

Conservative Judaism: How the Middle Became a Movement

The First Hundred Years of Conservative Judaism.

By [Rabbi Louis Jacobs](#)



Conservative Judaism is the form of the Jewish religion that occupies the middle ground between Orthodoxy and Reform, with its center in the United States, where it is the largest of the three movements, and with adherents in other parts of the world....

The Theoretical Origins of Conservative Judaism

The two key thinkers of Conservative Judaism are Zachariah Frankel and [Solomon Schechter](#), the former describes his religious position as that of “positive historic Judaism.” the latter stresses the idea of “Catholic Israel,” that the ultimate seat of authority in Judaism resides in the consensus of the Jewish people as a whole on the meaning of Judaism.

The attitudes of Frankel and Schechter were by no means novel in Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, where it became obvious to many thinking, observing Jews that, in the light of modern historical investigation into the Bible and the classical sources of Judaism, a reappraisal was required of the whole idea of revelation. For these Jews, the too-neat picture of the doctrine “the Torah is from heaven” as presented in Orthodoxy, was unacceptable, since historical research has demonstrated the developing nature of Jewish religion as it came into contact, throughout its history, with various and differing systems of thought.

On the other hand, these Jews saw Reform as too ready to accommodate Judaism to the zeitgeist and to abandon practices and doctrines hallowed by tradition, especially in Reform’s indifference, if not hostility, to the system of Jewish law, the *Halakhah*. The attitude of such Jews was articulated in Frankel’s maxim: positive historic Judaism –“positive” in its acceptance of the tradition and all of the *Halakhah*, “historic” in that it conceived of these in dynamic rather than static terms.

Schechter spelled it out further in his writings. Since, ultimately, as historic research has demonstrated, the dual process of acceptance and adaptation of ideas in conformity with the spirit of the religion was determined by the way Jews actually lived their religion, the Judaism of tradition is Judaism, although expressed in different ways in different times. On this view, the Jew can have an open mind on the question of origins. He may come to the conclusion, as the Bible critics argue, that some of the institutions of Judaism such as the Sabbath and the dietary laws originated in primitive taboos. It is not

the origins that matter but what the institutions actually became of the Jews long quest to discover the will of God.

The Conservative Movement Emerges in the United States

In the USA, a number of prominent rabbis and laymen became increasingly disturbed by the excesses of American Reform. When, in 1883, non-kosher food was served at the banquet in honor of the first graduates of Hebrew Union College, the Reform institution for the training of rabbis, these more "conservative" leaders founded the Jewish Theological Seminary [in New York] for the training of a modern but strictly traditionalist rabbinite. At a later date, the United Synagogue of America [today known as the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism] was founded, embracing synagogues of this traditional cast. A third movement was thus established and since its chief motivation [was] in reaction to Reform's untraditionalism, it gave itself the name "Conservative Judaism," namely a movement adopting a more conservative and more traditional approach than Reform.

Not everyone who joined the new movement was attracted by its ideology. Many Jews, sentimentally attached to the traditions of their forbears, most of whom came from Eastern Europe where Reform hardly existed as a movement, felt comfortable in a movement which preserved traditional norms without rejecting modernism and the American way of life. For all that, a gallery of outstanding Jewish scholars, members of the faculty at the JTS, demonstrated, on the intellectual level, that it was possible to wed critical scholarship to full observance of the Torah laws.

Twentieth-Century Developments

Schechter's "Catholic Israel" means, as has been frequently noted, that historically considered, God' does not so much reveal His will *to* the Jewish people as *through* them. The Jews are not simply passive recipients of the Torah. In a sense they are the creators and authors of the Torah under divine guidance, the latter being the operative phrase. But the emphasis on the concept "Catholic Israel" can result in an interpretation of Judaism in naturalistic terms, as in Reconstructionism, an offshoot of Conservative Judaism in which the precepts of the Torah are seen not as revealed will of a personal God, but as folk-ways and pleasant ceremonies, created entirely by the Jewish people, which are still capable of enriching the Jewish spirit. This was certainly not the view of Schechter, although in his admiration for Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionism, Schechter appointed him to a Professorship at the Jewish Theological Seminary where Kaplan influenced generations of rabbinic students.

It can perhaps be said that the thinker who more than any other restored the traditional thrust of Conservative Judaism was Abraham Joshua Heschel, whose thought, influenced by his Hasidic background, gave Conservative Judaism a more traditional but also a powerful mystical direction. Heschel also taught at the Seminary, where he influenced especially the younger generation of students.

Conservative Judaism, originally an American phenomenon, now has adherents in the State of Israel, where the movement is called the Masorti movement. Masorti means traditional and has the same connotation as "Conservative" in the USA, but with an Israeli slant. In order to avoid too close an association with the specific needs and approaches of American Jews, a few Anglo-Jewish congregations, sympathetic to the philosophy of Conservative Judaism, have adopted the Israeli term Masorti.

The whole question of traditionalism has recently exercised Conservative Rabbis in the USA. When the Jewish Theological Seminary decided to train women for the rabbinite and when the Rabbinical

Assembly accepted women rabbis as members [in the early 1980s], some rabbis and some teachers at the seminary formed themselves into the Union for Traditional Conservative Judaism.

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