

## President's Perspective...Conservative Judaism in 550 Words

First, to set the record straight, I'm not a Jewish scholar by any stretch of the imagination. But I am fascinated by certain Judaic discussions and recently I had the opportunity to learn about the formation of our own Conservative movement and how it fits into the spectrum of Jewish practice and thought from Rabbi Kushnick through our adult education offerings.

My experience is probably not unlike that of many of you. My grandparents went to an Orthodox shul until they died. My parents wanted some separation from their parents' traditions. They joined a Conservative synagogue so their children could get a decent Jewish education, yet assimilate into the wider society.

An easy (and wrong) answer to "what is the Conservative movement" is that it is midway between Orthodoxy and Reform. Our movement is not defined by what others are or aren't. We are not the "mushy middle" although it is easy to think along those lines. Before the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was just "Judaism" – no Orthodox, Reform or Conservative. Our movement originated as a response to the emergence of the Reform and then the Orthodox movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was born, with an abiding belief that Judaism must be relevant to its time; and that it needs to adapt as it has throughout history, not quickly but almost imperceptibly. Halakah, the body of Jewish law, governs us, but it is interpreted through the lens of our modern rabbinic authority using centuries of authority and learning – from the Committee of Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly (see <http://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/jewish-law/committee-jewish-law-and-standards>) to Rabbi Weinberg who serves as the *mara d'atre* (the decider of Jewish law) of our congregation. As an attorney versed in the common

law tradition, I can appreciate the interpretive process that our rabbis go through realizing that law does not move quickly and usually follows changes in society.

As I have thought about what we do at our shul, I am convinced that the Conservative movement is the right place for me. I can appreciate the Reform movement's focus on *tikkun olam*, repairing the world, but I also feel that we should be bound by Halakah as opposed to the Reform movement's historical belief that individuals should decide what Jewish laws to follow. And I am sure that many of us see Orthodoxy as an important force in Jewish life, although many of its vocal adherents seem steeped in the practices and thought of 600 years ago. What is interesting is that the Reform movement and parts of Modern Orthodoxy have made a very slow drift toward the position of our Conservative movement on some issues.

Here is what I do believe – the future of Judaism will look more like our Conservative movement whether or not we call it that, or whether there is a United Synagogues of Conservative Judaism (our governing body). Biblical Judaism is not Talmudic Judaism. Talmudic Judaism is not the 11<sup>th</sup> Century Judaism of Rashi. And modern day Judaism will not be 16<sup>th</sup> Century Judaism of the Shulchan Aruch or its compiler Joseph Karo. We have a dynamic movement that holds on to traditional notions of Jewish law, but is not afraid to apply the test of modernity to its practice and thought.

*Howard Rubin*