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Covenant

What does Conservative Judaism stand for? To me, that question is better phrased, “Where do we stand, and with whom?” The answer, to Conservative Judaism, has been clear. We are the heirs to the Jewish story that began, according to Torah, with Abraham and Sarah. We stand at Sinai, with every previous generation of the children of Israel, and reaffirm the promises made there to God, to one another, and to the world. I believe—humbly but firmly—that the Sinai Covenant continues in 2011/5771 through us. Participation in the set of relationships set forth in Covenant adds immeasurably to the meaning and purpose of our lives. The fact that the Covenant at Sinai established a *people* simultaneously with a *relationship to the Holy One* stands at the heart of Conservative Judaism today and in the future.

That double covenant means, first and most importantly, that life as a Jewish human being is given ultimate meaning. For reasons that mere mortals will never understand, but for which practicing Jews are profoundly grateful, the Creator of the universe seeks human assistance in completing the work of Creation. The world is not good enough as it is, the Torah insists, and you and I can make it better. All of us are needed for this task: Jews and non-Jews, men and women, old and young. Everything that each and every one of us brings to the task is required: the sum total of our diverse experiences and learning, our skills and our relationships, our intelligence and our passion, all the arts and all the sciences: all our hearts, all our souls, all our might.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, who spent much of his career teaching at The Jewish Theological Seminary, well captured the wonder and consequence of this divine-human partnership for the meaning of individual lives in the titles of two of his best-known books: *Man is not alone. God [is] in search of man.* Judaism provides a life-giving answer to what he called the “vital, personal question which every human being is called upon to answer, day in day out. What shall I do with my mind, my wealth, my power?”

There is no doubt that Jews continue to turn to Judaism in search of such meaning and purpose. I am a devoted Conservative Jew largely because, time and again, I have been vouchsafed the precious experience of meaning in Conservative auspices; I have long been shaped by the conviction, central to Conservative Judaism, that the Jewish part of my self need not be—indeed, should not be—separate from the rest of who I am. The Torah demands and offers wholeness; in our day it requires all that 21st-century men and women can bring to the task. Thanks in part to that

conviction, imbued in me since childhood, my love of family and friends is inextricably intertwined with love of God and Torah.

A second continuing consequence of Covenant is that Judaism has always been more than religion, even as religion has always been an integral part of Judaism. Jews are not defined as a church or sect. Rather, the Torah establishes Israel as “a kingdom,” “a nation,” “a people.” As important as religious belief is to Judaism, it is not everything, and, arguably, is not the main thing. The Torah aims to impact the *entirety* of life, individual and collective, not merely the aspect of it that other scriptures and traditions call “religion.” It offers a way, called mitzvah, that—if we walk it diligently—guides and impacts all of life.

Mordecai M. Kaplan, another great figure in JTS’s history, captured an important truth about Torah’s insistence that Judaism is far more than “religion” when he famously defined Judaism as a civilization in his great book by that title (1934). He knew that Judaism had always included aspects of life that went beyond “religion” in the normal sense of the word: history, language, literature, folk-customs, communal organizations, and intimate connection to the Land of Israel. Kaplan wanted to assure Jews whose doubts about God barred the way to faith that Judaism held an honored place for them.

This point bears repeating today. *Individuals enter Conservative auspices from differing backgrounds and bearing differing needs.* All of our institutions should reflect this, even while offering Jews the pleasure and meaning that come from acting, worshipping, and talking together, as one caring community of Torah.

It follows that *Conservative communities must be more than synagogues, and our synagogues must offer more than worship.* Our form of Judaism is well-known for the quality of ritual observances and life-cycle celebrations; the tone set for family relations in Conservative homes; the leadership roles accorded to women as well as men both on and off the bimah; and for the distinctive tenor of Conservative conversation as it moves back and forth from ancient sources to contemporary politics, Hebrew to English, Shabbat *zemirot* to rock music and jazz. There is an intangible but notable warmth in our shuls and schools that comes from comfort with Judaism and one another. At our best, Conservative Jews exhibit a quiet confidence that *living fully in this century and its culture at the same time as we immerse ourselves in Jewish tradition is what Torah wants us to do.*

That confidence is crucial to our future; it is the key to successful Conservative communities (the topic of the next post in this series) and goes hand in hand with the sense that you and I—every bit as much as Jewish ancestors—are part of a Reality and Purpose far larger than ourselves, longer than our life-span, wider than our mind can reach. Heschel said it eloquently: The Torah poses a question to which our life here and now “can be the spelling of an answer.” Conservative Judaism is the most compelling interpretation of Torah that I know, a precious word in the conversation begun at Sinai, guiding covenantal work that only our generation can perform.