

Conservative/Masorti Judaism, Covenantal Love, & Responsibility:

A Pastoral Letter to Conservative/Masorti Rabbis, Cantors, Educators, Institutional Leadership and Kehillot

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On behalf of

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*Summary: Conservative/Masorti Judaism, like all traditional Judaism, cherishes the mission of the Jewish people to deepen the ancient covenant between God and the Children of Israel. For that reason, rabbinic officiation is limited to events that celebrate covenantal commitment for members of the covenant: brit milah (circumcision), simchat bat (baby naming for daughters), bar and bat mitzvah, weddings, and funerals. Judaism survives as a communal system, worldwide and across generations, by changing as little as possible as late as possible, modifying it only when necessary and only when there isn't already a solution within the system of halakhah (Jewish law). Honoring the integrity of both partners in a wedding, and for the sake of deepening faithful Jewish living, rabbinic officiation at weddings is restricted to a marriage between two Jews. We also recognize the precious personal good of finding a loving partner and that all people can benefit from access to Jewish wisdom and community, so we call upon all Conservative/Masorti rabbis and congregations to foster deep and loving relationships with **all** couples, and to create a rabbinic relationship that is broader and deeper than simply the moment of officiation. To achieve both the desired goal of rabbinic officiation and the goal of meaningful Torah observance, we invite the non-Jewish partner who seeks rabbinic officiation to share responsibility with the rabbi by studying Judaism and then linking their identity with the destiny of the Jewish people through conversion.*

Introduction

Contemporary Jewish life is graced by extraordinary blessing: we are the heirs of a Torah of compassion and justice that has grown ever more supple and vibrant because of the dynamic nature of *halakhah* (Jewish law), and the joy and communal belonging generated by the opportunity to observe *mitzvot* (commandments). At the same time, modernity has removed barriers of discrimination and antisemitism, opened doors to participation in broader cultural participation and professions previously closed to Jews. We face the challenge of remaining true to the best of our ancient tradition while also enjoying the blessings of the best of modern civilization.

Conservative/Masorti Judaism understands our goal to be the integration of these two streams: the values and practices rooted in Torah, leavened by contemporary insight and knowledge. While that challenge is real, it should not blind us to the blessings that democracy now makes possible. It is a blessing that growing numbers of non-Jews are willing to see us as colleagues, neighbors, friends, and even family; it is miraculous that many turn to Judaism as part and parcel of their own cultural heritage as human beings.

Integrating those blessings, which sometimes conflict, requires all the courage, vision, and heart that our Torah demands of us. Honoring and loving the actual people whose lives are in our care remains a high privilege and duty. This integration of responsibilities requires us to recognize that there will properly be a pluralism of incompatible responses from different sectors of the Jewish world. We salute all constructive contemporary forms of Jewish vitality that root themselves in a Jewish vision of human dignity, rigorous and respectful debate, and a Torah of *hesed* (lovingkindness), *tzedek* (justice), and *emet* (truth).

Within that cluster of Jewish communities, Conservative/Masorti Judaism has long taken a stand among those who continue to hear the commanding voice of the Divine reverberate in our sacred texts and who find joy and purpose in communal lives of covenantal loyalty. We hold to the time-honored practice of *mitzvot* as interpreted in an unbroken yet dynamic link from Moses to the present day. New insights and possibilities (when they strengthen covenantal living) are integrated within the structure of *halakhah*. We see ourselves as faithful to traditional Judaism when we facilitate the organic growth of Torah and Jewish law to respond to a changing world, even while our primary response is to affirm and conserve traditional Jewish observance.

Jewish Community, Loves, & Lives

Conservative/Masorti Judaism affirms that a life of *mitzvot*, walking the pathway of *halakhah*, can elevate life and strengthen community today, even as it has for millennia. We understand Judaism as a covenantal relationship that binds God, the Children of Israel, and each individual in a living tapestry of meaning and beauty.

Our communal choices and constraints emerge from that understanding, both when we affirm halakhic precedent and when we can only attain a worthy goal by modifying that precedent using halakhic methods. Changes in precedent are called for when there is a clear moral mandate and no way to integrate the insight within existing *halakhah* (such as the issue of human dignity for LGBT people or the modern affirmation of equal rights for women). Halakhic responsibility means deciding when the system already contains a solution (to be preferred), or the only way to address an issue requires a greater rupture with precedent. Judaism survives as a communal system, worldwide and across generations, by changing as little as possible as late as possible.

At the same time, we openly acknowledge that all people are made in God's image and that love doesn't always follow expected paths. In a society that welcomes us, Jews share school, activities, and professions with humanity in all its wonderful diversity. And a significant number of us fall in love with wonderful people and once in love, seek to build a life together. In a lonely world, love remains a personal blessing. We honor that blessing and that love.

Conservative/Masorti Judaism affirms a sacred obligation to reach out to any seeking soul, any willing couple or family, to embrace with open welcome, and to join together to make possible as vibrant and meaningful a Jewish life as each family is willing to undertake. And we share responsibility with the couple: to those who are willing to take on Jewish identity as their own, we will spare no efforts to open for them the wonders of Jewish life and covenant through programs for conversion to Judaism. For those whose life path does not include sharing this identity at the moment, we honor their choice by not blurring the distinction between those who are members of the covenant and those who (while supportive) choose not to be. For all couples, regardless of whether or not both partners choose to be part of the covenant, we will spare no efforts to offer community and welcome their joining with us to learn, to grow, and to live.

Our goal for all seeking people is to deepen Jewish identity, community, and covenant, as well as to maximize the joy, meaning, and purpose that Judaism can offer. That means extending ourselves, through teaching, pastoral care, publications both scholarly and popular, preaching and speaking, and crafting communities resonant with rich covenantal life for those born Jewish, those seeking to become Jewish, and those who want their lives illumined by Jewish wisdom without converting. We must be tireless in creating access to robust Jewish wisdom, holy day and Sabbath observance, as well as the spiritual bounty that a daily life of mitzvot makes available.

At the core of this model is covenant: nurturing and molding Jewish lives in the context of loving and deepening the Jewish covenant. Traditional Judaism affirms that Jewish identity, as well as expressions of Jewish wisdom and practice, thrives as a manifestation of covenantal belonging and loyalty, when every member of a household personally identifies with the history and destiny of the Jewish people. We can then celebrate together, share the same stories and practices, resonate together about holidays, memories, Israel, and build together a rich Jewish future. Even in non-observant or irreligious homes, when both adults identify as Jewish, there is abundant cultural expression and historical memory shared. Jewishness is bigger than a religion, a culture, or an ethnicity. For all these reasons and more, Jewish tradition prioritizes marriage between two Jews.

Each Family, Special and Unique

Of course, each family is unique, and no one approach will fit all. Every family struggles with faith and how faithfulness can help us to thrive and to raise moral and robust children. How we guide each family (and its members) to find community, to maximize their Jewish observance, learning, faith, and observance must be nuanced and tailored for them personally. For a couple in which both partners are halakhically Jewish and see themselves as part of the history and destiny of the Jewish people, we celebrate the covenantal event of their union through pastoral conversations and counseling, celebratory blessings before any wedding event, officiation at the wedding ceremony, and often with a celebratory party and a week of blessings afterward.

For couples in which one member is Jewish and the other member is not Jewish and chooses — at least at that time — not to become Jewish, we honor both the love and the choice of the non-

Jewish partner not to personally identify with the covenant linking God and the Jewish people. The integrity of the Gentile is not trivial to us. Nor is the couple's love for each other. In such instances, we affirm the traditional practice of reserving rabbinic officiation to two Jews, and are equally adamant that our clergy and communities go out of their way to create multiple opportunities for deep and caring relationships between the couple and the rabbi, the couple and the community, all in the context of welcome and love that extends well before the moment of the wedding and well beyond it too.

What is clear is that in both cases, two Jews, or one Jew and one Gentile, all who approach our communities do so with the desire to gain access to Judaism to help strengthen their home lives and families. For this reason, we affirm USCJ's recognition of the diversity of Jewish families and the commitment to join with **all** Jewish families together in creating centers of robust Jewish life. We owe every family that assistance and we will benefit from their participation and presence. Jewish families now come in many different configurations. Our covenantal responsibility is to help maximize their Jewish identity, Torah observance and faithfulness. We do that by creating synagogues, schools, camps and communities in which the quality of Jewish life is uplifting and inviting for all. We do that too by teaching a Torah that fuses traditional text study, contemporary academic tools, prophetic justice, and deep spirituality.

We do so by seeing each individual as the distinct and precious locus of the Divine image that they are. And we do that by affirming the significance of choosing to personally affiliate with this ancient and holy covenant, or not.

One consequence of this nuanced approach is that we continue to prioritize the value of conversion as the primary way of sharing the blessing of Jewish identity and family when one of the parents is not born Jewish. Conservative/Masorti Judaism welcomes those who would convert to Judaism, and thousands of those converts each year elevate our communities with their faith, passion, and resolve. Let us be clear: a marriage between someone born Jewish and someone who chose to be Jewish is fully mandated by halakhah and should be actively offered to all interested in rabbinic officiation, not simply as a way to get Jewish clergy to officiate, but to allow both spouses to stand together as one in faith, identity, and future.

Be A Blessing

We take the path we do as an expression of our understanding of Torah and Judaism: an ancient, communal, and dynamic covenant that seeks to shine the light of Torah across the ages, augmented in each generation by the new insights of its time. In our age, we are blessed that many Gentiles love us and seek to share their lives with us. We love them too. And we respond to them with open arms. For those who would join their identities and destinies with ours, we will move heaven and earth to share Jewish community, wisdom, and observance, culminating in conversion to Judaism. Having chosen to join the covenant linking God and the Jewish people, those individuals bring their integrity as Jews to every moment of their lives, including their wedding ceremony. For those have not chosen (yet) to convert, and those who choose not to, we will move heaven and earth with equally open arms: honoring their identity as life partners of Jews, potentially someday as parents of covenantal Jews. We joyously include

them and their families in the lives of our congregations and organizations, in our teaching of Torah, in our worship, in our social action. And we find ways to celebrate their marriage and love that honors their choice not to merge their identity with the people Israel by being present pastorally before the wedding, as rabbinic guides and companions after the wedding, and as loving friends during the wedding period.

We hold out an open hand to those whose souls calls them to a life enriched with the kind of dynamic and deep Torah that characterizes Conservative/Masorti Judaism: fusing the writings and faith of the ages with the knowledge and moral advance of each new age. Together, we will keep our ancient covenant strong, supple, and holy.