

**The Middle Ground of Conservative Judaism:  
Full of Authenticity, Full of Promise  
Rosh Hashanah**

Rabbi Jason Miller

Two years ago I bought a new car. I called up the dealership and told them that my three-year lease was going to be up in a few days and that I would need a new car. The dealer began to tell me about specials, new lines, great deals on bigger models, promotions, etc. etc. I interrupted him: I want the same one again. And about an hour or so later, I handed in the keys to my car and I drove away with another one – the same car. Same model, same exterior color, same interior color. This was my third time buying the same car. The only difference was that this new one came with some additional features that weren't even available when I had bought the last one. I went from the 1997 model to the 2002 model to the 2005 model. Clearly I was sold on this car.

And then about a week later, I received in the mail, a whole package of information about the car I just bought. Brochures, letters, testimonials. Everything you can imagine to try and get me to buy the car I had just bought. And for the third time no less! I was already convinced. I already made the choice.

Friends, as I deliver my High Holy Day sermon, some of you might feel as I did when I received the mailing trying to sell me on the car I had already bought and had already been driving for some time already.

I'm going to speak this morning about Conservative Judaism. And it might feel like I'm selling it to you. However, I know that, as a congregation, you have already made the decision to be a Conservative shul, that we have been a Conservative shul for some time now, and that most of you don't need to be convinced anymore... if you even did in the first place.

Well, let me tell you from the outset: I'm not selling you anything! What I would like to do is tell you why, contrary to much public opinion right now, Conservative Judaism is the wave of the future. And I say that with no disrespect to other denominations to the left or to the right of us. In fact, there is much we should borrow from the other denominations to improve our own. Conservative Judaism, I believe, is a form of Judaism and Jewish practice that is the most sensible. It is a form of Judaism that is anything but parve, or bland. It is not wishy-washy as many will claim.

In fact, some have described American Judaism as being constituted of three main religious movements. One is crazy, one is hazy and one is lazy. Well, if Conservative Judaism is thought to be "hazy," it is only because the movement, to its own fault, has not done a sufficient job in explaining what it's all about. Not in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when the movement was first constituted; not in the middle part of the last century when it experienced its heyday; not in the late 80s and early 90s when it sought to really define and promote itself with a statement of principles; and, not even now when its membership numbers are in decline. I hope to be able to help change the tide and to provide a clear and coherent explanation of what Conservative Judaism is all about.

Another observer of American Judaism, by the way, said that there are three types of Jews in America: Orthodox, Reform, and Conservative Rabbis. Well, funny as that may sound, it is actually quite sad. It is sad because it means that the only Jews actually practicing the core tenets of Conservative Judaism are its own religious leaders who may not have ever successfully conveyed to their congregants why they, as rabbis, are Conservative Jews. So, if you leave shul today with a better understanding of this stream of Judaism, then I'll have succeeded in my mission here today.

For as long as I can remember, I have been told that a major flaw with Conservative Judaism is its public perception and understanding, which can be directly blamed on how Conservative Jews explain the movement with which they affiliate. That is, if you ask many Conservative Jews what Conservative Judaism is, they will simply state in negative terminology that it is "not Reform and not Orthodox." The

problem with this definition, of course, is that it does nothing to explain what Conservative Judaism actually IS – or what it stands for. It certainly won't get anyone excited about it.

Conservative Judaism is a pluralistic movement—we have many different kinds of synagogues within the movement. Some shuls are almost Orthodox in their practice; others are almost Reform. What is it that makes a synagogue community Conservative? And don't think that it's just sending membership dues to a central agency in New York City. How are our beliefs and practices different than other denominations? What is it about Conservative Judaism that is unique? What is exciting and promising about Conservative Judaism? And finally, why, contrary to public opinion, is the Conservative Movement not doomed for disaster or worse, death?

Allow me to give some background. The fundamental differences between the main denominations are in their general views on revelation (how the Torah got to us – humanity) and their views on Halakhah (Jewish law). What happened at Mt. Sinai? And what are the implications of that event on our Jewish practice. How does Jewish law evolve, and at what pace?

Most Orthodox Jews subscribe (at least publicly) to what they call “Torah mi-Sinai” – that the entirety of the Torah came from Mt. Sinai. Moses took dictation and wrote down the words of God. Every word in the Torah is literally what God told the prophet Moses, with the possible exception of the last few words of Deuteronomy which recorded the death of Moses. Some say this section was written by Joshua, successor to Moses. Halakhah, most on the far right will tell you, is completely binding and it is, with certain exceptions, immutable. That is to say unchallengeable and immobile.

At the other extreme, most Reform Jews would say that the Torah was written by people over a long period of time, and that it represents a collection of wisdom of the Jewish people. Halakhah, Jewish law, has a vote but not a veto. Reform Judaism rests on the value of personal autonomy – that each Jew has the freedom to choose which laws apply to them and which do not.

In a broad generalization, a well-known Conservative rabbi in Philadelphia, Ira Stone, has noted that the Reform threw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater, while the Orthodox have refused to change the bathwater no matter how murky the water has gotten.

People today tend toward the extremes. In politics, everyone wants to know which card you carry. “Liberal” puts you on the far left on all issues. “Conservative” and you're on the far right on all issues. It's been said that if you want authenticity in Judaism, you want to situate yourself on the far Right. If you aren't concerned with authenticity, you will be best suited on the Left with ultimate choice, and little in the way of expectations or requirements. If that sounds like a very black and white picture that I just painted... it's because it is.

Well, if the fundamentally opposing poles of extremism are painted black and white, then in between must be grey, right? But that's not right! I believe that the middle position is anything but grey. It is not wishy-washy. And there is not a muddle in the middle. There is a rainbow of beautiful colors representing the vibrancy of Jewish life and the diversity of opinion and approach in the center. If Conservative Judaism forced me into a monochromatic version of our faith, then I wouldn't want to have anything to do with it. But it's not monochromatic – it's an entire spectrum of bright colors.

Conservative Judaism prides itself on striking a balance somewhere between the extremes, harmonizing the Tradition with modernity. There is a lot of room in Conservative Judaism. You may have heard it described metaphorically as a “big tent.” And it is. Some might say that with a multitude of opinion, you end up standing for nothing. I don't believe that to be the case.

There are some very challenging issues that face us as a human race in general, and as a Jewish people in particular. There are differences of opinion about egalitarianism – women's roles in the synagogue service. There are differences of opinion on how the halakhic system understands homosexuality. There are differences of opinion on when life begins... and when life ends. What defines a Jew by birth?

Should we pray for a new Temple in Jerusalem and the restoration of animal sacrifice? Do all foods require a Kosher symbol? Should smoking be forbidden according to Jewish law? What about gambling? Spanking your child? Inhumane animal slaughter? Can we use electricity on Shabbat? Can we drive to shul on Shabbat? Can a non-Jewish man go on the bimah at his daughter's bat mitzvah?

These are not easy questions, and there is more than one acceptable answer. At least in the Conservative Movement there is.

Rabbi Jerry Epstein, the current leader of the lay arm of the Conservative Movement, the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, who I know visited here when the congregation was deciding between remaining a member of the Orthodox Union or affiliating with the Conservative Movement. By the way, he was selling you something. I'm here to get you excited and motivated about what you bought into. And to tell you made a sound decision! Rabbi Epstein explains in a pamphlet entitled "Conservative Judaism: Loud and Proud" that the schools of Hillel and Shammai were always in disagreement with each other over matters of Jewish law and observance. He writes, "It is widely known that, except for some minor exceptions, it was the opinion expressed by Beit Hillel that was accepted as law."

"What is less well known is why Halakhah generally follows Beit Hillel rather than Beit Shammai. The Talmud tells us quite explicitly: It is because "the followers of Beit Hillel were gentle and modest, and taught both their own opinions and the opinions of the school of Shammai. And, even more, they taught the words of Beit Shammai before theirs." They not only permitted different viewpoints on what a Jewish lifestyle should be, but by their very words and behavior, they encouraged diversity."

As a centrist movement, Conservative Judaism continues in the spirit of Beit Hillel. We humbly recognize and respect a diversity of authentic opinion and legitimate practice. Rather than reflecting an "identity crisis," this diversity, which is part of our essence and ideology, is a positive sign of vitality and strength. That diversity and balance will take Conservative Judaism into the future.

As one of my rabbinical school classmates once noted, if we only recognize one opinion, it is as if we are standing on only one leg. Not very balanced. But with two, or even more, accepted opinions we are more diverse and more balanced.

But can you have it both ways? Can you be two dichotomies at once? Does it make sense to say that Conservative Judaism believes in Tradition and Change? Are those not competing forces? Can our shul claim to be Traditional AND Egalitarian? Can the Torah be considered to be both from God and from man? Is Conservative Judaism an oxymoron? No, it is not. Just as someone can be ambidextrous – right handed and left handed at the same time, we can be traditionalists, preserving our past, all the while embracing and adapting to modernity and innovation. Perhaps it could be said that we practice ambidextrous Judaism? Though I prefer to say we believe in a Covenantal Judaism that is honest, authentic, and progressive.

Just how DO we understand Revelation? What is our communal understanding of how we came into contact with the Torah? Is the Torah a gift from God expressing God's love for us? Did it fall out of the heavens? Was Moses the sole author? Or is it the product of the divine partnership and relationship between God and the Jewish people to this very day through midrash and the interpretation of that covenantal relationship?

There is something divine and holy at the core of the Torah, but those holy words were filtered through the eyes of people of their day and age, and were subject to later editing. If God were to come back today and talk to one of us the same way God talked to Moses, or to any of the Biblical authors, the message would come out a little different because we live in a different time and place than Moses and our "filters" are different. Furthermore, Revelation is an ongoing process, not a one shot event that happened at Mt. Sinai and that's it. By study and effort, by opening our eyes to the world of today, we can discern God's will.

And how are the differing theologies reflected into actual practice? The Orthodox take a strict approach to Jewish law, and change only very slowly. There are no women rabbis, women are generally not allowed to lead services or read Torah, etc. The Reform take a very liberal approach to Jewish law—the ritual commandments are a path to connection with God, but not viewed as absolute commandments. Reform Jews are free to pick and choose which mitzvot speak to them, and how to fulfill them.

Conservative Judaism again is in between. We believe that mitzvah means commandment, not suggestion, but our rabbis are open to searching for ways to keep our Tradition viable and part of the world around us, not isolated from the world around us.

*As the joke goes: When you call the Board of Rabbis, the voicemail system states:*

*Hello, you have reached the office of the New York Board of Rabbis. Our Rabbi is ready to answer any of your questions.*

*If you are Orthodox, press 6, 1, 3.*

*If you are Conservative, press 1 or 2.*

*If you are Reform, press any button you like.*

*When connected to the appropriate rabbi, the voicemail states:*

*Hello, you have reached the Orthodox Rabbi. The answer to your question is “No, that it is absolutely forbidden by the Torah.”*

*Hello, you have reached the Conservative Rabbi. The answer to your question is that we have ruled that either answer is acceptable to some of us and neither answer is acceptable to all of us. We hope that this has been helpful.*

*Hello, you have reached the Reform Rabbi. The answer to your question is: If you want to, sure! Why not? Who are we to say?*

How is change implemented in Conservative Judaism? A case in point is the shul in which I grew up – Adat Shalom Synagogue in the suburban Detroit area. This is the shul I would attend with my grandfather, *alav hashalom*, when I was a youngster. I went to nursery school there, became bar mitzvah there, was married there, Jonah and Talya were named there, and I also taught there as a rabbi.

When I went there with my grandfather, it was a non-egalitarian congregation meaning that only men could lead services; however, women could read from the Torah, and only men could lead Birkat Hamazon, thanking God after meals. Only men were counted in the minyan. My grandfather passed away in 1994. In 1999 the rabbi retired and the assistant rabbi became the senior rabbi. In 2000 after a thoughtful paper on women’s roles in the synagogue, authored by the new rabbi, was studied and the issues debated, the synagogue became fully egalitarian. Women were counted in the minyan and I saw the first woman lead Musaf from the bimah. In 2004, the shul hired its first rabbi who was not a man, when “Rabbi Rachel” became one of the associate rabbis. And today, in September 2006, a woman cantor is leading the congregation in prayer on Rosh Hashanah. Certainly not my grandfather’s shul.

A famous story is told in the Talmud: Rabbi Yehuda said in the name of Rav: When Moses went up on high, he found the Holy One sitting and tying crowns on the Holy letters of the Torah. He said to the Holy One Ruler of the Universe, who is holding back Your hand?

The Holy One answered: “There is a man who will appear at the end of several generations and Akiva the son of Joseph is his name and he will need these crowns, because from each and every thorn he will derive scores and scores of laws.” He said to Him, “Ruler of the Universe, show this man to me.” The Holy One said, “Turn around!”

So, Moses went and sat in the back of Rabbi Akiva's class in the academy, and he had no idea what they were saying. And this is Moses we're talking about. He became weak and disoriented. Soon the class reached an issue and a student asked, "Rabbi, what's your source for this ruling?" He said, "It's a law of Moses from Sinai." And Moses was relieved.

Yes, if my grandfather were able to come back today and attend services at his shul, he very well might be surprised to see a female rabbi and female cantor leading services; to see woman being counted to make the minyan, yet I'm confident he would be pleased to hear the same melodies and basic format he was used to after all those years at that shul. It's the tradition with change. It's progress with the past.

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Allow me to speak personally for a moment. This is one of the most difficult sermons I've ever given. It's difficult to speak about Conservative Judaism for me because it has truly become second nature. It is so much a part of my life. It is who I am as a Jew. It makes sense to me. Have there been times in my life when I felt the push or pull away from Conservative Judaism? Certainly. Some of my friends have left the Conservative Movement for Modern Orthodoxy. Others have found their place of comfort in the Reform Movement. But what has always kept me grounded and comfortable is the idea of being balanced. Centered.

I never knew my father's mother very well and I don't have many memories of her. However, one thing I know about her, from my father, is that she was fond of saying "too much of anything is a bad thing." I've always understood that statement as a warning to steer clear of the extremes. To be balanced and to be centered. Too much religion leads to extremism. Too little, conversely, and religion is no longer a part of our being, of our soul. Religion then ceases to serve as a compass in our lives.

In Conservative Judaism I have found that sense of balance. But that sense of balance also means being open and honest enough to realize that you can never firmly plant your stake in the center. We need to wrestle with the tension of being in the center. The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Conservative Movement has been grappling with how homosexuality should be understood today within the framework of our millennia-old Halakhah and with our modern sensibilities. With our commitment to tradition and our knowledge of modern medical science. With our respect for biblical law and with respect to our code of ethics and love for all of God's children. To borrow the language of my teacher Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, we struggle to keep these polarities in balance.

Well, many have criticized the long, arduous process the rabbis who sit on this committee have taken in deciding the answer. In the end there will likely be more than one answer to the question. And yet, the process still has to run its course. Because it is in this process that we see the halakhic system evolve. It has to go through this process because we owe it to our forbearers. We owe it to our Tradition. And no matter what answer this committee arrives at, or how many answers they arrive at, the beauty will be in the process of the evolving halakhic system.

Conservative Judaism regards Halakhah as binding. As a Conservative Jew, I have the obligation to pray three times a day. To wrap tefillin around my arm and head six days a week. I don't have that obligation because I'm a rabbi. I have that obligation because I am Jew. I have to keep kosher and I have to keep the Shabbat. Next week I will have to fast for twenty-four hours. The week after that, I will have to take the lulav, and sit in the sukkah for eight days. I have to be charitable. I have to practice social justice. I have to be engaged in Torah study. I have to be honest and respectful. And those are just some of the positive actions for which I feel duty bound.

I'm proud of our movement. I'm proud of Conservative Judaism and of what it stands for. But we have a lot of work to do because we have not yet been successful in creating committed, observant Conservative Jewish communities. Many of us, rabbis and laypeople, have sampled the possibilities of an observant Conservative Jewish community for two months each summer at Camp Ramah. But we must make it our chief goal to form communities in which traditional Judaism with an awareness of, and appreciation for, modernity is honored 24/7/365.

For the first three years of rabbinical school, I lived in Manhattan where it is just about as easy to be an observant Jew as it is in Jerusalem. But, for my last three years of rabbinical school, we lived in a small, predominantly gentile New Jersey town about twenty miles outside of New York City. The thousand-family Conservative shul where I worked as a rabbinic intern was the only synagogue or temple in town. There were congregants who veered closer to the Left and others who veered closer to the Right, in terms of observance and ideology. But make no mistake about it; this was a Conservative shul and a committed community. Many of the families there are Shomer Shabbat. They have created Kosher homes, built sukkot, learned to read Torah, and have become serious about adult education. It is my goal and my desire to shape our community like this here in Columbus. We can do it and it will be well worth the challenge.

I want our shul to be a place where Judaism is taken seriously. Where Shabbat, youth education, adult education, Torah learning for its own sake, prayer, acts of chesed (righteousness), Kashrut, modesty, and on and on are all taken seriously. It's not easy. Keeping those polarities in balance is difficult, challenging work.

On our new website it states that we are a traditional-egalitarian congregation. Can we be both? Exactly one decade ago today, a Conservative rabbi in New Haven, Connecticut gave a sermon entitled "Will the 'Real' Judaism Please Stand Up?" He explained that his congregation's taskforce that had been charged with coming up with a mission statement wrestled for a year about whether they could say that they are a "traditional egalitarian congregation." Would it be better to say "traditional, BUT egalitarian?" Perhaps, this conversation seems semantic or pedantic, but really it explains so much about how this shul defines itself and, indeed, I think it is an apt description for our shul as well.

We are deeply invested in the *mesorah*, our deep-rooted tradition. We are also deeply invested in the future of our people, in science and technology, and in ethics. When I first learned about this congregation and heard about the contentious debate surrounding matters of ideology, religious practice, and ritual, my interest was immediately piqued. I heard stories of open, honest debate that occurred here. There was wrestling with challenging issues that we hold dear and consider to be sacred, like whether men and women should be divided in prayer services. Questions about whether women's roles in the synagogue today should be the same as they were yesteryear before women's roles and their status changed in our general society and in the workplace? What are our expectations and our requirements in congregational and communal life? These are Conservative Judaism questions. They are academic inquiries. The debate is intense. It is exhilarating. It's a learning process like the Talmudic debates of our sages of old.

So, Judaism today – it's not my grandfather's Judaism. And the Conservative Judaism our shul now affiliates with – it's not my grandfather's Conservative Judaism. I'm a traditionalist. I bought the same car over and over again. But, so too, I embraced those new features that came with the new car because I'm a modernist and I'm progressive. Tradition. Modernity. We CAN have both. We CAN head to the future while we honor our past.

My friends, today is Rosh Hashanah, but it is also Shabbat. Therefore, we do not sound the shofar today. That's the tradition. And we are not going to change that. But I think that if we all listen intently we can hear the blasts of the shofar emanating through the silence in our holy sanctuary today. Please rise as we listen to the shofar alerting us that a strong future is on hand for our congregation:

**Tekiyah** – The blast of Pluralism and Choice. **Sh'varim** – The blast of Authentic Scholarship and Integrity. **Teruah** – The blast of Commitment and Commandedness. **Tekiyah Gedolah** – The blast of Excitement and Promise.

My name is Jason Miller. I am proud to be a Conservative Jew. And I am proud to be your rabbi.

Shabbat Shalom and Shanah Tovah!