

## Conservative Judaism: Covenant and Commitment

### Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson

“You shall be My People and I shall be Your God.” (Lev. 26:12)

God and the Jewish People share a bond of love and sacred responsibility, which expresses itself in our biblical *b'rit* (covenant). This *b'rit* remains a central pillar of Judaism and has come to symbolize the mission of the Jewish People: to be partners in creation with God, to pursue the sacred task of bringing the knowledge of God to the world, to be “a nation of priests, a holy people” (Exodus 19:6). According to the Torah, our purpose is to make the world more just, sacred, and compassionate – in other words, more closely reflecting the image of God. Judaism guides us in this sacred task by inspiring us to work to repair the world. On a personal level, we strive to cultivate sensitivity, learning, and decency. And on a communal level, we work to foster ideals of *hesed* (lovingkindness), *kedushah* (holiness), and *tzedek* (justice).

Our encounter with God gives birth to a *shutafut* (partnership). Linked in sacred covenant, we joyfully embrace our privilege to make the world more holy and compassionate. Judaism summons us to a life of Torah and *mitzvot*, and a commitment to social justice. Through study, observance, prayer and acts of lovingkindness, we act as God’s partners, embodying God’s passion and involvement on behalf of all life.

This mission is made concrete through the implementation of *mitzvot* (commandments). Believing that thought without deed is incomplete, *mitzvot* concretize God’s will, thereby connecting us to God. The many *mitzvot*, giving substance to God’s *b'rit*, reflect divine love in every aspect of the human endeavor. Through *mitzvot*, we have the potential to transform each moment of our lives, even the most prosaic, into an encounter with the divine.

The *mitzvot* evolved through a long process of interpretation and debate into the body of law known as *halakhah*. Based on the dual pillars of written Torah (the Bible) and Oral Torah (which includes the Talmud, Codes, *Teshuvot* – legal rulings of later rabbis), *halakhah* allows us to seek God’s will and apply that will in each generation. Because the *halakhah* remains the basis for all authentic Jewish practice, Conservative Judaism recognizes that no living body of law can be frozen or fossilized, and holds dear the notion that the Torah is meant to serve us as a road “towards” the knowledge of God, not as a barrier keeping us back. Indeed, the very word *halakhah* itself is related to the Hebrew word for journey, and it is *halakhah* that guides and shapes us as a community. While the method of establishing the rules remains constant throughout the ages, the interpretation and application of these rules is shaped anew by emerging realities, innovative technologies, and new insights.

This commitment to Jewish law as the basis of our practice is matched by a commitment to Jewish thought. Together, these inform our learning and our spiritual



search so that Judaism itself becomes the physical manifestation of Torah in the lives of Jewish communities across time. These historical influences contribute to the unfolding of God's covenant. Integrating new insights to elevate the spirit and nurture the mind continues the age-old labor of harvesting the fullness of Torah. This, above all else, remains the cornerstone of the Conservative Jewish worldview.

This conception of an evolving Judaism has its basis in the Talmud. A quick glance at any page of the Talmud reveals a rabbinic passion for open discussion and a willingness to entertain a wide range of opposing viewpoints, with the single condition that all opinions expressed be rooted in abiding faith and in a love of God, learning, and reason. Indeed, the leading sages of the Talmudic era celebrated above all else the inquiring mind as the most valuable of God's gifts to humanity. These rabbis combined a commitment to the traditions they inherited with a remarkable courage to keep those traditions both relevant and compassionate. To do so, they did not shirk from offering new insights, or from instituting new rulings, often in contrast with established practice.

It is precisely this traditional approach – which combines fidelity to inherited tradition and the courage to integrate necessary change – which motivates Conservative Judaism today. Whether asserting the equality of women, reaffirming the centrality of Shabbat (the Sabbath), *kashrut* (the dietary laws), *tzedakah* (charity/justice), and prayer, or applying timeless wisdom to contemporary issues, Conservative Judaism insists on observance of tradition and respect for visionary change. The Conservative Jewish community places its trust in its rabbis to be interpreters of *halakhah* and guides to Jewish life and learning. Each rabbi serves as halakhic authority for his or her community, and our rabbis collectively give direction through the Rabbinical Assembly.

In our own century, the partnership between the Jewish People and God has produced a miracle: the restoration of the Jewish People to its ancestral home, Israel. No less miraculous is the restoration of our historical and sacred language, Hebrew, as the living language of today's Jews – in Israel and in the Diaspora. As Conservative Jews, we pray in Hebrew and promote Hebrew literacy in the Diaspora. We support the State of Israel as a democratic and pluralistic Jewish center and are committed to the ideal of *aliyah* (immigration to Israel) as an important component of contemporary Jewish expression.

Our understanding of Judaism embraces and celebrates the diversity of *K'lal Yisrael*, the entire Jewish people. Membership in the Jewish community does not require uniformity of practice or of thought. We hold out an open hand to any Jewish movement or ideology committed to the values of our heritage and to the well-being of our people. At the same time, we aggressively reach out to all Jews – and interested non-Jews wishing to pursue a Jewish path of holiness and meaning. We are happy to provide access to the profound treasures of Jewish texts, history, lifestyle, and spirituality for all those who seek.



This text is published by the Rabbinical Assembly and is available as a pamphlet. To order bulk quantities, please contact United Synagogue Book Service, 800-594-5617. For more information, go to our website: [www.rabbinicalassembly.org](http://www.rabbinicalassembly.org).

Please do not quote without citing the Rabbinical Assembly, publisher. For permissions requests, please contact us at 212-280-6065.

Published with permission from the Rabbinical Assembly.

