbath together, with shared meals and light recreation in neighborhood parks.

Beginning in 1955 but accelerating in the 1980s, the movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards approved a woman's right to count in a minyan (the quorum of 10 people required for communal prayer), to read publicly from the sacred scrolls, and to enter rabbinical and cantorial schools (in 1983). Some scholars required such women to adopt personal obligations to mitzvoth from which women had traditionally been exempted, while others considered that all women had an equal obligation to pray and could therefore serve as prayer leaders without distinction. Indeed, new liturgy was composed to include the names of the biblical matriarchs along with the patriarchs in the main Jewish prayer (the Amidah). A small group, the Union for Traditional Judaism, seceded, starting its own seminary, law committee, and synagogue organization. These organizations did not last long, however. The vast majority of Conservative institutions became fully egalitarian; dissenters generally affiliated with modern Orthodox congregations, which themselves began to experiment with halakhically acceptable ways of including women in liturgical leadership.

The incidence of marriage between Jews and non-Jews has increased in the United States. The 2013 Pew study reported that 58 percent of marriages after 2001 of a person who identified as Jewish were to a non-Jew. Some Conservative synagogue members put pressure on their rabbis to follow the lead of Reform Judaism in recognizing patrilineal (not just matrilineal) Jewish descent as a basis of Jewish identity. The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards and the Rabbinical Assembly resisted this change, while seeking alternative ways to engage people who are not Jewish according to the standards of Jewish law but who are interested in practicing Judaism.

By the 1990s Conservative Judaism was clearly differentiated from Orthodox Judaism, which opposed both the ordination of women and counting them in the quorum for prayer, and from Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism, which accepted rabbinic officiation at interfaith marriages, patrilineal descent as a basis for Jewish identity, and the ordination of gay men and women.

Also controversial has been the status of openly practicing gay and lesbian Jews. In the early 1990s a first round of heated debate resulted in a policy that

stated gay and lesbian Jews were welcome but not eligible for leadership roles such as ordination and that their committed relationships would not be recognized. This position was increasingly unpopular with many rabbis and lay leaders, especially those of the younger generation. As Western cultures became more sympathetic and respectful of homosexuals, the Conservative movement returned to the topic in the early 21st century. In December 2006 the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards approved two opposite papers, each with 13 of the 25 votes in favor and 12 opposed (one rabbi voted in support of the legitimacy of both points of view). Rabbi Joel Roth argued that Jewish law could not accommodate the radical shift of reversing its ancient ban on same-sex intimacy. Rabbis Elliot Dorff, Daniel Nevins (1966–), and Avram Reisner argued that Jewish law requires that human dignity be preserved and that this imperative justified a suspension of rabbinic laws prohibiting homosexual relationships. They further argued that same-sex relationships could be recognized and that gay and lesbian Jews could be accepted to the Conservative seminaries and clergy associations as rabbis and cantors.

On the basis of the Dorff, Nevins, and Reisner responsum, the Jewish Theological Seminary and the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies in Los Angeles both accepted gay and lesbian students in the spring of 2007 and began ordaining them shortly thereafter. The Schechter Rabbinic Seminary in Jerusalem initially rejected this position, adopting the Roth view as their policy, but in 2011 agreed to accept homosexual students. In 2012 Rabbis Dorff, Nevins, and Reisner brought ceremonies and documents of Jewish marriage and divorce for same-sex couples to the Law Committee, which approved them. When the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the Federal Defense of Marriage Act in 2013, Conservative clergy were ready with a ritual for same-sex marriage and also one for divorce. Not all clergy and congregations accepted these rituals, but gay inclusion became normative for the majority of American communities.

CULTURAL IMPACT The Jewish Museum in New York City, which operates under the auspices of the JTS, contains a collection of traditional Jewish art and sponsors exhibits that have received national acclaim. The JTS cantorial school promotes Jewish music, and its professors have composed many melodies that have entered the liturgy. With the shift to digital media in the Internet age and the growth of online social networks, Conservative Jewish scholars and lay leaders alike have

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found global audiences. While denominationalism as an organizing principle in American religion has steeply declined, and the fastest-growing identity of Jews is either “not religious” or ultra-Orthodox, Conservative Judaism continues to play a significant role as a committed center, preserving traditional practices with a spirit of inclusion for people of all backgrounds and identities.

Rela Mintz Geffen
Revised by Daniel S. Nevins

See Also Vol. 1: *Judaism, Orthodox Judaism, Reform Judaism*; Vol. 4: *United States*

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