

OFFICIAL USE OF “GOD”

Rabbi Kassel Abelson

This paper was approved by the CJLS on May 19, 1993, by a vote of twenty-four in favor (24-0-0). Voting in favor: Rabbis Kassel Abelson, Ben Zion Bergman, Stanley Bramnick, Elliot N. Dorff, Jerome M. Epstein, Ezra Finkelstein, Samuel Fraint, Myron S. Geller, Arnold M. Goodman, Susan Grossman, Jan Caryl Kaufman, Reuven Kimelman, Judah Kogen, Vernon H. Kurtz, Aaron L. Mackler, Lionel E. Moses, Paul Plotkin, Mayer Rabinowitz, Avram Israel Reischer, Joel E. Rembaum, Chaim Rogoff, Joel Roth, Gerald Skolnik, and Gordon Tucker.

The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly provides guidance in matters of halakhah for the Conservative movement. The individual rabbi, however, is the authority for the interpretation and application of all matters of halakhah.

שאלה

Should the different branches of the Conservative movement write out the full word “God,” or employ the hyphenation “G-d” in their publications?

תשובה

The Rabbis, basing themselves on Deut. 12:3-4, deduced that it is forbidden to erase the name of God from a written document. Since any paper upon which God’s name was written might be discarded and thus “erased,” the Rabbis forbade explicitly writing the name of God, except in holy books. And provisions were made for the proper disposal of such books. However, it is clear from the Talmud (Shevuot 35a-b) that the prohibition applies only to seven Biblical names of God and not to other names or attributes of God which may be freely written. The prohibition was later codified by Maimonides (see M.T. Yesodei HaTorah 6:1-2).

Shabbetai b. Meir Hakohen states that the prohibition of erasure of the Divine names applies only to the names in Hebrew but not in the vernacular (see Sifteï Kohen to Shulhan Arukh, Y.D. 179:8, and see also Avraham Tzvi Hirsch Eisenstadt in his Pithei Teshuvah to Y.D. 276:9). However Jehiel Michael Epstein in his Arukh Hashulhan (H.M. 27:3) opposes the practice of writing the Divine name even in the vernacular in correspondence. As a result, the custom has grown among some ritually strict Jews not to write the word God or any other name of God in full, even in the vernacular. The practice of using circumlocutions or hyphenations in the vernacular is not universal even among the most observant Jews.

Conclusion

The practice of writing the full word “God” and other names of God in the vernacular has clear precedent and justification in the halakhah. It is therefore permissible, for our national Conservative organizations, to follow this practice.