



## CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM: LOUD AND PROUD

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That there were significant and numerous disputes preserved in the Talmud between Bet Hillel and Bet Shammai is well known to anyone who has, even briefly, been introduced to rabbinic literature. It is also widely known that, except for some minor exceptions, it was the opinion expressed by Bet Hillel that was accepted as law.

What is less well known is why *halakhah* generally follows Bet Hillel rather than Bet Shammai. The Talmud tells us quite explicitly: It is because "the Hillelites 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 Bet 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.

**The Conservative Movement continues in the spirit of Bet 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.**

The Conservative Movement is a centrist movement. Many, mistakenly, equate being in the center with a lack of clarity on ideological issues. Quite the contrary: The centrist movement provides a clear position, bridging the chasm for the majority of Jews who find the extremes in Jewish life to be unacceptable. Although extreme positions – couched in clear and precise language -- may offer greater comfort, authentic Judaism has always sought to create a way of life marked by the search for a "golden mean."

In years past, our Rabbis and Prophets pushed and pulled, stroked and cajoled, the not yet religiously committed, urging them to adopt a life of observance. We in the Conservative Movement are following in their footsteps, working tirelessly to create models of Jewish living that will engage our diverse membership.

Our approach is to recognize and to welcome the individual Jew at whatever level of observance we find him and to urge, support, inspire and guide that individual to a richer Jewish life through Jewish living. If we have not yet fully succeeded, it is because the task is so large. It does not mean that we are ineffective, dishonest, superfluous, or hypocritical.

Conservative Judaism is not the only movement that has a diversity of belief and practice. Indeed, there is a wide range of opinions within both Reform and Orthodox Judaism -- but with a difference.

- In Reform Judaism, *halakhah* is not deemed binding. Therefore, wide differences in practice are not unexpected and have little significance.
- Orthodoxy -- which, like Conservative Judaism, accepts *halakhah* as binding – does not accept that Jewish law is evolving as well.

- Conservative Judaism remains unique in its acceptance of *halakhah* **and** in its recognition that the humility of the school of Hillel remains a valuable guide for our own approach to Jewish law. Our position has been to agree or disagree with a particular position (e.g., patrilineal descent), but never to question the sincerity or legitimacy of those putting forth those notions.

The Talmud does not just record diverse opinions; rather, it encourages them by stimulating independent inquiry and analysis and by recognizing the validity of the halakhic process. Conservative Judaism willingly accepts the challenge of preserving the law by continuing this dynamic process. Indeed, Conservative rabbis recognize that scholars in each generation are not merely permitted but are in fact obligated to interpret and reinterpret Jewish law in order to keep our tradition vibrant.

Conservative Judaism proudly encompasses the views of its many constituents. While it remains our goal to increase the level of religious observance and commitment among *all* our members, we must not confuse the presence of diverse views with a lack of direction.

**THE UNITED SYNAGOGUE OF CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM**  
 The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism promotes the role of the synagogue in Jewish life in order to motivate Conservative Jews to perform *mitzvot* encompassing ethical behavior, spirituality, Judaic learning, and ritual observance. The mission of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism is to strengthen and serve our congregations and their members.

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