

The Sacred Cluster

The Core Values of Conservative Judaism

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If dogmas or doctrines are the propositional language of a theological system, core values are the felt commitments of lived religion, the refraction of what people practice and profess. To identify them calls for keen observation as well as theoretical analysis.

Conservative Judaism is best understood as a sacred cluster of core values. No single propositional statement comes close to identifying its center of gravity. Nor does Conservative Judaism occupy the center of the contemporary religious spectrum because it is an arbitrary and facile composite of what may be found on the left and the right. On the contrary, its location flows from an organic and coherent world view best captured in terms of core values of relatively equal worth.

There are seven such core values, to my mind, that imprint Conservative Judaism with a principled receptivity to modernity balanced by a deep reverence for tradition. Whereas other movements in modern Judaism rest on a single tenet, such as the autonomy of the individual or the inclusiveness of God's revelation at Sinai (*Torah mi-Sinai*), Conservative Judaism manifests a kaleidoscopic cluster of discrete and unprioritized core values. Conceptually they fall into two sets—three national and three religious—which are grounded and joined to each other by the overarching presence of God, who represents the seventh and ultimate core value. The dual nature of Judaism as polity and piety, a world religion that never transcended its national origins, is unified by God. In sum, a total of seven core values corresponding to the most basic number in Judaism's construction of reality.

The centrality of modern Israel heads our list of core values. For Conservative Jews, as for their ancestors, Israel is not only the birthplace of the Jewish people, but also its final destiny. Sacred texts, historical experience and

liturgical memory have conspired to make it for them, in the words of Ezekiel, "the most desirable of all lands (20:6)." Its welfare is never out of mind. Conservative Jews are the backbone of Federation leadership in North America and the major source of its annual campaign. They visit Israel, send their children over a summer or for a year and support financially every one of its worthy institutions.¹ Israeli accomplishments on the battlefield and in the laboratory, in literature and politics, fill them with pride. Their life is a dialectic between homeland and exile. No matter how prosperous or assimilated, they betray an existential angst about anti-Semitism that denies them a complete sense of at-homeness anywhere in the Diaspora.

And their behavior reflects the dominant thrust of Conservative Judaism not to denationalize Judaism. Even in the era of emancipation, Zion remained the goal, as it was for the Torah, an arena in which to translate monotheism into social justice. A world governed by *realpolitik* needed a polity of a different order. The liturgy of the Conservative synagogue preserved the full text of the daily *amidah* (the silent devotion) with its frequent pleas for the restoration of Zion. Heinrich Graetz, who taught at the movement's rabbinical seminary in Breslau and authored the most nationalistic history of the Jews ever written, inspired Moses Hess to pen one of the earliest Zionist tracts in 1862 and would not write of the biblical period until he had personally visited Palestine in early 1872. During the last two decades, well over 100 Conservative rabbis have made *aliyah*, often at the cost of professional satisfaction, attesting not only to movement ideology, but personal courage.

This is not to say that Conservative Judaism divests the Diaspora of all spiritual value or demands of all Jews to settle in Israel. Ironically, the state of Judaism is far healthier outside the Jewish state, where Judaism is indispensable for a resilient Jewish identity. Most Israelis have sadly been severed from any meaningful contact with Judaism by the absence of religious alternatives and by the erosion of sacred Jewish content in the secular school system where 75% of Israel's Jewish children are educated. And yet, the miracle and mystery of Israel's restoration after two millennia out of the ashes of the Holocaust continues to overwhelm Conservative Jews with radical amazement and deep joy.

Hebrew as the irreplaceable language of Jewish expression is the second core value of Conservative Judaism. Its existence is coterminous with that of the Jewish people and the many layers of the language mirror the cultures in which Jews perpetuated Judaism. It was never merely a vehicle of communication, but part of the fabric and texture of Judaism. Words vibrate with religious meaning, moral values and literary associations. Torah and Hebrew are inseparable and Jewish education was always predicated on mastering Hebrew. Hebrew literacy is the key to Judaism, to joining the unending dialectic between sacred texts, between Jews of different ages, between God and Israel. To know Judaism only in translation is, to quote Bialik, akin to kissing the bride through the veil.

¹ Ismar Schorsch, *In Defense of the Common Good* (New York: 1992), pp. 1-2.

These are some of the sentiments which prompted Zacharias Frankel, the founder of Conservative Judaism in central Europe, to break with Reform over the issue of Hebrew at the Frankfurt Rabbinical Conference in 1845. Despite the leniency of Jewish law, he was not prepared to endorse a resolution which would acknowledge that synagogue services could theoretically dispense with Hebrew. Given the rapid shrinkage of Judaism with the advent of emancipation, the fostering of Hebrew for Frankel became a symbol of historical continuity and national unity. Much of his scholarly *oeuvre* was intentionally written in Hebrew. And the language has remained at the heart of the Conservative agenda ever since.

Hebrew became the language of instruction of the Seminary's Teachers Institute not too long after its opening in 1909, as well as the language of daily conversation in the Ramah summer camps which it launched in the late 1940s. The Conservative synagogue never expunged Hebrew from the liturgy, and its supplementary Hebrew school, despite the constraints of a very pared-down curriculum, never gave up the struggle to teach a modicum of Hebrew literacy to the young. If anything, the Solomon Schechter day schools of the movement, an achievement of the past two decades, excel in the teaching of Hebrew language.

The revival of Hebrew in the last century-and-a-half, that is *Hebrew Reborn* as Sholom Spiegel put it in the title of his celebratory book of 1930, is as singular a feat as the creation of the Jewish state. Hebrew has been wholly transformed from an unwieldy classical medium of liturgy and learning into a modern Western language fit for the sciences and sensibilities of secular society. Diaspora Jews can little afford to remain deaf to the sounds of Hebrew as they can ignore the fate of the Jewish state.

In a Jewish world of sundry and proliferating divisions, Hebrew must emerge as the common and unifying language of the Jewish people, and nothing would advance that vision more effectively than to redefine Zionism today solely in terms of the ability to speak Hebrew. To restructure the World Zionist Organization by earmarking all of its budget to the intensive teaching of Hebrew to Diaspora Jews would create many more Zionists (that is, Jews who appreciate the centrality of Israel) than all the atavistic politics of the current Zionist establishment. The natural bonds of language and culture bind more firmly than those of abstruse ideological constructs.

I offer as example the young Mordecai Kaplan, then dean of the Teachers Institute, struggling to perfect his command of Hebrew to the point where he could preside over its faculty meetings and public events in Hebrew. In the 1920s he made the following poignant entry in his diary: "Here is another failure I have to register against myself. Due to the lack of energy necessary to train myself to speak and write Hebrew with ease, I am afraid to venture on those occasions to give an address in Hebrew."² Of such failures, the fabric of Jewish unity is sewn!

² *Journal of the Alumni Association of the Seminary College-Teachers Institute*, June 1992, p. 4.

The third core value is an undiminished devotion to the ideal of *klal yisrael*, the unfractured totality of Jewish existence and the ultimate significance of every single Jew. In the consciousness of Conservative Jews, there yet resonates the affirmation of *haverim kol yisrael* (all Israel is still joined in fellowship)—despite all the dispersion, dichotomies and politicization that history has visited upon us, Jews remain united in a tenacious pilgrimage of universal import.³ It is that residue of Jewish solidarity that makes Conservative Jews the least sectarian or parochial members of the community, that renders them the ideal donor of Federation campaigns and brings them to support unstintingly every worthy cause in Jewish life. Often communal needs will prompt them to compromise the needs of the movement.

Such admirable commitment to the welfare of the whole does not spring from any special measure of ethnicity, as is so often ascribed to Conservative Jews. Rather, I would argue that it is nurtured by the acute historical sense cultivated by their leadership. In opposition to exclusively rational, moral or halakhic criteria for change, Conservative Judaism embraced a historical romanticism that rooted tradition in the normative power of a heroic past. To be sure, history infused an awareness of the richness and diversity of the Jewish experience. But it also presumed to identify a normative Judaism and invest it with the sanctity of antiquity. It is that mixture of critical breadth and romantic reverence that imbued men like Frankel, Graetz, Schechter, Kaplan and Louis Finkelstein with the love of *klal yisrael*. And, fortunately, they all commanded the literary gifts to disseminate and popularize their views.

The fourth core value is the defining role of Torah in the reshaping of Judaism after the loss of political sovereignty in 63 B.C.E. and the Second Temple in 70 C.E. to the Romans. In their stead, the Rabbis fashioned the Torah into a portable homeland, the synagogue into a national theater for religious drama and study into a form of worship. Conservative Judaism never repudiated any of these remarkable transformations. Chanting the Torah each Shabbat is still the centerpiece of the Conservative service, even if all too often it is lamentably done according to the triennial cycle and then without liturgical aplomb. Though historically defensible, the cycle makes a sham of *Simhat Torah*, even as it suggests the decline of Torah in our lives.

More substantively, the cycle misses a precious chance to reinvigorate Shabbat. As the rhythm of the Jewish week is to be set by Shabbat, so should the content of individual home study be informed by the weekly Torah portion. Conservative Jews increasingly evince a hunger for access to holy texts. To restore the reading of the entire *parashah* each Shabbat, to train a cadre of congregants, both young and old, to become proficient Torah readers and to help congregants in studying the *parashah* prior to Shabbat would create a *kahal kadosh*, a holy community, joined by a sacred calendar and text. Jews would then come to the synagogue on Shabbat morning prepared and primed to listen to the Torah reading, to recapture a touch of the numinous of the Sinai experience which, at best, it is designed to reenact.

³ The traditional prayer for announcing the new month. My translation.

For Conservative Jews, the Torah is no less sacred, if less central, than it was for their pre-modern ancestors. I use the word “sacred” advisedly. The Torah is the foundation text of Judaism, the apex of an inverted pyramid of infinite commentary, not because it is divine, but because it is sacred, that is, adopted by the Jewish people as its spiritual font. The term skirts the divisive and futile question of origins, the fetid swamp of heresy. The sense of individual obligation, of being commanded, does not derive from divine authorship, but communal consent. The Written Torah, no less than the Oral Torah, reverberates with the divine-human encounter, with “a minimum of revelation and a maximum of interpretation.”⁴ It is no longer possible to separate the tinder from the spark. What history can attest is that the community of Israel has always huddled in the warmth of the flame.

Accordingly, the study of Torah, in both the narrow and extended sense, is the fifth core value of Conservative Judaism. As a canon without closure, the Hebrew Bible became the unending stimulus for midrash, the medium of an I-Thou relationship with the text and with God. Each generation and every community appropriated the Torah afresh through their own interpretive activity, creating a vast exegetical dialogue in which differences of opinion were valid and preserved. The undogmatic preeminence of Torah spawned a textually-based culture that prized individual creativity and legitimate conflict.

What Conservative Judaism brings to this ancient and unfinished dialectic are the tools and perspectives of modern scholarship blended with traditional learning and empathy. The full meaning of sacred texts will always elude those who restrict the range of acceptable questions, fear to read contextually and who engage in willful ignorance. It is precisely the sacredness of these texts that requires of serious students to employ every piece of scholarly equipment to unpack their contents. Their power is crippled by inflicting upon them readings that no longer carry any intellectual cogency. Modern Jews deserve the right to study Torah in consonance with their mental world and not solely through the eyes of their ancestors. Judaism does not seek to limit our thinking, only our actions.

This is not to say that earlier generations got it all wrong. Nothing could be further from the truth. To witness their deep engagement with Torah and Talmud is to tap into inexhaustible wellsprings of mental acuity and spiritual power. It is to discover the multiple and ingenious ways—critical, midrashic, kabbalistic and philosophical—in which they explicated these texts. Like them, Conservative scholars take their place in an unbroken chain of exegetes, but with their own arsenal of questions, resources, and methodologies. No matter how differently done, the study of Torah remains at the heart of the Conservative spiritual enterprise.

Moreover, it is pursued with the conviction that critical scholarship will yield new religious meaning for the inner life of contemporary Jews. It is not the tools of the trade that make philology or history or anthropology or feminist studies threatening, but the spirit in which they are applied. Rigorous

⁴ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (New York: 1956), p. 274.

yet engaged and empathetic research often rises above the pedestrian to bristle with relevance. Witness the tribute paid by Moshe Greenberg, professor of biblical studies at the Hebrew University and a graduate of the Seminary, to Yehezkel Kaufmann, who a generation earlier pioneered a Jewish approach to the critical study of the Hebrew Bible.

Yehezkel Kaufmann embodied a passionate commitment to grand ideas, combining the philosopher's power of analysis and generalization with the attention to detail of the philological exegete. His lifework is a demonstration that the study of ancient texts does not necessitate losing contact with the vital currents of the spirit and the intellect.⁵

The sixth core value is the governance of Jewish life by halakhah, which expresses the fundamental thrust of Judaism to concretize ethics and theology into daily practice. The native language of Judaism has always been the medium of deeds. Conservative Jews are rabbinic and not biblical Jews. They avow the sanctity of the Oral Torah erected by Rabbinic Judaism alongside the Written Torah as complementary and vital to deepen, enrich and transform it. Even if in their individual lives they may often fall short on observance, they generally do not ask of their rabbinic leadership to dismantle wholesale the entire halakhic system in order to translate personal behavior into public policy. Imbued with devotion to *klal yisrael* and a pervasive respect for tradition, they are more inclined to sacrifice personal autonomy for a reasonable degree of consensus and uniformity in communal life.

Collectively, the injunctions of Jewish law articulate Judaism's deep-seated sense of covenant, a partnership with the divine to finish the task of creation. Individually, the mitzvot accomplish different ends. Some serve to harness and focus human energy by forging a regimen made up of boundaries, standards and rituals. To indulge in everything we are able to do, does not necessarily enhance human happiness or well-being. Some mitzvot provide the definitions and norms for the formation of community, while others still generate respites of holiness in which the feeling of God's nearness pervades and overwhelms.

The institution of Shabbat, perhaps the greatest legacy of the Jewish religious imagination, realizes all three. The weekly rest it imposes both humbles and elevates. By desisting from all productive work for an entire day, Jews acknowledge God's sovereignty over the world and the status of human beings as mere tenants and stewards. But the repose also conveys an echo of Eden, for Shabbat is the one fragment left over from the lost perfection of creation. Shabbat seeds the tortuous course of human history with moments of eternity, linking beginning to end while softening the massive suffering in between. Stopping the clock and diminishing the self allow others to reenter our lives. We are transposed to another dimension of reality.

Shabbat is an exquisite work of religious art created out of whole cloth by

the meticulous performance of countless mitzvot. We join with family, friends and community in a symphony of ritual-clothing, candles, table-setting, prayer, food, song and study—to turn Shabbat into the Jewish equivalent of a country home. To gain renewal, we give up a measure of dominion. The hallowed tranquility that ensues helps us reach beyond ourselves. Like the halakhah as a whole, Shabbat at its best invests the ordinary with eternity and life with ultimate meaning. Submission to God sets us free.

Never has this heroic effort to generate pockets of holiness in our personal lives been more important than today. Emancipation has thrust Jews irreversibly into the mainstream of contemporary civilization, with incalculable benefit to both. We are determined to live in two worlds and have won the right to be different, individually and collectively, without impairing our integration. The question is whether our Judaism will survive intact? Our sensibilities as Jews have been transformed and the discrepancies between the two worlds beg for accommodation.

The challenge, however, has not induced Conservative Judaism to assert blithely that the halakhah is immutable. Its historical sense is simply too keen. The halakhic system, historically considered, evinces a constant pattern of responsiveness, change and variety. Conservative Judaism did not read that record as *carte blanche* for a radical revision or even rejection of the system, but rather as warrant for valid adjustment where absolutely necessary. The result is a body of Conservative law sensitive to human need, halakhic integrity and the worldwide character of the Jewish community. Due deliberation generally avoided the adoption of positions which turned out to be ill-advised and unacceptable.

Nevertheless, what is critical for the present crisis is the reaffirmation of halakhah as a bulwark against syncretism, the overwhelming of Judaism by American society, not by coercion but seduction. Judaism is not a quilt of random patches onto which anything might be sewn. Its extraordinary individuality is marked by integrity and coherence. The supreme function of halakhah (and Hebrew, for that matter) is to replace external barriers with internal ones, to create the private space in which Jews can cultivate their separate identities while participating in the open society that engulfs them.

I come, at last, to the seventh and most basic core value of Conservative Judaism: its belief in God. It is this value which plants the religious nationalism and national religion that are inseparable from Judaism in the universal soil of monotheism. Remove God, the object of Israel's millennial quest, and the rest will soon unravel. But this is precisely what Conservative Judaism refused to do, even after the Holocaust. Abraham Joshua Heschel, who came to the United States in March, 1940, to emerge after the war as the most significant Jewish theologian of the modern period, placed God squarely at the center of his rich exposition of the totality of the Jewish religious experience.

To speak of God is akin to speaking about the undetected matter of the universe. Beyond the reach of our instruments, it constitutes at least 90 percent of the mass in the universe. Its existence is inferred solely from its effects: the gravitational force, otherwise unaccounted for, that it exerts on specific galactic

⁵ Moshe Greenberg, *The Anchor Bible: Ezekiel*, 1–20, (New York: 1983), p. v.

shapes and rotational patterns and that it contributes in general to holding the universe together.

Similarly, Heschel was wont to stress the partial and restricted nature of biblical revelation. "With amazing consistency the Bible records that the theophanies witnessed by Moses occurred in a cloud. Again and again we hear that the Lord 'called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud' (Exodus 24:16) . . . We must neither willfully ignore nor abuse by allegorization these important terms. Whatever specific fact it may denote, it unequivocally conveys to the mind the fundamental truth that God was *concealed* even when He *revealed*, that even while His voice became manifest, His essence remained hidden."⁶

For Judaism, then, God is a felt presence rather than a visible form, a voice rather than a vision. Revelation tends to be an auditory and not a visual experience. The grandeur of God is rarely compromised by the hunger to see or by the need to capture God in human language. And yet, God's nearness and compassion are sensually asserted. The austerity of the one and the intimacy of the other are the difference between what we know and what we feel. God is both remote and nearby, transcendent and immanent. To do justice to our head and heart, that is, to the whole person, Judaism has never vitiated the polarity that lies in the midst of its monotheistic faith.

I know of no finer example of this theological view than the *berakbah* which introduces the psalms (*pesukei de-zimra*) of the morning service. Its function is to praise God before we make our petitions. But, in essence, it is really a meditation on the nature of the deity we are about to address. Before we pray, we take a moment to orient ourselves. My quite literal translation of the text encompasses the first few lines, which are all I wish to comment on.

Praised be the one who spoke and the world sprang into being.
 Praised be that one.
 Praised be the maker of the beginning.
 Praised be the one who spoke and acted.
 Praised be the one who ordered and executed.
 Praised be the one who has compassion for all the earth.
 Praised be the one who has compassion for all of nature's creature.
 Praised be the one who rewards those who fear God.
 Praised be the one who lives forever and endures till eternity.
 Praised be the one who redeems and rescues.
 Praised be God's name.

What I find striking and altogether typical of Judaism in this ancient paean is the crescendo of appellations for God through a preference for circuitous verb forms. Despite a fervent desire to encounter and behold God, there is a palpable reluctance to depict or render God concrete, to traduce the mystery. The author takes refuge in verbs rather than nouns.

The very first appellation alludes to the strategy: "Praised be the one who

⁶ Heschel, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

spoke and the world sprang into being"—an awkward name for God that quickly brings to mind the majestic and imageless description of creation in the opening chapter of Genesis. Not a word is wasted there on what God looks like, on what God's sex might be, on what God did before creation. The Torah simply implies that there is but a single God who is absolutely transcendent and chose at some point to call forth the cosmos. And that creation is effected with effortless elegance through ten verbal commands. No consultations, no warfare, no labor!

It is wholly in the spirit of that supreme expression of biblical monotheism that our rabbinic author works. The act of creation becomes the name by which God is known. Theology compels us to turn verbs into nouns. We know God not through appearance, but effect. Only the experience of divine action falls within our ken. Our author even forms an adverb "*bereshit*" (in the beginning) into a noun and God rises before us as "the maker of the beginning."

But an unchanging, soaring, bodiless deity is also beyond human suffering. To counter that conclusion, the prayer immediately moves from creation to love. The God of Israel remains engaged, a soul mate as much as a prime mover. God's compassion extends to our planet and all its creatures as well as to the chosen people, "those who fear God." God is not an ineffable "It" but a caring "Thou," or, as Buber once said of his own faith in God: "If believing in God means being able to speak of Him in the third person, then I probably do not believe in God; or at least, I do not know if it is permissible for me to say that I believe in God. For I know, when I speak of Him in the third person, whenever it happens, and it has to happen again and again, there is no other way, then my tongue cleaves to the roof of my mouth so quickly that one cannot even call it speech."⁷

As this lilting paean makes so clear, for the rabbinic mind God was conceived in polarities, lofty yet loving, imageless yet intimate, hidden yet revealed. Conservative Judaism is very much part of that ancient Jewish quest for a comprehensive understanding of God.

More broadly still, Jewish tradition continues unbroken in Conservative Judaism, where yearning for God wells up primarily not from reason or revelation but from the blood-soaked, value-laden and textually rooted historical experience of the Jewish people.

It is surely in order to ask in closing whether this unique constellation of core values has ever coalesced into a vivifying ideal. I would submit that in its Ramah summer camps the Seminary created an extension of itself: a controlled environment for the formation of a model religious community. Over the past half-century Ramah has compiled an extraordinary record of touching and transforming young Jews to become the most effective educational setting ever generated by the movement. All the core values of Conservative Judaism are present in spades, defining and pervading the culture.

Let me single them out. The centrality of Israel finds expression in the large

⁷ Rivka Horwitz, *Buber's Way to "I and Thou"* (Philadelphia: 1988), p. 105.

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contingent of Israeli staff members brought over each summer, who often return to Israel themselves enamored of Conservative Judaism in the wake of experiencing Ramah. Their presence also reinforces the use of Hebrew as the camp's official language, while the value of *klal yisrael* promotes the priority of community and the inclusive spirit of camp programming.

On the religious side of the ledger, the Torah constitutes the lifeblood of camp life. The *parashah* is a basic text of study during the week and read in full every Shabbat, giving dozens of youngsters the chance to master the skill. A myriad of daily classes and Shabbat study groups symbolize the devotion to learning (in the Conservative manner), and halakhah governs every aspect of life, from daily services to human relationships to relating to the environment. Each week culminates in the magnificent choreography of Shabbat that puts Judaism to music by imbuing everyone with a sense of belonging and intimacy, of uplift and holiness. And finally, the engaged figure of a Seminary scholar-in-residence teaches and personifies the core values that animate the whole noble experiment.

Ramah is not the conscious articulation of an ideological blueprint, but rather the natural impulse of a vibrant, authentically Jewish religious culture, proof positive that Conservative Judaism bespeaks an organic, distinctive and transformational reality. What Solomon Schechter once said of Rabbinic Judaism, when he ventured to crystallize its theological underpinnings, holds true no less for its modern counterpart:

A great English writer has remarked that 'the true health of a man is to have a soul without being aware of it' In a similar way the old Rabbis seem to have thought that the true health of a religion is to have a theology without being aware of it; and thus they hardly ever made—nor could they make—any attempt towards working their theology into a formal system, or giving us a full exposition of it.⁸

Today, Conservative Judaism pulsates with many pockets of intense religious energy. Its congregational life, national conventions, USY pilgrimages and Schechter day schools increasingly manifest models of religious community shaped by its core values. More than ever, the lay leadership of these ventures consists of serious Jews for whom Conservative Judaism is hardly "a halfway house" (Sklare). The longstanding gap between Seminary and synagogue has also been largely transformed into a common calling to perpetuate rabbinic Judaism in an open society. What Conservative Judaism offers the growing number of Jews hungry for the holy is a sacred cluster where standards are coupled with compassion, scholarship with spirit, piety with intellectual honesty, and parochial passion with universalism—a prescription for salvation in this world and the one to come.

⁸ Solomon Schechter, *Some Aspects of Rabbinic Theology* (New York: 1936), pp. 11–12.